

Healing Your Mother Wound

By embracing your mother wound as your yoga, you transform what has been a hindrance in your life into a teacher of the heart.



IF YOU CHOOSE to follow the path of meditation, you are likely to encounter what are sometimes referred to as your “karmic knots”—those physical and emotional traumas you have accumulated throughout your lifetime. For instance, when you sit in meditation for a lengthy period, physical tensions in your body caused by stress or old injuries may manifest as a stabbing pain between the shoulder blades, an aching neck, or throbbing legs. Similarly, all your unfinished psychological issues will appear either as physical pain or other body sensations, intense emotions, voices, or as disturbing images that arise seemingly from nowhere. There is no way to avoid these experiences, nor should you. By allowing these sensations and emotions full expression while mindfully paying attention to them, you become free of them. The release of these knots can be

described as an unwinding that allows the difficult experience to complete itself. There is no rushing this process, nor knowing when it will be over.

There is one category of karmic knot that may be especially hard for you to deal with, as it is for many people. This is the emotional—some would say psychological—trauma that may have occurred within your family of origin. It may involve your mother, father, or both. This trauma may have been caused by a parent who was absent or overbearing, who committed inappropriate actions or failed to take positive action, or who took too little or too much interest in you. Or it may have been the interactions between your parents that was traumatizing to you. In meditation it is all grist for the mill of mindfulness.

A trauma involving the mother or father is sometimes referred to as a “wound” because it damages the body-mind, needs proper healing, and often leaves a scar or weakness in your body or emotional makeup. No wound is more charged for both men and women than the mother wound. Your relationship with your mother or whoever provided your “mothering” is the primary relationship in your development, and it inevitably conditions much of your life. It is easy to assume that if you had some difficulty in this relationship you have outgrown it, but do not be too sure. In my experience as a Dharma teacher, I have been surprised to discover how often yogis of both genders and all ages report being overwhelmed by unresolved feelings about their mothers. If you don’t acknowledge and make peace with these feelings, then she is forced to stay caught forever in your mind and heart as a negative “mother image,” preventing the possibility of an authentic relationship.

Many times I have listened to yogis—men as well as women—tell heart-rending stories of disinterest, inappropriate entanglement, or devastating disapproval from their mothers of such magnitude that they are still distorting the yogis’ lives. “What am I to

do?” they ask, “How do I stop getting caught?” The good news is that any trauma, including the mother wound, can become part of your mindfulness practice, but the bad news is you cannot avoid the suffering this mindfulness will encounter.

Yoga of the Mother Wound

THE DHARMA teaches us that while you are on the cushion all thoughts and feelings can be received and worked with mindfully. There is a series of techniques and reflections you can use to practice what I call the “yoga of the mother wound” to transform what has been a hindrance in your life into a teacher of the heart. “Transform” does not mean to fix or make go away whatever trauma and scars you may be carrying from childhood; instead, you slowly develop a new relationship with your difficulty, such that it is no longer a controlling factor in your life. What may seem like an intractable wound may even become a point of inspiration and deep understanding for you.

In one sense it is radical to think that what has injured you is an opportunity that contains the seeds of your liberation. But not so in another, for two of the valuable ingredients you need for a strong practice are focused attention and intense energy. Any highly charged, unresolved issue from your past can offer you both of these ingredients.

So, how do you make a deeply emotional wound your yoga? You begin by staying alert to those times you find yourself clinging, constricted from aversion, or caught in wanting in some manner connected to difficulties with your mother. You remind yourself to treat this difficult memory or emotion as your yoga practice. Your intention is to become more flexible in your emotions, to let loose of anger and defensiveness, and to stop suppressing your feelings.

Just as each posture in hatha yoga is a physical form to help your body find flexibility, so it is with how you begin to treat strong emotions around your mother. I mean this quite literally. In hatha yoga, you learn to hold a particular pose in a relaxed manner; after that, it is

the form of the pose that stretches you. As with the yoga of the mother wound, it is just the same; it becomes your emotional yoga. Each time you encounter the tension, you identify it as being a particular form that has appeared in the mind: It may be a memory, a current frustration, or a sense that you lack the ability to achieve something at present because of how the past has molded you. You stay mindful of the shape of the experience, noticing the pain and any resistance that arises. Meet these feelings with compassion, equanimity, and loving-kindness—it does not matter if the thoughts and feelings are dark and unseemly. This is the yoga of softening the heart, surrendering to what’s true in the moment. Despite the discomfort it may be causing, you can be with whatever is arising in your mind. It is only a thought that is emotionally loaded, which in time will pass.

