

**TRAIN YOUR BRAIN  
YOUR PRECIOUS LIFE  
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**ARTICLE**

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**Introduction**

This class is about the incredible opportunity it is to have a life. At all.

To fulfill that opportunity, we need a fundamental orientation inside that treats our life as if it *matters*. As if our happiness is important, as if being mistreated is not alright, as if we deserve the same care and goodwill as any other person. As if on the day we were born we were given a bag of pearls, one for each day we will ever have, and every day we spend one of those pearls, never to see it again, and the supply in the bag is steadily dwindling, and one day there will be just 365 left (though we never know which day that is as we cross it), then 10, and then one, and none.

In other words, the key to life is motivation. Nonetheless, being fully on your own side, steadfastly pursuing your own best interests – which always involve being virtuous, caring toward others, mentally steady, and wise – is actually quite uncommon.

There are lots of reasons for the inhibition of assertiveness, self-expression, ambition, drive, self-care, and aspirations:

- Many of us were raised to feel that it was vain, sinful, or disloyal to others to value our own needs and pursue their fulfillment without apology (of course, without harming others in the process).
- In childhood or later, sometimes expression of how one truly feels or what one truly wants provokes the kind of shaming attacks that makes people keep quiet in the future; as the Japanese proverb says, the nail that stands out gets hammered down.
- If our efforts were routinely thwarted, or painful things happened to us that we couldn't prevent, it's natural to develop what's called "learned helplessness" – which animal studies have shown is remarkably easy to learn and remarkably hard to undo.
- Sometimes cultural or religious norms undermine healthy autonomy or self-direction. For example, girls tend to be raised in ways that value tending to the needs of others ahead of one's own.

Deep down, in your heart of hearts, you probably know the essence, the crux of what would be great for you to be or do more of – or be or do less of – in the remainder of your life. What are those things?

Also, you probably know deep down where you have held back in pursuing your highest and sweetest aspirations – your heart’s deepest yearnings.

This class is about beginning to release the neurological circuitry inhibiting the expression into the world of the true self – your true self – and about beginning to strengthen your will for feeding the taproots of your precious life.

It’s more experiential than the two previous classes. You can do the exercises and guided meditations on your own, if you like. Just take care of yourself, and pull out of them if they get too uncomfortable.

You might also like to look at the articles entitled “Using the Will” and “Staying at Your Best” on the Wise Brain website: <http://www.wisebrain.org/articles.html>

### **A Word about Doing Personal Growth Exercises**

As with all the exercises we do in this course, you can keep your eyes open or closes, write in your notebook or not, and go as deeply as you want.

Please know that you cannot always predict or control what comes up for you in an exercises. The way we look at it: usually either some piece of valuable learning comes into awareness, or the “defense” against that learning comes into awareness, beginning to clear the way for the valuable learning itself to arise; either event is progress.

And, honestly, occasionally what is happening is that you are seeding your fertile unconscious, the dark and loamy soil of the mind – to which the great majority of the brain is dedicated, since only a tiny fraction of all neurological processes get represented in any way in consciousness – so that sprouts of valuable learning pop up later and bear fruit in time.

## **Being For Things In General**

### **Reflection**

Get comfortable. Posture that is both comfortable and alert.

Relaxing. Settling into your breath. Aware of your body as a whole . . . the body breathing . . . breathing the body.

Bring to mind some person or some thing that you really care about. Perhaps a child, a mate, a parent or sibling, a friend, a teacher or mentor, even a pet. Or perhaps a place, like Tuolumne Meadows or the seashore, or a cause, like justice or the caring for the poor.

Take a moment to wish that person or thing well. This is an expression of your lovingkindness, what in Buddhist practice is called metta. You might explore putting that lovingkindness, that goodwill into words such as “May you be well . . . . May you be safe from harm . . . . May you be healthy . . . . May you be happy . . . . May you live (or exist) with ease.”

Take a moment to be mindful of the experience of caring, of wishing well, of lovingkindness. Sense how it contains a feeling of being for the person or thing you care about.

Take a moment to explore that feeling of being for something . . . how it feels in your body . . . the emotions intertwined with it or associated with it . . . the attitudes or points of view that come with it . . . the behavioral orientation that comes with it, the inclination to protect and support, to take action.

If you like, take a moment to see if you can intensify that feeling of being for something. Maybe through breathing a little more deeply, or bringing yourself to feel your caring – perhaps your love – more deeply, perhaps more fiercely. Maybe through recalling times when you felt really strong . . . recalling a sense of strength in your own body and mind . . . a sense, perhaps, of great resolve and determination . . . and then applying that sense of strength to what you are caring about here.

Take a moment to be mindful of this experience of strength, of power . . . of resolve, of determination . . . regarding what you are for. See what is associated, in your mind, with that sense of commitment toward what you care about. . . . what is associated with those feelings of strength and power in yourself.

