

Moving Forward When We're In Reaction

*We're in reaction when we're
in offensive mode (attacking, blaming)
or
in defensive mode (protecting ourselves, justifying)
or
both.*

Prologue

In the group last Thursday I was talking with a woman. It was her time of sharing. She's come to the group many, many times. She became angry with me. I continued to go in a direction that she didn't like. Later in her sharing she said that she thought of leaving. Her anger was 'up' during most of her share. By the end of her sharing she was not angry and she said she felt relief. She stayed through the process, and, at times, her attention and feeling were strongly directed at me.

Emotional Reaction Is The Key To Let Us Know We're Got Work To Do

When we emotionally react in a strong way to something that was said to us, our first action is to blame the other person. They're wrong. Then we justify to ourselves of how we're right. When we're in emotional reaction two things usually go on – the other person is so wrong and I'm so right. Our anger is up and our protection is up. We're in both offensive mode and in defensive mode.

There were a couple of early retreats with my teacher where I said to myself: 'This is my last retreat. I don't need this shit.' I was in reaction during the dialog with Charles. Now it's rare that I'm thrown into a strong reaction when I'm working with Charles. When this happens, I lick my lips and say to myself: 'Goodie, there's something bad in me that has just been pushed into and is pissed off. Now I get to work on this block inside me.'

I've been to about seventy retreats with Charles. I've gotten to see many, many people in reaction, in anger, in denial, in defense (including myself). I've gotten to see the two very different ways that people are when they're in reaction. One way is when the person owns that it's their stuff kicking up a storm, they directly, and usually fairly quickly, move through the turmoil and find what's been blocking their happiness. Another way is when the person thinks that Charles is being unfair to them or mean to them. They begin by doing very little work on themselves. Charles is very patient, and usually, eventually, they lessen their outer attack or defense and their work begins. Sometimes people don't move through this process and they don't return.

Being In Reaction

We've experienced many times when we're grounded and centered as we relate with another person. When we're not in reaction, there's is no strong emotion of the other person being bad, of us having to defend ourselves and our body is relaxed. This is being in a healthy emotional state.

We've also experienced many times when we're in reaction. Reaction is when our emotions are strong and our mind is running with a story. In reaction, our emotions and our mind are not stable and centered. Our body has more tension in it and our breathing is shallow and tight. Simply said: We're not ourselves. We're far from being 'our best self' when we're in reaction.

If We Can Slow Down And Focus On Ourselves

When we're in reaction, if we can slow down, we have a grand opportunity to bring healing to a wounded part of ourselves. When we're in reaction, a wound has been pushed on and exposed. We're raw, agitated, upset, ready to lash out and heavily in protection. This protection can be pushing the other person away; mentally by how wrong they are or verbally by lashing out at them. We may decide to get up and leave. (Leaving can be a good option some times and an avoidance option at other times).

When a wound has been pushed into, we go into emotional reaction. Pema Chödrön says that she still has emotional reaction, justification, the whole caboodle. She says that now, thirty five years after becoming a Buddhist nun, she becomes very interested when she becomes so reactive. She's not being as swept away by the emotional reaction as she used to be. Her emotional reaction is there, though there's also a part of her that knows it's emotional reaction. She knows the story running in her head is not true as it's being told to her; that the story is exaggerated and distorted.

Pema has enough grounding to be able to not be as knocked over, as swept away, as she would have been many years ago. She's interested: 'Wow, am I ever pissed off right now.' *She's interested in herself; not in how right or wrong the other person is. This is the key. Stay focused on ourselves when we're in reaction.*

When We're In Reaction: Step One Is To Know We're In Reaction

When we're in reaction, no matter how right or wrong the other person is, it's the most grand (and the hardest) time to work on ourselves. If we go into defending ourselves or go into blaming, then we're not working on ourselves.

My recommendation of what to do when we're in reaction is first to know that we're in emotional reaction. Recognize what is happening inside us. Our mind and our emotions are strongly whirling and our breath and body are tense. We're not always going to be able to put our full attention on ourselves if another person is involved in why we're in reaction.

When We're In Reaction: Step Two Is To Stop

I recommend to stop when we recognize that we're in reaction. Stopping is to stop believing what our mind is saying and to stop, for at least a few breaths, further interaction with the other person. We're off center and probably overwhelmed. Any further thinking or talking, will most likely, send us into more inner turmoil.¹

Stopping is usually very hard to do. Stopping is to know inside, and to tell the other person (if we feel safe enough) that we're in reaction. *This step of saying to the other person that we're in reaction takes huge courage.* When we say that we're in reaction, we're being very vulnerable. We're revealing ourselves in a most raw, hurt and vulnerable moment. It shows that we have damage inside. It shows that we don't 'have it together,' that we feel hurt (underneath the anger, blame and justification). Our ego doesn't like it when we say that we're in a weak and vulnerable state.

