

Meditation and Dealing with Difficult Emotions

by Rodney Smith

Many of us remain ambiguous and unsettled with our emotions. We simply do not trust them. We believe we have to maintain tension and restraint for fear the emotions will get out of hand and drive us toward destructive behavior. Emotions seem to say something personal about us. To be angry means, "I am an angry person;" when despair arises, "I'm sliding back to my earlier days of depression." We have a strong tendency to project and deny emotions, to ward off the personal implications, and to keep them safely "out there" rather than "in here." We do this by pointing fingers and blaming, "You make me angry." This logic implies the problem would correct itself by getting rid of you (dismissal, murder, war) rather than taking responsibility and working with the feeling. All this shows an unclear relationship to emotions and a critical need to understand what they actually are.

Meditation provides a straight and accurate orientation to emotions. We experience them directly for what they are. By themselves they mean nothing more than the arising of an internal weather pattern. But when we are strongly identified with the weather conditions, we cast ourselves into the fray of the storm. We discover that emotions are frequently enmeshed with thoughts and interlaced with fear. Fear is often a secondary emotion driving a reactive response to the primary one. We are afraid to be angry, lonely, sad and fearful. Fear governs how the sense of self reacts to the primary emotion, in this case, by avoiding it completely. Denying it does not make it go away, it subverts the energy and becomes an unconscious shadow controlling our life.

Thoughts perpetuate the emotion long past its natural duration. Thinking projects the emotion into the absurd. I make a routine mistake, and suddenly I am completely worthless; I separate from my partner, and thinking destines me to perpetual loneliness; I express anger and recoil in shame. None of this can take root without fixing the sense of I, me, and mine within the emotion; but emotions are so strongly believed, they become the very embodiment of the sense of who we are. To understand emotions is to begin to disassemble our painful storyline and to see them as temporary, empty phenomenon.

Mindfulness, awareness of what is arising, has a built in safety factor. When we are unconscious to the emotion and identified with its energy, we lose control and act out. Mindfulness begins to break that identification first by making the unconscious conscious, and then by separating the experience from the content. In meditation we learn to release the content and conceptual explanation for the emotion. The justification and analysis of an emotion are strategies to make it safe. We believe the emotion is too painful and self-implicating to experience on its own terms, so we add the reasoning to explain why we have to feel it at all. "You said this to me and then of course I was offended..." We do not want the emotion pinned on us so we analyze to blame it elsewhere – "It's all because of my mother." But it is arising in us. That is the existential fact. Can we open, allowing the fact to be friendly rather than indicating betrayal?

Emotions are impersonal aspects of mind. They say nothing about us, nor imply a character flaw. To feel them totally without avoidance or clinging is the Buddhist way. To be whole and complete, everything of mind and body must be allowed to be just what it is. Emotions represent part of our aliveness, part of our totality. When we realize that freedom means being fully alive, then we investigate the fears we have placed between that aliveness and ourselves. Resisting, suppressing, projecting, and denying our emotions creates an inherent tension that holds part of us at bay.

We have the capacity to experience emotions without fear. By maintaining a soft attention to the physical sensations of the emotions, we remain grounded in the body as the emotion unfolds. If we then offer ourselves the gentle mantra, "It's OK to feel this," we begin to increase our capacity to hold the continuum of emotions safely within that ground.

The only power an emotion has is its feeling tone. That is the extent of its muscle. It does not imply anything beyond the experience of the feeling. If we are willing to experience that, then our emotional world comes back into balance. The famous Thai meditation teacher, Ajahn Chah, said, when asked about an emotion, "It's only that much." We give them their validity and power through fear. Relax and face them head on, and they are only that much.

