The Gift of Our Compulsions

Introduction

To some degree, we are all compulsive. By compulsive, I mean engaging in any recurring activity to manage our feelings, an activity that eventually ends up managing us. We can get compulsive in many different ways — by overspending, overeating, overworking, overplanning, overworrying, overexercising, overdrinking, overcomputerizing, or just “overovering.” Many of us are compulsive without even knowing it. It isn’t until the computer crashes or the credit card is canceled or the doctor says you can’t eat a high-fat diet that it becomes clear just how much a particular activity controls your life.

Ultimately, our core compulsion is to struggle. We live in a story in our heads that is always trying to get us to “do” life, dictating to us, telling us we need to make ourselves and our lives better or different from what they are. In our endless trying, we have forgotten how to be. We have forgotten how to open to the marvelous and magical adventure of life. We have forgotten how to trust ourselves, to trust our lives, and to live in joy. So we turn to our compulsions to numb ourselves out from all our struggles, only to find ourselves struggling with our compulsions. As we know too well, this cycle wreaks a lot of havoc in our lives.

What would our lives be like if we could move beyond struggle and instead reconnect with the joy, wonder, and vitality of being truly alive? And how would it feel not only to heal our compulsions but also to be healed by them in return? By being healed I don’t just mean that our compulsions would no longer overtake our lives; rather, I mean that we would again be able to experience the deep peace that comes from being comfortable in our own skins, knowing that we are okay, that life is okay, and that everything is going to be okay.

It is possible to be healed in this way. That is what we will be exploring together in this book — a new approach to working with compulsions that not only heals our compulsions but also allows us to be healed to our core. My life is a testimony to the fact that this is possible. Using the principles and practices put forth in this book, I awakened out of struggle into a dynamic, healing, and harmonious relationship with life and the challenges it brings, and I have been sharing all that I have learned with others for more than twenty years as an author, counselor and facilitator.

To heal in this way, we need to learn how to be in a new type of relationship with our compulsions. We have been taught to dominate them, only to have them dominate us. And if we do control one, another seems to take us over. We stop smoking, and we find ourselves overeating. We let go of drinking, and we end up shopping. We try to think positive thoughts to stop our worrying and we find our to-do lists taking over our lives.

When we try to control our compulsions we think that this will hold back these powerful urges, but controlling never brings us the lasting healing that we long for. Instead, it actually fuels the compulsive cycle. The U.S. Surgeon General reports that 98 percent of all the weight that is lost in the United States is gained back within a year and a half! In fact, people usually gain more weight. What we fight controls us. What we resist persists.

There is another way of working with compulsions, a way that will bring us home to ourselves, helping us to open what has been closed, to reclaim what has been hidden,
and to remember what has been forgotten. This new way moves us beyond seeing our compulsions as enemies needing to be conquered to recognizing them as guides back into a deep and abiding relationship with ourselves and our lives. This new way is about being curious rather than controlling and about responding rather than reacting. Our compulsions thrive in reaction. They heal in response. They won’t let go until they teach us how to engage with them, giving the attention and the compassion they need to heal. In the light of our compassionate attention, not only do our compulsions lose their power over us, but they also become a doorway into the healing that we long for.

To learn the art of being curious rather than being reactive, in this book we will be exploring what could be called alchemy. In the Middle Ages, it was thought that alchemy was about turning base metals into gold. Some people believed this so deeply that they spent their lives pursuing this fantasy. True alchemy is much more powerful than that. It is about using the light of human attention to transform the dense, dark clouds of our forgetting into the aliveness and joy of our remembering. As I describe in greater detail in my first book, Belonging to Life: The Journey of Awakening, it is about cultivating curiosity and compassion in order to transform the holdings in our minds, bodies, and hearts back into the free-flowing aliveness that we truly are.

In part 1 we look at what we are truly longing for whenever we are compulsive. In part 2 we explore how our compulsions have served us. We then go on to explore the difference between our old style of working with compulsions – endlessly trying to manage them — and the new style we are exploring, which is about engaging with them so that we can listen, learn, and make skillful choices. In part 3, we cultivate four skills using this new style, allowing us to heal and be healed by our compulsions. Each chapter in this part is devoted to a particular skill. The first skill, Cultivating Curiosity, takes us beyond our ideas of what should be so that we can simply experience what we are experiencing. Using the second skill, Loving Ourselves from the Insides Out, we meet the world from the spaciousness of our hearts. We use the third skill, Opening to Our Breath, to nourish ourselves with the wisdom of our breath. We then apply the fourth skill, Coming Home to Ourselves, to invite ourselves back into our bodies and into a deep and abiding relationship with ourselves and with the present moment — what we are truly longing for whenever we are compulsive. At the end of each of these chapters, I have included a “practices” section to help you apply the skills you have learned.

Finally, in part 4 we bring everything we have explored so far into formulating four questions that we can use in our healing. First we apply these questions to the sensations in our bodies, then to our feelings, and then to our compulsions themselves. These questions are designed to dissolve the core patterns in our minds, to open our hearts to healing, and to put us in direct contact with the wellspring of deep knowing within us that will guide us home.

Throughout the book I have included stories, exercises, and meditations to help work through particular issues, and every chapter ends with a “core idea” section to help focus on the ideas presented in that chapter. Working with all these tools will bring us the deep healing we long for, opening us to the truth that we are not alone. Help is always available from our own inner wisdom, which is connected to the wisdom at the heart of life. As we make contact with our own wisdom, we have the capacity to let go of doing life and we become life instead, reconnecting with the healing of simply being. I have also included an appendix that provides a handy reference guide to all the skills and
techniques explored in the book. You will also find a resources list including the titles of many wonderful books that I hope you will find useful on your path to healing.

As we allow our compulsions to be a guide back to ourselves, not only will we be healed, but we will also become part of the healing of our planet. When we learn how to listen to our compulsions, they will teach us how to be conscious, compassionate, loving, wise human beings. Living from our inner wellspring of wisdom, we will find ourselves relating to our friends, our family, and all the other people we meet from a wiser, more compassionate place. And then, no matter where we are or what is happening in our lives, we become a healing presence in the world.