

## Chapter 4

### Burning It In

How difficult is it to remember how to apply the brakes of your car? How much effort does it take to remember to flip on your turn signal before you make your turn? What about getting to work? Is it difficult or easy to remember the route? You probably cruise through all the turns and stops without thinking of them. Your mind is on other matters. All of these driving tasks and the route itself have been “burned in” and are now intuitive.

Let’s consider a different situation. Someone offends you at work. You overhear them complain to coworkers that you’re stupid and ridiculous. They’re speaking loudly enough to make sure you and other coworkers can hear. Your heart starts racing, you feel your stomach knot. You feel like defending yourself so that you won’t appear weak and stupid. There are many ways that this can play out depending on what you do. At this point do you know the most constructive response? Does your intuition map the likely outcome for each route you could take? Does your model of the future include spiritual goals along with your immediate goals? Your route out of this mess depends not only on logic but also a positive spiritual frame of meaning. If you have it then your brain will operate with some wisdom. Wisdom depends on your unconscious where your spiritual values keep you smart. They keep your brain from regressing to a short-sighted infantile state. You want all of this to happen intuitively like stick shifting a car. You want to have already burned in your spiritual maps.

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There are different ways that we can “burn in” spiritual values. But before we go into those details it behooves us to clarify what’s involved in such a burning. “Burning in” is my metaphor for the complex process of embedding information into memory and there’s a lot of established neuroscience about how this happens. Please bear with me while we go over some technical details because it’s useful to understand the science of what’s happening down below.

“Burning it in” involves modulatory neurons stimulating other neurons to switch on cellular machinery for new growth. On an extreme microscopic level, neurons extend new tendrils connections to other neurons. It’s similar to how physical exercise stimulates the growth of new muscle tissue. “Burning it in” also involves certain brain and body reflexes that facilitate the intake of new information. It’s as if preamplifiers switch on to amp up the new data. The brain may also speed up its processing speed if the information is interesting.

There are different kinds of learning. With spiritual learning, we're not dealing with semantic learning as in remembering a lecture or performance learning such as learning to ride a bicycle. We're dealing with contextual learning. It's a form of learning that many people don't understand because it doesn't rely on conscious awareness. It's how we change our intuitive model of the world based on experience.

Starting in the 1980's, psychophysicologists were able to measure a person's brain metabolism when they updated their contextual model of the world. They measured the P300 wave which is an event related EEG potential. What they discovered was that a robust P300 wave would predict when a person learned from their mistakes. A wimpy P300 wave would predict when they wouldn't learn. Therefore, the P300 gave us a view into how people update their implicit world view. In the 1990's, things became more exciting when a formula was discovered that strongly predicted the P300's magnitude. Without getting too technical, one of the predicting variables is called "significance." This same variable was also found by the Soviets to be important in other learning reflexes. Therefore, we now know that significance helps us to metabolize changes in our contextual world view.

Significance is really a class of influences that causes our brain to rewire itself. According to the P300 research, there are different kinds of influence that can do the job:

- If we have a significant consequence depending on how we use some information, then we'll burn that information more deeply into context. If we might win a million dollars for some measure of our performance, then we'll absorb contextual information more strongly.
- If the information is relevant to some future task, then we'll burn it in stronger.
- If we're publicly observed while using the information, then we'll burn it in stronger.
- If we struggle or pay an emotional price for an outcome, then we'll burn in the contextual information more strongly.

Although not yet researched with the P300, I would add the following 2 factors based on my clinical experience as well as the teachings of my former mentor and renowned psychologist Hobart Mowrer.

- When we're in a relationship that is important to us, we'll be inspired to absorb values through a process called introjection. We actually have specialized neurons in our brain to help us do this. We're like sponges. We model other people's minds in our own mind and we're able to absorb other people's values in the process. This is an important process when we're parented.

- When we're a part of some group, we'll introject information from the group consensus. Group participation helps burn in the shared information.

The psychophysiological research with the P300 didn't focus on spiritual values but this research can give us important clues about how to strengthen our spirituality. We know that long term learning involves the growth and rearrangement of connecting filaments between neurons called dendrites. We also know that significance can turbocharge this reconnecting process. There's no reason why spiritual values can't be woven into context along with other more concrete information about the world.