When you practice mindfulness of thoughts and emotions, you are practicing what the Buddha taught as the “third foundation of mindfulness.” Mindfulness practice is nonjudgmental; therefore, you need not feel guilt or shame over any emotions or thoughts that arise. By repeatedly staying with difficult feelings and body sensations, your perspective of the past shifts. You become far less reactive and more flexible in your emotional responses. It is not that your history is rewritten, but rather that the self experiencing that history is transformed.

When a trauma first presents itself, your feelings may not be at all clear. However, all emotions are felt in the body, so if you stay with your body sensations, they can bring you into direct contact with feelings and help you identify them. Remember in doing this practice that you are not claiming that your memories or feelings are the absolute factual and unbiased truth about the past. Rather it is your actual experience of the moment that is the object of your mindfulness, not your old stories or your interpretation of how your childhood was supposed to be.

You may have certain hidden misperceptions, which will hinder you in treating the mother wound as your yoga. One error

in perception is thinking it possible to have been a child without having received wounding experiences. Learning to live life hurts all children. Some amount of wounding is inevitable and in a certain sense necessary. It is the severity of the trauma, the context of the wound, and how it is handled that determines whether the mother wound leads to strength and wholeness or ongoing trauma.

You may also secretly believe that your wound is ugly, something to be ashamed of. But ask, do the wounds of your friends make them any less attractive? Are you not inspired when they handle them in a courageous manner? Why would it not be the same for you? If there is some part of you that you find unacceptable, make it the object of your loving-kindness practice. Above all, watch for the misperception that without realizing it, you are wanting the past to be other than it was. This is the most insidious form of wanting mind; it is absolute delusion.

The Four Functions of Mothering

YOU CAN BRING more clarity to your mother wound by reflecting specifically on what mothering means to you. There are four basic functions of mothering—nurturing, protecting, empowering, and initiating—and a trauma can occur in any of them. Although they are interconnected, it helps to examine them separately in order to clarify the trauma. Using inquiry into these four functions is most helpful in identifying what you are experiencing in the moments of your daily life as well as during meditation.

Doing inquiry as part of your yoga of the mother wound is not the same as psychological or therapeutic work. When you use reflection in this manner, you have to beware of getting caught in the story or lost in thinking, or embracing the idea of being a victim and assigning blame. Through practicing mindfulness, compassion, and loving-kindness, you develop the four mothering capacities within yourself. The practice of developing these inner capacities is slow, but the effect is strong and easily felt.

Keep in mind that “fathering” also involves these same four functions, with

some differences. Ideally these functions are shared by both parents, with each compensating for the other's weaknesses. If you struggle with a trauma around the father, you can reflect on these same functions, and make your father wound your yoga.

Reflecting on these functions will also help you understand that no woman is only a mother and no man only a father; "mothering" and "fathering" are done by women and men who by their very humanness are less than perfect in what they can give. For many people, this understanding alone is liberating.

If you are a mother or father yourself, you may discover that reflecting on these functions allows you to be more fulfilled as a parent or that your own mother or father wound is healed through your experience of being a parent.

Mother As Nurturer

THE FIRST OF THE four functions of the mother is nurturing, the giving of care that allows for life (symbolized by the mother's milk), which encompasses meeting the wide range of physical and emotional needs a child has in order to grow and develop. You know about a child's needs for food, shelter, medicine, comfort, and relatedness; a child who is not held enough develops into an adult with a range of physical and emotional difficulties, just as an inadequate diet manifests as health problems later in life. But there is a more subtle aspect of nurturing I call "nurturing with joy," which celebrates the existence of the child as a source of delight for the one who is mothering and which manifests in the child and continues into adulthood as a sense of innate worth and spontaneous joy.