When we're in reaction, there's a lot of strong emotion going on inside of us. Our mind will want to 'run with a story' and keep running and running with the story. Stopping doesn't mean to stop the story. Stopping the story will probably be impossible to do, and it's not necessary for the story to stop. *One part of stopping is to stop believing the story that is in a frenzy.* If we've been through this many times, we know that the mind is in a very exaggerated, agitated, and off center explosion.

Recognizing that we're in reaction, knowing an exaggerated story is going on, feeling ourselves in attack and defense mode is what stopping will look like at this point. Our emotions and our mind are still running amok inside, though there is an inward awareness of this. Everything inside us wants to run or blame or defend.

When We're In Reaction: Step Three Is To Breathe Into Our Belly Rhythmically and More Deeply

When we're in reaction, our mind and our emotions are running amok. I recommend putting our attention on our body. Our body grounds us and stabilizes us. Our body and our breathing will be tense when we're in reaction. We can influence our body to become more balanced and stable during this time of inner amokness. *Our body is the most receptive of our three parts (body, emotions and mind) to becoming more calm when we're in reaction.* It'll take a lot to focus on our body because our emotions and mind will still be in rampant reaction.

When we're in reaction our breathing almost always will be shallow and our belly won't be moving very much as we breathe. We can bring our breath down deeper into our belly and we can deepen our inhalation and exhalation. As we deepen our breath, our breathing rate will slow down. Deeper and slower belly breathing grounds and stabilizes us during this time of turmoil.²

This calming of our body through breathing will cascade a calming influence into our mind and emotions. Working directly with our mind and emotions when we're in reaction is like wrestling with an angry tiger we'll most likely end up scratched and clawed.

When We're In Reaction: Step Four Is To Sense Into Our Body And Help Release The Anchor Point

When we're in reaction, our mind and emotions are very agitated and tense. Our body also is agitated and tense. *When we're in reaction our body will have a place where it's tight and probably even painful. I call this very noticeable tension and/or pain point an anchor point. The anchor point is rampant emotional and mental energy that is locked/stuck in the physical tissues of our body.*

There's always a point or an area in our body that has a focused tension or pain when we're in emotional and mental reaction. The anchor point may not be obvious to us as we begin investigating about anchor points in our body. The more times we sense into our body to find the anchor point, the easier it'll be to locate.

Releasing the anchor point is similar to pulling a weed out by its root. Without the root, the weed cannot live. *Without the anchor point being tight or painful, the emotions and mind cannot stay in turmoil.* As the anchor point releases its tension and pain, the turmoil of our emotions and of our mind also releases. Traditional therapy involves primarily working with the mind and with the emotions when we're in reaction. These two are maniacs when we're in reaction. Our body is the most receptive part of ourselves to calm down when we're in reaction.

Hands-On Help To Help Release The Anchor Point

A key part of group work is to have another person put their hands on the anchor point. Just as a massage therapist can help loosen our muscles, another person can help the anchor point to release through hands-on help. *As the anchor point releases its pain and tension, the emotions and mind will always release the energy that is keeping them in turmoil.* (I know always is a big word).³

Breathing To Help Release The Anchor Point

Most of the time that we're in reaction, it's up to us to help release the anchor point. There is no one there to assist us. If there is another person with us, it's usually the person we're lashing out at or who we're defending ourselves against. Breathing, as described in the previous section, is a key. As we breathe more deeply into our belly, we can also breathe into the anchor point if the point is in our belly, chest or back. Most of our anchor points will be in our chest area and belly area including our spine. Our spine is the back of our chest and belly.

When we breathe in and know where the anchor point is, we can make sure that the pressure of our inhalation is also pushing into the anchor point that's holding tension and pain. When we exhale, we can give permission for the tension or pain at the anchor point to lessen. There is the saying: 'in with the good, out with the bad.' We can use our inhalation to bring in life to the constricted anchor point. We can use our exhalation to help the tension or pain in the anchor point to release.

Using Our Voice To Help Release The Anchor Point

Using our voice to help release the anchor point can be done in two ways. One way is to emote when we use our voice. We can cry, sob, weep, scream, yell. A second way to use our voice is to make sounds. These sounds may or may not have a strong emotional feeling. Making sound as we exhale can release more of the physical, emotional and mental pain and tension that's held in our body.

