

On the Nature of Boundaries

by Tom Kenyon

A while back, at one of my workshops, a woman approached me quite upset.

She had been having lunch with other participants in the seminar and the topic of trust had come up. She admitted to the group that she had trouble trusting others. Her new-found friends began to immediately offer ways to help her.

One suggested affirmations like "I fully and completely trust the universe." Another offered a visualization exercise to see herself as a flower of light fully open to the world. A third offered her a private healing session at half price. Everyone at the table seemed to agree that if she trusted enough, the universe would mirror itself back to her that way.

In other words, she should be trusting to everyone and then they would act in a trustworthy way. This person, new to personal growth, left the group quite dismayed. She found me in a hallway between sessions and asked if she could run something by me.

"What do you think?" she asked. "Can I trust the universe?"

"Trust the universe to do what?" I asked.

She blinked and proceeded with her line of thought. "They say I need to trust more"

"Trust whom," I asked.

"Everyone."

"Rubbish," I said.

She blinked again and a slight smile came across her face.

"Tell me," I asked. "Who in your life, right now, do you find trouble trusting?"

"My boyfriend," she responded without a moment's hesitation.

"And what has he done?" I asked.

"Well he says he loves me, but he has cheated on me twice. I wonder if I can trust him." "

How did it feel when you found him cheating?" I asked. "It hurt."

"I think that your natural gut-wisdom is telling you to put up a boundary to protect yourself."

"But is it spiritual?" she asked, truly perplexed.

As a psychotherapist it has been my observation, for some time now, that much in the New Age is psychologically dysfunctional. I had an engineer friend who referred to these New Age "truisms" as NABS, or New Age Bullshit. They are like those little snacks you eat at cocktail parties. They fill you up for a bit, and give the illusion of nutrition, but they are empty calories.

I think that one of the NABS currently in vogue is the notion that one should let down one's guard and be fully and completely open. As a therapist I think this idea is potentially dangerous and here's why.

We have many levels to ourselves. At one level, the transpersonal, we may be spirit, unbounded by time and space, but at another level we are mammals, like dogs, and cats, whales, dolphins and monkeys, to name a few. We have biology. And our psychological health depends upon balancing our transpersonal (out-of-time) aspects of "self" with our personal (bound by time) aspects.

At the level of our biology, our body wisdom understands quite clearly the need for boundaries. Every cell has a cell wall that keeps out the world. Any cell that lets down its guard is quickly going to perish. The cellular walls set a boundary for the cellular processes inside to continue. The walls also keep out toxic invaders like viruses, bacteria and other biochemical demons.

The message? Without boundaries, there is no life.

However, the cellular walls also have little openings to the world. These portals are guarded, but if the cell senses that a visitor is beneficial, it will open the molecular doors. If the visitor is toxic, however, the doors remain closed. Among the beneficial visitors are things like oxygen and nutrition. Without these "life messengers" the cells will eventually die. The precarious forces within our animal bodies responsible for continuing life depend upon a balance between boundaries and openness.

In other words, at a cellular level, our biology has an innate wisdom to distinguish between something toxic and something life-enhancing. Biological systems set up boundaries between themselves and that which is toxic while, at the same time, they open themselves to that which brings increased life.

In the psychological realm the same principle holds true. There are situations and people that are life-enhancing and others that are toxic. The psychological task for mental and spiritual health is to distinguish between toxic people and those that are healthy. Unfortunately, while our bodies naturally create healthy boundaries, we have to learn how to create both mental and emotional boundaries between us and the world. For many of us, growing up in dysfunctional families, the skills of compassionate boundary making were never taught.

And what do I mean by compassionate boundary making? Well to explain this, I think I probably need to discuss "judgment" and "discrimination." They are not the same thing. And this will lead us directly to the woman's question at the beginning, "Is it spiritual to set a boundary?"

Quite simply, discrimination is assessing the apparent truth of a situation while judgment is placing a value upon the situation as "good" or "bad." For instance, back to the young woman and her quandary about her "two-timing" boyfriend. His actions hurt her, or to be "psycho-politically correct," she allowed herself to be hurt by his actions.

That he did this twice and might do it again is discrimination. It is logic, simple logic. This is discrimination, the act of discriminating apparent truth from bullshit. There is no judgment in this, just observation. She has observed his behavior and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to conclude that he might (probably will) do it again. If she wishes to avoid getting hurt again, she would do well to set up an emotional boundary and to become detached from his advances. This is discrimination in action.

This is different from judgment. If she were to decide that he was a "shiftless and worthless bastard," for instance, she would be placing a value judgment on him. Discrimination, by

nature, is neutral; it is not emotionally charged. It is simply a mental recognition about a reality. There is no blame or judgment in this, simply observation.

Compassionate Boundary Making first requires a discriminating look at the situation. One must clearly see the situation the way it is without romanticizing and without trying to make it into something it isn't. If the person or situation is not healthy for you, you remove yourself. Period. End of sentence.

In the process of removing yourself from the situation you resist the temptation to judge the person or situation, as "good" or "bad." Even though you might not understand his or her motives, and even though you might feel hurt by the situation, you give yourself and the "offender" the gift of spaciousness to do what they need to do -- with one clear limitation, so long as it does not impinge on you.

I love what a southern grandmother once told a friend of mine, "Your rights end where my nose begins." How beautifully direct and pragmatic that statement is!

One psychological task facing all of us is to distinguish between what is healthy and unhealthy. Psychological maturity requires that we act on our own behalf to separate ourselves from that which damages us. How we separate ourselves from those things that are toxic is a matter of personal style more than anything else.

As Paul Simon said in one of his songs, "Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover," there are many ways to separate ourselves from toxic situations and people.

