

The Inquiry of Byron Katie and Cognitive Restructuring

We know the truth not only by reason, but by heart.

Blaise Pascal

©2005 by Ken Farber

The inquiry of Byron Katie is a novel approach to alleviating the suffering caused by negative beliefs.¹ It is a method of questioning beliefs, much like the Socratic inquiry used in cognitive restructuring. Yet, it is also a meditative or mindfulness-based inquiry—a form of inquiry that invites a fundamentally different internal investigation process than traditional intellectual-discursive based reasoning. This approach appears to retain the benefits of cognitive restructuring, while offering some very distinct advantages.

Understanding the inquiry of Byron Katie requires distinguishing between two fundamentally different kinds of mental processes:

1. Deliberative Thinking. Deliberative thinking occurs when one is consciously and intentionally thinking about something. With deliberative thinking one experiences oneself as *doing* one's thinking.

2. Witnessing Awareness (receptive attention). Witnessing awareness occurs when one observes, moment to moment, what arises in awareness without *trying* to control or intellectually think about what one observes. With witnessing awareness one is aware of thoughts as they arise, apparently on their own volition, in the field of awareness, *and one is aware of oneself as the witness of the thoughts*. One is not actively *doing* thinking as in deliberative thinking. And, unlike “automatic thinking,” one is fully cognizant of oneself witnessing the thoughts. The cultivation of witnessing awareness is a core component of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

Four Questions and a “Turnaround”

The core process in the inquiry of Byron Katie consists of four questions and a “turnaround.” Each of the questions can be asked by a facilitator or by oneself (to oneself). After a question is asked, *one is instructed to listen internally with a witnessing awareness and wait to see if an answer arises from within to meet the question.*

¹ Mitchell, B.K., (2002). *Loving What Is*. New York: Harmony Books.

The four questions used in this inquiry process are a method for investigating the truthfulness of thoughts that cause suffering and for seeing the effects of holding a particular thought. The four questions are:

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you react when you think that thought?
4. Who or what would you be without the thought? (Imagine yourself in the situation without it.)

The turnaround invites an individual to consider whether or not the opposite of a stated belief could be as true as, or truer, than the stated belief.²

On the surface, one trained in Cognitive Therapy would think that this is simply another derivation of cognitive restructuring; however, there are *fundamental* distinctions between these two methods that lead to far-reaching implications.

Key Distinctions

1. Cognitive restructuring encourages an individual to use deliberative thinking to answer questions, whereas the inquiry of Byron Katie encourages an individual to use deliberative thinking to ask a question, and then to rely on one's witnessing awareness to listen for a response to arise naturally from within.

The internal process activated when one is able to “wait receptively for a response to arise from within” is a qualitatively different inner experience than what occurs when one is using deliberative, “left brain” thinking.

- One key difference is that awareness is left more evenly distributed throughout the body, rather than being primarily localized in the head.
- Another key difference is that one's sense of self is experienced in this process as *one observing* the content of thoughts and feelings in the foreground of awareness, rather than one's sense of self being identified to a large degree *as* those thoughts and feelings.
- The inquiry of Byron Katie appears to elicit more of a sense of a “felt shift” that accompanies one's realizations. A felt shift in the body has been associated with genuine therapeutic change.³

In *actual practice*, for most people, the inquiry of Byron Katie will involve a mix of witnessing thinking and deliberative thinking.

This approach of *listening* within in response to a question has a history in both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions. In Western philosophy Martin Heidegger makes a distinction between what he calls “calculative” thinking and “meditative” thinking; calculative thinking being the standard reasoned calculations upon which Western

² The turnaround in the full process of inquiry developed by Byron Katie is used to see how beliefs projected out onto the world around us may elucidate aspects of ourselves as well. This is described in *Loving What Is*. The inquiry process described here is a core abbreviated version.

