

V. TRANSFORMING CONFLICTING EMOTIONS

16. WHY ARE EMOTIONS DISTURBING?

There's probably no more difficult aspect of mind to deal with than intense, conflicted emotion. It comes flooding through the mind and body, a potent, powerful force that we simply don't know how to handle. It feels as if it will overwhelm us like a tidal wave—the ground under our feet will get swept away. We'll give up our sense of self, our reference points, our dignity and self-control and become at the mercy of our rage, lust, or sorrow. We won't know how to function normally, how to brush our teeth or tie our shoes. In other words, we panic.

This freaked out reaction might take place within a second of the emotion coming up. It may happen so fast we barely notice it, but we're easily rattled by the intensity of the emotion, unsettled by fear of it, and respond—as we've discussed—by grabbing hold of habitual patterns.

There are three automatic approaches we fall into. Either we suppress the emotion, trying to avoid feeling it; we dwell on it inwardly, clinging to it and

justifying it; or we act it out, trying to get rid of it.

What all three have in common is the mind's struggle to control and conceptualize emotion. In one way or another, we look to explain the emotion to ourselves in a way that seeks to avoid really relating to it and understanding it. We confuse our strategies for dealing with an emotion with the emotion itself. The fear and bewilderment we have toward emotion keeps us from understanding it accurately or working with it intelligently.

Suppressing an emotion means we regard it as something bad and shameful that we can't allow ourselves to experience. We're not open to it; we've condemned that experience of ourselves. We may have been taught by our parents or friends or society that this kind of emotion is wrong and unacceptable. Maybe we fear harm somehow if we express it. So we find it easier to just stuff it down inside ourselves, and we could become so efficient about how we do that, we don't even experience a particular emotion or certain emotionally difficult memories because the mind has become so capable of blotting them out.

This may relieve of us of facing any pain in the short-term, but suppressing emotion builds up pressure and tension in our beings that can explode out of us at a later time. We may take out our aggression on someone unrelated to what we're really so emotional about, blaming them for something we won't relate to

in ourselves. The tension could also fester in us, making us physically sick or emotionally imbalanced. Suppressing emotion can become a weight we carry around with us, like a stone on our backs, a stress that never gets resolved.

On the other hand, we could cling to an emotion and build up a tremendous story about it, justifying to ourselves why it's valid. We could come up with all kinds of logics justifying why it's solid, true, and real. We're dealing with and controlling the emotion by surrounding it in explanations. We're making "sense" of it this way, justifying its existence, trying to buffer its painful quality by making it part of the story we tell about ourselves. This effort we make to control the emotion is itself quite painful and typically extends the life of the emotion, building it up further, giving it more momentum. This becomes a way of preoccupying ourselves and easily leads to acting out the emotion.

Acting out emotion seeks to release it by spewing it at the environment. We're looking for a way out of the tension of the emotion. We explain that by making the external world responsible for our emotional reaction. If someone pisses you off, then you have to take revenge on them because it's "their fault." Whatever they did, they're responsible for it, but they're not responsible for *your* own reactions. If you're an alcoholic and see a bar, it's not the bar that

makes you go in, sit down, and start drinking. It's your own emotional state and the story you tell yourself. The easy logic we fall into is to make the external world responsible for our emotional reactions. We're seeking a release from the irritation of the emotion, feeling that if we can put it out on the world, we'll get rid of it from inside ourselves. It's a false release. Acting out emotions tends to reinforce them. They grow stronger, not weaker. You may think you've gotten rid of it, but it only becomes more ingrained, and comes back later with more force than before.

None of these ways of relating to emotions is based in mindfulness. They don't encourage us to see emotions clearly, or to relate with the living quality of emotional energy. Instead they keep us trapped in the cocoon, replaying the same old stuck scenarios. Our problem isn't emotion itself but the way we deal with it.

17. EMOTION AS POISON

Feel, Hold, Look

We'll discuss three practical ways of viewing emotions in order to work with them mindfully: emotion as poison, emotion as friend, and emotion as awake energy. We could understand these as three stages of transformation, from basic to most advanced. We'll start with emotion as poison.

Probably the most dangerous issue we face with emotions begins with a tendency to fly blindly into them at a moment's notice, either dwelling in them for extended time, or instantly taking them out on someone else. As with our discussion of learning to do sitting practice and beginning to relate with our thoughts, we have to get our bearings, figure out what's going on, and begin to see what's happening inside ourselves more clearly. We can't do this unless we create some space around our emotional states and start to understand what their effects are.

This is the initial stage of mindfulness with emotion—we need to pay attention to it without getting sucked into it. First you **notice and feel the emotion**. Then you **hold back from engaging with it or reacting to it**. You let it be and keep your seat like a warrior. If you have some distance from the emotion—even a little—you can start to **look at it and see what's happening**. Start to know what's going on

by observing it as it happens without forcing your beliefs onto it. Are you jealous? Are you shutting down into dullness and stupidity? Are you dominated by desire? Figure out what you're feeling as it occurs. That's the beginning of self-awareness. Sometimes we can launch into a state of emotion so blindly, we're already acting it out before we even know *what* we're feeling.

