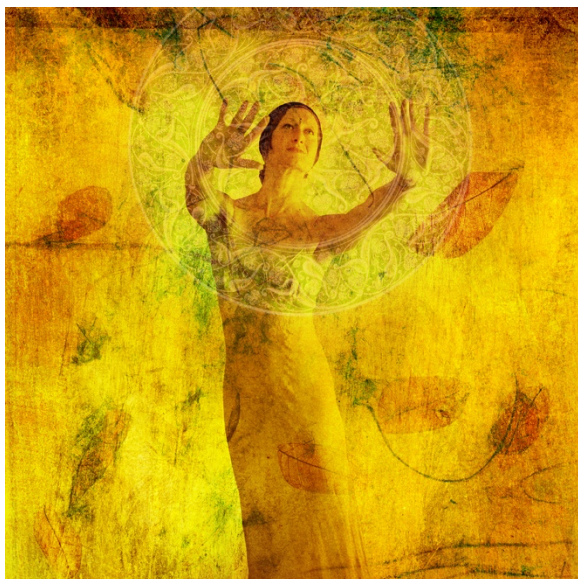


LIVING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

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It is sometimes suggested in spiritual and personal growth teachings that it's better to “respond” than to “react” to external events, especially those that would usually be triggering for us. An example of triggering is becoming upset by someone else's words or actions. It can feel like hitting a raw nerve or hearing metal against metal. It may seem like a tall order not to become upset by egregious choices that others make, and it is, but that is a key to inner peace.

Triggering brings to the surface anger, fear, or emotions that aren't love-based and therefore don't feel good. Anger and fear are two ends of the same stick; they are the activation of our fight or flight (or freeze) response in the face of perceived threats. If a bear appears about to maul us, for example, a fear response is appropriate, and useful when it leads us to safety. When someone is violating reasonable boundaries (e.g., attacking someone), anger can likewise be a healthy and helpful response when it is under control and properly targeted.

In fact, all emotions and other energies, whether or not they feel good, are valid parts of being human and provide useful information. Painful ones let us know where healing is

needed. As we become healthier and more skillful, we reduce negative reactions and become happier. That is one aim of the spiritual path.

Animals who aren't carrying trauma from the past mostly live in the moment and limit their fear/anger reactions to actual threats in the moment. When the threat has passed, they "shake it off." Humans, though, whose reactions are filtered through our capacity to conceptualize, can expand the definition of threat beyond the present moment and in unreasonable ways. We can, for example, interpret someone's criticisms as threats to our survival when they aren't. Furthermore, a criticism may bring up memories of all the other times we were criticized (unfairly, we usually believe). Therefore, our reaction is not only to the criticism of the moment but is daisy-chained to all the others that seem to resemble it. (John Friedlander, author of *Recentering Seth* and other books, calls these "matching pictures.") That is why our reactions are often out of proportion. People who habitually react that way are seen as being touchy, but most of us do that at least occasionally.

The spiritual path is, in part, about developing a reservoir of inner peace that allows us to have equanimity no matter what's happening around us. I know, easier said than done. Students who first learn this principle might keep silent rather than flying off the handle if they can manage it. That is a step in the right direction, but if we are still being triggered, it is wise to diffuse the nuclear reactor, or as John puts it, "destroy matching pictures." Otherwise, we're just repressing. Repression can be a useful tactic short term before we know what to do with feelings that are coming up, but it is destructive long term. Repressed energies fester and turn rancid.

We can heal them purely energetically by feeling and releasing them using the power of our consciousness. The simplest method is to be in meditation, summon them, and lovingly be present with them as we observe them dispersing. To destroy matching pictures,

imagine them going into a rose in front of you, and then see the rose exploding. There are many other excellent techniques for doing this, such as EFT (Emotional Freedom Technique, or tapping).

It can also be useful to explore their roots. In humans, anger is often irrational and unjustified, based in the idea that we have the right to control things that we actually do not. Facing those illusions can help us lighten our load and avoid developing new daisy chains of anger. Therefore, each time we're triggered, as unpleasant as that is, we can be grateful that it's pointing out a daisy chain that we can release.

Virtually all human relationships have an element of mutual triggering. When we get off the karmic wheel of reaction that leads to more reaction to then still more reaction, others might at first be infuriated that we're not following the script and might eventually lose interest in us. That's okay. Awakening often involves losing some relationships, but they are not a great loss. As we become more peaceful, we also lose interest in high-drama relationships.

How do we develop a reservoir of peace so that other's choices don't trigger us? Meditation and other spiritual and therapeutic practices are designed to help us do that, especially by healing wounds and developing greater love and understanding. Ultimately, we find that love is not only something we have but what we are—our true nature.

Some people try to give the appearance of not caring what others think and do by shutting down emotionally, by becoming cold. We even call those people “cool.” Maybe they don't react negatively, but they also limit their capacity for expressing joy and other positive emotions.

