

*Warning! This article I wrote with advanced Plum Village practitioners in mind. If you are a beginner or your nervous system is easily overwhelmed, **do not jump directly into overwhelming feelings!***

It was Thay who reminded us that we can use science to deepen our understanding of Buddhism. This is my journey on how I discovered a way to be in touch with the body which works for me. A journey about trauma. A journey of healing.

Ever since I remember I have been driven. There was an urgency in how I rode a bicycle, how I needed to be first in finishing an exam in school, how I made more money than others and earlier started to work at 16 years old. At 19 I drove a company car, at 22 years I bought my house and at 26 had my own company and had a 3 figure salary. So maybe it was no surprise that at 27 I had my first burnout after 10 years of working. This was also the time I first found Plum Village. Now this urge, this volition was applied to the spiritual dimension. I took the 5 mindfulness trainings after hearing about it 12 hours before, I sold my car and house, bought a hut, started wake up sanghas, organised retreats and finally became a monk, when I realised that nobody wanted to create a Plum Village plus / wake up community with a fanatic like myself.

Ofcourse, now without irony, I also see that in me I had a deep wish to connect and felt a deep sense of loneliness and intuitively knew that in order to be really free and happy I first needed to learn to enjoy my own company. And now after 8 years as a monk, I am starting to see some fruits. I now can enjoy drinking a cup of tea.

But this article is about burnout and trauma. And it is very simple and very difficult. The reason why I suffered, why I needed to run, to be so driven, was because I was unable to feel a feeling in the body. That's it. That is why I suffer.

In my journey of discovery I found that words often are very limiting. Yet in poetry sometimes you can say more, as you can say the unsaid. Yet, I also find poetry quite annoying, as most is bad, so forgive me, I do not want to write good poetry, I only want to express myself.

Our raging afflictions
An intense dangerous fire
The heat ready to burn
If you believe it will

The imagined radiance
The nature of a dream
Only our fear towards it
Creates the threat

For how long have I been fooled
Imprisoned and enslaved
in the realms of suffering and darkness

Just, just, because
In the believing it was real
I made it so

In my diary I wrote:

I am a stressed-out, burnout, traumatised monk and I am happy. I found in my burning afflictions the very colors that paint beauty in life. By daring to step into the very unpleasant, life threatening feelings and body sensations I discovered that my beliefs about myself are not true. Not only are they not true, the very nature of this suffering is empty of sustenance. I only believe them into existence and the threat of their existence is the confirmation of the belief.

I have been running all my life, just because I had feelings, that I thought when I would feel them, I would die. Maybe this is the deeper meaning of the first noble truth. Stop running, and start suffering, and experience that you do not die when you feel those feelings. They give the illusion that you die, but you don't. So now when I feel life threatening feelings, I actively feel them and no longer do I have to be afraid of them. No longer do I have to live a life of reactivity because of a feeling. No longer do I have to put the blame on the conditions outside of myself that give rise to a feeling. By allowing feelings to express themselves, they heal and transformation happens at the base.

So what is trauma then? Trauma happens when you experience an intense emotional feeling that you can not handle, the nervous system overloads and the memory gets stored in disconnected fragments, in the body, in the feelings, in the story. Normally a memory has these components and they are connected. When a similar situation occurs the memory gets triggered, but only partly, so for example only the body will respond. In my case the body responds with a burning sensation in my chest, but without any emotional feeling or story. I feel something is wrong, that there is a threat somewhere, but I can not locate it, the mind will then use the current situation and explain why I am feeling this way. For me this would mean for example, this elder brother is dangerous, he will try to manipulate me, he is not to be trusted, he is scheming behind my back, he is the reason I do not feel safe.

Now this brings us to an illusion that many are caught in. We think that our emotions follow the interpretation of the present moment. So intuitively we think. Sense contact leads to perception, leads to feelings. Which implies, if you change your perception, you can change the feeling. Which implies that analysing the content of your mind and getting insight about the working of it leads to transformation of suffering. We then put a lot of emphasis on asking "why is the content of my mind like this?", thinking that an answer will lead to the end of suffering, but it doesn't. Why? Because, sense contact leads to feeling, which conditions our perception. Which they call in neuroscience, the primacy of emotions. Human beings are emotional beings, not rational beings.

Which leads us to the question, what is an emotion. In the book "How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain", Lisa Feldman Barrett writes that sense contact leads to a response in the body, which leads to a perception of these sensations called interoception. The buddha I believe uses the word feelings for this. This interoception then uses the context of the situation to create an emotion. The same interoception of an intense sensation in the stomach, can be interpreted as anxiety in the dentist waiting room and as joyful anticipation on a wedding day. So an emotion has a body part, a feeling part and a context/story part. An emotion is not just the peak experience, like raging anger, despair, etc, but is always there and has a very rich life, which can be very subtle and also very intense. In it you can touch your suffering at any moment. But you can only experience this in the body. And I believe most of us are almost completely disassociated from our bodies. Why? Because the only way to not feel dreadful, threatening feelings is to ignore where they live in the body.

"Now wait, you say, but I do not feel those feelings right now, and what I do not feel, is not there, right? I do not actively ignore those feelings", you might think.

