

Wise to Emotions (3 of 5) Emotions and Self-Referencing

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Today we are continuing with the topic of emotions. Recognizing that some emotions arise out of an appraisal or evaluation of the situation we are in is an important aspect of mindfulness of emotions. I like to call the emotions that arise from stories, judgments, and meanings we assign “secondary emotions.” Those which do not require much appraisal, evaluation, or assignment of meaning, I call “primary emotions.”

As an example of primary emotions, maybe a car driving fast appears out of nowhere right next to you, so fear arises suddenly. Or while working in the kitchen with a knife, the knife suddenly falls off the counter toward your foot. There might be a quick reaction of fear, which does not allow much evaluation. It is not as if you watch the knife falling and say: “Oh, there’s a knife falling. The point of the knife is heading towards my foot. It wouldn’t be a good idea to let it hit me.” There is not enough time for that level of evaluation.

Secondary emotions arise because of our evaluations. Sometimes those evaluations have to do with me, myself, and mine. The situation is what it is, but then we refer it to ourselves. We evaluate it in reference to how we identify, think about, and consider ourselves.

For instance, if we have the idea that we are supposed to be in control all the time, we bring with us this preestablished evaluation or meaning into every situation. When this idea of control does not work, then we are disappointed. That is a secondary emotion. Rather than the emotion arising simply out of the situation we are in, instead, the situation travels through our need to be in control. We have the idea that we *should* be capable of taking care of things. If we do not take care of them properly, then our reaction goes through the idea that we should have been able to do it. Then there is disappointment, anger, or grief.

When we refer our response back to some idea of self, and then the emotion arises out of that, this is not a primary but a secondary emotion. If it is secondary, maybe it is not always needed. (Maybe sometimes it is.) The point is to be able to consider how this works, and to be able to question: “Is this emotion I’m feeling now more primary or more secondary?”

Some emotions lend themselves to being mostly secondary. One example is guilt. There are many reasons for guilt, but one aspect of guilt is the idea that who we are is wrong or bad. I have seen people who feel guilty for no reason that I can tell, since they have done nothing wrong. But they have a preconceived policy that if anything in the world is going wrong, they should say, “I’m sorry” and feel guilty.

Another example is anger, sometimes related to our self-concepts. If our self-concepts are threatened or attacked, we can get angry. (There are other reasons for anger.) Perhaps, I read the news, where it says that self-respecting dharma teachers should only wear blue shirts, not red shirts. Then I get angry: “Wow. Where’s that coming from? I chose this shirt carefully. I’m happy and proud of my shirt.” My red shirt is essentially broadcasting my importance as a dharma teacher. When someone says something that differs from my concept, I might get angry with them and feel threatened or hurt – all because I had this idea of what a dharma teacher should be like.

Or perhaps you have read the same headlines that say that dharma teachers should wear blue shirts. Now, in front of you all, I am afraid of your judgments. I am afraid that I am wrong, and I feel threatened. My reactions are all related to this image of who I am: I am defined by the shirt I wear.

Sometimes boredom is a sign that our self-concept is not being pumped up and reinforced. When our concept of self gets praised or criticized, sometimes we feel energized by that. We might feel a kind of joy when we are praised. Maybe we are prepared to get angry if we are criticized, or if something does not support or challenges our status or our sense of self.

When nothing happens – nothing either supports or threatens the self – then boredom can arise. This is a particular kind of boredom that arises from evaluating everything through the filter of our self-concept: who we are, and whether we are being supported or undermined by situations.

All of these examples can also be primary emotions, in the sense that they can come from experience in the moment without going through the channels of our self-concepts, self-definitions, and ideas of who we are. But so many of our emotions are triggered by something threatening, praising, or challenging an idea we are carrying around of how things should be.

Some of those ideas are probably appropriate. Some of them are not. The most painful ones have to do with attachment to a concept or image of ourselves that we want to hold up, defend, or use to create safety for ourselves. Some ideas of self that get threatened have to do with status or conceit: “I’m better than others.” Or we have an idea of what we are supposed to be in order to be successful human beings. If we do not have that success, then we can feel despondent because we think that is how a good human being is supposed to be.

With secondary emotions, we would do well to ask ourselves: “What are we believing? What are the stories? What are the evaluations? What appraisal are we making that has triggered this emotion?” If we do not investigate this, we might think that the emotion is a primary one: “It is built into the nature of the universe that if someone says something about the color of my shirt that casts an aspersion on who I am, I need to defend myself.”

Maybe I can take a look at that, and see that even if people do judge a dharma teacher by the color of their shirt, that is their problem. I do not have to pick up their judgments and

ideas. I can be free of them. I will wear what I would like to wear, and let people think what they want.

The point of my example is that some emotions that arise are primary and core, and these may be important to listen to. They may have important messages for us. But we have some emotions where the message is not in our best interest. They come from appraisals, evaluations, and concepts and ideas of self that are not well-founded or very useful. When those ideas of self encounter situations which threaten, support, or offend them, then we can have secondary forms of emotion like guilt, anger, fear, boredom, despondency, joy, or excitement, and others.

Today I would like to leave you with an investigation into secondary emotions. A couple of times during the day, maybe with a pen and paper or with a friend, sit down and review some of the stronger emotions of the day. Ask yourself: did those emotions get triggered by some evaluation or appraisal of the situation? The situation by itself did not trigger an emotion. It only did so after it was filtered through the appraisal. Was that evaluation somehow related to your self-identity – your concepts about who and how you think you should be in the world?

After you do this exercise, ask yourself: Is there a simpler way to be present for that experience (any experience) without the filter of these appraisals, evaluations, and self-concepts? Can we set our experience free from the (sometimes) incessant ideas we use to appraise the situation, often in terms of what the situation does for me, myself, and mine?

I hope this is useful, and we will continue with the exploration of emotions tomorrow. Thank you.