When using sound, we encourage our body to make any sounds that it wants to make. These sounds may vary a lot or the sound may be more like a long tone or note. If we're using our voice and we're deep with emotion (like screaming or crying), then we may have no extra attention to locate the anchor point. This is okay. Let the sounds come out. So much is held in our body. Let the physical, emotional and mental tension and pain come out through sound. We can also cry into or scream into where the anchor point is. When we direct more sound and vibration to the anchor point, the extra vibration of the sound helps further release the anchor point.

Using Our Own Hands-On Or Using Massage Pressure To Release The Anchor Point

We can put our own hands on the anchor point. We can simply put our hands on the area, feel the energy moving from our hands to the anchor point to help dissolve the anchor point or in placing our hands on the anchor point we may choose to add pressure in the form of just pushing on the area or by rubbing/massaging the point. Using our own hands-on applied to the anchor point can accelerate the release of the anchor point. It's very helpful to breathe deeper into our belly as we apply either gentle hands-on or hands-on with pressure.

Using Our Attention-Awareness To Help Release The Anchor Point

We're in emotional turmoil and mental hyperbole when we're in reaction. Using visualization of the anchor point melting or dissolving may be more fantasy than reality. The mind is in reaction and probably in overwhelm. How good of a job can the mind do at this time with visualization as a healing tool? It's not even doing a good job of 'thinking straight' at this time. Add in the emotional turmoil and the mind most likely has little capacity, at this time, to do good work in regards to helping with visualization.

We can bring our attention and awareness to the anchor point whenever we're using our breath, our voice, hands-on help or movement to help release the anchor point. The mind can be useful as a witness to whether the tension and pain in the anchor point is lessening or not. Just asking some steady attention from the mind as to the state of the anchor point is proper use of the mind in relation to working with the anchor point when we're in strong reaction. The anchor point is usually released much more through physical means (breathing, hands-on help, using our voice and using movement) than through mental means.

Using Movement To Help Release The Anchor Point

The anchor point is held-built up energy. Movement of our body can help release the built up tension and energy at the anchor point. It's important to be receptive to how our body wants to move; quickly, slowly, in a stretching way, in a dancing way, in a shaking

way. When we have enough attention to bring our breath deeper, then do breathe deeper when moving. If we 'get lost in movement' and forget about our breath, that is okay.

It's important for us to 'go with' how our body wants to release the anchor point. Be receptive to how our body, not our mind, wants to use one or more of these ways of breathing, using our voice, hands-on helping and movement to help release the anchor point.⁴

Final Comments

We have a grand opportunity to heal a wound that is exposed when we're in reaction. The more energy that we give to blaming the other person or in justifying ourselves, the more we lose the opportunity to work. When doing group work, we have a very supportive environment to be able to stop and focus on what is happening inside our body, emotions and mind.

As Pema discovered, what caused the reaction is not important. Something big is going on inside herself. If we stay inside ourselves, then much work can be done. We desire to be free. To be free of what? Whatever holds us back from a living as a full expression of our Truth. *When we're in reaction, there's a stockpile of untruth that has been disturbed. And just like a growling bear, it wants us to stay the hell away from it.*

This is the time when we need courage. Courage to not listen to the bear. Courage to go into the pain. Courage to be vulnerable at the exact same time everything inside of us is saying to stay the hell away from the growling bear. Courage to stay through the process until the turmoil of our emotions and of our mind have come to peace. Then we'll be more free of, and know more about, what's holding us back from being a more full expression of our Truth.

Footnotes:

- 1 Stopping and having more inner attention can be done every time when we're in a group meeting. And yes, the reaction from a person in a group meeting will often come from something I've said, though it also may be what somebody else says or does.
- 2 I've written many times before that we have two parts to our nervous system; the calming part and the stimulating part. The calming part of our nervous system is

activated by breathing into our belly and the stimulating part is activated when we breathe primarily in our chest.

- 3 A cautionary note: I highly recommend that a person is first trained in how to do hands-on help before they put their hands on an anchor point. The emotional and mental energy held in the anchor point can be transferred to the person who is applying hands on. Many people who start in massage practice cannot keep working because they are picking up too much transference of energy. Their health and feeling of well being becomes less from doing massage work. Other people can do massage for years and experience very little transference of energy.
- 4 This section about the anchor point has been lengthy. It's probably the least known way to move in a positive direction when we're in reaction; hence more detail in this section than in the other sections.