

Trauma Sensitive Zen

ADAPTING PRACTICE TO MEET THE
NEEDS OF TRAUMA SURVIVORS



Why Zen Centers need to know about trauma

1. Trauma is widespread.
 1. 1 in 5 women are raped.
 2. Every 28 hours a Black man is murdered.
 3. Systems of oppression traumatize working class, disabled, people of color, LGBTQ
 4. Black people are 4X as likely as White to die at the hands of law enforcement.
 5. PTSD from returning Veterans
 6. Disabled – 80% odds they experienced sexual violence at least once.
2. Meditation practice can exacerbate the symptoms of trauma. Staying with pain/or certain sensations can be triggering.

Why Zen Centers need to know about trauma

3. “Just Sit” is not enough. Dismissive of legitimate distress and pain.

4. Overstate the benefits of practice.

5. Meditation is a two-edged sword.

- Can enhance self-regulation or it can dysregulate.
- Can regain a sense of agency or can disempower someone.
- Practice is a two-edged sword.
 - Can move one to dropping ego.
 - Can move one to clinging tighter to ego.

Practice – Trauma Sensitive Zazen

Language

- Invitational – Non-directive
- Offering Choices – A or B. Or A, B, or C
- Concrete – No metaphors or phrases that require a leap of imagination

Guided Rather than Silent

Shorter Rather than Longer

Three Theoretical Underpinnings

Trauma Theory

Attachment Theory

Neuroscience

PTSD

- ONLY OFFICIAL DIAGNOSIS STARTING IN 1980
 - SYMPTOM ORIENTED
 - INFLUENCED MOST BY WORK WITH VIETNAM WAR VETERANS
 - CONNECTED TO FUNDING
-

CPTSD

TRAUMA THAT OCCURS WITHIN
THE CONTEXT OF
RELATIONSHIPS AND MORE THAN
ONCE.

DR. JUDITH HERMAN



CPTSD

"No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest".

Judith Herman, M.D.

Reframe: Interventions that empower survivors foster recovery.

Questions for Zen Teachers

Are we taking power away from survivors in the way that we teach?

How do we teach meditation? Do we tell survivors what to do, or do we offer suggestions?

Is making choices encouraged or discouraged by you or by the climate of your center?

Questions for Zen Teachers

Do you operate within a hierarchical power structure where you hold most of the power? What might that mean in relating to survivors?

How do we offer the Dharma? (For example, do we encourage exploring to see what works? Do we lean towards total compliance with rules?)

When is pulling the rug out from the student inappropriate?

When is it appropriate to affirm the self?

(Cannot experience no-self without a healthy sense of self.)

Attachment Theory



Theory

"AN INFANT WHOSE MOTHER'S RESPONSIVENESS HELPS HIM TO ACHIEVE HIS ENDS DEVELOPS CONFIDENCE IN HIS OWN ABILITY TO CONTROL WHAT HAPPENS TO HIM"

MARY AINSWORTH

Relationships support the development of *agency*



Attachment Theory

THE CHILD WHO RECEIVES
RELATIVELY CONSISTENT,
SENSITIVE RESPONSES FROM
CAREGIVERS DEVELOPS A BASIC
SENSE OF SAFETY IN THE
WORLD, AN UNDERSTANDING OF
OTHERS AS RESPONSIVE AND
TRUSTWORTHY, AND AN
UNDERSTANDING OF THE SELF AS
WORTHY OF CARE.

BLAUSTEIN AND KINNIBURG (2010)

How can Zazen be used to develop a sense of agency?

How can Zazen not support the development of agency?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

"For the infant and young child exposed to chaos, violence, or neglect, interpretation of sensory stimuli will become infused with danger. At this stage, given nonverbal processing, cues of potential danger will generalize and be solidified without language ..."

