

Vulnerability & Kindness

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In Reflective Meditation we invite students to talk about their actual experiences in meditation --in as much detail as feels right, to talk about what happened as honestly as they can. Talking honestly about meditative experience is vulnerable and entangled with what we hold dear, what matters most to us, and how we regard ourselves and the lives we have created. This is what we uncover when we allow our lives into our meditation and describe this to others.

We rarely have the ideal meditation we wish we had. We labor under many ideas of what we think are good, skillful or spiritual meditations, often not fully aware of these ideals. We rarely reach this high bar. Our meditations often contain the painful, messy stuff of our lives.

When we reflect upon our meditation, we reveal our inner life to ourselves. We'll feel raw when we touch the places that hurt inside of us, the messiness, the places where we do not meet our own mark and the ways we feel inadequate. It takes both trust and confidence to allow others to see this. We best develop relationships with people who hold our vulnerability and pain with care.

Vulnerable could be another translation of *dukkha*. *Dukkha* includes experiences that are "hard to bear." Commonly translated as suffering – though often more subtle – it is more like things are not quite right or how you wish they were. Like a "wobbly wheel." Our inner experience is best touched with tenderness, yet we so habitually treat it with harshness and fear the same from others. Vulnerability and pain can't be "fixed" away. This knowledge is the First Ennobling Truth in Buddhism.

Shame often accompanies vulnerability. Shame is often felt in our body, like a wrenching in the gut or a stab in the heart. Or maybe like a dream segment where you're caught in a crowd with no clothes on, naked. Often shame is accompanied by a false certainty of "I am rotten at the core and this is now exposed". Shame is excruciating, it can feel life threatening.

Avoiding vulnerability is instinctual, but is only a short-term fix. Honestly exploring our pain and vulnerability is difficult and subtle. It takes much more than a simple decision to turn towards vulnerability. Perhaps a more fruitful direction is to become more aware of the ways we avoid it, along with being honest with ourselves about how much we can tolerate. Care for ourselves by not pushing ourselves too hard.

Vulnerability and shame are hard look at. However, they are rich with views about the self – how you think you appear, how you imagine others are judging you, how you think you should be, and much more.

The word vulnerable comes from the Latin "vulnerabilis" meaning "wounding" or "injurious". With the addition of the suffix "ability", we have the word "vulnerability". While this word refers to a susceptibility to wounding, might we instead focus on developing the ability to

endure, soften and learn from our emotional, physical and existential fragility? Learning to sit with our vulnerability and that of others is healing, a gift of kindness and care. Though it's counter-intuitive, being more vulnerable makes you less scared. When there's less to hide, you're freer.