

Dharmette: Exploring Emotions

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 27, 2010

Usually I find mindfulness practice quite interesting. There's so much to notice and to be revealed. One of the things I often find interesting is mindfulness of emotions. There are many perspectives through which to look at emotions and be present for them.

One of the guidelines for learning to be mindful of emotions is to be able to distinguish between living in the emotion, being caught up in the emotion, versus having an emotion but, in a sense, standing aside and watching it and seeing it. Or to be present for it, be aware of it, without assuming that you are the emotion. Not defining yourself by the emotion. It can be helpful sometimes to shift from saying, "I'm angry" to "There's anger here." "I'm sad." "There's sadness here." "I'm afraid," versus "There's fear here." Or "I'm happy." "There's happiness here" – whatever there might be. Often when we define ourselves by the emotion, "I am angry," and then it becomes much more complicated for two reasons.

One is that it's an abstraction. "I am X" is an abstract thing. It's very hard to get a handle on an abstraction, to really see it for what it is, but "there's anger here" – that's not so abstract. The 'I' is the abstract thing.

The second reason why it's difficult is because that abstraction, 'I', it tends to load the emotion with a lot of other ideas and associations and meanings. 'I' am not supposed to be a person who's angry. "I'm" supposed to be showing off all my happiness. It's not acceptable for 'me' to be this way. Whereas if it's just anger, and you separate out the anger, or the happiness, from yourself, then it's easier to see clearly what's actually happening, and not be entangled with it quite as much.

One of the perspectives in exploring emotions is to look at them from the point of view of any motivation that's part of them? Is there any sense of purpose, anything that the emotions are trying to do? If you're angry, there's often kind of a purpose, or motivation, to somehow lash out, push away, get away from what's going on. If you're in love, there might be desire, the motivation to want to be closer to that person in a variety of ways. If there is happiness, there might be a kind of leaning into it, wanting to have more of it, which might be part of that happiness, or that joy. There might be a feeling of contentment, and that contentment seems to come together with a feeling of wanting to settle back, just relax, be present, settle in.

Whatever the emotion might be, it's interesting to see if there's a desire or a motivation, that comes along with it, because it's often the desire, the motivation that is one of the hooks. When we get involved in the emotion, and it influences us, it has an impact on how we live our lives. But if you see the motivation that comes with it, then you have much more choice about whether you go along with that motivation, or whether you try to free yourself from it, or not get hooked by it.

Another thing that's interesting with mindfulness of emotions is to notice how quickly they change. There might be an overarching mood, which colors your whole day. You just feel like you're grumpy all day, or irritated all day, or frightened or anxious all day. But emotions are not solid. They're constantly being recreated and reinforced.

Lately, I've heard of something called the 90-second rule regarding emotions. Have you heard of this? The idea seems to be that if you don't do anything about a strong emotion that's happened, meaning you don't get involved with it or re-trigger it, then an emotion doesn't last more than 90 seconds, no matter how intense and strong it is. If you say, "Okay I'm feeling grief," and just relax and let the grief wash through, that wave of it is not going to last more than 90 seconds. It lasts a lot longer if we get involved. It seems like it lasts for days when we're entangled with it. "I'm the one who's grieving. I'm upset. This is terrible. It shouldn't be like this. Poor me. This great loss." And then we tell ourselves a story over and over again about the loss we have. It can be a very real loss – not to be made fun of or belittled.

But there's something about getting out of the way that allows things to come. Take the approach with anger of counting to 10. Partly it's just getting out of the way. Maybe it doesn't take quite 90 seconds to count to 10, but it's the same principle. You get out of the way. Because emotions are not fixed, solid things – they're processes

that are moving through us – if we can get out of the way enough to let it wash through, it actually passes quite quickly. I don't know where this 90 second rule came from but it's quite interesting, 90 seconds. Can you be patient for 90 seconds?

Another thing that I find interesting is how many different emotions can wash through, even if there's an overall mood that lasts all day. One of the fun places to do mindfulness of emotions is driving – to be sensitive to all the subtle shifts of emotions that go on. Again, you might have an overarching mood, and you might be blinded by that. That's all you see. You're involved with the mood, the emotion – you're involved with your irritation, your anger at what's going on at work or something. It's eating away at you, and that's all you think there is. But if you relax a little bit and look around for the subtleties of what's happening, you'll see that as you're driving, there are a lot of small little shifts of emotions of different kinds. So you're driving along, happily being irritated, or happily being happy, or whatever, and this police car pulls up behind you. If you're sensitive and paying attention, probably you'll notice a little bit of fear, a little concern. "What's this? A cop car is not leaving my tail. What's going on here?" A year ago, in Redwood City, I had a police car pull up behind me and stay close. I made a left turn into a side street. It made a left turn. I made a right turn. It just kept following me, seemingly, through Redwood City. I didn't know if he was checking up on me, or doing a computer search on my license plate, or if it just happened to be a coincidence that we were going to the same place. I was a little bit more awake [laughs]. My interests were directed in my rear view mirror much more than they normally would be. "What is this?"

And then you're on the freeway and some car cuts you off, or doesn't let you in, and you need to get into the lane. Sometimes there's irritation that arises. Or suddenly a car brakes a little bit too fast in front of you, and a little bit of fear can happen. Some beautiful car, some attractive, luxurious car drives by, and you feel this desire, "I'd like that car." Or maybe it's the person driving the car. I remember when I was growing up in Italy – I guess I was eighteen – I had really long blonde hair, way down to my diaphragm area. There weren't a lot of long-haired guys back then. I remember driving on the freeways in Italy, and every Italian man who drove by me would turn around and look [laughs]. And I said, "Oh that's what it's like for women. They probably get that kind of attention all the time."

There are all these little shifts that can happen, and I find it fascinating to ride the kaleidoscope – the shifting and changing. It might seem inconsequential, but with any particular minor little movement of irritation, or fear, or desire, or delight, or humor, or whatever, if you're not careful, it can have a cumulative effect on you over the day. A lot of seemingly incidental movements of anxiety take their toll. They add up over time, and so it's not surprising that at the end of the day, you're exhausted, or stressed out, or the anxiety has built. But if you track the mood or emotion as you go along, then one of the beautiful qualities of mindfulness is that, if you track it in a non-reactive way, and just let it be there, and you don't get involved with it – you just let it wash through – then it tends not to accumulate, not to leave traces. That slow, step by step, building of tension, or habit, or whatever it might be, tends not to happen as much. It's a nice thing to know how to let the emotions wash through.

I would recommend that you find some situation where you can practice the kaleidoscope approach to mindfulness, the kaleidoscope of emotions, whether it's driving, if that's where you do it, or at work, or someplace where you have enough quiet, are left alone enough, so that you can watch what's going on. Maybe it's shopping in the supermarket. You go down the aisles and just notice all the really subtle shifts and changes that are going on inside of you. What attracts your attention? How do you feel about things? The desire, the aversion, the other people there, and how you react to them and take them in, and what happens to you emotionally when you go down the detergent or the household pesticide aisle. I feel a shift in me when I go down certain aisles. "Oh I don't know if I want to be in this aisle" [laughs].

You might have fun. It could be fun. Hopefully it's fun. Watch your kaleidoscopes go through. That's what I have to say this morning. I hope you enjoy your emotions.