



# Buddhist Psychology: From Trauma to Enlightenment

Session 1: The Buddha, A Story of Trauma and Liberation

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Clear Way Zen, Regina, Saskatchewan

# Introduction

- Clear Way Zen Community
- My background

# Disclaimer

Some contents of the course may be triggering to some individuals, as it is the course's contents to discuss various aspects and experiences of trauma.

When triggered:

Take a break and practice deep breathing to ground yourself, leave the room if necessary, or talk with your therapist (if you have one).

This course is NOT a substitute for individual therapy.

Spiritual Bypassing isn't recommended!

# Course Structure

- Theoretical
  - Readings/homework
  - Class lecture(1-1.25 hours)
- A taste of the application in class (15-30 minutes)
- A pop-quiz during class
  - A prize at the end of the course for perfect attendance and best score.

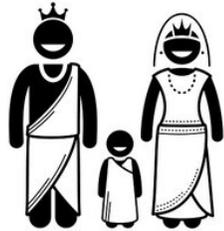
# Covered in this session

- Introduction
- Overview of course structure
- The story of the Buddha and how it relates to trauma
- A brief overview of how trauma is defined in modern clinical psychology
- Two modern psychological theories underlying the experience of Trauma and its comparative alignment with Buddhist concepts
- The impact of trauma on mental, emotional, and physiological processes.

# The story of the Buddha



*Sage prediction*



*Family of Siddhartha*



*Old Man*



*Disease*



*Dead body*



*Ascetic*



*Path to Liberation*



*Asceticism*



*The Middle Way*



*Siddhartha abandoned asceticism*



*Cultivation under Bodhi Tree*



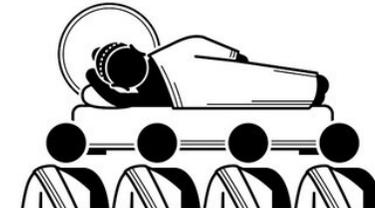
*Mara*



*Enlightenment*



*Teaching disciples about Dharma*



*Final days*

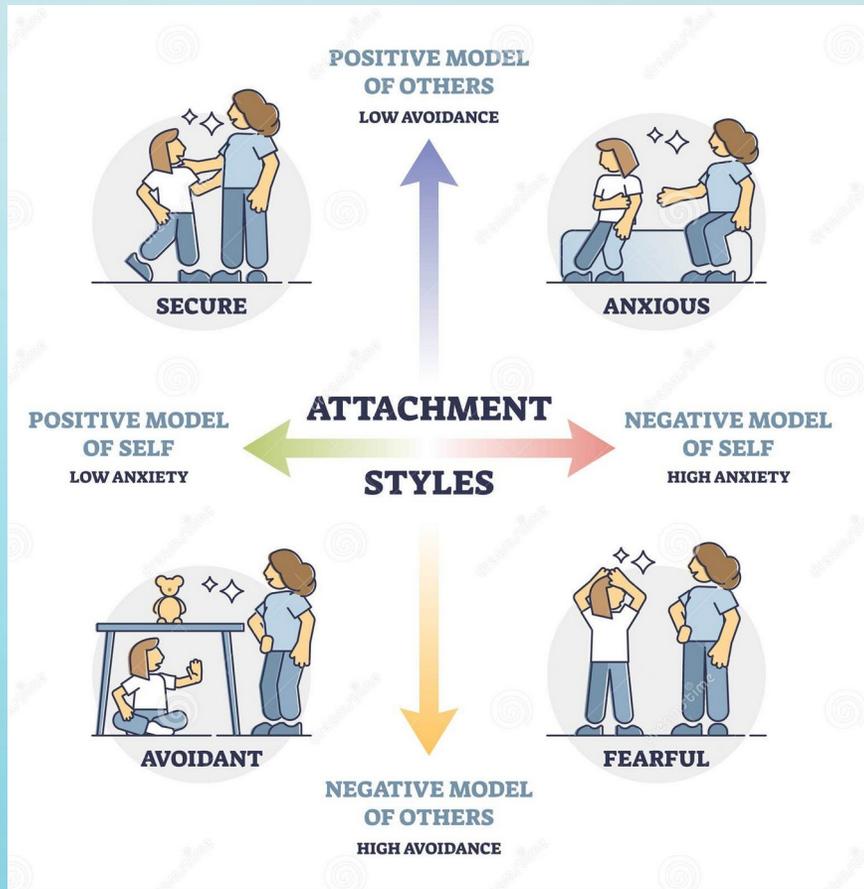
# What's traumatic about this story?

