

Meditating our Emotions: Finding Martin Luther King- Posted July 30, 2009 on "The Meditative Life," a blog for *Psychology Today*,

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Meditation's reach has recently gotten significantly broader. Over the last couple of years, Google's Chade-Meng Tan(link is external) has teamed up with the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society(link is external) to develop a successful course for Google employees called "Search Inside Yourself(link is external)." It is a key part of the School of Personal Growth at Google University, and combines research into emotional intelligence as presented by Daniel Goleman with meditation, which is taught by Zen master Norman Fischer and the Center's senior fellow Mirabai Bush. But Meng's vision is much greater, and includes world peace. He wants the SIY course to be an "open source" resource for businesses everywhere and envisions the combination of meditation and emotional intelligence as key to bringing forth human flourishing and a compassionate world.

Most of us don't work at Google, and our vision is more modest, but we are all aware that when we search inside ourselves emotions play a large, and often times, disruptive part in our inner life. One of the primary purposes of meditation is to work with emotions, bringing light and balance into what can be a turbulent and disturbing arena. The goal is not to eliminate emotions, but to refine them, make them less tormenting and more transparent and intelligent. As every artist knows, feelings can be cognitive if they can be made lucid and responsive. They can become ways of connecting more fully to the subtle dimensions of the world, but that is often not our experience of them.

Normally, we view experiences, emotions, and thoughts unreflectively from inside. We identify with them. They are us, we are them. In this sense we are enmeshed in our emotions and thoughts, and often driven by them. The following exercise provides us with some distance from our own emotions, allowing us to consider them from the outside and work with them from a new vantage point. The discovery of that new and higher vantage point is not always easy, but once we learn the way to it, then the narrow pathway to emotional equanimity can open and allow us to consider the most intense emotional struggles of daily life gracefully from a viewpoint familiar to us from meditation. By way of introduction, I relate an episode from the life of the American civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



During his years of work on behalf of black Americans, Martin Luther King ceaselessly advocated for nonviolent action as a means of drawing attention to the oppression of blacks, especially in the South. He received many threats and suffered several attempts on his life. In one instance his home in Montgomery, Alabama, was bombed while he was at a church meeting. The porch and front of the house were heavily damaged. His wife, Coretta, and daughter Yoki were in the back of the house at the time, and no one was hurt. By the time King arrived, an agitated crowd of hundreds of black neighbors had gathered, ready to retaliate against the police who were there. Their much-loved leader and his family had been attacked. Facing the strong possibility of a race riot, the police asked King if he would address the crowd. King went out onto what remained of his front porch, held up his hands and everyone grew quiet. He said, "We believe in law and order. Don't do anything panicky at all. Don't get your weapons. He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword. Remember that is what God said. We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them." When Martin finished, everyone went home without violence, saying "Amen" and "God bless you." Tears were on many faces. King had felt the same emotions of anger at the attempt on the lives of his family and himself, but he was also able to find a place in himself from which he could speak and act that did not answer hate with hate, but instead could meet hate with love.

In our own lives we experience similar if smaller affronts, but they can lead to long periods of brooding anger and internal agitation. The meditation begins by selecting from out of past experience an occasion of hatred, jealousy, desire, anger, etc. It should be strong but not overwhelming or too recent. Then, after having settled the mind, and found your way to the gateway of humility and the path of reverence as described in [my previous blog entries](#), relive the occasion selected. As you call the situation back to mind, it is important to allow the associated negative emotions (desire, pride, anger...) to rise up once again. Feel their force, sense the stir of feelings and the undertow that, if left unchecked, might well lead you back into the dark,

uncontrolled emotions of the original situation. Only by allowing these feelings some sway can we practice overcoming them and so learn to hold the situation in a new light. As the emotions begin to take hold, like the arrival of Martin Luther King's angry neighbors, look within yourself for higher ground, for a place from which to inwardly behold yourself and the entire situation. Encompass the conflicting parts of the drama within your field of attention. Feel the contention between two selves. Move away from the undertow of destructive emotions and take up your place as a witness. Find your way from the mentality of the crowd to the Martin Luther King in you. From your new vantage point, go on to experience the inner dynamics that are at play in the situation.

To come under the sway of negative emotions is to be blinded. When carried away by anger, lust, or jealousy, we do not really see who or what is before us. We cannot judge the forces at play or intuit the right way forward. Now, from the new vantage point, attempt to see who really stands before you and what forces are actually active. In the midst of the occurrence, sense the history behind it and the possibility that lies beyond it. The events of the day and indeed your entire life have led to the encounter and to the negative emotions. They are factors that can be seen and appreciated.

If others are involved, imagine them in like manner. They too bring a history and future to the encounter; they too lived through events unknown to you during that day. Do not psychoanalyze yourself or the other person. Rather, simply appreciate, sympathetically and objectively, the complexity and multiple dimensions of the drama that is unfolding. It is not a question of right or wrong but of compassionate understanding. The emotional force of the exchange, though still present, is now viewed and held differently. When we speak and act from this place of compassionate understanding, we are better able to disperse the angry mob, and to answer hate with love.

If we are sailing on the high seas and a storm hits, how do we respond? To simply curse the wind and crashing waves would be immature as well as ineffective. Far better to accept the fact of the storm, over which we have no control, and turn our attention to that over which we do have control, namely ourselves and the sailboat. How much sail should we have up, what should be the heading, is the cargo tied down and are the hatches shut? Life presents us with storms and trials. Often they are not of our making, but how we handle them is. This exercise is, therefore, not designed to empty us of emotion but rather to help guide us through high seas.

It should be clear that we cultivate equanimity not so as to be better prepared for a counter attack, but rather so we can find an opening for understanding and reconciliation. From the vantage point of the helm or the high ground we may well discover the petty basis for our jealousies or the illusory grounds for our desires. The insight so gained does not automatically lead to the destruction of jealousy and desire. It is much harder to live our insights than to have them! Nevertheless, a beginning is made by not giving ourselves over to our emotions, but pausing to set aside egotism, seek higher ground, discover the Martin Luther King in ourselves, and so hold the conflict in a far more generous pair of hands. I sometimes call this the Martin Luther King exercise because King, while still possessed of human frailties, seemed so often to live, speak, and act from a high place beyond ego that we can call, with Thomas Merton, the "the silent self."