



EXERCISE – TRAINING IN A COMPASSIONATE IMPULSE

Imagine a patient alone in her room, recovering from surgery for a newly diagnosed malignancy. With no one around, she's alone with her thoughts—with the arisings, the fears, the elaborations of thought and scenarios that may happen—each a new guest, “sent as a guide from beyond.” Her mind, untrained to see each thought as simply a passing phenomenon, experiences one dark thought after another as a threat to her wholeness. She is unable to bring her attention back to the present, back to a stability of mind. Instead of promoting a positive neuroimmunological environment, she is weakening her resolve and building up stories of despair, hopelessness, and fear. She is completely at the mercy of her mind.

We've already discovered how out of control our own minds can be, without the added burden of a life-threatening illness or a chronic condition that robs us of our identities and sense of self. Imagine, as we did above, the patient who has been given no tools to deal with the chaotic nature of her mind, whose thoughts come back repeatedly to her illness and disease. How are we going to help this individual if we haven't learned to train our own mind? Imagine how our effectiveness and presence will calm and benefit her if we have worked with our own mind and if we've achieved a certain degree of stability in our mind.

With the most vivid imagination possible, imagine a scenario similar to the one above. Perhaps visualize a patient who you've seen or met recently or one particularly memorable patient who you've worked with in the past. Conjure up the patient in your mind; evoke the feelings within your own body that he or she must have been feeling in his or her situation. Let your heart and mind go out to her or him, compassionately, fully present. Really be with this person, allowing yourself to feel their suffering, their sense of hopelessness, their utter despair. Investigate the dynamics of your mind to the best of your ability when doing this exercise.

Whoever it is that you use as the focus of this exercise, feel the compassion that arises when you think of their suffering, and allow a sense of urgency to arise on your part to do whatever is necessary to help alleviate their suffering. Imagine what you would do if you could do anything to help them. Work with this. If you become distracted, bring your mind back to the picture of this person within your mind. Or use your breath to anchor your attention.

Once you're able to stay with this for a while, broaden this compassionate impulse to include all those you care for, imagining your own family, your loved ones, eventually yourself, as if you were all suffering from the same illness, dealing with the same challenges. What would you do if you could bring happiness and freedom from suffering to all those you think of? How good would you feel knowing that you could make a difference in the lives of all those you love, care for, and know? Really imagine being able to help everyone who needed your help and see what that feels like.

Slowly, bring the patient who inspired this exercise into your mind and imagine that you're sending to them the same concern that you would feel for a family member in their position. Then, imagine applying this same level of care to all of your patients, even those who cause you some degree of anxiety or frustration. Imagine caring for them as if they were your most precious friend or family member. They are, in fact, someone's family members. Certainly, they were someone's children.

Now, just relax in this atmosphere of caring. Reflect on how each one of our patients deserves to have peace of mind, to have freedom from the anxiety and fears that an untamed mind can bring. And just relax.