- **Loss:**
  - Loss of his birth mother as a child
  - Loss of ability to engage in the real world, being too sheltered (delayed to launch). Failure to gradually introduce dissatisfaction in life.
  - Abandoned his wife and child (repeat of trauma cycle)
- **“Primitive Agony”**(Winnicott, 2016)
  - A state of intense fear or anxiety that can't be easily described. This fear of breakdown was a defense mechanism against unbearable anxieties that arise when someone experiences a failure of their environment.
  - During infancy, a breakdown in the bond between mother and infant can occur. The infant is forced to deal with emotional events they can't manage
  - The infant creates defense organizations to short-circuit their experience of primitive agony
  - This defense organization becomes the default mode of operations, establishing the core unconscious patterns of the infants who developed into adulthood.

# Attachment Theory

- Developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth (1950-1990s)
  - ❑ Humans have evolved to be socially connected with others for **safety**, **security** and **survival**.
  - ❑ The blueprint for this evolutionary intimate connection is formed during early development with the primary caregiver called the ***“Internal Working Model”*** (Bretherton, 1990)
  - ❑ If the primary caregiver is responsive to the infant’s needs, secure attachment is formed. If the caregiver is not responsive, insecure attachment is formed.

# Attachment Theory & Buddhist Teachings



## Attachment Styles

**Buddhist Concept**  
(Three Poisons: clinging, avoiding, mindlessness or not present)

**Secure** – feels safe, relaxed, trusting with others

Not clinging, not avoiding, being present/aware of others and self

**Anxious** – not safe, overly clingy, lacks boundaries, not present

Clinging, not present

**Avoidant** – not safe, avoids others and self,

Avoiding/aversion, not present

**Fearful** – not safe, wants closeness and clings, then closeness triggers danger/fear, avoidance response

Clinging, Avoiding (aversion), not present

What kind of attachment style do you think Prince Siddhartha had before he became the Buddha?



# PTSD and CPTSD

(International Classification of Diseases ICD-11 Definitions:)

- Post-Traumatic Syndrome Disorder
  - Exposure to an event or situation (either short- or long-lasting) of an extremely threatening or horrific nature.
- Complex Post-Traumatic Syndrome Disorder
  - Exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible. Such events include, but are not limited to, torture, concentration camps, slavery, genocide campaigns and other forms of organized violence, prolonged domestic violence, and repeated childhood sexual or physical abuse.