## **Introjection And Consolidation**

We have two forces that help us to burn in spirituality: The first is called introjection and it's how we become socialized. We absorb values from people around us, especially if we have a close relationship with them. The second process is consolidation and it's how we strengthen and elaborate our spirituality. I've borrowed the term consolidation from psychology where it refers to the strengthening of memory. Growing spirituality is a special case of consolidation because we're strengthening unconscious memory in our contextual model of the world. Both introjection and consolidation are important to understand if we want to strengthen spirituality.

When we're first born, we're like little sponges. We absorb information. We don't just consciously learn it. In the 90's, neuroscientists discovered that we have what's called a mirror neuron system that models other people's minds. The mirror neuron system helps us to internalize important people starting with our parents. In this way, our prefrontal cortex becomes conditioned with imprints of important others which communicate from our unconscious about what's good and what's bad. It's the beginning of our value system, our spirituality. As we get older, we still absorb information through our mirror neuron systems. Friends, mentors and community all become influential in shaping the messages that come from below. The mirror neuron system also gives us the ability to empathize with others and intuit how they feel.

In the previous chapter I described how I introjected my father's appreciation of wonder and creation. I absorbed those values by noticing what he valued and what he chose to share with me. The direction of his attention was a powerful message about what was important. In less fortunate families, some children learn that order, silence and not asking for anything for your self are the most desirable values.

The process of introjection continues on into adulthood even though we're less absorbent of information as we get older. We're not as dependent and the information doesn't burn in as rapidly as with parents. However, there's another environment that becomes available to us for absorbing transcendent values. Community becomes a powerful influence. To illustrate my point, let me share an important episode from my own life story.

When I was 19 years old I was flunking out of Columbia in New York City. I was depressed, often skipped classes and sought refuge down at the local pub drinking their 25 cent beers. I found no interest in my studies and detested the memorization of static tables of information. Premed was not doing it for me. Prior to college I had been enmeshed with my parents who wanted the status of a doctor or lawyer son. I had bought into my family's egotistical message that we were superior to other people and that I would carry the family escutcheon forward.

When I got to Columbia my egotistical pursuit of pride failed me. I couldn't keep my attention on a book for any length of time. My grades were abysmal and I despaired further. I had no viable future in sight. Then fate provided a long shot opportunity. There was a posted note on the campus bulletin board that sought volunteers to become involved with recovering heroin addicts down in the Bowery of New York City. I thought that doing something to help someone else might just be the ticket to get me out of my misery – since I didn't seem to be able to help myself.

The storefront in the Bowery belonged to the Daytop organization, a self-help residential community that used hard-hitting group therapy to rehabilitate addicts. They operated the storefront as a part of their SPAN program (Social Project Against Narcotics) and did group therapy with addicts off the street to screen for the few applicants who might be viable for their program. The people running those groups were astounding! They were former murderers, thieves, rapists and prostitutes but they were 4 or 5 years clean and had transformed themselves because their lives depended on it. When I met them they were radically honest, responsible and open. They demonstrated a kind of freedom from hypocrisy that I had never seen before. Their openness with internal truth was refreshing. I essentially looked at them and decided "I want to be like that!"

In the groups with these recovering addicts, I quickly became a focus for help myself. They could see that I was in trouble. I don't remember the exact dialogue but they went something like this:

"Bryce, you're blowing it! You have the whole world laid out for you on a platter but you're letting it go down the drain. Most of these other folks would give their right arm to have the opportunities you have in front of you. They weren't as lucky as you. What do you care about? What's important to you?"

"I dunno."

"Where do you see yourself in 5 years? What do you want to be doing?"

"I dunno."

"OK. What have you enjoyed in the past? What really captured your interest?"

I thought for awhile. Then I told them about how I had always been interested in psychology and how my father and I had built a sensory deprivation chamber down in my basement and won the biology prize in my high school science fair. I told them how I had been befriended by a prominent researcher in sensory deprivation, Jay Shirley, who let me observe and participate in his research one summer. I had also had fun participating in a program run by the National Science Foundation at Grinnell College in Iowa that taught behaviorism to aspiring high school students. Many researchers had come to the program to introduce us to their work. After hearing about all my early fun with psychology, the group facilitators asked the obvious question.

“Well, why aren’t you studying psychology?”

“I can’t do that because my folks want me to be a medical doctor. There’s no way I can get them to agree to let me become a mere psychologist. Besides, they’re paying my way.”