If you did not receive sufficient nurturing in childhood, as an adult you may feel an insatiable need, an inability to take joy in others, or a lack of self-worth despite your competency and confidence. These feelings may arise in your relationships as well as when you are alone or on the cushion. You may agonize over your behavior as a parent or in your romantic relationship because of these childhood wounds. You may feel it is simply too late,

that you are forever stuck, broken, mired, or imprisoned in your inadequacy. You may believe your fear of being abandoned or devoured, or your unquenchable neediness will always define you. Never buy such a story or the feelings of despair or anger that come with it, for it is only a story that is being created by your mind.

As you develop mindfulness, you find your capacity to be in the moment includes the ability to nurture yourself and others. The practices of loving-kindness, empathetic joy, and compassion can feed your nourishing capacity. Finding teachers who nourish without creating the codependency of excessive mothering can furnish further inspiration and role modeling. Being mindful of the fear is in itself transforming. Observing the thousands of ways in which you are nurtured and nurture others in the greater community also break up the solidity and credibility of your wound's story. Nurturing, as with all the functions, begins with the mindful intention that this is a value, a particular energetic quality, or manner of relating to yourself and others that you wish to cultivate. By giving up clinging to your agenda that nurturing should be a certain way and instead simply staying with your intention, you slowly develop an inner nurturer. In so doing, you will change both your inadequate feelings and your story.

Mother As Protector

THE SECOND OF the four functions of mothering is protecting. This is the instinctive and cultivated impulse to see that no physical or emotional harm comes to one who is vulnerable. It is symbolized by the warrior or guardian spirit. A child needs to be protected from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, and from the threat of all three. Ironically, the first persons a child has to be protected from are the mother and father and their destructive impulses. These destructive impulses might take the form of excessive anger or emotional instability, for instance.

There is a subtle aspect of protecting energy that gives the child the incredible gift of feeling intrinsically

safe, a feeling of trust in life. Unfortunately, quite frequently a child must try to flourish in a home environment that does not feel safe, even though no overt harm is done. As an adult the individual will often be at a loss to explain the unsafe feelings that plague them.

If you did not receive sufficient protection as a child, as an adult you may feel that there is "no one in your corner." You may have a memory of some traumatic event or environment that recurs during meditation. You may have developed an elaborate compensatory behavior pattern for your anxieties. You may be confused about the discrepancy between your family's "factual history" of your childhood versus the feelings you remember having as a child. For these reasons, in making the mother wound your practice, you focus on the feelings arising at present. They can be worked with, released, and transformed. The past is not so easy to work with. It is comprised of outer and inner events that are now immutable, hazy in recollection, or maybe even inaccurate.

There is no "magic bullet" that will dissipate all your past trauma or create instant feelings of safety. But if you continually bring attention to feelings of fear, loss, and confusion as they are arising and receive those feelings with compassion, they will begin to lose their grip. Gradually you will discover that they come less often, with less intensity, and stay for shorter periods of time.

Mother As Empowerer

THE THIRD OF THE four functions of the mother is empowering the child, encouraging and teaching independence and self-confidence. It is symbolized by the queen, who elevates her subjects and facilitates the beginning of their coming into their own power. The mother uses her royal power over the child with fairness, patience, generosity, and a commitment to preparing her child to become her equal or even to surpass her. The ability to perform this function comes from the mother's own self-confidence and love and from embracing the view that it is her sacred duty to empower

er her young. Empowering is achieved by encouraging self-reliance and providing education, discipline, and learning opportunities for the child. You are empowered to try, therefore to make mistakes and still be fully accepted. Your interests are met with enthusiasm; the importance and joy of hard work are recognized and encouraged. Failure is treated lightly, while curiosity and integrity are held in high regard.

In fairy tales, when the queen neglects or is afraid to allow the young their power, the kingdom becomes ill and languishes. In real life, this is seen in the mother who neglects or is even afraid of her child becoming powerful, so that a host of problems develop through neglect, constant criticism, or creating dependency.

Sometimes because of over-identification, the mother is willing to empower but insists that her child be like her or succeed in ways that satisfy her own ego. This is a false form of empowerment, a subtle form of enslavement.