# What is PTSD and CPTSD?

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms

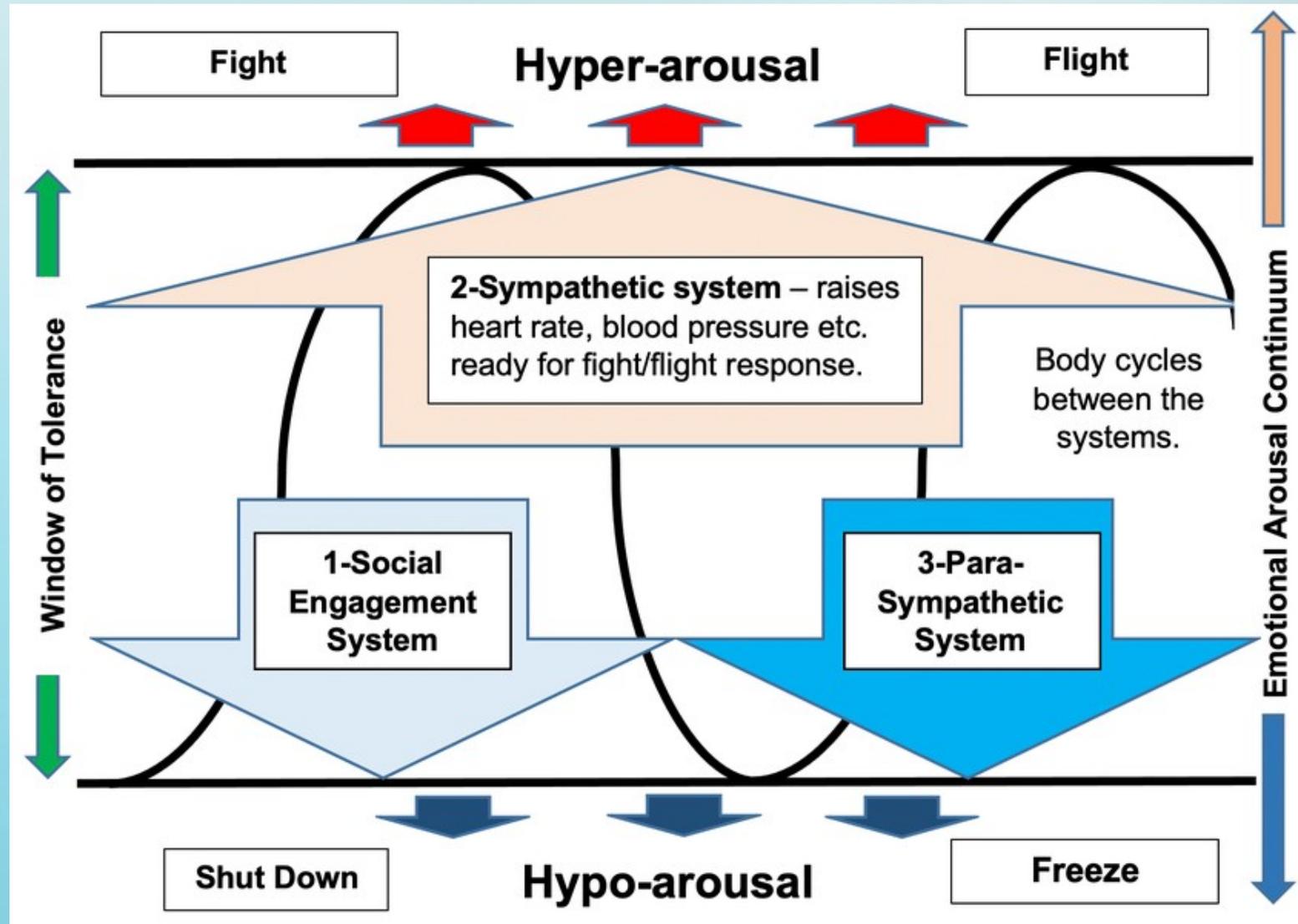
Re-experiencing the trauma
Avoidance of people, places, or thoughts that remind you of the trauma
Impairment in relationships and daily functioning
Alertness and reactivity

## Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms

Difficulties with emotional regulation
Impairment in relationships and daily functioning
Interpersonal problems
Re-experiencing the trauma
Avoidance of people, places, or thoughts that remind you of the trauma
Impairment in relationships and daily functioning
Alertness and reactivity

PLEASE NOTE: People with PTSD may also experience these additional symptoms in the C-PTSD column.

# Human Physiological Response System to Stress in the Environment



# Polyvagal Theory on Trauma

## 3 Core Ideas

We have a  
**3 Part Autonomic  
Nervous System**



ventral  
vagus  
(safe mode)



dorsal  
vagus  
(shutdown)



sympathetic  
system  
(fight/flight)

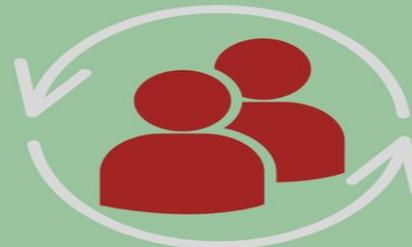


The brainstem  
detects danger  
or safety  
↓ from  
environment,  
body, memories,  
mindset

