

Finding True Refuge

by Tara Brach



Imagine you just found out that your child was suspended from school. Imagine your boss just told you to “start over” on a report you’ve worked on for a month. Imagine you just realized you’ve been on Facebook for three hours and have finished off a box of cookies in the process. Imagine your partner just confessed to an affair.

It’s hard to hang out with the truth of what we’re feeling. We may sincerely intend to pause and be mindful whenever a crisis arises or whenever we feel stuck and confused, but our conditioning to react, escape, or become possessed by emotion is very strong.

Yes, there are times when being present feels out of reach or too much to bear. There are times when a false refuge can relieve stress, give us a breather, and help lift our mood. But when we’re not connected to the clarity and kindness of presence, we’re all too likely to fall into more misunderstanding, more conflict, and more distance from others and from our own heart.

About 12 years ago, a number of Buddhist teachers began to share a new mindfulness tool that offered in-the-trenches support for working with intense and difficult emotions. The tool is called RAIN (an acronym for the four steps of the process), and it can be accessed in almost any place or situation. RAIN directs our attention in a clear, systematic way that cuts through confusion and stress. The steps give us somewhere to turn in a painful moment, and as we call on them more regularly, they strengthen our capacity to come home to our deepest truth. Like the clear sky and

clean air after a cooling rain, this mindfulness practice brings a new openness and calm to our daily lives.

I have taught RAIN to thousands of students, clients, and mental health professionals. I’ve also made it a core practice in my own life. Here are the four steps of RAIN, presented in the way I’ve found most helpful:

R
Recognize what is happening
A
Allow life to be just as it is
I
Investigate with kindness
N
Non-identification

RAIN directly deconditions the habitual ways in which you resist your moment-to-moment experience. It doesn’t matter whether you resist “what is” by lashing out in anger, by having a cigarette, or by getting immersed in obsessive thinking. Your attempt to control the life within and around you actually cuts you off from your own heart and from this living world. RAIN begins to undo these unconscious patterns as soon as we take the first step.

Recognize what is happening.

Recognition is seeing what is true in your inner life. It starts the minute you focus your attention on whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations are arising right here and now. As your attention settles and opens, you will discover that some parts of your experience are easier to connect with than others. For example, you might recognize anxiety right away, but if you focus on your worried thoughts, you might not notice the actual sensations of squeezing, pressure, or tightness arising in the body. On the other hand, if your body is gripped by jittery nervousness, you might not recognize that this

physical response is being triggered by your underlying belief that you are about to fail. You can awaken recognition simply by asking yourself: “What is happening inside me right now?” Call on your natural curiosity as you focus inward. Try to let go of any preconceived ideas and instead listen in a kind, receptive way to your body and heart.

Allow life to be just as it is.

Allowing means “letting be” the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations you discover. You may feel a natural sense of aversion, of wishing that unpleasant feelings would go away, but as you become more willing to be present with “what is,” a different quality of attention will emerge. Allowing is intrinsic to healing, and realizing this can give rise to a conscious intention to “let be.”

Many students I work with support their resolve to “let be” by mentally whispering an encouraging word or phrase. For instance, you might feel the grip of fear and whisper “yes” or experience the swelling of deep grief and whisper “yes.” You might use the words “this too” or “I consent.” At first you might feel you’re just “putting up” with unpleasant emotions or sensations. Or you might say “yes” to shame and hope that it will magically disappear. In reality, we have to consent again and again. Yet even the first gesture of allowing, simply whispering a phrase like “yes” or “I consent” begins to soften the harsh edges of your pain. Your entire being is not so rallied in resistance. Offer the phrase gently and patiently, and in time your defenses will relax, and you may feel a physical sense of yielding or opening to waves of experience.

Investigate with Kindness.

At times, simply working through the first two steps of RAIN is enough to provide relief and reconnect you with presence. In other cases, however, the simple intention to recognize and allow is not enough. For instance, if you are in the thick of a divorce, about to lose a job, or dealing with a life-threatening illness, you may be easily overwhelmed by intense feelings. Because these feelings are triggered over and over again—you

get a phone call from your soon-to-be ex, your bank statement comes, you wake up to pain in the morning—your reactions can become very entrenched. In such situations, you may need to further awaken and strengthen mindful awareness with this step, the I of RAIN.

Investigation means calling on your natural interest—the desire to know truth—and directing a more focused attention to your present experience. Simply pausing to ask, “What is happening inside me?” might initiate recognition, but with investigation you engage in a more active and pointed kind of inquiry. You might ask yourself: “What most wants attention?” “How am I experiencing this in my body?” or “What am I believing?” or “What does this feeling want from me?” You might contact sensations of hollowness or shakiness, and then find a sense of unworthiness and shame buried in these feelings. Unless they are brought into consciousness, these beliefs and emotions will control your experience and perpetuate your identification with a limited, deficient self.