“But if you could become a psychologist, would you? I mean if that’s something that you really enjoy and find interesting?”

“I suppose so but there’s no way I can get my parents to support it.”

“OK, so how could you take it over yourself? How could you do it on your own?”

“That’s out of the question. Columbia is an expensive Ivy League school. It’s phenomenally expensive to live here in New York?”

“What would you have to do?”

“But I can’t! There’s no way!”

“What would you have to do?!!!”

They kept coming at me and coming at me, not letting me off the hook. And because I was so attracted to the power of their openness and honesty I kept coming back to the groups. Finally, I reached the tipping point. I cut my parents off. No more tuition money, no rent money, no money for food. I sought education loans to help me and I drove a taxi cab in New York to put myself through school. My girlfriend and I split living expenses which also helped. I experienced a surge of energy that I could now funnel into my studies. Discipline became easier and I developed routines of going to the library to focus on my studies.

While I was assuming more responsibility over my life, I kept going back to the groups. There were also new groups in the college community that had spun off of the SPAN project and I participated in them. All of these groups practiced radical honesty where we pushed ourselves and each other to speak the embarrassing truths of what we

actually feared, how we really sometimes betrayed our own code, where we felt truly ashamed of our inconsistencies. Honesty and responsibility were being burned in as I absorbed the implicit values of those groups. I also consolidated those values further by practicing radical responsibility outside the groups. The net result of all of this is that I got into a top psych school, my career was saved and I was set on a life trajectory that allowed me to eventually develop a frame of meaning that stabilized and enriched myself and eventually my marriage.

There's an interesting anecdote to this story. Several years later I became mentored by Hobart Mowrer, a prominent psychologist who was president of the American Psychological Association in 1952. Hobart had met the same people from the Daytop organization that I had. The spiritual power that he had observed in them had convinced him to switch his field of study in his final years to that of group dynamics. He developed what he called Integrity Groups, built on the foundation values of honesty, responsibility and involvement. He and I studied group process together and became close friends.

The point of this story is to illustrate how powerful a force introjection can be for developing a spiritual frame even later in life. Radical honesty, responsibility and involvement can imbue you with inspiration that eventually gets down into your bones! And if you're smart enough, you can engineer it into your life. I've done some incredibly dumb things in my life but one of the smartest was to seek out and hang with people who could inspire me. I shared with them my struggle and I can still feel their influence today like voices in the back of my mind. My father helped me to introject the values of creation and wonder but recovering addicts helped me to introject the transcendent values of truth and responsibility.

The introjection of spirituality is promoted to some extent by almost all of the world's major religions. When we look at all the world's major religions, there's a heavy emphasis of worshiping together in groups and joining together in song. Twelve step groups that emphasize spirituality are also the most popular form of self-help for combating compulsive disorders. When we look at how relationships and group participation facilitate burning in context, it's reasonable to suggest that these organizations are already using the technology. Hobart Mowrer taught me that the first 200 years of Gnostic Christianity often involved intimate groups with open confession. This may have partly accounted for early Christianity's explosive growth.

A one-on-one relationship can also help burn in spiritual values but usually much less so than an intimate group. In psychotherapy, the term transference refers to how the patient respects and imbues the therapist with authority. Some introjection of values can take place in this process and spirituality can be strengthened as a patient struggles to regain access to their internal truth. The role of sponsorship also does this in twelve step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous. The sponsor acts as a witness while the recovering addict performs a courageous moral inventory of their transgressions. In this way, the struggle for internal truth and the public witnessing of the struggle both help to burn in the values of truth and responsibility.

There's an obvious conclusion to be drawn from this discussion if we want to strengthen our own spirituality. If we want to develop a frame of transcendent values then it's important to associate with others who can inspire us. A radically honest and intimate group of people who struggle with the same challenges would be ideal. It's a simple concept but the results are profound. Both simple and powerful. How good is that?