& determines  
our neural state

This process  
is called  
**Neuroception**

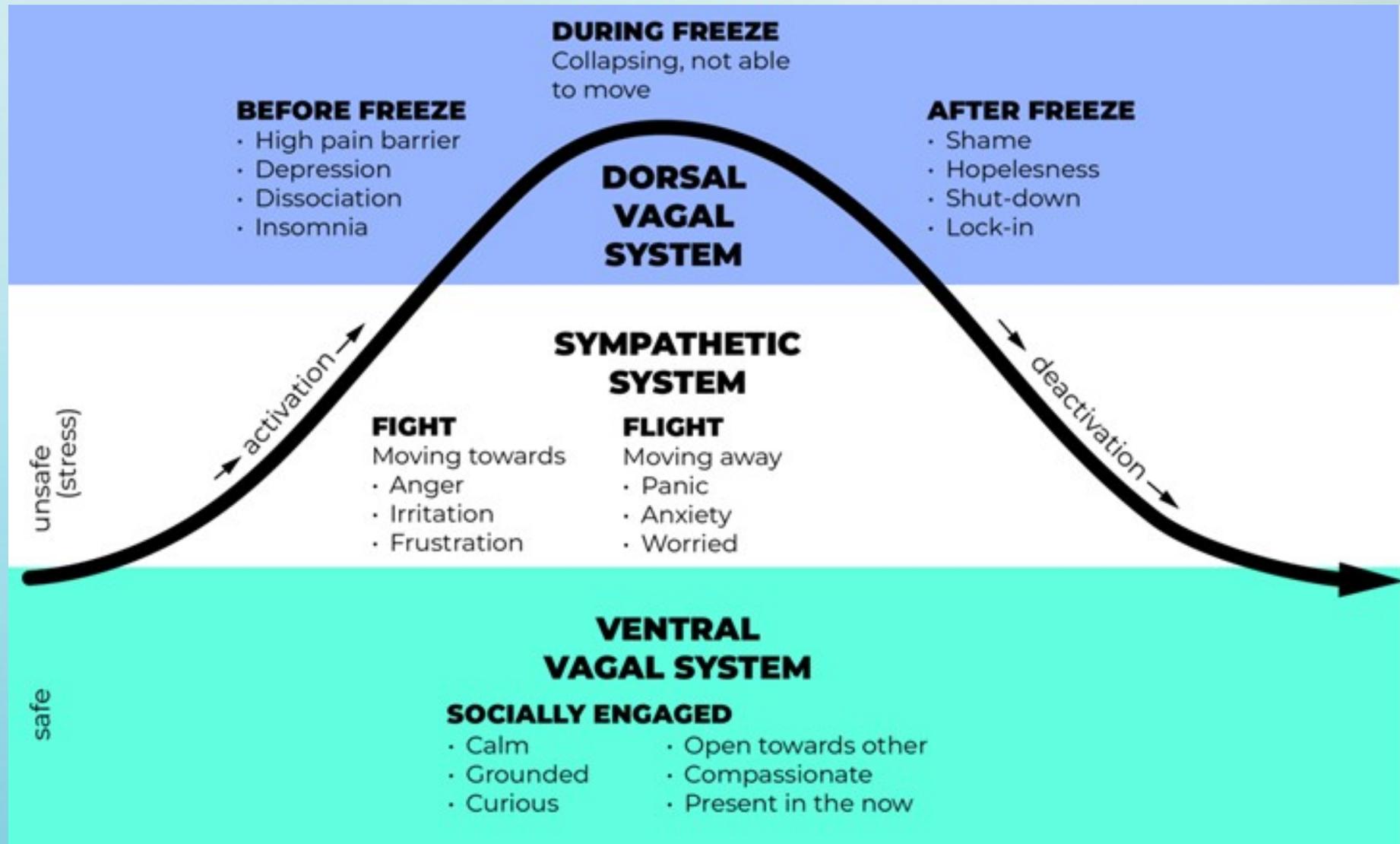
**Co-Regulation**  
is the strongest  
safety cue



