

Mindfulness of Emotions (2 of 5) Emotions in the Body

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Here in California and elsewhere, our sympathy and our love go out to the people displaced by the fires who have lost their homes and are struggling with the smoke and challenges of the heat.

This is the second talk on mindfulness of emotions. Emotions are a big part of our world. Learning how to be with our emotions is such an important skill because becoming wiser with our emotions allows us to be present and offer more of our care for the world, rather than our distress.

As I said yesterday is that the English word "emotion" doesn't really have a clear definition. "Emotion" is a vague category term. No one really knows exactly what emotions are. Many people assume they know exactly what emotions are and they take it for granted that emotions are a huge part of human life.

But there are many things that we take for granted and assume are just built into the nature of the universe. These things are really partly a product of our conventions, our culture, our ideas, and the concepts we use to organize our lives. There's nothing wrong with that, but sometimes we are limited by our concepts, ideas, and stories. Maybe it's useful to think that emotions are not what we think they are. Just that little phrase: "emotions are not what we think they are" might help us to open up to be with direct experience rather than removed, with our thoughts, ideas, opinions, and stories about the emotions.

In the Buddha's teachings the alternative way of being with what we call "emotions" is to look at our experience through the four different perspectives in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. First, we look at experience through the perspective of our body. How is it being experienced physically? Second, we look through what he calls "feeling." This means the subjective experience of the sense of pleasantness and unpleasantness, liking and not liking. Third, we can look at experience from the point of view of the mental state that's present. Fourth, we look at it in relation to some of the activities of the mind – our reactions and responses to emotions or whatever is there.

Today the topic is to use the body and really feel the experience in the body. When the Buddha started teaching about mindfulness of the body he first taught mindfulness of breathing. If our life is a mandala or concentric circles, for a meditator, I see breathing as at the center. As we expand outwards and hold more of our experience, the next concentric circle is our embodied physical experience. The next concentric circle is the mind states. The last one is the activities of the mind that lead to suffering or freedom.

With that image, the idea is that we stay at the center with breathing and just breathe with things. As I said in the guided meditation, breathing with the emotions can be a great support for not getting pulled too far into the world of thinking about emotions. The statement "emotions are not what we think" is also meant to dislodge the strong pull into the world of thinking, stories, and meaning-making. We can learn to use breathing as a way to be a little bit free of our thinking, not focused on our thinking. Focusing on breathing keeps us fluid and relaxed.

Then we begin to feel the wider field of bodily experience that happens in the middle of that breathing. The Buddha called this "the experience of the whole body." Feeling the whole body gives us a reference point for our emotions that is phenomenally useful: we feel in the present moment the physicality of the emotions we're having. Our involvement with emotions, especially if this involves stories, ideas, and events of our lives, might

not really be focused on the present moment, but on who said what, what I said, what happened, what the person did, what I want. That whole world of stories keeps the emotions stirred up.

The French word from which the English word "emotion" comes – (*émouvoir*?) apparently means "to stir up and to set in motion." We keep stirring emotions up with our thoughts and ideas. The physical manifestations of emotions are the ways that our stomach gets tight, the butterflies in the stomach if we're afraid, the ways our shoulders go up if we're angry, or the ways that our eyes widen if we're afraid.

All over the body, there are muscles that have direct lines to what we would call our emotional lives. Those muscles are being tugged, pulled, energized, and activated in different ways. Some people say that we probably wouldn't be able to recognize the emotion we're having unless we had the physical evidence of something happening in our body related to the emotion – some sensation that is an expression or a manifestation of that emotion.

What we do in mindfulness meditation is to bring our attention to the physical component of the emotion. It's a way of respecting emotion and feeling it. Then we allow it to be there. What we're doing is stepping away from the thoughts and stories about the emotion. We're offering a profound respect to the emotion, allowing it to be there. But we're allowing it to be there as a present-moment phenomenon – as it manifests in the present moment. We can start to feel it in the body. The Buddha talked about feeling the experiences of the body through all the different bodily sensations that come into play. In relation to emotions, we feel in the body all the emotions that come into play.

There are a few advantages of bringing attention to the physical experience of emotions. One is that emotions felt in the body are not a story, so it's a way of connecting to the emotions without continuing to fuel them and stir them up. The body is very honest. Sometimes we can feel more clearly and more honestly what's happening than we can if we're looking through the filter of our thoughts, ideas, meanings, associations, or biases.

One of the most important advantages of experiencing emotions in our body is that the body has a lot of intelligence. The body is not a thing, it's not like a hunk of meat. The body that the Buddha talks about is the dynamic and active field of sensations, nerves, activities, and movements that are going on. It's a process, just as emotions are processes that move and unfold – unless they get stuck in a loop going around and around.

So the body is a process. As we make room for how the emotions feel in the body, it's kind of like the body is giving room for the process of the emotion to unfold. It's as if the psychophysical or somatic body, if really left alone *in awareness*, often knows what to do. It knows what needs to relax, what needs to unfold, what direction the emotion needs to go.

That doesn't necessarily mean that difficult emotions get better right away. Sometimes difficult emotions need to get stronger until some kind of resolution comes. Grief might need to become stronger for a while. It needs time. Fear might need to be stronger for a while. It needs time. Anger might need time. But we get out of the way in the sense of our thoughts, our ideas, and our projections, and we just feel it in the body.

That's not always easy. If there are very intense or difficult, painful emotions that have a long history and difficult associations with events in our lives, then this might not be the right thing to do (getting out of the way and feeling it in the body). There are other ways of working with mindfulness of the body for things that are too difficult to touch directly. But if it's not too difficult, bring your attention to how emotions feel in the body.

With difficult emotions, I think of it as composting them in the body. I just keep coming back and feeling my body. This might just be for a few moments because I'm stirred up by something. But when I remember, I come back and compost it in the body, feel it in the body, and allow the body to handle it. I trust the body to handle it.

With some of the more beautiful emotions, it isn't so much they get composted, but by feeling them physically in the body, we give them more room to grow and unfold. They also want to move. Joy and happiness can also become more expansive. When we start feeling them in the body, the deeper kinds of joy and happiness actually get limited by thinking about things. The deeper joy and happiness become more expansive and grow when we keep relaxing into the body and feeling them.

To end this, I want to say that one of the great ways that the body can support emotions, both the difficult ones and the ones that are quite wonderful to experience, is by helping our emotional life to feel safe with us. Let the

body be that place of safety. Let the body hold the emotion. Open to the body, and allow the fear to feel safe within you. Allow the anger to feel safe. Allow the joy to feel safe. Allow the love to feel safe within you. Hold it and be with it.

That can mean breathing with the emotion through the body, feeling it in the body and breathing with it, or accompanying it with breath. Or simply, with a loving, caring, soft attention, feel where the emotion is present in the body and make room for it. Give it permission to be there and see what happens in a quiet mind that's not preoccupied by thoughts. Whenever you start thinking about the emotions, take all those thoughts and compost them back into your body.

This idea of coming back to your body, back to your body, is one of the great skills in meditation practice. It takes a while to learn it. It takes a while to learn how to feel safe about it and how to be wise about it. Mindfulness of the body is one of the four big areas where we bring our attention. The more we're in our body, the more it can be a foundation for the next three foundations of mindfulness – three other ways in which we can bring attention to the emotions, which I'll continue with tomorrow. Thank you so much for being part of this. I hope that in this process you become friends with your emotions and that your emotions feel that you're a support and a friend to them. Thank you.