

Meditative Story Transcript – Rohan’s meditation: holidays

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Growing up in the UK, I was always jealous of American Thanksgiving. A holiday all about gratitude, the earth's abundance, the kindness of others, family, and of course food. It's a lovely concept. But like so many holidays, it can mean many different things to many different people. It might be one you're incredibly fond of, or it might be one you find deeply painful. Or perhaps it's one you don't celebrate at all.

Let's just take a moment and feel what arises in the body when you think about Thanksgiving. Is it warmth? Tension? Ambivalence? Anger? Whatever it may be, let's name it, and sit with it for a moment – even allowing multiple of these feelings to exist all at once.

I know that this season can feel challenging for many people. So in that spirit, for this special episode of Meditative Story, I'd like to share three different practice ideas for you to try over the holidays.

The first is for people who don't have anywhere to go.

Loneliness is really hard. And for all the Thanksgiving mythology that portrays everyone wrapped up in the warmth of a large and largely-welcoming family, the reality for many of us is that it is a time spent alone and isolated. Loneliness can manifest in a number of different ways, and I have found that one of the most useful mindfulness techniques to try during a difficult experience like this is one developed by the great Tara Brach called RAIN. It's a four-stage process that might help you find a little space in a situation that otherwise might feel too much to bear. RAIN is an acronym.

R stands for Recognize. When we are feeling lonely and low, just recognize that it is happening. It is a valid experience and not something we have to push away or give ourselves a hard time for feeling. It is happening.

A stands for Allow. This second stage is hard, but it invites us to let whatever is happening in our mind and in our body to just happen.

If we are able to do that then try the third stage: Investigate. What are the actual sensations in your body? Or in other words, what does loneliness actually feel like? Are you able to notice any fine details about the sensations? Are the feelings fluid or solid? Are the thoughts persistent, or do they come and go?

The final letter N is “Not me.” This is a big one. Having recognized, allowed, and investigated the experience of loneliness, can you see that by the very act of observing loneliness, its associated thoughts and feelings, means that the loneliness is not you? Moving from “I am lonely” to “there is loneliness” may feel semantic but it can change everything.

The second practice I want to share is about getting into the holiday mindset. And that means stepping away from work.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with checking email, Slack, Teams, or whatever during the holiday. But for most of us, Thanksgiving is a rare chance for some relative inbox silence. But it can be hard putting down those phones, whether we're checking our emails, the news, or social media. These habits often happen automatically, without any real sense of awareness. And since mindfulness is ultimately all about bringing more awareness to our lives, here is a technique that can help do just that.

Whenever you notice the impulse to check your phone, just say the word "Wanting" out loud. If your awareness is relatively acute, you might just catch the impulse, or you may only catch it when your hand has already moved to the phone. Saying the word out loud is a technique called noting, and by bringing awareness to an otherwise automatic action, it gives us the choice to either continue with the action or let it go. And while you can also say the word silently to yourself, saying it out loud makes the spotting of the pattern more remarkable. Shining more light on our digital compulsions can not only soften any work anxiety we may have. It also lets us pay quality attention to the loved ones around us.

If we get good at this, we begin to see that the impulse to check our phones doesn't come out of nowhere. Most often, we have a feeling of boredom we want to fix. Again, the aim is to become more aware of our impulses and to name them. Boredom. Irritation. The fear of missing out. The urge to run away. When our awareness is sensitive enough to notice the triggers for our habits as they happen, that is when we can unlearn them completely, no matter how ingrained they might feel.

The third and final practice I want to share today is the opposite of loneliness. It's about the challenges of being with other people and is specifically about those difficult conversations that can arise around the dinner table and around the house. Because hey, what's more Thanksgiving than an argument with a loved one whose opinions we cannot stand?

There is a common misconception that mindfulness is all about being perfectly balanced and calm in all situations and that we have somehow failed at mindfulness if we blow our top.

This can be a dangerous perspective since it places all the responsibility in a conflict on us, rather than recognizing that there absolutely are times when anger and frustration are appropriate responses. However, one of the best ways of avoiding arguments is to put more effort into listening well.

So much so-called conversation between two people is actually two monologues rather than actual dialogue, one person waiting until the other person stops talking so that they can say what they want to say. This is where mindful listening comes into play, and it involves balancing three types of hearing. The first is hearing the words the other person is saying. The second is

being aware of how they are saying them. Is their body closed or open? Does anything look tight or do they look relaxed? The final component is listening to ourselves, noticing how our mind reacts and wants to get involved. Being present with another human being as they are speaking is one of the most generous things we can do. Learning to do it well can not only diffuse arguments before they arise, but can turn our time with others into a moment of real connection.

So I hope these suggestions are helpful. Using the acronym RAIN to work with loneliness or any other difficult emotion, noticing the pull of work and the motivation behind that, and being a generous multi-dimensional listener with others.

And if you are celebrating Thanksgiving, everyone here at Meditative Story wishes you all the best for the holidays. And if Thanksgiving isn't one of yours, we wish you the best all the same.

See you soon.