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If choice of relationships were the only form of significance for burning in spirituality then this book probably wouldn't be written. It would only be a pamphlet. The truth is that intimate relationships or radically honest groups are not enough. Spiritual values will only partially strengthen from such sharing. Religious or spiritual beliefs are often not enough to get down to the visceral level. Strong spirituality permeates everyday experience and generates meaning throughout a person's daily life. More active personal diligence is required to embed values bone deep. It's not enough to absorb values by listening to others. You'll have to earn your spirituality with struggle. I remember my old therapist with much affection. On various occasions I would ask him "Nick, how're you doing?" He would always answer "Still struggling!" I now know that he wasn't bemoaning his life as being miserable. He was trying to teach me something profound about life and the process of becoming. It was thirty years later when he revealed to me his concept of "homeomorphogenesis" during a pleasant lunch while we discussed how people grow their own selves. His old phrase "still struggling" had been pregnant with a lot of wisdom.

## **The Power of Reciprocal Consolidation**

In July of 2010 my wife and I started an unusual venture called "Love Odyssey." We started taking couples out on our pilothouse sailboat to different ports of call around the rivers and sounds of North Carolina. While we were embarked on such an odyssey, we would perform counseling interventions to help their ailing relationships. We had a lot of fun that summer.

Bob and Jennifer were a different kind of couple. She had been my patient and had already made phenomenal gains at healing dissociative fractures in her personality from a fairly psychotic mother. Bob had been her sweetheart and fiancé 20 years prior before Jennifer's mother had split them up. They were finally getting back together after each had terminated a disastrous marriage to a previous spouse and were now requesting

that we take them on a premarital odyssey. Because they were going to be moving up to New York in the following month, we decided to give them a good sendoff by giving them a premarital preparation cruise.

It was a picturesque day when we crossed the Pamlico Sound. Winds were fairly calm as I talked to Bob in the cockpit. It was also a very memorable day for me because I had learned the day before that an intimate of mine had developed an addiction that had created disaster. It was apparent to me that the person's lying to avoid disapproval had provided the fertile environment from which the addiction had grown. As I sat facing Bob, I was acutely aware that his profile showed a similar problem with lying. On one of my surveys he had scored very high anxiety to a mental state that involves opposing another person in order to defend one's self. In other words, he found it frightening to speak up and would use evasion instead. He lied to avoid heat and he freely admitted it.

We both discussed how his lying would eventually wreck his relationship, how he would suck in shame with every lie and how he would eventually lose attraction to Jennifer because of his built-up inhibition. We discussed an alternative path that would involve much struggle but one that would protect his passion in the marriage. I told him how to apply a principle that I call reciprocal consolidation.

I was full of my own emotion while I talked to Bob. I told him to not make the same mistake that had cost so for someone who was dear to me. I told him that every choice matters, especially when no one else knows what's going on in your mind. Meaning always matters! Perhaps my own emotional state helped the idea to sink in. I then told him how to create his own spiritual strength by doing the following whenever he feared telling his truth:

- 1) Be aware in the moment that his fear is creating an opportunity for growing stronger.
- 2) Hold in his mind the idea that he is creating his future love of truth and integrity.
- 3) While holding his idea of strengthening his spiritual truth, push through the fear and speak his truth.

I told Bob that the world doesn't emphasize the importance of thoughts and merely focuses on concrete outcomes. However, if he could hold a spiritual value in his mind while he struggled with consistent behavior then the spiritual value would strengthen in his unconscious. He claimed to understand but I'm always conservative with my expectations of how people will implement ideas.

Two months later, I received an email from Jennifer about how they were settling in up north. In her email, she talked about how Bob was working on his truth telling. She said that she noticed how Bob had always had a hesitation while pondering what others wanted him to say. Now she was noticing that he would either preface what he had to say with "This is my truth" or end his statements with "...and that's my truth."

From her email, I could tell that Bob was working with the reciprocal consolidation principle we had discussed that day in the boat.

