

Mindfulness of Emotions (1 of 5) Introduction

September 7, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, cultural phenomena, pie, self-identity, conditioning, fixed categories, physiology, psychology, freedom, embodied, feelings, motivations, reactivities, activities, mind states, non-clinging, nonattachment

Gil Fronsdal

Because it is the beginning of the week, there's a new theme – mindfulness of emotions. I think many English-speaking people would say that emotions are a central and very important aspect of life. For some people, emotions are how they navigate and understand the world and themselves. It's what they're oriented around. Others are not so centrally focused on emotions, but emotions still play a very important part in life.

Without emotions, life wouldn't be as interesting. The stories we tell, the books we read, and the movies we watch would be phenomenally dull if the characters in them were emotionally flat. There would probably be very little drama or excitement in them if that was the case. For some people, emotions make life worth living. Emotions infuse them with inspiration and purpose.

In some ways all that is true, but it turns out, oddly enough, that no one really knows what an emotion is. I tried to study them. There are many theories about what an emotion is. We often assume we know what emotions are. We can often identify them very quickly – “Of course, I know what anger is; I know what sadness is; I know what happiness is, or joy.”

Although some people have very strong opinions about emotions, it's hard to pin down exactly what they are and define them. Where is the line between what is an emotion and what is not an emotion? Is peace an emotion? Is calm an emotion? Some people would say yes. But are they the same kind of emotion as something like anger, joy, or delight?

Someone who wrote a book on the history of emotions made this amazing statement: prior to 1830 in the English-speaking world, no one experienced emotions. That's kind of a stunning statement. It seems that the word “emotion” entered the English language in the early 1800s, so English-speaking people have been using this word for about 200 years.

Before that, other words were used, but they were not equivalent to the word “emotions.” You needed to use a variety of different words to encompass what we now call “emotions.” If you go back to the ancient world of the Buddha and try to find an equivalent in his language for the English word “emotion,” you have a hard time finding an equivalent. I know of no Pali word that can be translated by the English word “emotion.”

Now, did the Buddha not experience emotions? Did the people before 1800 not experience any of the things we call “emotions?” Of course, they did. They felt anger, sadness, joy, and happiness. In the ancient texts, we find words that translate that way pretty easily, but are they a perfect fit? There seem to be words in Pali for things like sadness, but we're not quite sure how to translate some of these words. Are we supposed to translate them into words that are used in our English language?

Emotions are cultural phenomena just like everything else, but they're cultural phenomena that are also deeply connected to evolutionary instincts, reactions, and responses to the world. So the line between culture and conditioning and the physiology and the psychology of emotions is not independent of culture. It is a very loose, ambiguous line.

In ancient Buddhism, we don't find the word “emotion.” If you go through the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness practice, there are very clear instructions in a text usually translated these days as the Discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. He doesn't talk about emotions in a very obvious and clear way, as we would expect. One way of understanding this is if human experience is a pie, and you slice the pie to offer your

friends pie, that pie of human experience can be divided up many different ways. Different cultures divide it up differently.

When the Buddha gave instructions for mindfulness, he was seemingly dividing up human experiences in different ways than we would necessarily do here in the English-speaking world. It is very interesting to practice his instructions in relation to what we call emotions. It challenges us a bit not to get too hung up on what we think our experience is. This is similar to the way Buddhists tend not to want to identify with the notion of self and the identification with self. They don't see our experience through the lens of self-identity. They also don't see experience through the lens of this particular idea of emotion that we have in English.

Just as in clinical studies of emotions in human psychology it is very difficult to pinpoint what the self is, it's hard to pinpoint what an emotion is. In the same way, ancient Buddhism doesn't really support our usual ideas of who we are and how we are. This does not have to disorient us. Rather, it can help us free ourselves from the fixed categories and ideas with which we sometimes struggle and limit ourselves.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness is an alternative way of organizing the human pie of experience. With emotions, whatever you want to include in the category of emotions, it's possible to use these four different slices of the pie that Buddha talked about to get a new perspective on emotions for the purpose of becoming free – not free of emotions, but free with them, free from them while still having them.

One of the great gifts we can give our emotions is their freedom. This doesn't mean the freedom to wreak havoc if we're angry or full of lust, but rather, we give emotions permission to be here free like a cloud in the sky. We allow emotions to morph, change, and unfold in whatever way they want.

The four slices of the human pie that the Buddha uses are: first, to experience things through the vantage point of our physical embodied experience; second, to experience from the vantage point of the subjective feeling of whether things are pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, which is called "feelings" in Buddhism. The third slice of the pie is the state of the mind. This includes the motivational state of the mind – what drives us to be involved in the world or the orientation we have towards the world. It also includes more deeply the overall state, quality, and characteristics of awareness itself, the mind. The fourth piece of the pie or basket is the reactivities and the activities of the mind in relation to having an emotion.

If we go through these four different categories looking at emotions, we see emotions not as a singular thing, but as a composite. This is exactly what modern researchers are coming up with in the different theories of emotions. Emotions are never a singular thing. They are a composite of a variety of things that come together to create the particular emotion that we're talking about.

Mindfulness can be a process through which we see clearly what these different elements are. This is not to validate, repress, deny emotions, or have aversion to them. In the end, the practice is not even to give emotions their freedom. (The idea of giving emotions freedom can be confusing.) From a Buddhist point of view, what we are really doing is not clinging to emotions. We are learning radical non-clinging and non-attachment. That is a phenomenal thing to grant our inner life. When our inner life exists without any clinging, this allows some of the best, creative, intelligent, compassionate, and loving parts of our life to come through.

This week, I'll go through the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as a way of looking at four different areas of emotions – four different perspectives or aspects of them. I hope that you will find it instructive, interesting, and useful to look at and understand emotions in new and different ways than we usually do. I hope this will support you in discovering this phenomenal capacity for freedom, which in Buddhist language means non-clinging to our emotions. That's the plan for these next four days. I look forward to our time together. Thank you.