Next, if you like, experiment with seeing if you can weaken the feeling of being for something. Try to turn down the heat . . . reduce the sense of strength. Notice what that feels like. Take a moment to be mindful of this experience of weakening resolve, weakening commitment, lessening strength and power. See what is associated with it in your mind.

Now, for the last part of this exercise, take a moment to see if you can intensify again that feeling of being for something. First you intensified that feeling, then you dialed

it down, and now you are turning it up again. Maybe through breathing a little more deeply, or bringing yourself to feel your caring – perhaps your love – more deeply, perhaps more fiercely. Maybe through recalling times when you felt really strong, really powerful . . . really resolved and determined . . . Now intensifying that sense of strength in your own body and mind . . . and then applying that sense of strength to what you are caring about here.

Enjoy that sense of strength and determination in being for something good. Breathe it in . . . breathe it out . . . Breathing a sense of strength . . . Strength breathing you . . .

OK, get a sense of this room. And see if you can continue to be centered in this experience of strength for what you care about. If you like, rub your hands on your chair or thighs . . . rub your feet on the floor. . . . all in the space of, intertwined with, your sense of strength for what you care about.

### **Discussion Points**

- The sense of being for something has one or more of these aspects to it:
  - A warmth, a valuing, a caring for whatever you are for (e.g., the person, the cause, yourself)
  - A loyalty to it; a bond, a sense of fidelity
  - An inclination to act, to be responsible, to do something
  - Impulses of protection, support, stewardship, encouragement, bringing resources
  - A sense of strength, power
  - A sense of determination, resolve, commitment
  - A view (sometimes implicit) about the goodness, rightness, of being for what you're for
- Neurologically, being for something probably activates, and entails:
  - Some arousal of the sympathetic nervous system; that's what we use to mobilize resources; in the extreme (e.g., life and death moments) that arousal could be very intense

- Particularly when being for has a nurturing, caregiving element, it is probably associated with flows of “tend and befriend” hormones such as oxytocin and estrogen – which men have, too.

- The overall view about the goodness of being for, and any related strategies and goals and monitoring of results, are generated within the frontal lobes

- In more sustained, balanced, relaxed states of pursuing the good – for example, Thich Nat Hanh was described by Richard Baker, Roshi as “a combination cloud, butterfly, and bulldozer” – there is probably significant parasympathetic arousal as well (associated with feeling relaxed and contented); calm but relentless advocacy for what you care about, from a space of love, is arguably a premier example of uncommon and optimal balancing of these two vital wings of your autonomic nervous system.

- Of course, there must be wisdom in what we are for. We can all think of many examples in the history of the world in which people were very sincerely for something which had very negative consequences (e.g., for slavery in the American South, for Nazism during its rise to power).

- We also need wisdom about not holding on too long to the things we are for if it’s turning into a significant problem for ourselves, or perhaps for others. When to hold them and when to fold them . . . . is a cliché that points to one of the truly important questions in life.

- Notice any resistance to being for good things. Like a sense of futility, exhaustion, learned helplessness, fear of a shaming attack if you stand up or stand out, etc.

- Describe learned helplessness. Point out how quick it is to learn, and how hard it is to distinguish

- Notice any sense that you have to be totally gung ho, or it’s not worthwhile. Notice any related self-criticism that’s based on an unrealistic set of standards about how you should be in life regarding what you are for.

- Being for something also applies, of course, to being for yourself. What blocks people from being on their own side?

- Feeling unworthy

- That it's vain
- That it will provoke a shaming attack to assert yourself (e.g., the nail that stands out gets hammered down)
- That by being for yourself you in effect let others off the hook who should be for you; this pattern often starts in childhood; it's understandable but really bad for you
- Can you start letting go of these blocks in yourself?
- Being for yourself is part of a larger context of a precious human life. The Five Reflections:
  - It is not given to me to avoid aging.
  - It is not given to me to avoid illness.
  - It is not given to me to avoid death.
  - It is not given to me to avoid being separated from everything I enjoy and love.
  - It is not given to me to avoid inheriting the results – positive and negative – of my actions.

## **Being For Yourself**

### **Reflection**

Settle into your seat, eyes open or closed

Bring to mind:

- A sense of yourself as a child, especially focused on your neat qualities. . . . Your vulnerability . . . . Your loveliness.
- Compassion for that child you were . . . just like you would have compassion for any child.

Then see if you bring that same compassion to yourself today . . . just like you could have compassion for any child grown into an adult.

Compassion for the human difficulties you have faced, and face today . . .  
compassion for the physical illnesses and pains . . . compassion for the hard  
circumstances, including genuine bad luck, that you have had to overcome . . .  
compassion for the ways other have truly mistreated you or might mistreat you in  
the future. . . compassion for simply being human and thus subject to unavoidable  
suffering.