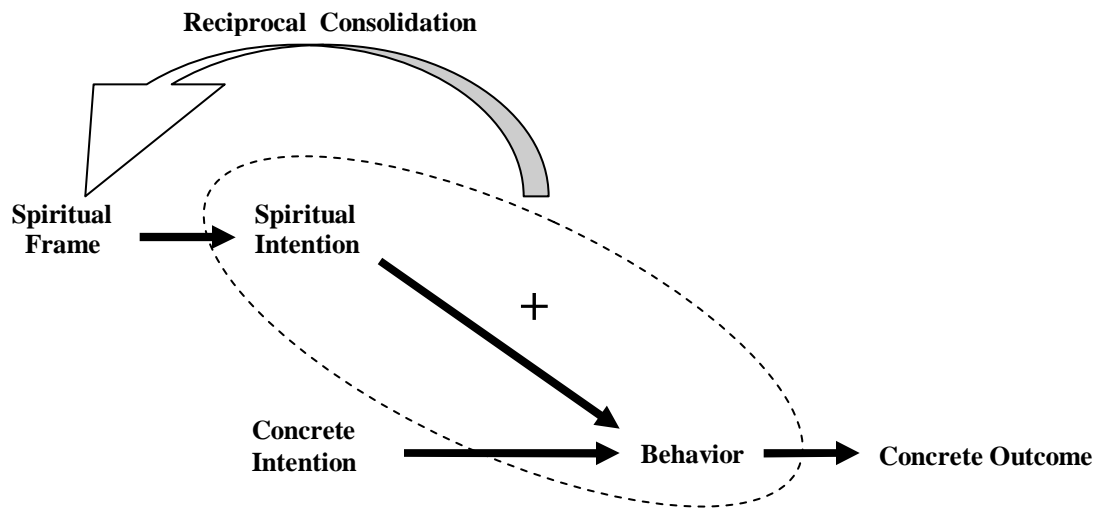
In December, 2010 I received another email from Jennifer. This one was especially interesting because she claimed that Bob had reached some kind of a tipping point. He had told her that he couldn't stand lying any more. It had become easier to tell his truth. He had also noticed something else. His ex-wife had always dominated him with her criticisms and attacks. He had been emasculated and terrorized by her in their prior marriage. Now he felt as though their conflicts were taking place at a distance and she couldn't get to him. When she threw barbs he knew it wasn't his truth and she couldn't hurt him. He could see her level of functioning and had even started feeling sorry for her. When I read Jennifer's email, I called Bob to get his version of what was happening. It was as it appeared. He had been working to consolidate his new core.

Reciprocal consolidation isn't really a difficult concept. It's just unusual because the rest of the world thinks so concretely. We're so concerned with external behavior that we minimize what's in our mind at the time that we act. Figure 3 illustrates how most people view thinking, behavior and outcome.



**Figure 3. The common view of thoughts, behavior and outcome.**

What's important about the common view is that causal effect only works in one direction. It's like entropy. It only works one way. But the principle of reciprocal consolidation introduces a new vision of causality that works in two directions. Thoughts can influence behavior but behavior coupled with thoughts can change a person through their spiritual frame. The causal effect loops around and changes the initiator of the action. Figure 4 illustrates the concept.



**Figure 4. Reciprocal consolidation of one’s future spirituality**

What’s very different from conventional wisdom is that reciprocal consolidation emphasizes the backward channel of behavior influencing mind. The world doesn’t think like this. Most of us learn to minimize that our background thoughts are important. The concept of reciprocal consolidation emphasizes that background meaning is critically important in the task of self-growth. Meaning matters! Whatever we fight for becomes dear to us in the future. When we fight for spiritual values our struggle burns them in stronger.

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Let’s visit some imaginary examples to see how reciprocal consolidation could be used in your own life

- You’re at the grocery store to buy one item you’re missing for a recipe. The check-out girl gives you some change back from a \$10 bill. As you’re leaving you notice that she gave you a \$ 20 bill mixed in with the singles. No one would know if you just kept on walking.

You decide that this presents you with an opportunity to grow your spirituality. You turn around and go back. Just before you give the check-out girl the \$ 20, you put in your mind the idea that you’re growing your future spirituality. You’re mindful that you’re strengthening your honesty as you hand her the bill. You explain what’s happened. Your struggle against temptation but especially what

you held in your mind during that struggle has just burned in more love of honesty and responsibility.

- You and your intimate partner are having a quarrel. It gets more and more intense. You can see your partner's nostrils flaring. Those familiar furrows of contempt are starting to show on his/her face. Your partner's eyes squint with pupils constricting to near pin points as he/she rattles off a litany of your past sins. The diatribe ends with a blast about how much your partner hates you. Your immediate impulse is to use your trump card. You remember what your partner's sibling once told you about your partner's character flaws. You've never told your partner about this but now it's tempting to use the information to hurt him or her.