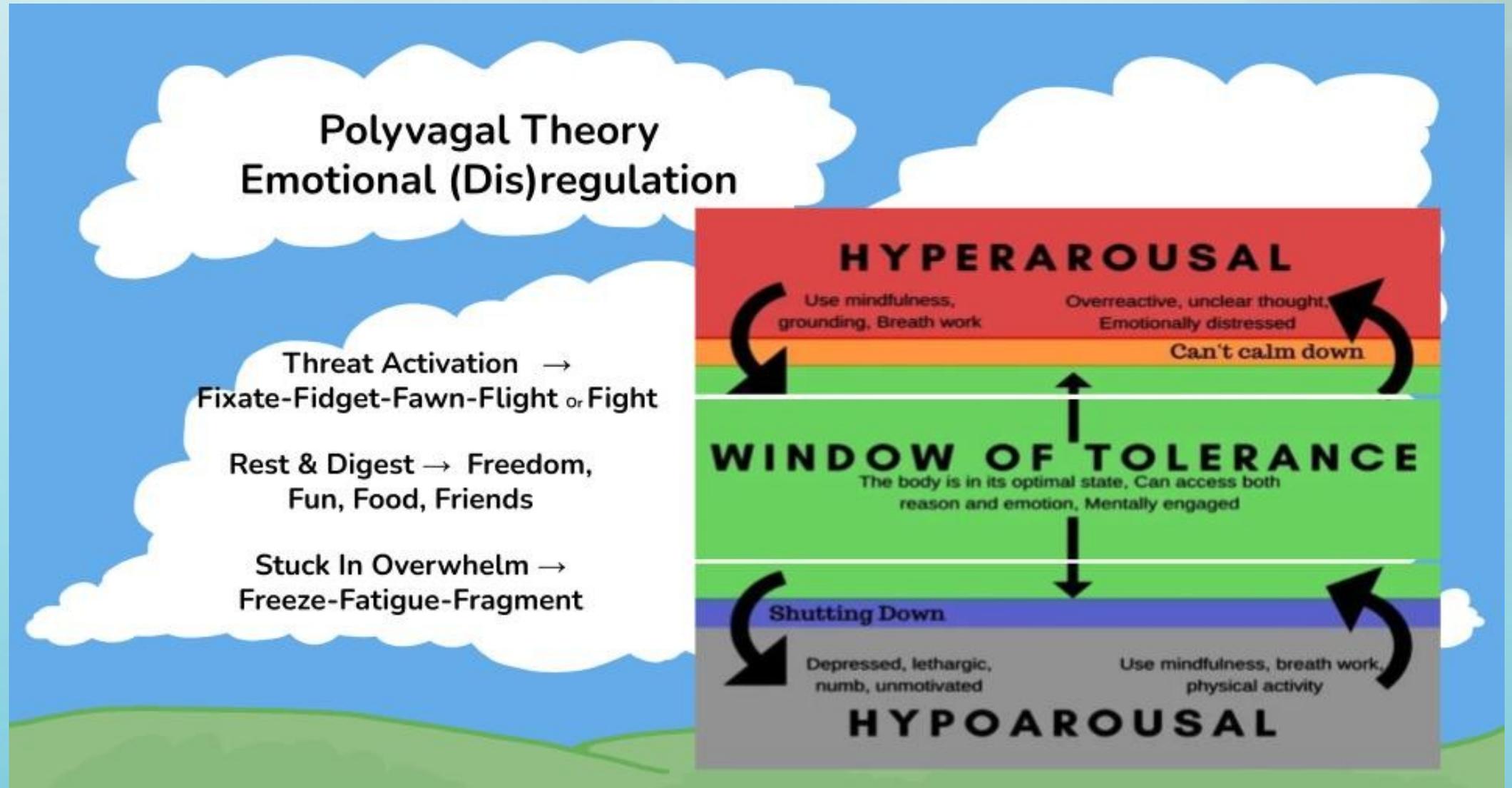
An under- or  
over-activated  
nervous system  
returns to safety  
through resonance  
and mirroring

Infants and children require co-regulation for normal development.  
Co-regulation deficits can be repaired at any point in life.

