

THE GIFTS OF TRAUMA

When it comes to trauma, the best medicine is love. Psychological wounds, knots, and contractions—even the psyche itself—respond much more effectively to love than they do to force or judgement. In this regard, self-love is not frivolous or indulgent, but actually necessary to heal trauma. Incredible healing comes when we combine mindfulness with self-compassion, and when we practice yoga well, it is a direct, embodied form of self love. Self-soothing is one way we can use love as a remedy to fear. Kind words, embracing our own body, a gentle voice, a warm bath, a walk in nature—opportunities to engage in soothing thoughts and actions are all around us. For years I wore soft fabrics and velvet shirts just so that I'd be more inclined to rub my arms and embrace myself.

When I teach psychologically informed asana classes, I begin with different versions of the Mountain pose that yoga classes often start with. Instead of holding hands in prayer in front of their chest, I have people explore the pose with their arms in a self-hugging position or with their hands resting gently on their belly. Even simple changes like this can create a stable, loving, and self-soothing atmosphere in relationship to our body.

Most people who have been traumatized are surprised to learn that their trauma can also be an asset. To be specific, the more we face our trauma, the more wisdom, transformation, and opening we gain. If we pay attention to trauma and the gifts it brings, the gifts have a chance to flourish in us. Here are four such gifts that yoga and psychotherapy can help to transform:

Empathy

If we can keep our hearts open even as they are breaking, we become better able to feel and connect with others and their suffering. People who have suffered from trauma can often access great empathy for the suffering of others. With the requisite training and inner work, psychotherapists and yoga teachers who have experienced trauma can learn to establish and maintain healthy boundaries with clients, which will actually allow them to activate their empathy and become more permeable without getting overwhelmed by others' suffering. This balance is crucial to prevent overwhelm and additional wounding.

Sensitivity

Understandably, people who have experienced sympathetic/hyperarousal symptoms for much of their lives tend to be hypersensitive. With yoga and psychological inquiry, hypersensitivity transforms into energetic awareness. This can feel psychic at times, but it's actually quite natural, like the phenomenon of receiving a phone call from a friend you were just thinking about. Someone with heightened sensitivity has the ability to attune to the energy of others and the physical space they share. Like empathy, this level of sensitivity empowers our ability to connect. Working through trauma allows us to harness this unique gift and benefit anyone we choose to encounter.

Spiritual Transformation

Trauma often breaks people open at an early age. It leaves them with fundamental questions about love, connection, suffering, the meaning of life, healing, and service. In this way, trauma opens our hearts to spiritual longing. My teacher Lee Lozowick wrote a wonderful prayer: "Please give me a wound of love that only God can heal." Trauma can leave us feeling overly

porous, but this permeability can offer us more doorways into our own embodiment as well as the mystical states offered in yoga and meditation. Again, committing to the necessary inner work enables us to access this profound gift of trauma without succumbing to the popular pitfall of spiritual bypassing.

Healing

So many of our greatest teachers and leaders have experienced some type of trauma in their lives. It actually seems rare to me that people enter the path of yoga or psychological inquiry with a healthy, intact, and supportive childhood. According, the commitment to our own healing allows us to offer the same to others. Countless people come to yoga through extreme circumstances—chronic illness, accidents, severe injuries, and addictions. Yoga can be incredibly powerful medicine in this way, and it enables these people to communicate yoga’s potential when they themselves become teachers. The wounded healer is such an important archetype for our time, and it’s paramount that those who suffer trauma understand that recovery and empowerment are possible. As Peter Levine writes, “Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence.”

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