

Meditative Story Transcript – Rohan Gunatillake (“Tools to help us process hard times”)

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ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: I drop my three-year-old at nursery, and we’re now on the way to my son’s school. We’re both still a bit tired from my wife’s birthday weekend, and are sitting in a bit of traffic listening to the morning news on BBC radio.

Nothing really prepares you for how to explain what an airstrike is to your six-year-old while waiting at a red light. I explain what it means, the basics of it, and there’s a pause. We get rolling again on the green light, me now thinking about a block of flats in Kyiv.

The news moves to last night’s big football game that I watched the last 10 minutes of. Arne, my son, then tells me that he has science club today. He’s excited. They’re going to make a DNA model out of sweeties.

This week’s episode is one of my solo ones, and it’s about what is happening in Ukraine. Actually I don’t know if I can claim that, since how can this even touch the edges of that? It can’t. But what I can do is offer some words and some practices and hope that they might be helpful.

And as we begin, let’s do something to help us settle down and settle in.

You might want to soften your shoulders and your face, your jaw. You might want to shuffle your body so that things feel a smidge more comfortable.

You might notice any thought chains or judgements that have arisen based on what you’ve heard already, and let them go. Sending them on their way with a sigh or a nice long out-breath.

Let’s talk about doom-scrolling. Even if you’re not familiar with the word then there’s still a pretty high chance that you do it. A decent definition of doom-scrolling is spending an excessive amount of time devoted to negative news. If Covid was the long painful warm up, then the Ukraine crisis is today’s headline act. You can look into some of the early scientific research into doom-scrolling but having done so myself I can summarize it as that it’s not good for us.

But it’s so compulsive. We can’t stop. We want to know, want to feel connected to what is happening. But it drags our fingers, our eyes, our mood, our energy down. So next time you are doom-scrolling, here’s something you can try to soften things. Still taking in the information but balancing the attention.

Feel your phone.

It sounds simple, too simple, silly even, but it’s become an important part of my own device-use for a long time now. When taking in content on the screen, feel the weight of the phone in your

hand. Know the smoothness of the glass on your finger as you tap into the next story. Be aware of the pressure of your hand on the edge of the phone. The reason this can be a powerful thing to do is that part of our attention is present on physical sensation, on what is happening. With part of our attention, our mind locked into body awareness, there is less space for our mind to spin away. There is just that little bit more presence to help us avoid getting caught in the attention pit, a better chance of us noticing when one more terrible story actually might not be what serves us best in that moment.

When something is so much bigger than us it can be hard to know what to do. And when we do do something, it is hard to know that it is making a difference. That is when the combination of intention, action, and trust become a practice. As does letting go that we are at the center of the universe. It's tough though, so do be easy on yourself. Adding our guilt onto an already challenging situation tends not to help anyone, certainly not us.

When thinking about this meditation, the practice that came to mind first was one I've shared before called RAIN. My infantile brain went Ukraine, rain, right? Rain is a meditation framework which is the one I get the most messages about when I've shared it before in apps and other places. Developed by the insight meditation teacher Michele McDonald, it's a mnemonic for use when facing difficult experiences. So it fits. Let me walk you through it.

It's a four-stage process that you can use at any time but becomes particularly valuable when dealing with that which is hard to bear.

R is for Recognize. If you're afraid, confused, hurting, angry, feeling lost. recognize that that is what is happening. It is a valid experience. It is happening.

A is for Allow. This is hard. To allow means to let whatever is happening in our mind and in our body to just happen. Not to fight it. Not to deny it. To allow it.

I is for Investigate. This is possible if there is some stability here. What are the actual sensations in your body? How does fear, confusion, hurt, anger, feeling lost express itself in the body? With any stability that is here, can you notice any of the fine details of the sensations? What comes and goes? What mental patterns sit alongside the physical ones?

N is for Not Me. If you can get to this point, this is a key instruction. We've recognized, allowed, and investigated our experience in the cauldron of this moment in history. We've observed our experience. And if we are able to observe it, then we are not it.

In situations where we feel we have no power, and there is stress and distress, it's good to know a process, a practice, like RAIN. It's a small support system that helps bring some ease to our experience, while keeping us connected to what goes on around us. We don't always want or need to disengage, but we find our place to be present with what's around us.

The other thing I'm doing a lot at the moment is what I sometimes call living from my chest. At least that's what I call it to myself, I'd never say it out loud because it sounds weird. I do it when lying down in bed. I do it when walking the dog. I do it when things feel too much. I do it during that little space when I've parked the car and before I remove my seatbelt and open the door.

I place my attention into the region about my heart, into my chest, and just let what is there come up. Most of the time at the moment there is some flavor of constriction. And when I stick with it for a little time, the act of resting here, of giving my heart the generosity of my attention softens things. So if you're ok to do that, let's do this for a little bit. For a minute, not a minute's silence, but a minute full of connection, sensitivity, and careful, loving attention.

Dropping all our awareness into the heart region, and letting what is here be known. And letting the natural care of our awareness bring some softness to a hard time.

Thank you.

The DNA model that my six-year-old makes in science club is pretty great actually. Two strawberry licorice laces with colored marshmallows acting as the bases, cocktail sticks holding it all together, so you can form it all into a small double helix. If not tomorrow, he'll ask more questions about Ukraine. They are talking about it in assemblies and have a fundraising day coming up soon. And he'll get upset because he's six. And because he's human.

You're human too. so look after yourself.

Let's do this again soon.

Go well.