When I first shared the RAIN acronym with students, many of them had problems with the investigation step. Some said things like “When fear arises, my investigation just takes me into thinking about what is causing it and how to feel better.” Others reported, “I can’t stay in my body long enough to investigate where an emotion lives in me.” For many, investigation triggered judgment: “I know I’m supposed to be investigating this shame, but I hate it. . . and I hate myself for having it.”

All these responses reflect our natural resistance to feeling uncomfortable and unsafe: thoughts swarm in our head, we leave our body, we judge what is happening. What my students were telling me was that RAIN was missing a key ingredient. In order for investigation to be healing and freeing, we need to approach our experience with an intimate quality of attention. We need to offer a gentle welcome to whatever surfaces. This is why I use the phrase “Investigate with kindness.” Without this heart energy, investigation cannot penetrate; there is not enough safety and openness for real contact.

Imagine that your child comes home in tears after being bullied at school. In order to find out what happened and how your child is feeling, you

have to offer a kind, receptive, gentle attention. Bringing that same kindness to your inner life makes inquiry, and ultimately healing, possible.

Realize non-identification.

The lucid, open, and kind presence evoked in the R, A, and I of RAIN leads to the N: the freedom of Non-identification, and the realization of what I call natural awareness or natural presence. Non-identification means that your sense of who you are is not fused with or defined by any limited set of emotions, sensations, or stories. When identification with the small self is loosened, we begin to intuit and live from the openness and love that express our natural awareness. The first three steps of RAIN require some intentional activity. In contrast, the N of RAIN expresses the result: a liberating realization of your natural awareness. There's nothing to do for this last part of RAIN—realization arises spontaneously, on its own. We simply rest in natural awareness.

Guidelines for Practicing with RAIN

You can practice the steps of RAIN during a formal meditation whenever a difficult emotion arises, or you can call on it in the midst of daily life. Either way, the key is to be conscious and purposeful as you initiate the practice, knowing that you are offering a committed presence to what is true, here and now. Here are some more specific suggestions that have emerged as I've taught RAIN:

Pause.

Before you begin RAIN, take the time to pause. The pause might be in the form of a physical "time-out" that removes you from immediate external triggers. More importantly, it is an internal "time-out" from the reactive tumble of thoughts. In a pause, you intentionally create a space in which you set aside distractions and pay attention. This willingness to deliberately interrupt habitual activity and dedicate time to being present will lend increased focus and clarity to your practice.

Give yourself the support of a regular meditation practice.

A regular meditation practice directly awakens the key ingredients in RAIN—mindfulness, openheartedness, and inquiry. During my evening walk, the skills developed through past meditation training served me in several key ways. My practice in being mindful of thinking helped me to be aware of my thoughts without getting lost in them. Similarly, my practice in bringing presence to unpleasant experience allowed me to open to the raw feelings and sensations in my body. Maybe most important, my practice with awakening self-compassion, a key element in my own meditative path and in my teachings, enabled me to bring a warm, intimate attention to the onslaught of judgment and blame.

Cultivate flexibility.

You have a unique body and mind, with a particular history and conditioning. No one can offer you a formula for navigating all situations and all states of mind. Only by listening inwardly in a fresh and open way will you discern at any given time what most serves your healing and freedom.

As you practice RAIN, keep in mind that the sequence I've suggested is neither rigid nor necessarily linear; you may need to adapt the order as you attend to your inner experience. You might find, for instance, that as soon as you feel rising anxiety, you recognize it as a familiar inner weather pattern that happens to you and most everyone you know, and hence does not feel so "personal." In moments like these you have already arrived at the N of RAIN; so rather than any continued "doing" such as investigating with kindness, you might simply rest in natural presence. Similarly, you might end your RAIN practice before formally moving through all the steps, or you might cycle through the process again if you encounter something unexpected.

As you listen inwardly to what is needed, you may also feel drawn to weave other forms of meditation into your practice of RAIN. To ground yourself, you might begin with a body-based reflection, yoga, or a walking meditation. If strong

feelings arise in the midst of RAIN, you might take some time to simply focus on your breath. Or you might find that a few minutes of lovingkindness practice help you to bring a gentler and more compassionate attention to investigation. This kind of inner listening and adaptability can help you transform what at first might seem to be a mechanical technique into a creative and vibrant means of awakening on your spiritual path.

Practice with the "small stuff."