It is harder to respond rather than react when we're overly attached to things in the outer world, such as particular outcomes. Some teachers say that we shouldn't want or be attached to anything at all. Maybe it's semantics, but with most things, there's a sweet spot between absolutes. Our deeper wants might stem from our soul's plan seeking fulfilment. In any

case, we need to do something with our time here, and having goals focuses our activities. The key is not to hold to them too tightly, to trust that right action will bring the best available results, even if they're not what we'd targeted.

Let's say that your goal is to write a great book that sells well and helps a lot of people. That is a worthy goal, and having it motivates you to think deeply about your subject and hone your writing skills. Healthy non-attachment here means that if you publish your book and you're proud of it but it doesn't sell well, you still feel good about the endeavor and let go of attachment to the results. You did your best, and that's what counts. And who knows? Maybe it will take off later. You could think creatively about how to more effectively promote it.

When we have goals, we envision our future looking a certain way. Non-attachment suggests fluidity, that we know that we can have a good life even if it ends up looking different from how we imagined it (as lives usually do). We can keep refining our goals based on current reality as we move forward. We can always find constructive, satisfying things to do with our time; it's an illusion to think that only certain things will work for us. The spiritual principle here is to keep being right cause by making the best choices we can and let the effects take care of themselves.

What does it look like to respond rather than to react? The Michael teachings suggest that a big part of our growth as souls is becoming increasingly skillful at making choices, which include not only our actions but also our words and even our thoughts. We can learn from every choice, but good choices could be said to be those that we still feel good about later and that make situations better (more harmonious, peaceful, etc.) The best choices (there can be more than one option in any situation) are those that improve situations the most possible.

We might think of life as being like playing a game of chess. Others make a move, and then we make ours. A good chess player carefully

considers the whole board before making the next move.

This analogy sounds coldly intellectual. The best choices do usually include intellectual consideration, but they also include consulting our emotional and physical feelings. It can also be wise at times to research and get opinions from others. After we've gathered enough of various kinds of information, if we sit with them long enough, it will usually become clear what our best choice is, especially if we're well integrated with our essence, or soul. This is what is meant by responding.

With a game of chess, the goal is to individually win. Playing well does give others the opportunity to also sharpen their skills. But here the analogy breaks down: From love comes altruism, which is a desire that everyone win, rather than just advancing our own position. In fact, when everyone wins, we individually win more, at least in the long run.

When we react, our choices are knee-jerk, based on our conditioning. We often then do things that we later regret (if we aren't so defensive that we refuse to recognize the harm we've done). This is "living from the outside in"—our choices are triggered by what is outside of us, unleashing our programming. "Living from the inside out" (the title of a book I'm working on) is making choices consciously from our whole self. As with anything else, the more we practice, the better we become at doing this.

It might seem that living this way would lack spontaneity. However, when we live in the present moment, we might be able to make some choices from the inside out quickly and playfully; the difference is that we're aware in the present moment rather than being on autopilot. We're in the flow of life. This enhances creativity.

The most "inside" part of us is our essence, or higher self. The goal, however, isn't to obliterate our personality and have essence call all the shots. Personality was created by essence for good reason. The goal is to have all parts of self work together without unnecessary friction,

developing consensus. That allows the best results.

Love is intimately linked with wisdom, which includes understanding why others act as they do. Hurtful actions usually spring from the unhealed hurts of those who do them and/or their lack of experience and thus evolution. This does not excuse violations, but understanding them does help us avoid jumping in to meet those violations with similar tactics.

True understanding leads to forgiveness. Many people understand forgiveness as: “That terrible thing you did is okay. Let’s just forget about it.” That interpretation may not lead to resolution and healing. Forgiveness doesn’t condone doing harm; it is releasing our anger when it is no longer useful. Holding onto anger harms us and limits our ability to help improve the situation. Unconditional love for all parties, including both victims and victimizers, allows us to clearly see what actions would be most helpful, including what might constitute appropriate restitution.

Even stopping aggression with force can be an act of love when it is for the highest good, especially when aggressors are not demonized and the minimum of force is used. It is simply doing what needs to be done. Doing so with love also can lead to effective healing and rehabilitation for transgressors who are open to it, which can result in fewer problems in the future.

Responding rather than reacting does not turn us into spiritual automatons with frozen smiles and “appropriateness.” We might, for example, still feel and express grief at the loss of a loved one. Responding is not the same as keeping a stiff upper lip. It’s actually when we’re reacting on autopilot that we’re automatons, with predictable and inauthentic reactions. For example, we may react with anger when the underlying emotion is hurt. Living from the inside out, we continue to have all the human feelings, including some anger, even when it’s not justified objectively speaking. However, we handle them with greater love and wisdom, allowing our inner world to stabilize. We react

when we're at the mercy of the outside world.
We respond when we have confidence in our
innate spiritual power.