# Polyvagal Theory on Trauma



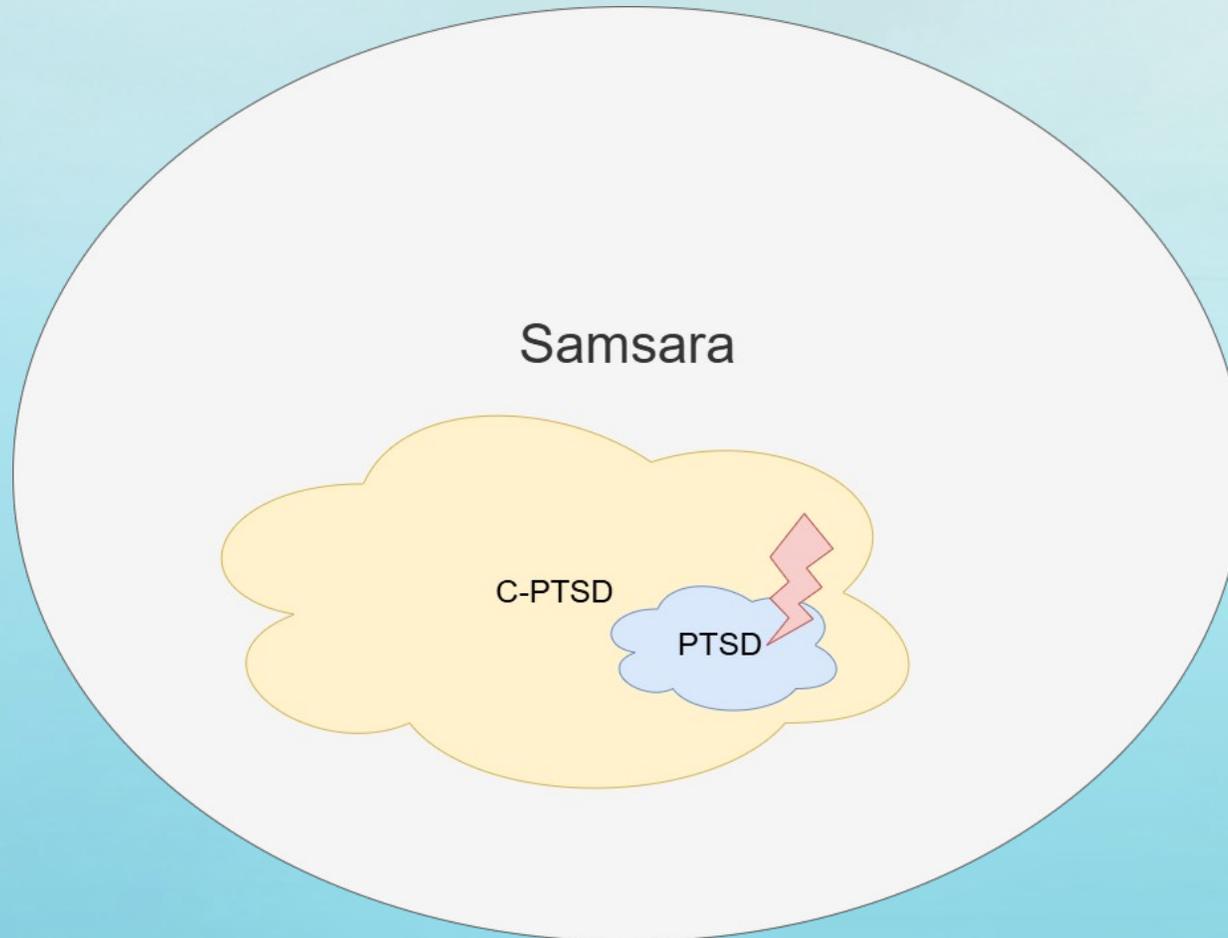
# Window of Tolerance or Dysregulation



# What did the Buddha Find Upon Enlightenment?

1. Life is dissatisfaction or full of difficult things to face (Dukkha)
2. This dissatisfaction is constructed by the **three poisons, the twelve links of dependent origination** and failing to accept the **three marks of existence** (Samedha Dukkha)
3. There is an optimal way of being to cease dissatisfaction/ sufferings. (Nirodha Dukkha)
4. The path to cease dissatisfaction varied (**37 factors of enlightenment**). It always contains 2 types of meditations: calm abiding (**Jhana**) and Mindfulness (**Sati**), and one boundary practice or Precepts (**Sila**), with the support of the Sangha (community of practitioners).

# Modern Psychology of Trauma vs. Buddhist Psychology of Trauma



**Samsara** – Cyclic  
Existence where experiences of **Dukkha** (difficult to face) are consistently experienced.

Non-pathologizing view of dissatisfaction or suffering

# What did the Buddha Practice to Gain Enlightenment?

- Calm Abiding Meditation
  - Slows the breaths, lowers Heart Rate, relaxing tensions, grounded, focused on the present and breathing
- Mindfulness
  - Dispassionately observes one's internal experience without judgments; to discover and understand with open curiosity one's internal experiences
- Practicing Boundaries with Connections to Others
  - Living in harmony with oneself, others, society, the environment and connecting with others

