

THE WHITE PERFECTIONIST

Living in the Now

Lesson Five

THE THIRD LAYER

YOUR NEEDS AND EMOTIONS

So here we are at the third layer of the map and the domain of your needs and emotions. This layer of the map borders the centre space, it is the gateway through which you must pass if you are to live fully in the present moment.

The domain of emotions is the domain the ego fears the most. The ego was activated to defend us from emotions that were in danger of overwhelming us as children. As a child you simply did not have the capacity to process painful emotions, and because of that the ego took your inbuilt personality and created patterns of behaviour that kept you at a safe distance from these strong emotions. In other words your ego learnt to build walls around to protect you.

In addition, your caregivers would unconsciously reject you when you exhibited strong emotions that they could not handle, and this rejection felt to you like the equivalent of a baby bird being thrown out of the nest before it had learnt to fly. Put simply this rejection of your emotions threatened your very survival, and you came to the conclusion that strong emotions were not safe things to have.

The link between your emotions and your needs

As a child, you had three survival needs that you needed from your caregivers. These needs were to feel unconditional **attention** and love, physical and emotional **re-assurance** that you were safe, and **acknowledgement** that you were good enough just the way you were.

However, each time your caregivers unconsciously rejected your emotions, this threatened your survival needs. In other words each time you expressed emotion that was rejected you did not feel loved, you did not feel safe and you did not feel good enough. Your ultimate conclusion was that the simplest way to get your needs met was to suppress your capacity to feel strong emotion, or in some cases feel anything at all.

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To be human is to feel, and the more mindful awareness of our direct experience we develop, the greater our capacity to be non-reactive and to remain present. Non-reactivity grows organically as a consequence of deepening our mindful awareness of our immediate experience. When we turn our attention to every moment and really feel it for good or bad, we are deepening our experience of the here and now.

As long as we flee the present moment into our habitual ways of thinking and doing, as long as we allow unmet feelings to dictate story after story about who we are and who we should be, we are victims. But when we allow ourselves to experience all these feelings in their own right, we stop being victims. The energy of those feelings then loses its power to pull us away from the present moment.

To meet difficult feelings in this way goes against all the survival strategies that have sustained our defences since early childhood. But it is in the fire of such intimacy with what we have always run away from that we realise 'I am more than this.'

We are rightfully afraid of pain, especially emotional pain, but to continue to rely on a survival structure of avoidance created in childhood is to remain barren. When we become less afraid of our humanity, we naturally become more human.

Working with this third layer of the map is about bringing mindful awareness to our feelings without collapsing into them, it is to give our feelings total empathy and complete attention. We can hold our own inner experience softly without judging it or reacting to it. When we are attending to what we feel, more than ever we must bring the loving presence of mindful awareness. This quality of presence is the most crucial element of this stage of work with the map.

The reason this is the gateway to the centre of the map is that if we can master sitting in mindful awareness with our feelings, we at the same time return to the now and our essential self. Like a loving mother with her baby we must hold ourselves with complete unblinking and empathetic attention.

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To do this, first it is useful to think of the third layer of the map as a conscious holding environment for all your feelings and experiences. At first it will take all your power to simply stay present with difficult feelings without fleeing, but as you practice returning to your awareness the survival strategies of the ego will weaken their grip on you.

The way to begin this work is to pay attention to your body, just as you have done all along this journey. If you perceive feelings to be a threat to your safety then your breathing will become faster and shallower, your heart will pound and your muscles will tighten. Your voice will become strained and facial muscles turn wary. These small changes will often not be recognised by you, but your body knows they are happening. The body would describe the loss of connection with the now, as tension.

To work with this tension in the body, it is important to bring your awareness to whatever it is you are feeling with the steady, tender non-reactive attention of mindful awareness. Gradually you will notice that the tension recedes and at the same time the reason for the tension emerges and after some time you might come to realise that 'I am feeling insecure,' or 'I am feeling unloved', or 'I am feeling unacknowledged.' In other words, your needs and emotions are often lurking underneath your tension.

But there is another mystery to this process which never ceases to amaze me. When we enter this relationship of mindful awareness with our emotions, suddenly even the darkest places become still and we enter a space of spaciousness and presence. This happens time and time again if, and only if, we treat each encounter as if it were the first, without agenda and without expectation. At this stage you are capable of responding to your own feelings rather than reacting, in this moment you have deepened your connection to the present moment.

EXERCISE

Simply sit with your map open in front of you and allow your gaze to rest in the holding environment of the third layer. Pay attention to any areas of tension you might be feeling. Bring mindful awareness to what you are feeling right now in your body. Avoid trying to get rid of the tension by taking a deep breath or stretching, simply hold the tension in your deeper awareness. If you're thinking mind starts to analyse simply nod and smile and bring your awareness back to your body. Do not analyse or think about why this tension is there...simply sit for as long as it takes to notice the tension disappearing. Allow any deeper needs or fears that want to be experienced to surface, and hold them in your loving presence.

Practice this whenever you have a chance to get your map out. The more you practice using this third layer as an unconditional holding environment, the more readily you will be able to drop into the space of bodily inquiry.

The guided meditation called 'Your Emotions' will support you in this inquiry.