For those of us striving to be more conscious in our actions, and perhaps, more spiritual, the task requires compassion as well. But compassion does not mean becoming a "door mat" for someone to walk all over you. Rather compassion means creating a mental and emotional space in yourself to allow other people to be themselves, even if you don't understand or agree with them. Compassion does not, however, mean that we let others intrude into our emotional space. That is submission, which is not the same thing.

As we grow in psychological and spiritual strength, we may find that we are no longer comfortable with certain persons or situations. What seemed to be nourishing or at least neutral, is now perceived as toxic. This sometimes happens with family members, spouses and friends. I am noticing that, for many of us, this phenomenon looks like it is increasing. Perhaps it is because things are speeding up and more seems to be happening in less time. Perhaps it is simply the price of self-evolution.

As we pass over a line in ourselves from unconscious to conscious (I should probably say semi-conscious, to be more exact), we may find ourselves having to set boundaries with past relationships. This can be very challenging to say the least. For those of us caught in this dilemma, I suggest the Way of the White Cloud.

The Way of the White Cloud is to see all things and all situations as essentially devoid of substance. What appears to be very real at the moment becomes only a memory. The apparent solidity of things and the gravity of a situation is actually a mirage, an illusion. Buddhists call this samsara. And we are caught up in it by virtue of having an embodiment. The art of living, from this viewpoint, is to live and take action without getting caught up in the snares of the illusion.

When clients get stuck in interpersonal conflict, I sometimes have them imagine going into the future, maybe a hundred years and look back at the situation. In almost every case the charge is dissolved. The hostility gives way to a recognition of impermanence. Why, the

"wisdom mind" asks, should we get caught up in this when it is so insignificant from the vantage of expanded vision? In the realms of samsara, nothing is permanent. All is transient, like white clouds. By becoming aware of this truth, we see that we are all in the same boat, so to speak, the boat of samsara, or illusion.

It may look like someone or something has "the upper hand" at the moment, but that is true, only from one perspective. We all suffer, both the dominators and dominated, because we are, all of us, time-locked into time and space. We are also free and open, for a part of us is both unbounded pure consciousness and luminous light. This pure consciousness and luminous light may or may not be directly experienced by us, but it is there, nonetheless, like the clear sky hidden by clouds. Our clouds of obsuration, those thoughts, feelings and patterns of behavior that hold us in the samsaric lies of limitation come and go, like the clouds. But the clear sky is always there.

The spiritual task, for those of us desiring to live with more compassion, regardless of the lineages or traditions we follow, is to penetrate this level of ourselves, the place of pure mind and unbounded light. For the gift of this is that we become suffused with a direct knowledge of the relativity of all things. We can afford to be gracious in our dealings with ourselves and others because we recognize that things are not what they appear to be. The act of compassionate boundary making comes out of our luminous and unbounded nature.

Even though we may have been "hurt" by a particular situation or person, from the view of the transpersonal, all of this is like clouds, in one moment vividly real and in the next moment, gone. This spaciousness allows us to let others be without the need to judge, defile, or seek revenge.

For the young woman mentioned earlier, making a compassionate boundary with her boyfriend might look like her telling him three things: first, that based on his past behavior she has concluded that she cannot trust him; second, she is leaving him; and three, she holds him no ill-will. She goes on with her life and he goes on with his.

Now, this does not mean that the desire for judgment, defilement or revenge doesn't arise in our minds especially when we perceive being hurt by another. But the spiritual discipline of not indulging these thoughts, feelings, and fantasies is a powerful *niyama*, (Sanskrit, meaning constraint or control). *Niyamas*, such as the attempt to remain harmless to oneself and others, strengthen both the soul and personal will. Besides reducing interpersonal stress, compassionate boundary making affords us real insight into the state of our own psychology.

What I mean by this is that for some of us, it may be a challenge to let someone "off the hook" who has harmed us in some way. But if it is anyone who is let "off the hook" it is ourselves, since the desire for revenge or retribution on another is an emotional and spiritual poison.

And so, to the woman I mentioned at the beginning, I would say "yes." To set a boundary between ourselves and another can be spiritual. How it is done makes it "spiritual" or not. If the "spiritual life" is an attempt to live with an awareness of the sacredness of life, then compassionate boundary making is, in fact, a spiritual act. To set an appropriate boundary is necessary for all biological life. It is also a requirement for mental and emotional health, and I would venture to say for the "spiritual life" as well.

To say "no" to ourselves or another can sometimes be the most courageous and powerful act imaginable. And sometimes, saying "no" to someone is more "loving" (i.e., caring) than saying "yes."

There is another piece in relation to boundary making: detachment. Finding your truth and acting on it regardless of how others might react is the benchmark of personal sovereignty. Such action requires the ability to create and hold boundaries. I am reminded in this of a story.

One day the immortal yogi, Babaji, was meditating in a forest with his chelas (disciples) up in the Himalayas. A man stumbled upon them and recognizing the great yogi, he begged to become a disciple.

Babaji refused and told the man to leave. Instead, the man followed the group wherever they went. Finally, Babaji threw rocks at him and told him to go way.

The man, distraught, told Babaji that if he, a great yogi, did not accept him as a disciple, he would cast himself off the nearby cliffs. Calmly, Babaji told him he didn't care what he did. With these words, the man threw himself to his death on the rocks below.

Babaji went down the side of the mountain and brought the man back to life. Having dissolved immense negative karma, the man was accepted as a disciple.

Gurus are notoriously irascible. They follow impulses that we can hardly even imagine. At the very least, this is a story about spiritual boundaries. Hopefully in our journey to wholeness none of us will have to jump off a cliff; but all of us will, no doubt, have to set boundaries from time to time.

May all of us find ways to be more compassionate in our boundary making. And may we find the strength to open and say yes, when we mean yes, and the courage to say no, when we mean no. End. . . .

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