# Buddhism's Concepts of Practice Relating to the Polyvagal Theory

- **Jhana / Samadhi Practice**

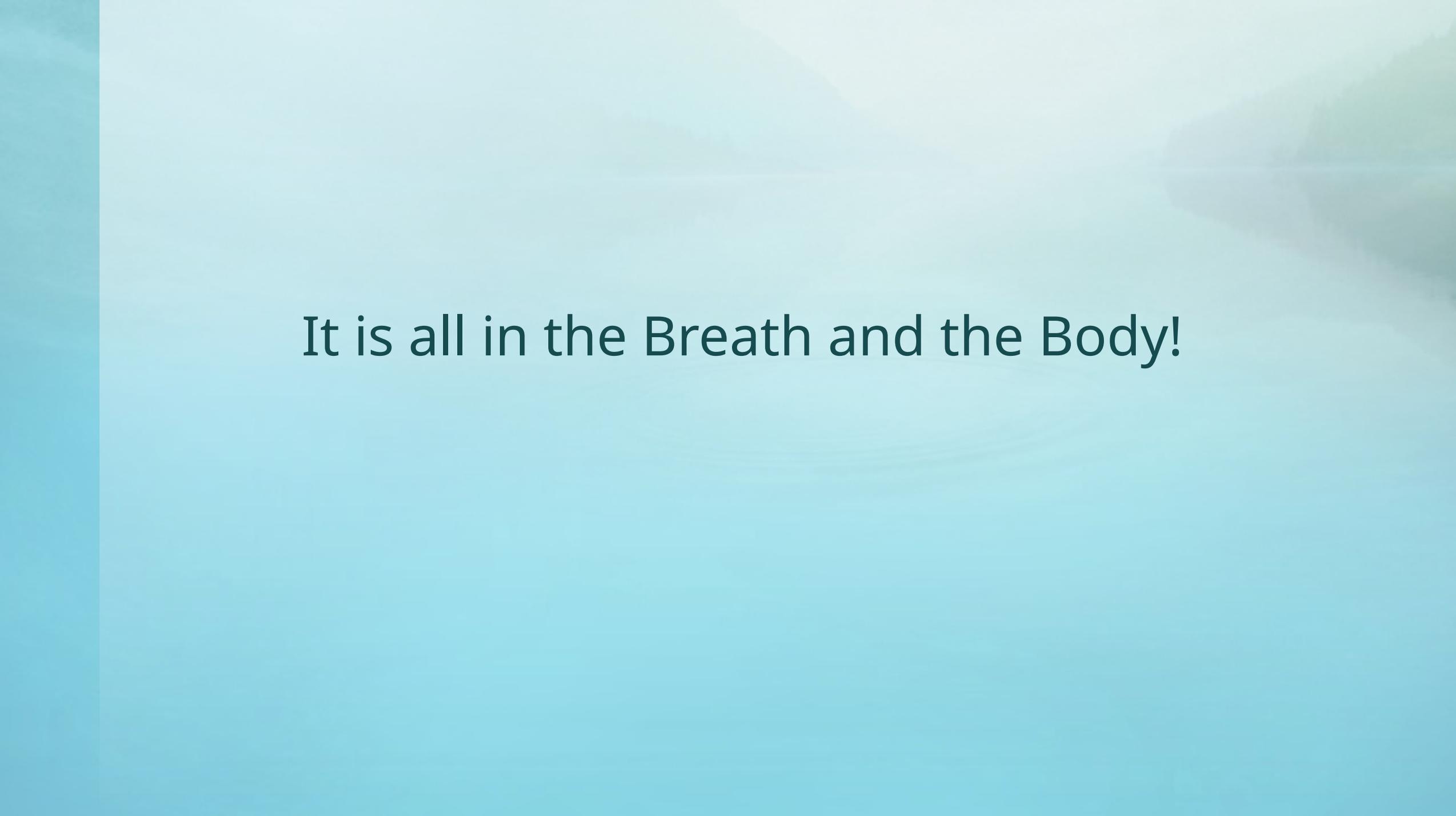
- lowers autonomic / stress arousal
- Increases dopamine and serotonin levels (creating experience of contentment, calm & relaxation)
- Increases window of tolerance

- **Mindfulness Practice**

- Generates insights and “wisdom mind” or witnessing presence.
- Dispassionate observation of one’s habitual patterns to understand and change them
- Balanced connected state of awareness

- **Community Practice**

- Taking Refuge in the **Three Gems**, establishing healthy boundaries with the **Precepts**, and healing and learning through connection with others who are also practicing the Dharma by applying the Six Harmony Principles for the Community.



It is all in the Breath and the Body!



# Zen Practice Starts with the Body & Breath

Shao Lin Breathing Exercises (Qi Gong) works with the moving  
body

# 7-Minutes Breath Work Qi Gong Exercises



Questions? Comments?

See you next week!

# References

Bretherton I, Munholland KA (1999). "Internal Working Models in Attachment Relationships: A Construct Revisited". In Cassidy J, Shaver PR (eds.). *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications*. New York: Guilford Press. pp. 89–114. ISBN 1-57230-087-6.

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