³ Gendlin, E., (1978). *Focusing*. New York: Bantam Books.

philosophy is based, and “meditative” thinking being a kind of “releasement” towards what would arise in the holistic field of awareness.⁴ Contemporary Zen meditation teacher Toni Packer also distinguishes between the intellectual inquiry that is standard fare in philosophical discourse and a meditative approach to inquiry. Packer states:

Questioning usually means . . . to ask intellectual questions and search for intellectual answers But then there is another meaning to the word questioning. It means beginning with a question, and then pausing to look and listen directly, not overflowing with knowledge about what something is, but quietly wondering without knowing the answer.⁵

Both Heidegger and Packer are addressing an approach to inquiry that is clearly different than the intellectual calculations upon which Western philosophical discourse and traditional Cognitive Therapy are built.

2. Cognitive Therapy seeks to change thoughts; the inquiry of Byron Katie is about awareness of thoughts, not about trying to manipulate or change them.

The root methodology of Cognitive Therapy is to strategically help change the client’s thinking. One enlists the use of well-reasoned deliberative thinking to help get rid of unreasonable and distressing thoughts and facilitate the adoption of more accurate and functional alternative thoughts—hence the term “cognitive restructuring.”

The inquiry of Byron Katie is an invitation towards awareness. Inquiry is used to discover what is genuinely true for an individual and to gain awareness of cause and effect in the world of thoughts, feelings and behaviors. While cognitive restructuring may occur spontaneously, with negative thoughts being replaced by positive ones, the aim of inquiry is to simply *understand* what is true rather than to attempt to manipulate one’s thinking. Inquiring internally to find what one takes to be true seems to imply trying to change one’s mind. However, waiting receptively to see one’s internal response to a question in no way suggests a manipulative action towards altering one’s beliefs. In fact, in the practice of the inquiry of Byron Katie people are often explicitly told *not* to try to get rid of or change their negative thoughts. The attitude taken towards thoughts is very much like that taken in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy—one of being receptive, *not manipulative*, towards thoughts as they occur in one’s psyche. Change occurs naturally through the process of seeing into the effects of one’s thinking.

3. The inquiry of Byron Katie functions to disidentify one’s sense of self from distressing thoughts and feelings. It directly facilitates metacognitive awareness.

The act of waiting receptively for a response to arise from within *functions* to leave one’s sense of self free from identification with foreground thoughts. And, when thoughts do arise from this vantage point, one is less likely to identify one’s sense of “I” with one’s

⁴ Heidegger, M., (1966). *Discourse on Thinking*. New York: Harpur and Row.

⁵ Packer, T., (1995), *Seeing Without Knowing: And What is Meditative Inquiry*, Rochester: Springwater Center.

thoughts as one does with deliberative thinking. Furthermore, the question, “Who would you be without that thought?” can directly function to further disidentification of one’s sense of self with a particular thought and, over time, with thoughts in general.

Depth of Realization as a Key Component of Transformation

Many years ago I was told by a beekeeper that if you are not afraid of most species of bees, they will not sting you. Apparently, they sense the fear response and are threatened by that. Most of us are very well conditioned that when we experience a bee landing on us, we feel fear. Having intellectually learned that we will not get stung if we relax, it can take some time (if ever) to truly realize that we can trust that we will not be stung—and not feel fear when in physical contact with a bee. There is a difference between knowing something intellectually and letting that understanding sink in to a level deep enough that we *truly* believe in it. There’s a difference between thinking, “I will not be stung” and intellectually believing it, and really knowing it deeply enough that we do not activate the fear response from falsely perceiving a threat.

There have been times that I’ve been out in the woods late at night and felt like someone was right behind me who was “out to get me.” During these times, as an adult, I intellectually knew full well that no one was there. Yet even knowing all this by reason, most of the time I still couldn’t intellectualize myself out of being afraid in the dark.

Beliefs that fuel anxiety, anger and depression appear to be held deeper in one’s psyche than one’s reasoning intellect. Deeply held beliefs, where one sees oneself as threatened, helpless, needing to defend one’s ideas, and more, are commonly not let go of in the face of good reason, even when one has proven this to oneself intellectually.

This then begs the question, what kind of process is *most* likely to facilitate the release of deeply held beliefs?

This is where I think the inquiry of Byron Katie has *advantages* over cognitive restructuring. I believe this inquiry process is more likely to touch the place inside that truly holds onto beliefs—and it is more likely to allow for a letting go that comes from a *penetrating* realization.