You may not realize that there is a difference between the functions of nurturing and protecting and that of empowering, but the difference is crucial. With nurturing and protecting the mother is doing for you, whereas the empowering function allows you to find your own power through doing for yourself. With your mother's blessing, you become independent and self-confident.

If you struggle with empowerment, then you may lament your anxiety and ineptitude, your perfectionism, or your unwillingness to try new things. Struggles with self-confidence will be visible in your meditation. It is as though a blessing was withheld, and it is debilitating. Slowly, through your yoga of being fully mindful of the wound, you learn how to give yourself the blessing of unconditional acceptance. By practicing being with things as they are, you may discover that all your life you have secretly been demanding that things be other than they are, and it has stopped your growth. You may discover that the empowering mother you have internalized is always critical, fearful, filled with aversion. Meditation teaches you that this voice is mere think-

ing, characterized in Buddhism as Mara, the one who erodes one's power through doubt, fear, and greed.

As your self-acceptance grows, you will discover that what needs to and can change about you will do so. This happens both because you have acquired the power to initiate change and because you have the capacity to respond to life in a manner that allows the ensuing experiences to reshape you. Those things that cannot change then become your yoga. In time you realize that when consciously worked with, the limitations in your life can become the gateways to freedom. You start to discover that dis-identifying with the drama of your own story leads to a state of happiness and peace that is not dependent on the conditions of your life being a certain way.

Mother As Initiator

THE FOURTH FUNCTION of the mother is initiating, and it is the most difficult to understand. It is through acts of initiation that you come to feel as though you are a valuable and welcome member of your family. As you develop, it is this function that provides the inner feeling that your life has meaning, and by the teenage years you understand that you have the right to become the full expression of your own unique life. It is also the initiation function that permits, accepts, and celebrates your leaving home to start your own life.

A girl achieves the inner experience of womanhood by way of initiation by the mother, who does this through how she treats her own womanhood and that of her daughter. The father plays a key role in initiation as well by recognizing the girl's power and her natural right to become a woman. For a boy, it is the father who is the primary initiator into manhood, but it is the mother who recognizes that the boy is leaving her side to enter the company of men. She signals that this is appropriate, not a reason for guilt, and she supports his bringing "mother replacements" in the way of female friends and girlfriends into her house. In welcoming them she acknowledges his independence.

When initiation occurs in a timely and clear manner, it is a beautiful process, though often painful for the parent. Most initiation takes place through symbols, rituals, and unspoken behavior. When it does not occur, there is a sense of guilt, of staying a youth, of not knowing or not feeling entitled to one's place in life. For a mother to be effective in providing initiation, she must have somehow received or found her own. It is the most selfless of all the aspects, for she is encouraging a separation that leaves her without. This initiating power is associated with the shaman, the goddess, the magus, and the medicine woman.

In seeking initiation you may be attracted to teachers who claim superior understanding, who create an impression of having vast authority, thus signaling what is often a false claim that they can initiate. You may frantically want answers in your life, not understanding that initiatory power will come to you if you treat your questions as sacred. It is tempting to surrender your power to a teacher rather than seek a teacher who will initiate you so that you gain self-empowerment.

You may be caught in wanting to have energetic experiences on the cushion as a form of initiation. You may simply want something to happen in your life that signals your aliveness, meaning, and place. It is a call for initiation. It is much the same with teenagers who get tattoos, pierce their bodies, form cliques, posses, or gangs, and carelessly risk their lives and use drugs or fundamentalism of one sort or another to initiate themselves.

It is not realistic to expect a parent to provide all the initiation functions for a child. A parent only begins the process of initiation, which can be viewed as a series of lifelong developmental processes that are actualized through the use of rituals and sacred space by various spiritual and societal leaders. If you were fortunate, what you did not receive from a mother or father, you might have received from grandparents, a caring relative, a teacher, or youth leader. Your experience of the first three functions may have been less than "good enough," therefore you may never have had the momentum to seek

initiation.

Likewise, your mother and your father may have suffered from their own lack of initiation such that providing initiation was simply far beyond them, even though they were good parents in other ways.