- Blaustein and Kinniburgh

Teacher Qualities

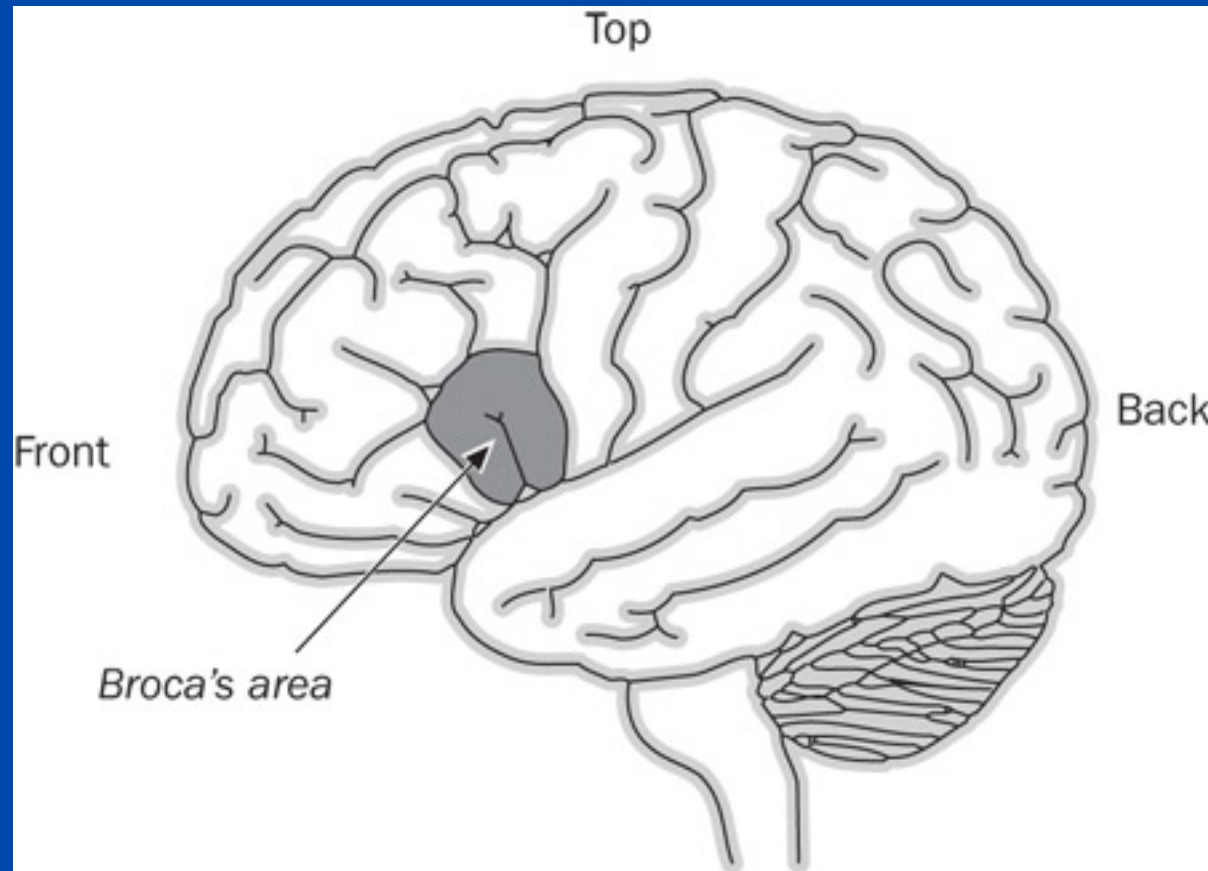
1. Can't present Zen with excitement.
2. Make little eye contact.
3. How teacher handles him / herself is important.
4. Should not tell people we are safe and trustworthy.
5. Practice interoception yourself.
6. Warmth and empathy.

Neuroscience

"EVOLUTIONARILY ... IF THERE
HAD BEEN NO BODY THERE
WOULD BE NO BRAIN"

