

How We Change: A Letter upon Pratipaksha Bhavana

One of my students, concerned for their child, who has a serious health condition, asked for advice about how to compartmentalize their feelings in the presence of the child.

Beloved friend,

The mind has a thing it is concerned about. That is what is happening. The brain's fear/safety center, the amygdala, gets first dibs on responding to thoughts; this is a sound result of evolution, helping keep us safe and alive. The tendency is for fearful thoughts about the thing the mind is concerned about to arise: that's natural, and that's fine. What comes next, that is where we practice. In yoga, we use *pratipaksha bhavana* (prah-tea-pak'-sha bah'-vah-nah) to shift mental tendencies that are not useful; a common translation is "cultivation of the opposite thought."

So! The mind has a concern and you do not wish to be awash in fear? Cultivate hope, or cherishing of the now, or whatever else you choose to aim toward feeling in relation to this situation. This is not denial. Go ahead and acknowledge that fear, tenderly, as if that emotion were a sad or frightened child itself: "Yes, little one, I see you there. I am holding you." and then cultivate what you aim for: "Here I am now, in the sunlight, watching it shine on this child's beautiful hair." Or, "Here I am, in the car in heavy traffic, listening to my children bicker on this glorious, miraculous, everyday day. How lucky we are to be here now, for even this mundane moment, in all its glory." Or, "I cultivate bravery, hope, and cherishing of the now in honor of myself and this beautiful spirit, my child." You see what I mean, and the key is to consider your own heart, mind, imagination, and choose something to practice regularly that moves you. Let it grow deep until it becomes a habit of its own; eventually it can become the first response

when we retrain our thought patterns with dedication over time.

Your original query was a thoughtful ask about compartmentalization, which stores things for later. Often we forget to unpack what we store until we run out of storage and the boxes knock us over, or we lose the key to the box and we don't know how to open it again. So let us not compartmentalize. Let us acknowledge -- which might need a space of its own: running on the beach, beating the couch with a tennis racket, sobbing on the shoulder of a dear friend. Let us make space what needs to be felt -- and also, in other moments, let us transform with pratipaksha bhavana. Take the energy of your concern and turn it to cherishing, to savoring, to wishing, to prayer. Let it become a force for good within you and around you, that energy. Use it to enrich your sense of love and connection to all-that-is rather than allowing it to imprison you with the illusion of separation in your own mind. This is what we mean when we speak of spiritual alchemy: emotion arises. We could become lost in the story of that emotion, but if we go back to the root, which is always love, we can shine right out past fear into more love, into cherishing, into the glorious beauty of the shining, endless NOW. Impermanence is terrifying; the mind cannot grasp it for long. Impermanence is also that which makes the eternal now so beautiful, so beautiful.

As for me, I will be practicing what I teach here, and turning my concern for you and yours into loving prayer for your peace and wellbeing, over and over. My heart is with you.

In love and service,
Kristie Dahlia Home