

Wise to Emotions (1 of 5) Introduction to Emotions

June 13, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

emotion, mindfulness, meditation, freedom, allow, indulge

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Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this Monday morning. This week's theme will be emotions. Emotions are an important part of human life, sometimes for ourselves, and sometimes for others. Being aware of and wise with emotions is one of the potentials of mindfulness practice. We can learn to be mindful of emotions and see them in deeper and fuller ways. Today, I want to say some introductory words about this.

Many of you know that I am fond of the etymology of words. With word "emotion," "e" means "out" in Latin, and "motus" means "motion" – that which moves out. I like to think that whatever emotions are, they are changing, in flux, and moving. If we leave emotions alone, they move out, they settle out, they do not stay too long. We can use mindfulness practice to understand the conditions that keep emotions going – fueling, triggering, and perpetuating them.

It seems that, more literally, the word "emotion" originally comes not from Latin, but from French, where it is *émouvoir*. In French, this means to be excited by something, to have a certain kind of agitation, to be stirred up by something. So the word has an interesting history.

But even more interesting, I think, is that many of us English speakers take the English word "emotion" for granted, as if it describes something real, essential, or important. It does in certain ways. But I find it fascinating that, as an English word, "emotion" was not coined until around the early 1800s.

In a book on emotions and the history of emotions, the author writes, maybe a bit tongue-in-cheek, that it was not until 1830 that the word "emotion" started to get currency or was actively adopted into popular speech, at least in England.

The author of this book writes that up until the 1830s, English-speaking people did not have "emotions." They had what they referred to as "sentiments." The author calls them "accidents of the soul" or "passions." They had other words they used for something in the domain of emotions, but these words overlapped, having slightly different nuances. The words did not mean exactly the same thing as what many people today think of as emotions.

I have looked in dictionaries for different definitions of the word "emotion," and most of the definitions do not really tell me much. I do not feel like they are very helpful in providing a clear definition. One of the wonderful things about the word "emotion" in English is that there is no real agreement about what the word means. Even among psychologists, there are different definitions.

Not having a clear, precise definition can also be seen as giving us some freedom around it. We do not have to have some kind of fixed idea of what emotions are – fixed ideas of their role in our lives, their impact on us personally, where they are going, what is happening, and what they mean. We can learn that, whatever each of us individually refers to as an emotion, we are allowed to have our own definition of it. We are allowed to use the word to apply to what we are experiencing.

But whatever we are using that word to refer to, the practice of mindfulness can help us discover freedom in relationship to what we are experiencing. To experience freedom in relationship to emotions is, for some of us, a radical idea. It is not that we need to do anything about emotions – need to get rid of the ones we do not like, or bring on the ones we want. It is not changing our emotions. To be free with our emotions is to change our way of relating to them, the way we hold them, and the way we think about them. This is a radical idea of discovering

freedom in relationship to emotions: to not be defined or pushed around by them; to not assume that emotions have a meaning, a purpose, and tell us who we are or who we are not.

All those things might exist together with emotions, but we can discover freedom in relationship to them, discover a peacefulness that can hold whatever emotion we have, or discover wakefulness. We can be awake to emotions, as opposed to being overwhelmed by them. We can be awake to emotions, rather than being pushed around by them or defined by them. We can have emotions without assigning meaning to them. This ability to give freedom to our emotions is a tremendous gift to ourselves.

The place, I think, where that gift is safest and most productive is in meditation, whether it is sitting meditation or walking meditation. But we can do so in a context where we are not acting out the emotion, not acting because of the emotion, not criticizing the emotion, and not needing to repress the emotion because what we are feeling is socially unacceptable in some way.

In meditation, we look peaceful; the body is still and quiet. But internally, we can allow whatever energies, feelings, sensations, or moods might arise. We can allow for the states of mind that might be associated with all this, and for the motivations associated with some of these emotions. All this can flow through us, be present for us, with our permission. We permit them to be there. We are not fighting emotions; we are not feeling ashamed because of having emotions. We are not justifying some emotions; are not indulging in some emotions. There is an ability to be still, to be quiet, and to create lots of space for whatever the emotional expression is at the time. We are awake to it, at peace with it. We allow it, but we are not going to act on it.

If we are angry with someone and want to punch them out, we do not, in meditation, because we are not going to move. We just feel the energy that is there. If we have a strong desire for something, we do not act on the desire. We just sit there and let the desire be there in that space of freedom. Just allowing it to be there without making a story, meaning, or purpose out of it.

If there is a wonderful emotion, something which feels delightful – and this is where some people now will protest – we do not indulge in it. We do not lean in to it. We do not fuel or encourage it. Some people might say: “Why not? It’s a good thing.” That is true. There are times when it is good to lean in and allow ourselves to really feel a lot of good emotions. When we are trying to discover how to be free with emotions, freedom has to be equally granted in all directions, to the good emotions and the difficult emotions.

Certainly, we are allowed to feel good emotions, but we do not indulge in them. We do not lean into, savor, or actively enjoy them. We just allow the enjoyment to be there. We also allow difficult emotions to be there. We do not pull away from them, shut down, or attack them.

Learning how to be free with our emotions is a huge gift of mindfulness practice. It begins by recognizing what our emotions are. Each of us is allowed to have it our own way in this recognition of things. Different cultures, different places in the world, and different languages have somewhat different relationships with what we might think of as emotions. Maybe different families do as well. Here, in this freedom practice, you are allowing for it to be your way, allowing for your own associations with it. A clear mindfulness of your emotional life, a clear recognition of what is there, can support you to hold it peacefully, to be aware of it without being pushed around by it.

As we start this week, I would like to suggest that you reflect a bit on your emotional life. Reflect on what different emotions move through you during the day. At the end of the day, you might write down a list of all the emotions you can identify that you have had for that day, from the subtle to the big. Once you have that long list of all those emotions, see if there are any patterns, whether certain emotions appear more often or are more predominant.

Then reflect a little bit about what you have learned about emotions. How have your culture, family, religion, society, and language (languages, if you speak different languages) affected your emotions? What have you learned about this emotional life of yours, how do you identify it, and what do you think your emotions are? That will be the beginning of our reflections for this week. I am happy to be sharing this with you. Thank you.