ANTONIO DAMASIO,
NEUROLOGIST

The doorway for somatic interventions for complex trauma is Broca's Area

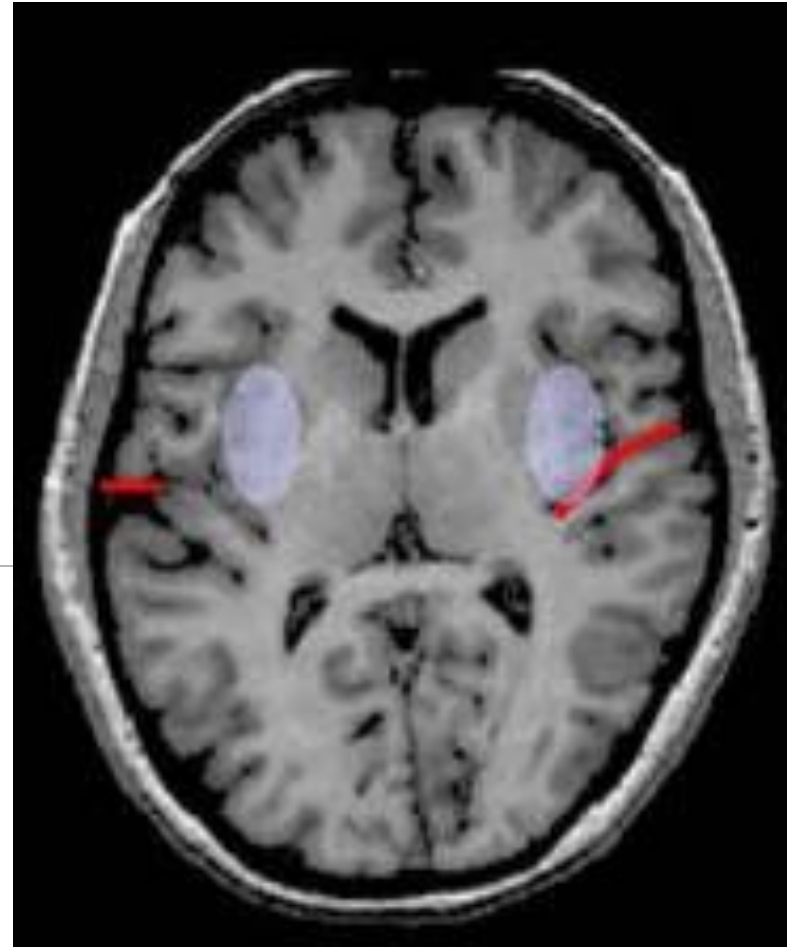


The key concept for
us is ...

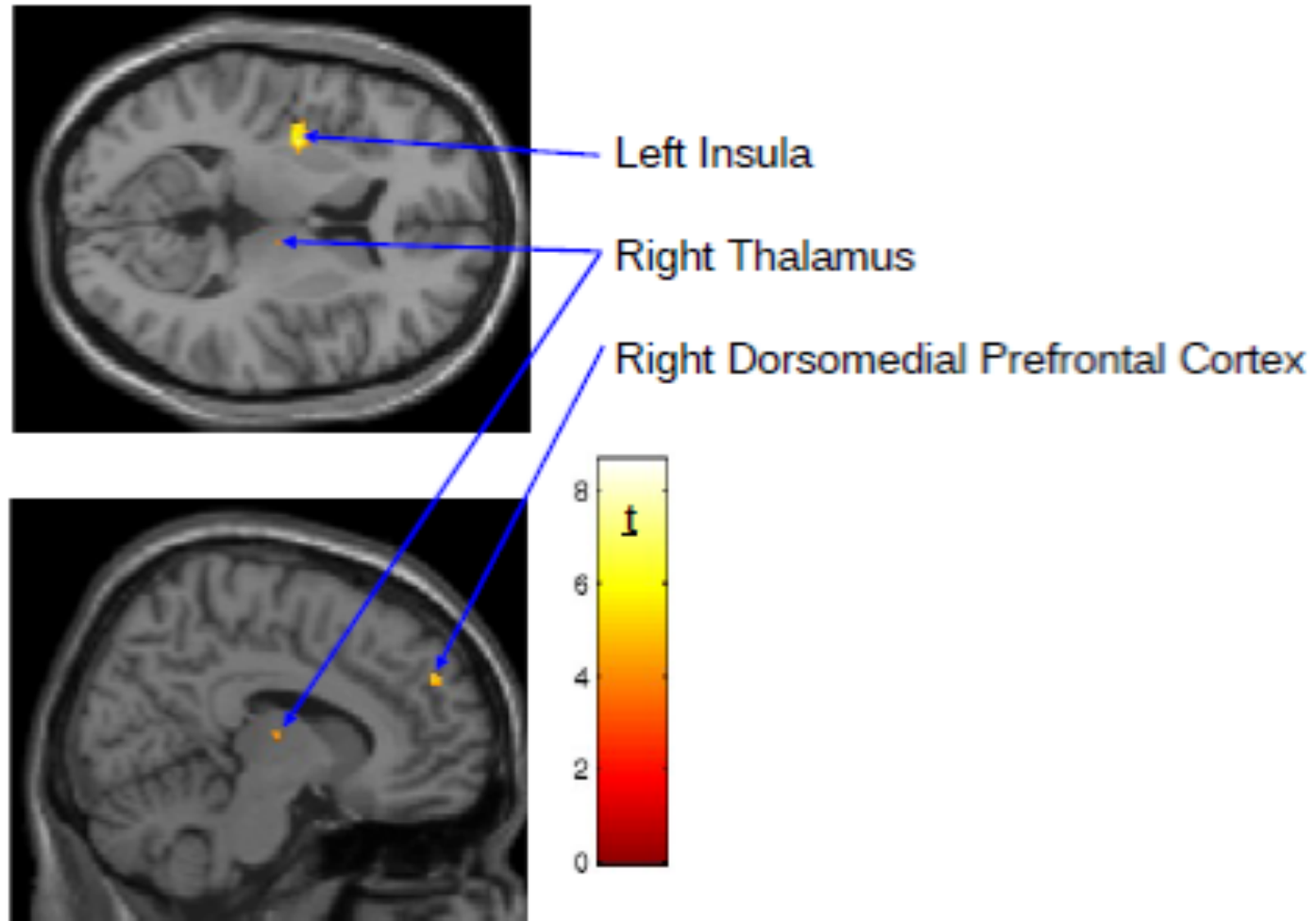
INTEROCEPTI

ON

An important interoceptive region is called the Insular Cortex (in purple)



