

Responding to Emotional or Physical Pain

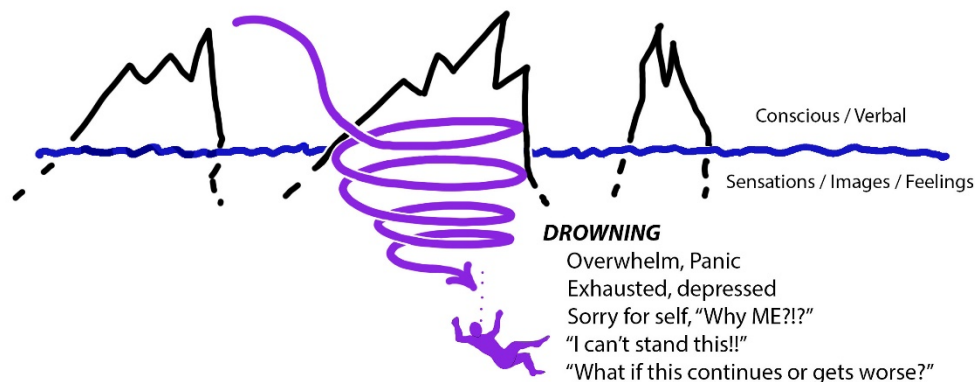
Blocking / Drowning / Letting Go / Turning Toward

by Dave Potter

The two most typical responses to significant pain, whether primarily physical or emotional, are **Blocking** and **Drowning**. In “**Blocking**”, we push away or deny our discomfort by numbing or pushing through it using force of will, by distracting ourselves or staying busy, convincing ourselves we don't have a problem, and/or by self-medicating with food, alcohol, or drugs. This “solution” is problematic in itself and is ultimately unsatisfactory, not just because of unwanted side-effects of our solution, but because nothing has been done to resolve the underlying cause of the pain:

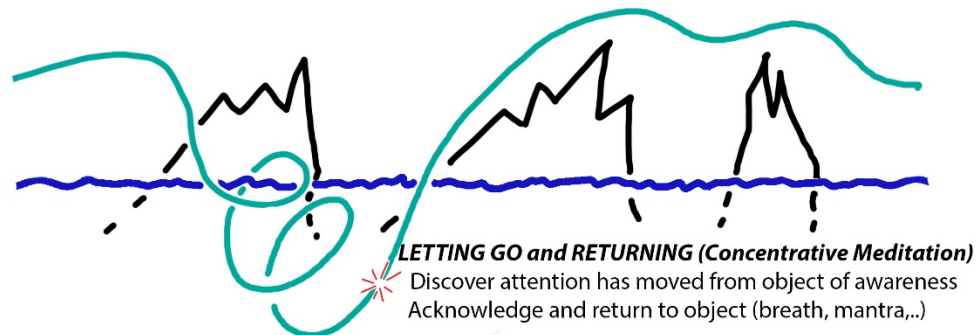


The second most typical response, “**Drowning**”, is not a conscious choice, but the effect of not having sufficient resources to deal with the painful condition. In Drowning, we are consumed by the difficulty: overwhelmed with the discomfort and its associated fears and/or judgments. Accompanying the physical and/or emotional pain often come feelings of helplessness and judgment (“I can’t stand this!”, “What if this continues or gets worse?”, “How could they/I have been so stupid?!?”, etc.). In the end, we can find ourselves feeling hopeless and powerless about how to take care of our own pain.