Well, this brings us to how we now think perception works. In neuroscience the popular theory is called predictive coding. This basically explains how the mind is one of the senses. So let me explain by a story. One day I was sitting in the car and far away I saw something lying on the road. "Oh, no, a dead dog", I thought and as I drove closer, I saw that it was a carton box. Now you might think that I always saw a carton box and that I just interpreted it as a dog, until I saw it more clearly. We think that we process all of our sense information and build our reality from that, that we are always in direct contact with reality. But this is not true. Science has proven that the brain would be too slow to respond to the world. A baseball player would not be able to hit the ball if it would rely on processing his sight in order to hit the ball. The tiger would have already jumped on us. Instead how we create reality is by predicting what will happen in the next moment, based on our experience of the past. The brain only has to predict what will change and check with the senses if it conflicts and whether the conflict is important enough and then it will update its prediction. This perfectly explains why we can wake up in a dream and be unable to tell the difference between waking reality and dreaming reality. Our reality is of the nature of a dream limited by sense information. So the main sense of sight, is the mind. If you know how trees look like, you just need a little bit of sight information in order to see a tree in the mind. Predictions are much more energy efficient and quicker, then processing the senses. So when I sat in the car, did I see a dead dog? Yes, I saw a dead dog, until my senses contradicted my prediction enough, which led to a strange feeling, and suddenly I saw a carton box and the mind tried to tell me I always only saw a carton box. Now this brings us to the body and feelings. The mind is perfectly capable of predicting the body, so when you follow the breath, what are you following? I realised that most of the time, I just follow my dream breathe, as I am not that interested in it, as it does not feel very interesting. Ofcourse it does not feel interesting, as I am already predicting the breath, I already know the breath, I touch something dead, something not real. But when I start to really pay attention, deeply focussing on the breath, I can feel that the breath is a whole world with constant changing sensations, completely unknown, completely fascinating, a complete wonder, but this also brings me close to something that I really do not want to feel: My suffering. And we can stay a whole life time practicing with only the mind and the dream body, just so we do not have to touch our suffering.

The moment I get in touch with the body as it is, I also get in touch with the suffering that is stored there and that is conditioning my feelings and my perceptions in every moment. No longer can I predict away my body feelings, and can I ignore what is there and that is freakingly scary. But does it kill me? Even though it feels like I will die if I feel these feelings in the body, I can dip into them and start feeling them.

Part of the defense mechanism is that this suffering in my body I define as not me, as something outside of the self, an unwelcome intruder - not self. But when I deeply start to feel them, I find in them my suffering of the past, I find my 5-year old, my 9-year old, memories come up, intense feelings come up and belatedly I can allow them to express and process them. I realize my suffering is me and that because now I allow myself to feel them, I get access to my body and with it I get access to a wealth of feelings. I realised that I always have felt a bit dead, as if a bit of me was missing. I have found that bit now and I am no longer scared of it. As it is me and needs all my love.

Ah, I forgot about burnout. Burnout is conflicting feelings that demand to be felt, to no longer be ignored, that overwhelm the whole body so I start to listen, it is a wake up call.

So how did I heal my trauma and burnout? Just, be lazy. I took a few weeks, did not take any distractions with me, and just drank tea and sat and walked and allowed myself to be fully bored and always looked for feelings I did not want to feel and then feel them. I looked for sensations in the body and deeply concentrated on them, becoming them, becoming the senses, to aimlessly dwell in the senses and experience whatever is there without trying to solve, without trying to interpret, without trying to push away or pull towards, just drinking a cup of tea. Just being.

The way out is in

The Dharmakaya is the body itself
Radiating mindfulness, feelings, sensations and all objects of mind
In this splendid manifestation mind is formed
What a foolishness then to bring the mind to the body
Or the Dharmakaya itself
You go in the wrong direction
Don't you see
You already come from there
You are already there
You are already home

The Body

To go deeply in the body
You need a still mind
To have a still mind
You need to go deeply into the body
Seek when the mind is agitated where the body is not available
By including the unfelt sensations the mind calms
By resting in the felt body sensations
The unfelt body sensations appear
Resting between the felt and unfelt sensations they connect
And full body awareness arises
The mind revels in dwelling in unison with the body
Arriving home

PS I wrote about this journey especially with advanced practitioners in mind to help you deepen your practice and I really hope this will open doors for you. I hope this will help you find a nourishing, healing breath or step. But also a warning. We can be overwhelmed by intense emotions if we just step into them expecting healing without having solidity. It takes a lot of training to dwell in the body and directly in the sensations without any agenda, without any aim. Especially if you have a nervous system which is easily overloaded, do not jump directly into the body. First find out where it is safe to be in the body, maybe in the hands or feet, then expand that awareness, staying in the zone where discomfort mixes with comfort - neither pleasant, nor too overwhelming. Building up your tolerance. Only if you can stay rooted in the sensations of an overwhelming emotion, and clearly see the refuge in the sensations themselves, seeing that the interpretation of the sensation in the form of feelings,

emotions and stories are just that, limited interpretations that distort the true expression of the sensations in themselves, then it is healing. If you still identify with feelings, emotions and stories and see them as true, stay away from overwhelming feelings, you are not ready yet! Just so you do not retraumatize yourself.

* This part can be deleted for La Thu Lang Mai

PPS In this journey of discovery I found help in different sources. A session with Peter Levine was super helpful in which I discovered with somatic experiencing and how to recognise trauma in the body. Ongoing one on one support by a psychotherapist and a dear brother. The book Trauma and the unbound body from Sarah Blackstone helped to relate to the body differently. Focussing from Eugene Gendlin to help deep listening and healing in pairs. And Bruce Tift's book "Already Free" helped to integrate psychotherapy with Buddhism.