Take a moment to settle into that feeling of compassion for yourself . . . letting it fill  
you . . . breathing compassion in and out . . . compassion breathing . . . compassion  
breathing you.

- Now bring to mind a sense of caring or kindness – I'll call that lovingkindness  
from now on – for that child you were . . . just like you would have lovingkindness  
for any child.

Then see if you bring that same lovingkindness to yourself today . . . just like you  
could have lovingkindness for any child grown into an adult.

Lovingkindness for the human difficulties you have faced, and face today . . .  
Lovingkindness for the physical illnesses and pains . . . Lovingkindness for the hard  
circumstances, including genuine bad luck, that you have had to overcome . . .  
Lovingkindness for the ways other have truly mistreated you or might mistreat you  
in the future . . . Lovingkindness for simply being human and thus subject to  
unavoidable suffering.

Take a moment to settle into that feeling of lovingkindness for yourself . . . letting it  
fill you . . . breathing lovingkindness in and out . . . lovingkindness breathing . . .  
lovingkindness breathing you.

- Now bring to mind a sense of being for that child you were . . . a sense of good  
will toward that child you were, a sense of advocacy or protection for that child you  
were . . . just like you would be for, be on the side of any child.

Then see if you can bring that same stance of being for, of being on the side of, of  
caring about the happiness of . . . yourself today.

Being for yourself as you face normal human difficulties . . . Being for yourself as you  
face physical illnesses and pains . . . Being for yourself as you face hard  
circumstances, including genuine bad luck . . . Being for yourself as you face  
mistreatment or ill will . . . Being for yourself as you face simply being human and  
thus subject to unavoidable suffering.

Take a moment to settle into that feeling of being for yourself . . . letting it fill you . . . Having a sense of strength, power, determination, commitment . . . breathing that feeling in and out . . . being for yourself breathing . . . being for yourself breathing you.

### **Explorations**

You can do this part with a partner, or on your own by writing or simply considering things for yourself.

Please consider:

- How have you been for yourself?
- In what ways have you helped yourself have a good life?
- How have you stood up for yourself?
- How have you acted like your inner experience of living matters?

And also consider:

- How have you not been for yourself?
- In what ways have you not helped yourself have a good life?
- How have you sold yourself short, not had faith in yourself?
- How have you numbed to or discounted your experience of living?
- How have you been excessively critical or mean to yourself?

## **The Porch . . . and Beyond**

### **Introduction**

If you like, here you can do a self-guided meditation. But it's an unusual one, and potentially intense, so we want to create a context.

The meditation will start with you imagining that you are sitting on a porch somewhere, on your rocking chair, very old but with your wits still about you. From that vantage point in the future, you will be reflecting about your life: the good things about it, and how you had stood up for your yourself, and been for yourself.

In other words you will be imagining, today, what you hope and intend will have happened in the rest of your life, as you look back on it from a point in the future. Just take whatever you get. It's alright.

Next, you will imagine your own body dying, particularly the parts of that which involve the brain. Do not worry, you will not die as you imagine some of what it could be like for your body to die. And you can go as deeply or as lightly into the meditation as you like.

The point of doing this is to bring home the realness of death, the inevitability of death, and thus the preciousness of every moment of life. We do not know ourselves for certain what lies on the other side of death. But we are certain what lies on this side: and it is first life, and then it is death.

On the whole, the people who have thought most deeply about the import of all this have done so from a religious or spiritual perspective, though the Existentialists have given them a run for their money.

For example, a Buddhist sutra, the Marana-Sati, offers these reflections about death – and you might consider their personal implications:

#### THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

- 1) Everyone has to die.
- 2) Our life span is decreasing continuously.
- 3) The time available in life to develop the mind is very small.

#### THE UNCERTAINTY OF THE TIME OF DEATH

- 4) Human life expectancy is uncertain.
- 5) There are many causes of death.
- 6) The human body is so fragile.

#### ONLY INSIGHT INTO TRUTH CAN HELP US AT THE TIME OF DEATH

- 7) Our possessions and enjoyments cannot help.
- 8) Our loved ones cannot help.
- 9) Our own body cannot help.

Of course, no matter what your religious – or existential – orientation may be, it is an undeniable fact that every year contains two special days.

One you know for sure: the anniversary of your birthday.

And one you do not know: the “pre-anniversary” of the day of your death sometime down the road: Could it be January 5<sup>th</sup>? June 18<sup>th</sup>? October 25<sup>th</sup>?

Allowing the possibility that this day, this moment, could be the pre-anniversary of your death can, if you have the right view, add to the preciousness and beauty of every moment of your life.