The 6th-century Buddhist master Shantideva suggested that by staying present “with little cares, we train ourselves to work with great adversity.” Each time you bring RAIN to a situation that usually causes you to react, you strengthen your capacity to awaken from trance. You might identify in advance what, to you, is chronic “small stuff”—the annoyance that comes up when someone repeats themselves, the restlessness when you are waiting in line, the frustration when you’ve forgotten to pick up something on your shopping list—and commit to pausing and practicing a “light” version of RAIN. By pausing many times throughout the day and bringing an interest and presence to your habitual ways of reacting, your life will become increasingly spontaneous and free.

Seek help.

Practicing RAIN can intensify your emotional experience. If you are concerned that you might become overwhelmed by your feelings, postpone practicing RAIN alone and seek help. Particularly if you are working with post-traumatic stress, it can be important, and even necessary, to have the support of a therapist or a psychologically attuned meditation teacher. The presence of a trusted and experienced person can help you feel safe enough to connect with inner vulnerability and also help you to find relief if what arises feels like “too much.”

Let your senses be a gateway to presence.

The practice of RAIN comes alive as you learn to step out of your thoughts and connect

with your body’s experience. Many people move through daily life obsessed with thoughts and, to varying degrees, dissociated from the felt sense in the body. Strong emotional trauma or wounding makes dissociation from bodily awareness particularly likely. Whether you are working through deep fear and shame or a less acute emotional reaction, your inner freedom will arise from bringing attention to how the experience is expressed in your body. On my evening walk, the pivotal moment came when I could directly feel how layers of judgment, assumed unworthiness, and grief were squeezing my heart.

Be mindful of doubt.

Doubt acts as a main impediment to RAIN and more broadly, to any gateway of true refuge. The Buddha considered doubt (along with clinging and aversion) to be a universal “hindrance” to spiritual freedom. When you are stuck in beliefs like “I’m never going to change,” “I’m not cut out for spiritual practice,” or “Healing and freedom aren’t really possible,” you get stopped in your tracks.

Needless to say, some doubt is healthy, as in “I’m no longer certain this job is in line with my values,” or “Maybe I’ve been the one who is avoiding intimacy,” or “I wonder whether I can trust a spiritual teacher who speaks disrespectfully of other teachers.” Like investigation, healthy doubt arises from the urge to know what is true—it challenges assumptions or the status quo in service of healing and freedom. In contrast, unhealthy doubt arises from fear and aversion, and it questions one’s own basic potential or worth, or the value of another.

When unhealthy doubt arises, let it be the subject of RAIN. It helps to say to yourself, “This is doubt,” consciously acknowledging its presence in your mind. By recognizing and naming doubt when it arises but not judging it, you immediately enlarge your perspective and loosen the bind of trance. If the doubt is persistent, you can deepen presence by regarding it with kindness. Rather than being controlled and perhaps paralyzed by doubt, let it be a call for clear, mindful presence.

Be patient.

Patience gives you joy in the process of awakening. Without patience, you may find yourself at war with your own forgetfulness or reactivity. Long-term meditators or therapy clients often complain, “I’ve been dealing with this same issue for decades.” They are troubled by their “regressions” into old feelings of being worthless or rejected, unsafe or ashamed. Such bouts of trance can be accompanied by desperation and the fear that there will be no end to the cycling of unhealthy patterns of feelings and behaviors. While RAIN reduces the grip of trance, it is rarely a one-shot experience. You may need to go through numerous rounds of RAIN, again and again meeting entrenched patterns of suffering with attention and kindness.

The belief and feeling that “something is wrong with me” was a key theme in my first book, *Radical Acceptance*, and this feeling continues to be part of my life. But my many rounds of meeting it with presence have had an effect: the trance is much more transparent, short-lived, and suffering-free. Often it makes a brief appearance, and then there’s recognition, “Ah, this again...” and a letting go. It’s not that “I” am letting go, but rather the old false sense of self just dissolves when it is seen. What remains is an invigorated realization of the heart-space that holds this life, and a trust in the tender awareness that lives beyond the trance.

Each time you meet an old emotional pattern with presence, your awakening to truth can deepen. There’s less identification with the self in the story and more ability to rest in the awareness that is witnessing what’s happening. You become more able to abide in compassion, to remember and trust your true home. Rather than cycling repetitively through old conditioning, you are actually spiraling toward freedom.

Be sincere.

An attitude of sincerity in approaching spiritual practices like RAIN orients your heart and mind toward freedom. Let yourself recall again and again what for you is “the most important thing.” Perhaps you long to realize the truth of who you are, to love well, to touch peace, or to live more from presence. Whatever you most care about, let this tenderness of heart energize your meditation. The sincerity of your longing will carry you home.

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