Yoga Participants(n=6) Greater Than Control(n=2),
Post-Yoga Greater Than Pre-Yoga



fMRI subtraction contrast, van der Kolk's
lab, Trauma Center

Some key aspects of teaching Trauma Sensitive Zen

Language

- Concrete
 - Visceral
 - No-metaphors
 - 2 basic styles: Invitational and Interoceptive
-

Invitational Language (every cue preceded by an invitation)

- IN TEACHING ZAZEN TO SURVIVORS
- “AS YOU’RE READY”
- “WHEN YOU’RE READY”
- “IF YOU LIKE”
- “MAYBE”
- “POSSIBLY”

-
- ONCE IN ZAZEN...
 - “YOU CAN ALWAYS MODIFY TO SUIT YOUR EXPERIENCE.”
 - “FEEL FREE TO MOVE OUT OF THIS FORM FOR ANY REASON AT ANY TIME”

Language of Interoception

- NOTICE
 - FOCUS ON ...
 - CURIOUS
 - FEEL THE SENSATION...
-
- INVESTIGATE
 - INTERESTS
 - EXPLORE

The key interoceptive phrase

“IF YOU CHOOSE TO
YOU MAY NOTICE A
FEELING/SENSATION IN
YOUR _____.”

Posture Adjustments

I DO NOT DO THEM WHEN
TEACHING TRAUMA
SURVIVORS NOR DO I
RECOMMEND THEM.

***KEY POINT: INTERPRETATION OF SENSORY
STIMULI.***

Two Key Themes

- PRACTICE MAKING CHOICES
 - PRESENT MOMENT EXPERIENCE
-

Practice Making Choices

“You can’t remind me enough that I have choices”

TC Yoga Student

At the root of trauma and PTSD is an experience that involves extreme lack of choice. Within the context of zazen instruction and guided meditation we can invite folks to begin to make choices again in direct relation to their experience. Choice for the sake of choice.

Present Moment Experience

“The goal of treatment of [trauma] is to help people live in the present, without feeling or behaving according to irrelevant demands belonging to the past.” Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

Zen practice is an opportunity to have a present moment experience. Recognizing that trauma survivors are often stuck in a body/breath/mind that is relating to past conditions let's call attention to what's happening right here right now.

What does it mean to be in the present moment?

When your physical reality (external environment) and your neurophysiological reality are in sync.

What is a Survivor Experiencing?

Characteristics of Hypoarousal

Foggy

Listless

Numb

Apathetic thoughts

Characteristics of Hyperarousal

Hypervigilant

What is a Survivor Experiencing?

Anxious

Heart racing

Tight jaw

Racing thoughts

Window of tolerance

Easy focusing

Easy Breathing

Feel feet on the ground

If Hyper-Aroused

- Maybe encourage break from practice.
- Maybe encourage walking meditation or lying down
- Maybe encourage a few deep breaths
- Have a conversation to ask what's happening in their practice – ask them how we can support their stability

If Hypo-Aroused

- Maybe encourage a few faster breaths or paying closer attention to breath
- Maybe mindful movements or walking meditation
- Maybe even encourage sleep and rest outside the group

Apply the brakes to practice

1. Use your eyes to look around.
2. Name what you see.
3. Linger on 3 different objects in the room.
4. Encourage deep breathing.
5. Engage in soothing touch (student touches themselves)
6. Do shorter practices.
7. Take breaks from practice - walking, yoga, unstructured time.

Apply the brakes to practice

4. Focus on bottoms of feet.
5. Focus on feeling sensation of buttocks/back on cushion/chair
6. Notice feelings in hands
7. Purposefully attune to what brings energy/joy
8. Recall who/what you love.
9. Practice self-care
10. Get involved in community events

Focus on Stabilization and Safety

Will talking about impermanence and no-self be helpful for this person at this time?

Will encouraging the experience of groundlessness be helpful at this time and for this person?

Three Ways to Invite Synchronicity Between External and Internal Worlds

1. Attention Direction

2. Body Awareness

3. Emotional Regulation

Summary of Recommendations for Zen contexts

Giving choice

Present moment experiences, especially in the body (interoception)

Opportunities to develop agency

Invitational Language useage

Zen teacher shifts role to empowering student

Discussion – what does this look like/ mean for us? What have you done that works?

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.