

Supporting participants who experience grief during your Shinrin Yoku walk-

Ben 'Crow' Page

The wound is the place where the light enters you. -Rumi

Let us begin by discussing the nature of suffering, for in order to have a conversation about supporting those in suffering, we must first understand what it is and what it means for you as a Shinrin Yoku Guide. This is a difficult conversation to have with folks who were acculturated in the West because the perception that suffering is intrinsically negative, superfluous, and avoidable is one of the most entrenched cultural biases that we unconsciously operate under.

What is suffering?

So what is suffering? To explore this question, we must first turn to neurobiology, which tells us that suffering is natural. It is not good, nor is it bad. It is a fundamental part of our conscious experience as human beings because it is rooted in our neurobiological evolution. Like all aspects of our neurobiology and wider physiology, suffering is a physical adaptation meant for our survival. So why do our brains work this way? What does suffering have to do with our survival?

In the evolution of the human species, cooperative tendencies have pushed themselves to front of the gene pool. Wilson (2009) notes, "In that harsh environment [of prehistory], individuals who cooperated with other members of the band typically lived longer and left more offspring." Because of this evolutionary trend, humans have evolved to be the most empathic species on this planet. This condition is created by the presence of what are called mirror neurons, which are found in several significant neural networks of the human brain. The perceptual-motor system "light[s] up both when you perform an action and when you see someone else perform that action, giving you a *felt sense* of what he's experiencing in his body" (Hanson, 2009, p.125). The insula and linked circuits activate in the same mirroring way, but for emotions. Because of this neural mirroring, we are actually capable of feeling what others feel, both physically and psychologically. This ability to share in the suffering of others was evolutionarily critical to our ancestors whose individual survival depended on group cohesion and community health. While the circumstances of existence have changed since those times, our brains have remained largely the same.

Viewed in this context, we can see that suffering is actually a natural side effect of empathy. Beyond our own personal suffering, we often carry the suffering of others through our embedded empathic response. Interestingly, this empathic neurochemical response extends beyond our species such that we can experience the suffering of plants and animals as well (the producers of the Sarah McLachlan

ASPCA video are well aware of this neurochemical quirk). Joanna Macy theorized that we can apply our sense of empathy to the feelings of the entire planet so that we might suffer with it as well. She writes, "It is the distress we feel on behalf of the larger whole of which we a part. It is the pain of the world itself, experienced in each of us." This pain, brought into individual consciousness through empathic response, is exactly the kind of suffering you are likely to encounter while leading Shinrin Yoku walks, especially when employing the gateway of grief invitation.

Equally important in this discussion of suffering and neurobiology is that suffering is not abstract or conceptual. It is embodied and proceeds through physiological mechanisms. We do not experience suffering through cognition, we feel it viscerally in our bodies. Even when the source of suffering is outside of us, our mirror neurons replicate the experience of suffering in our own bodies. If you see someone fall down a flight of stairs, you actually can feel the pain of that other body because of this neurochemical reaction. And because all perceptual phenomena are rooted in our neurobiology, psychological suffering is no different. When we witness someone in distress, our brains replicate that feeling through empathic response. This is not a choice. We feel what others feel in a very real way, whether we like it or not, and thus some degree of suffering cannot be avoided, whether it originates in our own bodies or in those around us.

But not all suffering is inevitable. To borrow from the Buddha and modern neuroscience, there are 'first darts' which are inevitable, such as illness, loss, and death. And then there are 'second darts' which are our reactions to the experience of suffering brought on by the first dart. Second darts are triggered by associative neural networks and we throw them at ourselves. While animals and humans both register first darts through the sensory experience of pain triggering the amygdala, only humans magnify suffering through second darts. This is because the prefrontal cortex of the human brain allows us to experience a sense of subjectivity and so we tend to attach additional meanings to the original sense of suffering such as 'I must be a bad person so I deserve this' or 'I am angry at the world because I deserve better than this.' Notice how both these second darts rely on a sense of self (an 'I'). It is this sense of subjectivity that creates the possibility for us to think that suffering means more than it does, and thus perpetuate and magnify it. Animals and plants, who lack this sense of subjectivity, experience suffering and then let it go. If a dog loses a leg, it does not blame itself or become bitter and angry at the world; it suffers the pain of loss and then adjusts its' behavior to accommodate a new reality.

In other words, humans tend to suffer twice, though the second form of suffering is by our own creation. To use the context of Shinrin Yoku, the experience of feeling disconnected from the Earth may trigger a sense of suffering registered as grief (first dart), but that experience may trigger that participant to feel guilt, anger, and hopelessness (second darts). Most of our suffering comes from these second darts and understanding this distinction will assist us later in recognizing how to hold space for suffering.

your mental afflictions and the discomfort of being ruled by them." We can find happiness amidst suffering when we accept that these things occupy the same reality.

What is the Appropriate Response to Suffering?

This brings us to the question of what is the appropriate response to suffering? As we have discussed, we must not try to fix it, deny it, or repress it. We must welcome it. And this is where Council becomes your greatest tool in honoring and working with suffering.

Do not approach suffering with a plan or an agenda. Do not preference that you are the healer and the other is ill. Do not judge or offer advice or psychoanalyze the sufferer. Simply come along side their suffering and witness it, hold the space respectfully so that the individual feels safe in expressing their suffering and relax into your natural state of empathy through listening. Empathy has a positive impact on others' perceptions of their suffering when they realize they are not alone. When they see that others listen and acknowledge their suffering as valid and natural, they feel better. Thich Nhat Hanh (2010) describes suffering, and suffering together, as an exercise in liberation. He writes, "You suffer in order to find a way out" (p.112).

