

TRAUMA AND THE SETTING OF PERCEPTION

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The capacity to accomplish attachment and emotional bonding has long been viewed as a standard of Human Development in Western Psychology. In Buddhist Psychology the word *shenpa* generally translates as attachment, but its connotation is very different from the Western term. When people experience emotional disruptions there is often a sense of isolation associated with it that requires skill to repair. That is because in response to these experiences, we have learned to tighten, shut down or avoid. The Buddhist definition of attachment in the form of *shenpa* may at times illuminate the path of those in emotional pain due to a sense of personal detachment which may stem from difficult experiences, including trauma. *Shenpa* constitutes attachment to these difficulties that limit people to avoidance, escape, and shut down of emotions due to experience which primes such responses, as if automatically. In such cases, the person is especially attuned to responses that include recoil, tightening, constriction, narrowing, and the well known and often described fight or flight responses. While these may and often could be life preserving, the inclination to build narratives that bolster the belief that these are the verifiable facts about life and who we are can be self-fulfilling while simultaneously inaccurate. When repeated in an unabated and continuous pattern, they can take on a mantle of habituated acceptability or even “truth.” In a Buddhist Psychological observation they seem true since we are attached to these beliefs or thoughts. The response to them, in behavior, emotion and thought can lead to unhappiness.

Such impressions, and the narratives associated with beliefs about how best to respond to them, strengthen the perception that the world is threatening, and that a self that has learned this must be vigilant to protect and guard “me,” as separate and as alone as that may be. Other behaviors this perception engenders are the seeking of comforts in the attempt to avoid discomforts, material collection and attachments to the pleasurable. The combined package may thematically resemble, “me against the elements.”

The Post-Modern Psychoanalytic (Western Psychology) theorist, Henry Krystal, (1988), Integration and Self Healing: Affect, Trauma and Alexithymia, has defined Affect Tolerance as the ability to bear emotional distress and to know that it will pass. This skill could further be described as the capacity to be with the intensity of the range of emotional experience without the use of escape, avoidance or emotional shutdown. Krystal points out that the most common obstacle to the process is trauma.

By its steadily gradual and gentle progression into emotional material, content, states, transitions and processes, Mindfulness connects the practitioner to self-guided adroitness and skill in self-kindness that can open affect tolerance. Mindfulness paves the way to Affect Tolerance by removing the pressure to “accomplish selfhood,” or be a success at self love as if it were another life performance to rate, criticize or measure. This is what makes Mindfulness practice a useful and self-comforting action in the self work with trauma. What softens shock softens the components which keep shock and traumatic stress in place. First experiencing the strength to be with the energy of pain, eventually

builds the confidence it can be borne and then dissipate. Meanwhile, at every step in the process, gentle opening takes the place of tightening; harshness is smoothed with heartiness and a soft intention is maintained creating new learning through the rhythm and poetry of the breath. The obstacle is the way.