

Shaping thoughts and feelings

In “taking control of your life” we see that the thing we can control and need to take responsibility for is our **actions**. This gets things in order because we can’t directly control our thoughts and feelings. What we can do is gently and slowly cultivate our inner world so that certain thoughts and certain feelings are more likely to show up. However we can’t control this directly and it is almost inevitable that unwanted thoughts and feelings will show up from time to time and we need to be OK with that when they do.

A good metaphor for thinking about how to shape your inner world is to see yourself to be a house: The unwanted thought or feeling is someone knocking on your door. Just like in everyday life, anyone can knock on your door. It is up to you to decide how to deal with them when they call for your attention. Some thoughts are unwanted, and like a salesperson coming to the door, it is possible to gently and politely bid them farewell without being bothered by them (and the more you do this the less likely they are to come knocking again). However if it is a valued friend you want to welcome in, make them comfortable and encourage them to stay.

In skillfully working with thoughts and feelings it is important to seek to understand them and their value. Most feelings are related to a thought: Sometimes it’s about a perceived threat (leading to fear); sometimes the threat is in the form of a wrong or injustice (then anger appears). So whenever an emotion or feeling shows up, it’s good to understand what it relates to and whether it really belongs in this situation or another. For example in the classic case of the stressed out office worker who comes home and kicks the cat – the anger built up during a day of having to put up with injustices is finally taken out on the unfortunate feline. Because we are complex, sometimes when our “buttons” get pushed, it is often the case that we don’t express our feelings where they belong but instead release them in places where we feel safe. If this means in the home, it can cause troubles with those who we live with.

In shaping our inner world, we need to understand the thoughts and feelings which show up and work with them, not against them. Sometimes they convey valuable information about the world around us. Each feeling has a source and conveys a message. A wise person listens to the information available and then identifies the source. It is important to accept the “messenger” whether the message is unwanted or wanted. If we keep getting messages about “threat” which upon careful examination prove not to be true, then we need to adjust our radar so we can more accurately assess our environment.

The RAIN technique

This technique allows us to skillfully work with feelings and thoughts by inquiring into their nature.

When a feeling shows up, it is important to **R**ecognize it – it helps to try and name it or at least name what it is like.

Second, **A**cept it - many times we repress feelings or deny them – this does not help in dealing with them.

Then **I**nquire into it - identify the source, the nature of the “button” that was pushed, and beliefs that might have informed the reaction.

Lastly, **N**on-identification – there is no need to identify with the thought or feeling and see it as you. Thoughts and feelings arise and pass away – they are not you.

The more you practice this sequence of steps the more it will happen naturally. When you form a habit of recognizing, accepting, and inquiring into your thoughts, you create distance between yourself and your thoughts, and this gives you the opportunity to choose whether to let your thoughts in.

More on the RAIN Technique:

<https://www.tarabrach.com/rain/>

<https://jackkornfield.com/doing-the-buddhas-practice/>

<https://www.npr.org/2020/02/03/802347757/a-conversation-with-tara-brach-mindfulness-tools-for-big-feelings>

<https://blog.calm.com/tara-brach-home-practice/rain-the-power-of-inquiry>

Understanding the Thoughts that Inhabit your House

If you are a house, your thoughts are your residents. Who have you got in your house? How would you like to change things? In many ways we choose our residents by the attention we pay them. If you watch horror movies you will have many scary thoughts. If you spend your time around positive people you are more likely to have positive thoughts.

Our thoughts about who we are come from the stories we tell ourselves. We each have a number of story lines going at once like we are writing a number of books with plots that weave in and out – sometimes the stories are parallel and sometimes connected. To make sense of ourselves and our life choices we have to have a sense of a coherent story. We struggle to ensure it makes sense. Many of the thoughts are “editorial notes” that either confirm or question how one of our stories is going.

Be aware of this, try to watch the process with the eye of a detached observer, that way we don't need to take many of the matters quite so seriously – after all its only a story.