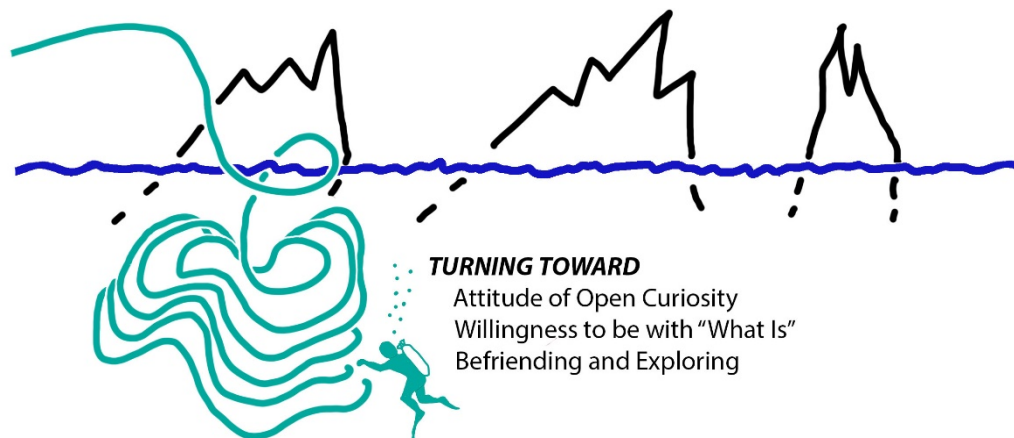
Often, it’s not just blocking or drowning, but a swinging from one to the other. For instance, after a period of overwhelm (*drowning*), there can be a retreat into eating or self-medicating (*blocking*), which is only effective temporarily, after which another round of overwhelming emotion begins (*drowning*), and when that gets to be too much, there’s escape with distraction (*blocking*), and so on. This can be a never-ending cycle.

So far in this course, when some difficulty presents itself during meditation in the form of a thought, emotion, or physical sensation, we simply acknowledge it and then “firmly but gently” return to the object of awareness (for instance, breath in the sitting meditation). This is similar to other meditative disciplines such as TM (Transcendental Meditation) or Christian centering prayer, where there is a return to silently repeating the mantra or prayer when something interrupts it. For the purposes of our illustration, we could call this “**Letting Go and Returning**”:



This approach strengthens grounding, stability and resilience, and can lead to very pleasant, even blissful states of absorption. And if the acknowledgment is done in a truly non-reactive way, and with a brief excursion exploring the difficult area, the difficulty may actually shift or dissolve. But if it is a long-standing pattern, the underlying dynamics remain in place, to be encountered at another time, strong as ever.

There is another approach, which we'll call “**Turning Toward**”. This is a powerful method, but it is deeply counter-intuitive, because the last thing we think we want to do is to move closer to what's been troubling us. Instead of moving away from the difficulty that has arisen, we move toward it. Although such an exploration might sound scary and uncomfortable, this is a gentle process, and is done in a special way, one that draws on the skills of awareness and non-judgment that you have been strengthening so far in this course.



In “**Turning Toward**”, there is an attitude of open curiosity and a willingness to be with and explore what is being encountered, even if it is uncomfortable. A surprising and counter-intuitive result of staying with something in this way is that the “I've got to get out of here” component of the discomfort lessens, and sometimes even disappears, even while staying in contact with it, and a successful encounter of this type can sometimes unravel long-standing problematic patterns.

“Turning Toward” difficult emotions or sensations in a way that is non-reactive and productive is an art in itself and merits some study and practice. Of course, it's not always possible in terms of timing and setting to engage in this kind of exploration, and it may be appropriate, if possible, to set aside the difficult sensation or emotion, until there is time and there are resources to deal with the difficulty (which might be a healthy form of “blocking”).

The [“Turning Toward” meditations](#) and informal practices described in the course are an adaptation of Vidyamala Burch’s “Five-Step” model, and they guide you in explorations of physical and emotional difficulties in a way that brings in personal resources to help keep you grounded as you practice this approach.

There are a number of other approaches which involve a “turning toward” our inner landscape, including [RAIN](#) (as taught by Tara Brach), [Soften-Soothe-Allow](#) (as taught by Kristin Neff), and [Focusing](#) (as taught by Ann Weiser Cornell). Of all of these methods, the most sophisticated and complete method I know of is Focusing. It is well worth learning and Ann has some great resources, including some excellent online trainings. Becoming completely comfortable and skilled with Focusing takes significant time and work, but if you are interested in exploring it, see [Inner Listening: An Introduction to Focusing](#).