A great teacher once gave a profound teaching on this, without words. He simply held up a flower.

Interwoven into the beauty of the present moment is the inevitability of decay and death.

Interwoven into the decay and death of the present beauty is the creation of future beauty.

This is the truth.

As Dylan Thomas expressed it, in the lines from his poem that are inscribed in his memorial in Westminster Cathedral:

*“Time held me green and dying*

*Though I sang in my chains like the sea.”*

So let’s do the meditation. You can do it for yourself by reading a little and then going with your own imagination.

### **On the Porch**

Relax. If you can, locate or call to mind a sense of well-being, of simple calm, peacefulness, maybe happiness.

Get a sense of sitting comfortably somewhere many years from now, let’s say in your 90’s, with your mind intact, but being very, very old.

Make it concrete for yourself: a comfortable location, maybe a porch . . . a comfortable chair . . . maybe a sense of other people around . . . perhaps a sense of vistas before you, like a view down a long valley below.

Imagine feeling quite good, happy, contented . . . pleased with your life.

From that place, that porch perhaps, reflect back on your life.

To guide your reflections, here are some questions to consider, but you can focus in your own way, if you like. And whatever answers come to you about the questions are fine.

Looking back from your 90's, what will you be happy about, regarding your life?  
What will you feel grateful for?

What will you feel has been important in your life?

What will you be glad you had been for?

In what ways will you be glad that you had acted like your own life mattered . . . that your happiness mattered?

In what ways will you be glad that you had been on your own side?

You might like to take some time in silence, and see if you can find your way to an ever-growing sense of peace and wisdom.

### **As I Lay Dying**

Now imagine it's a few years later, and you are lying in a comfortable bed, with one or more loved ones by your side. There is no pain, you are comfortable, and you know that in a minute or two your body will die.

You accept that and are at peace with that fact.

This is one of the possible ways to die, and you can hold this meditation both as an exploration of the end of your life and as an affirmation of the possibility of a comfortable passing for yourself down the road.

You are awake and conscious, though in a very deep, almost impersonal state of awareness, what's called core consciousness, where you are simply witnessing what is happening.

You are not bothered by anything that happens. Not troubled, not hurt, not pained, not alarmed, not afraid. You are floating in peaceful, bare awareness as your body starts shutting down.

Your body's breathing is getting lighter and softer . . . breaths wispy . . . . slowing down . . . Heartbeat also slowing down . . . . Breath and heart beat coming more intermittently . . . seeming to end for a moment, then another very light breath and another light heartbeat . . . . getting softer and softer . . . Awareness remaining peaceful . . . A calm letting go . . . . Absorbed in a peaceful well-being . . .

The breath slowly fading away . . . . heartbeat slowly fading away . . . . breath and heartbeat stopping . . . No more breath or heartbeat . . .

Still calm awareness, floating in peace . . . .

In the brain, there is enough oxygen in the local blood supply to support neuronal activity for another few minutes. . . . Still calm awareness, floating in peace . . . .

But soon the lights in the brain start to go out for lack of oxygen . . .

Let's say the frontal lobes go dark first as the millions of neurons there die without oxygen . . . .and with them goes the capacity for planning, abstraction, ideas, and "personality" . . . .

The temporal lobes, on the sides of your head near the temples, go dark, and with them goes the capacity for language and imagery . . .

The parietal lobes go dark, at the upper back of your head, and with them the capacity for sensory processing . . .

The occipital lobes go dark, at the back of your head, and with them the capacity for vision. . . .

The limbic system goes dark, and so fade the emotions . . .

The cerebellum at the very base of your skull goes dark, and so goes all complex motor activity . . . now only the most primitive reflexes are left, and in seconds those will be gone, too.

Let's say that the nerve cells in the innermost, most central structures of the brain stem are the last to die . . . As they go, so go the last shreds of the awareness, of the consciousness, that is a product of the brain. . . .

Those lights go out . . .

No more neurological activity at all in the brain . . . .

Physically, it is all quiet . . . .

What is left, if anything at all, is a mystery . . . .

[Let yourself stay quiet here for as long as you like.]

### **Private Reflections**

You might like to take some time in silence to reflect on the personal meaning of the meditations you just did. You can leave your eyes closed or open them. You can write things down or simply think for yourself.

Here are a few questions perhaps to consider:

- What are the important messages for you from the meditations?
- What are the key things to be for, in your life?
- What is involved in being for yourself? What could you be for, that would feed the roots of your life?
- What are the key ways, looking ahead, that you want to continue or to start being more for your own well-being and growth?

### **Conclusion**

Anything you do for yourself, whether small or large, will help make your life better, for your own benefit and that of other beings. You don't have to make a big lunge in some direction – unless you really want to – and it's fine to take small steps over and over again . . . which is how anyone climbs the tallest mountains.