You become aware that this is an opportunity for micro-transcendence, for spiritual growth. You know that you're under attack but you decide to make your internal truth and your responsibility for protecting the relationship more important than momentarily appearing strong. You hold in your mind the idea that you're strengthening your love of truth and responsibility for welfare. While you're holding this awareness, you respond albeit with still with an angry tone:

“Oh Yeah? Well I **LOVE** you even if you won't believe it! But I'm not going to do this crazy anger dance thing with you! I'm going to go into the den now so we can cool down. Let me know sometime this evening when you might be ready to talk about this again without so much heat. “

You've just burned in more love for your internal truth and your responsibility for welfare. Your spirituality has just climbed a notch.

- You've just had a disagreement with a customer at work. You held to your position despite their attempts to convince you otherwise. The conflict never gets resolved and you don't see the person for a good while afterwards. However, you find out over time that the customer was right and you were wrong. You just didn't have the correct information before.

A year after your original disagreement you see the customer walking down the street. You remember your original conflict. Even though you could walk away unnoticed you recognize that this is a momentary opportunity for spiritual growth. You hail the person to stop for a moment so you can catch up and talk.

Before you start talking, you hold in your mind the idea that you're about to strengthen both your love for truth and also your love for humility. You remind yourself that REAL strength doesn't depend on momentary appearance. It depends on having the ability to face what you fear even if what you fear is appearing less competent in someone else's eyes. With this awareness in your mind, you tell the customer that he or she was right and how you found out you that were wrong.

Your healthy humility has just been reinforced when you prioritized truth over appearance. Your fear of imperfection has just notched down and you've gained more freedom and comfort within yourself. Real strength!

For a final example, let me take a scenario taken from my own history that even relates to my current struggle for spiritual growth. When I was a younger therapist, James Masterson came to town to give a conference on borderline and narcissistic personality disorders. A person with a narcissistic personality usually displays a huge ego on the outside but he or she is really emotionally bankrupt. Masterson was the leading expert in the U.S on these types of disorders. There were about 150 of my colleague psychiatrists and psychologists in the audience. When Masterson asked the audience to describe some cases I volunteered to describe a case that had turned out poorly.

When I finished describing the case, Masterson explained why he thought I had actually been helping the patient. He said that it was just that the patient had aborted therapy as narcissistic cases often do. Then I made a decision to share more about my involvement with the case. I decided to risk a deeper truth. I spoke about why the aborted case was especially painful for me, that I strongly identified with the man and could see many of his feelings and dynamics in my own self. I stated that for some time I had considered myself to be a "recovering narcissist." Masterson listened carefully and then after some thought had an unusual response: "Hey, you guys are pretty good!"

Decades later I had a chance to further discuss my own narcissistic tendencies in yet another conference about therapist-patient dynamics. I told the story of how my grandfather had died in the great flu epidemic of 1917 and how my grandmother had sunk into depression and had abandoned my infant mother to the care of various aunts and uncles. My mother's profound attachment trauma developed into her strong narcissistic character as she sought pride to bolster her hollow sense of self. My mother later taught me about how I would be special and superior to other people. My own grandiosity grew malignant as I became sadistic and highly competitive. I hurt a lot of people. At the conference, I explained how I could still see some of my old emotional dynamics of wanting exhibition, to be superior and to dominate others. After I presented a difficult case the facilitator asked me what I had ever done about my feelings toward my own mother. My reply was that I perceived that my mother and I were both victims of the 1917 flu.

Why would I disclose this narcissistic aspect of myself at both conferences? Were these just more examples of my exhibitionism? The intent in my mind is the only thing that reveals the truth. I wanted and still want to grow beyond appearances. Similar to a recovering alcoholic who stands up in an AA meeting and says "Hi. I'm John and I'm an alcoholic", I don't want to fight my truth about my own ego. My colleagues don't have to know that I've grown a lot of compassion over my self-absorption and infantile pride. They don't have to know that over my egotistical tendencies I've grown the

capacity to care about and love others. They don't have to know because my purpose is focused on a private agenda. It's to strengthen my own self-acceptance of a truth that for years I had denied. I'm still burning the truth in. A patient once told me of a quote he had read from another author. I won't claim it as mine but I wish it were. "You'd best embrace your demons tightly to your breast.....or else they'll bite you on your ass!" Burning in the truth of our own demons is the best way I know of having them defanged and declawed.

The bottom line on the concept of reciprocal consolidation, the central point of this discussion is that there's an important strategy for burning in your spiritual frame. When it comes to growing your spirituality, what matters most is not that you do good. It's your perspective while you're doing it.

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