Initiation begins with finding an identity within the family and community, then switches to initiation into wholeness within your inner being, and culminates in a sense of unity with life itself. Each stage of initiation is more subtle than the previous one, and the unhealed emotional wounds become more treacherous to deal with at each level. It is never too late for you to experience any of the stages of initiation in your life. Both through your own explorations and by working with those who act as elders, you can achieve a deeper symbolic relationship with yourself and life.

Mindfulness & the Mother Wound

THERE ARE A SERIES of reflections that may help you develop your yoga of the mother wound. For instance, throughout human history, the tasks of mothering were shared by members of the extended family, tribal elders, and family friends. The community had rituals that helped in the process, including those that taught you to take comfort in the earth or nature as the Great Mother. Unfortunately, nowadays there is often only a mother and father to do all that needs to be done. Nor is there much use of nature as mother or of group ritual. Is it any wonder that your mother may have struggled with some of these aspects of mothering?

No matter how difficult your relationship with your mother, there is still the singular fact that she carried you to birth. The gift of birth forms its own strong bond. Likewise, there is within your mother experience a level of sufficiency that brought you to this moment. Your having this awareness and capacity means that the mothering you received was good enough for you to go on from there to find your own wholeness in life.

Maybe the most useful reflection is to realize the gift of the negative. This points to the understanding that what

was not given or was poorly given is also valuable because of what it elicits from you. Much of your wisdom comes from having to cope with the pain and uncertainty you experienced as a child. The negative mothering experiences helped form your priorities, taught you what was important, and gave you the motivation to be different as a parent yourself. They are a critical part of your inheritance; they forced you to know yourself and to develop a sense of right and wrong.

If you do not receive the negative as a gift, if you see it only as suffering, you reduce your relationship to life and distort the richness of your life experiences. Moreover, you are far less likely to make your life all it can be. It is this failure to manifest your own values that would be the true tragedy. This understanding is a key to your own empowerment. It allows the yoga to transform your mother wound into an enhanced sense of aliveness and freedom. Can you feel this potential in your heart? Can you cultivate this understanding with your own intuition?

As the yoga of the mother wound begins to stretch both your heart and mind, more insights become available to you. One is that much of what you took so personally is in fact quite impersonal. What was done and not done to you or for you arose out of a set of conditions in your mother's life. You need not carry the actions caused by those conditions as a personal burden. Therefore, the wounds you once thought to be intransigent are accessible and subject to change. The wounds do not disappear, but they lose much of their charge. They fail to hook your mind and imprison your heart.

Keep in mind that meditation is not psychotherapy. These words are the offering of a meditation teacher, not a therapist. In mindfulness practice, unlike therapy, the specific content of afflictive emotions are not the focus of your attention.

Instead, the focus is on the mind state that is arising. The teachings are concerned with finding freedom from your wanting mind. They guide you to discover for yourself that happiness is not

dependent on the external conditions of your present, past, or future life. You may well greatly benefit from working with a therapist as a supplement to your practice, reflecting the principle that "you must first have a self in order to give up attachment to it."

If you make the mother wound your yoga, you may encounter a trauma that is not resolvable in the context of daily life goals. Such extreme experiences are often viewed as the "sacred wound." A sacred wound is that trauma which occurred so early in your life or was so deep that it forces you into the spiritual life because it is not possible for you to find the peace you seek in any other way. Because of the motivation it provides, it is viewed as a gift, though a costly one that renders many of life's ordinary rewards unsatisfactory and can lead you to perform unskillful actions.

When you decide to embrace the mother wound as your yoga and make it your teacher, a miraculous and unexpected event occurs. As you find your freedom from being captured by the wound, you also give your mother back her own life. Rather than simply being a label, a set of responsibilities called "mother," she is allowed to be a woman, a human being with her own story, her own gains and losses, and a life trajectory separate from yours. It is not that she ceases to be your mother, but that she becomes everything else she always was, except in the minds of her children. ■

The author wishes to acknowledge that the mothering functions described in this article are rooted in the archetypal psychology of C. G. Jung and his successors, including Robert Moore and Joseph Henderson, M.D. "Dharma Wisdom" columnist Phillip Moffitt is a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers' Council in Woodacre, California, and the founder and president of the Life Balance Institute. He teaches vipassana meditation at Turtle Island Yoga Center in San Rafael, California. For a retreat schedule, check www.lifebalance.org.