You might feel extremely angry, for instance, but it's not necessary to afflict that on anyone, or to throw a tantrum and try to destroy your cell so that the c.o.'s have to do a take down on you. Whatever you may be imagining in your mind, no matter how furious you might be, put some distance between yourself and your feelings, and hold yourself there. Recognize what's going on. Rather than being carried away with your rage, be interested in it and how it works. Yes, your body is tense and your head feels like it's on fire. You're seeing violent images, and saying vengeful things to yourself. Keep it at a distance so that it doesn't drag you away, and you can start to understand what's happening.

This state of mind isn't a lot of fun, but it can be educational. You can note how upset and unhappy it makes you feel. You can look at some of your thoughts and see that if you really did kill so and so and do such and such, it might be a terrible disaster for you, much less for them. You can feel the

vividness of how miserable you've become. You can recognize how the thoughts feed the emotion and the emotion grows stronger and stronger. You can spend the whole day wrapped up in hatred—or your whole life. You may find that even when you get tired of the whole rage thing, it's not interested in letting go of *you*.

This is seeing emotion as poison. You're getting that it's not helping you, while it *is* harming you.

If you're an addict, you can make a whole opera out of your neediness. You don't have to be addicted to drugs. You could be addicted to sex, money, control, possessions—many things. If you launch into a state of yearning and hunger, endlessly fantasizing and scheming, desperate to get what you don't have, what you imagine would make you happy if you did have it, craving for it with no end, this is what your mind is doing and who you are. It's not a mind of ease and perspective. It's filled with hollowness and grasping. It's like being slimed by something you can't wash off. Hunger feeds more hunger, and even if you scheme in your situation to get something of what you want, you're still dominated by that state of mind that can never be satisfied.

Whether it's hatred, neediness, depression, or some other kind of negative emotion, recognizing its poisonous quality is the necessary first step. We contemplate the emotion's effect on us and what happens

when we act it out. This is the basis of disowning emotional conflicts.

Disowning, Patience, and Letting Go

Disowning means we don't want to get dragged into these states of misery anymore. It's easy to flounder in them and easy to get carried away expressing them. We might be deeply invested in certain kinds of emotions, but the more we come to terms with the suffering they cause, the less enthusiasm we have for indulging them. Once we've recognized how they take us over, keep us dissatisfied, harm other people, and lead to bad outcomes, disowning them becomes an obvious path to sanity.

Although we're actively taking the view of these emotions as harmful, which is different than viewing everything arising in sitting practice in a completely neutral way, we're still relating to the thoughts and experiences with some objectivity. The difference is we're encouraging ourselves not to indulge emotional states and to recognize their destructive aspect. They are still only a series of thoughts that we're getting caught up in, so we're encouraging a sense of distance and a refusal to feed into our wantingness, jealousy, and so on. This takes patience.

Patience is a quality of non-aggression. It's the speed of aggression that pushes us to repress emo-

tions or act them out. It's a lack of aggression that enables us to hold back from emotion and examine it. It takes time because emotion tends to sweep us up and carry us away, and because we haven't really looked carefully at emotion to understand it. Sometimes we only get glimpses of what's going on; our mind isn't so steady and clear, and it's very impulsive.

Letting go of the emotion won't happen all at once, especially if it's intense and deep-rooted. We're continually relaxing our grip on it, returning to the breath, or to whatever activity we're doing. If we're actively trying to force it away or destroy it, this will amount to suppressing it, which doesn't help. We're learning to let it be, so that it can lose momentum and dissolve on its own. We're countering our normal tendency to get drawn into its whirlpool by recognizing its destructive qualities, refusing to get sucked in by it, and holding our seat of mindfulness and awareness.

All thoughts dissolve eventually, and the most intense emotion we can have will be no different. Understanding this and knowing it from personal experience helps us keep our seat. The more we train in keeping our seat when emotions arise, the more we'll train our minds to have spaciousness and patience with emotions.

Emotions are felt both mentally and physically. Work with the physical aspect of emotions by recog-

nizing the tension you're holding in your body and releasing it. In sitting practice, you can rely on returning to the posture and the breath to aid you in adjusting and relaxing physical tension. If you're able to focus mindfulness on the tense parts of your body, they could release or least have an invitation to start to shift their disposition.

It can be helpful to loosen and relax the body so that the emotional energy flows more easily. Some exercise or yoga can encourage emotion to flow through. You might also breathe deliberately, inhaling deeply without rushing to exhale. Experience it for a moment, and then let it out. This can encourage calm and relaxation, at least enough to relax your grip on the emotional state.

It's the mental grasp we have on emotions that's the true problem. It's clinging to them that solidifies and bloats them. Normally we think it's the person we're upset at or the thing we desire to possess that generates the emotional problem, but it's our habitual grasping and fixation. Therefore letting go ultimately means letting go of the mental tendency to cling to an emotional state. This is the essence of our discipline, and better yet, it's not something outside us that we have no control over. It's something we can relate with right now that doesn't depend on anyone or anything else.

However, if you're doing sitting practice and

the emotion seems much too intense to handle, you can stop your practice and do something else, like exercising or reading, to divert the intensity. When the intensity subsides some and the emotion seems more workable, you can go back to sitting and try to deal with it feeling a little more settled.

This is a very personal process. It can be hard work. You are feeling your way through it as you go along. See what you find helpful as your experience evolves.