The way beliefs are held in the human psyche is intertwined with memory and emotion. One’s memory of bees and the pain associated with a bee sting involves a complex association between the bee, the pain of the sting, emotion, sense impressions and discursive cognition. Cognitive Therapy is based on the canons of logic and deliberative thinking. *Yet, one’s construction of a sense of self, the world, and self-in-relation to the world, is a complex web of memory, embedded with emotion and sense impressions. Beliefs that leave one feeling angry, fearful and depressed are part of this web.*

In the inquiry of Byron Katie, one is instructed to let the mind ask the question—and then be still and wait for a response to arise from within. Letting the response arise from within denotes waiting for a response to arise from an aspect of mind other than the discursive mind that reasons by use of deliberative thinking. The inquiry of Byron Katie *directly* invites a deeper aspect of the psyche to engage with a question.

Marsha Linehan addresses this issue of accessing a deeper aspect of the psyche with her conception of “wise mind” in Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Linehan states, “‘Wise mind’ depends upon a full cooperation of all ways of knowing: observation, logical analysis, kinetic and sensory experience, behavioral learning and intuition.” She goes on to say “[Accessing wise mind] can be compared to going deep within a well in the ground.” Regarding self-perceptions such as “I’m unlovable” or “I can’t live without him,” Linehan addresses her interest in having patients access wise mind by suggesting the following line of questioning: “I’m not interested in how you feel, I’m not interested in what you believe or think. I am interested in what you know to be true (in your ‘wise mind’).”⁶

Let’s consider for a moment the belief, “I’ll be deeply hurt in an intimate relationship.” Let’s assume this belief is fueling persistent fear and defensiveness. When one asks the question, “Is it true?” one can attempt to find an answer using deliberative thinking, which is the domain of intellectual reason. This may keep one focused *in the head, in other words, in the intellect*. Yet if in response to “Is it true?” we listen for something deeper to arise, something more internal, yet still unformed at the conscious level of the psyche, there may be a more genuine realization that, “No, I don’t know that I will be hurt in an intimate relationship. That might not be true in this case.” This inner realization will *feel* different. It may feel like an “aha” experience. It may include an experience of inner release or relaxation.

Asking a question and then waiting receptively for a response to arise from within appears to function to prevent an intellectually constructed consideration of the concepts in question *and to foster a direct connection with the aspects of the psyche where one’s actual construction of one’s sense of self, the world, and self-in-relation-to-the-world are in place*.

Integration with Mindfulness-Based Approaches to Wellbeing and Psychotherapy

The inquiry of Byron Katie is similar to mindfulness meditation in that it is *not* about *trying* to change one’s mind. It is about awareness. The effect of awareness *may* be that the mind changes.

This is a very important distinction to make, especially when one is using a mindfulness-based approach to therapy or well-being. A *fundamental* premise of a mindfulness-based approach is *not try* to suppress, get rid of, or change thoughts that occur, including negative ones. If one tries to combine cognitive restructuring with genuine mindfulness-based training, there is an implicit conflict regarding how to respond to negative thinking. Cognitive restructuring emphasizes the *need* to change one’s thinking. One of the core features in mindfulness-based training is the emphasis that people *not* try to manipulate or change their thoughts. In mindfulness-based training one is encouraged to cultivate a decentered relationship with one’s thinking. Mindfulness-based training can help people learn to observe their thoughts without necessarily believing their story. The inquiry of Byron Katie complements mindfulness-based skills training because it too does *not* seek to change or manipulate the content of people’s beliefs. It too is about cultivating awareness.

⁶ Linehan, M. (1993) *Cognitive Behavioral Treatment of Borderline Personality Disorder*, New York: The Guilford Press.

Conclusion

The inquiry of Byron Katie appears to offer advantages compared to traditional cognitive restructuring. It also offers a valuable tool for those using acceptance and mindfulness based approaches that reject the “control of thoughts and feelings” agenda of traditional Cognitive Therapy. Given the pre-eminence of Cognitive Therapy in evidence-based mental health care, this is a subject that certainly warrants further investigation.

*Ken Farber, MA
(510) 868-1629
kenfarb@aol.com*