There is no way out except through this suffering together, so your primary job is simply to be with the person. If a facilitator appears daunted and thrown off center by a display of suffering, there is a natural tendency for more second darts to be thrown. But if you are listening from your heart and steadfast in your attention, it opens the doorway for that suffering to blossom into teaching. As a mentor of mine once told me, there are many gifts in our wounds, but we must open the wounds up to find them.

It might feel strange at first to simply witness and not try to fix the suffering of another. Because of our neurobiology, we are predisposed to want to alleviate the suffering of others because it alleviates the suffering we experience through empathic response. Reinforced by the cultural idea of suffering as dysfunction, we are compelled to fix, but we must recognize that this desire is not about helping another triumph over suffering, it is about helping ourselves feel that we do not need to share in that suffering. To put it bluntly, there is an often-unconscious selfishness in the desire to fix. The Council facilitator must be aware of this so as to not throw second darts when suffering manifests in the circle. When you encounter this as a guide, you may start to throw second darts at yourself such as 'Oh no! This person is in pain, I must be doing something wrong!' This type of thinking quickly descends into a vicious cycle where both you and the participants will begin throwing more and more second darts because the suffering has been handled as if it were dysfunction. If a participant expresses suffering and you respond by throwing second darts at yourself, the participant will then feel guilty for *your* suffering and you will enter a reciprocal cycle of suffering, shame and guilt. So that no second darts are thrown, simply let the suffering be what it is.

I have described how suffering is natural in the context of our neurobiology, but there is also an important aspect of suffering that is psychological, which is that suffering is never good or bad. Like all natural things, it is inherently amoral. We do not say that the lion who kills a gazelle is a murderer or the vulture who scavenges some of the meat is a thief. These moral concepts are not endemic to the natural world, but are an ethical construction of the human mind. I like to suggest that one of the reasons why it was easy to condition people to believe that pain is dysfunctional is because our brains had already evolved to value stasis and fear change. Suffering in the form of mental anguish is a form of disequilibrium that creates the conditions for psychological change. Consider a man who has spent his life cutting down trees and attends a Shinrin Yoku walk. If he sits beneath a tree and listens to it, he will experience grief and if he holds that grief he may come to see that his work was not in proper relationship to the Earth. In order for his mind to be changed, however, he must walk through the gateway of grief. If we deny people the experience of suffering in this way, we also deny them the experience of perceiving a new reality and changing their actions in accordance. Disequilibrium feels like suffering but it is not, it is simply the growing pains of consciousness as we become more aware of ourselves and our interconnectedness to the world.

Why is Suffering So Problematic?

Now that we have some brief background on the nature of suffering, let us quickly turn to the question of why suffering is particularly problematic in Western culture. Joanna Macy (1998) notes, "Our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional... To permit ourselves to entertain anguish for the world is not only painful, but also frightening; it appears to threaten our capacity to cope with daily life. We are afraid that if we were to let ourselves fully experience these feelings, we might fall apart, lose control, or be mired in them permanently."

As we noted, pain is not dysfunctional, it is natural. But when individuals experience suffering, our medical system labels this as dysfunctional behavior and often prescribes medication to counter it. However, the cultural idea that suffering is dysfunctional extends beyond those who take such medications. We are all subject to this cultural bias because everything in popular culture reinforces it. Most of us are conditioned to think that happiness means comfort, affluence, and power from a young age. In many ways, it is a classically American problem; because of our inherited cultural worldview, we struggle to see that one cannot *pursue happiness* as was written in the Declaration of Independence. Happiness is not a destination, it is the journey; it ensues naturally when we recognize our interconnectedness to all things. It is the feeling of holding your child or your parent in an embrace; it is embodied and ephemeral and cannot be bought, earned or sought after. We experience these moments when we walk in the forest as well. Such moments do not manifest because you chased them down but because you sat quietly and let them find space in your heart. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche reminds us, "Ultimately, happiness comes down to choosing between the discomfort of becoming aware of

So what do you say and do when suffering is expressed? The most important thing you can do is not said; it is to always be listening from the heart while participants are sharing their stories. You cannot anticipate what will be said, so do not try to turn it on when you sense there is a story of suffering emerging. Listen to all stories as if your listening is critical, for sometimes even seemingly comical stories can have elements of grief and sadness buried in them. What is crucial is that you always listen with an open heart because, nine times out of ten, your listening is more healing than anything you could possibly say in response. Most people just need to say what is in their hearts without fear of judgment and by not responding directly you are actively creating an open and non-judgmental space for that type of sharing. If you feel really moved to respond, simply thank the participant for sharing. Offering gratitude is essentially non-judgmental and signals to everyone that you were listening from the heart and not analyzing or thinking of what to do next. When everyone sees how you hold the space in this way, more hearts will open and a community begins to form and then everyone is suffering together. The feeling of being held in community is more powerful than anything that any one person can offer. It is in the sense of solidarity and compassion that people begin to find their own answers. When you recognize this, suffering becomes a means to connection, both with the Earth and the people on the walk, and the entire experience will deepen as a result.

To conclude, let us not forget that as eco-therapists we are in partnership with the Land. You are not responsible for managing the emotional responses of others; your job is to listen. The Land will offer compassion and wisdom if you allow it to speak for itself. We look around and we see trees with dying limbs, blossoms that have fallen and begun to decompose, and the skins and feathers of animals who no longer live. This is not cause for sadness; this is the reality of our ecosystem. When we witness that suffering and beauty coexist in nature, we begin to relax into our own suffering to see that it too has purpose and meaning if we honor it. It does nothing to explain this phenomenon abstractly, it must be felt by your participants, so have faith that the land knows how to address suffering and transform it into the imperative to live in proper relation to all beings.