

Wise to Emotions (4 of 5) Emotions as Messengers

June 16, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

anger, pointer, hurt, fear, reaction, attachment, meditation retreat, aversive, freedom, grief

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We are continuing our discussion of emotions. People have many attitudes toward their emotional life. Some people are shy with their emotions or troubled by them. Some people do not pay much attention to them. Certain emotions are considered wrong or inappropriate to have. We may have an aversive relationship to them. We are ashamed of having them. Some emotions we are happy to have. Some we are delighted by and hold on to. There is a wide range of ways of relating to emotions.

In the Dharma, in practicing with emotions, it is useful to respect all emotions, in the sense, that all emotions have a place. Buddhist practice is not meant to negate, squash, or push away any emotion. We can have a healthy relationship with our emotions by being open to experiencing the full range of emotions that we have.

One way to relate to emotions for this purpose is to see all emotions, provisionally at least, as a message. All emotions are pointing to something. We do not want to kill the messenger before we have seen the message or even after we see the message. Think of emotions as pointing to something deeper.

Some emotions arise out of other emotions. Some emotions come together with other emotions. For instance, the predominant emotion might be grief, but mixed in might be a sense of guilt, shame, or anger. It is part of the whole complex of how we are feeling at a particular time. Maybe we focus mostly on the grief. We might sense that other emotions are there, but we feel somehow it is wrong to have those. But they are part of the complex. Maybe they are a needed part of the complex. They all point to something.

When we see all emotions as messengers pointing to something, it can be easier to respect them and take the time to get to know them more. If we take some emotions like anger, in and of itself, without being connected to something deeper, then we can have an aversive relationship to anger. We can feel ashamed or upset with ourselves for having anger. But if we see anger as a message, we can ask: "What is going on here? What deeper thing is it pointing to?"

In the broadest terms, some emotions arise out of attachment. They arise out of something we are holding on to. Their message might be to discover, "What are we attached to here?" If we get caught up in the anger by itself, relating only to the anger, we are missing the deeper message, a deeper understanding. But we can look and see that the anger represents something deeper. "What might that be?"

In terms of other emotions, it might be that we are hurt. Being hurt is more primary than anger, which is secondary. We are allowing the anger to point back to the hurt. The hurt might be what really needs our attention – what we want to practice with. Because the hurt is more primary, it is somehow the source that is prompting the anger.

It might be that what underlies anger is fear. If we just stay with the anger, blame someone, or get angry with someone, we will not feel the fear. We will not recognize that we are afraid as well. Recognizing fear does not make us weak. Recognizing fear can actually give us a lot of strength if we learn how to be with fear in a useful, productive way. Then we are more connected to what is primary. We are coming home in a deeper way. Now we know what needs to be taken care of. We know better what needs to happen.

Both hurt and fear may be related to something even deeper. Those are messages too. What deeper thing is going on here? That is where there might be attachments, and there might not be attachments. If there are

attachments and clinging, then that is what we want to see in this practice. That is really the heart of moving towards freedom – to see where we are caught.

If we are not attached and caught, then below the fear and hurt, there might be something really precious, tender, loving, appreciative, or grateful about this life. There might be some deeper place of being at home that makes us feel more vulnerable. Rather than avoiding our vulnerability, our tenderness, or our love, the Dharma task is to discover how to find strength in that. How to find ease with that. How to be wise about that, so we can stay in touch with that, as we go through our lives.

Whatever the emotion might be, it should be respected. My understanding of the etymology of the word “respect” is “to look again,” “to inspect again.” To re-spect means taking a second or third look – to really spend time getting to know this experience. What is this? Be available to feel or sense: What else is happening here? What might it be pointing to? What might it be coming out of? Not so much to analyze what it is. This is why mindfulness is so helpful. We are available to notice what is going on in the cracks of it. What is going on underneath it?

If we open up our attention more widely, beyond the secondary emotion or the thing that is strongest, to look at what it is pointing to, then we might start seeing deeper and deeper sources and processes that are going on. In this way, we are being respectful.

What is the message? Even the most difficult, challenging, painful, even inappropriate emotions that we might feel, the stronger they are, the more they represent something important for us to delve into and see what is going on. There probably is some strong attachment, some strong clinging to something. The stronger the reaction – despair, grief, anger, whatever it might be – the more it actually is a messenger.

It is hard to take this idea in sometimes when the strength of our reaction or emotions has a lot to do with the terrible things that are being done to us or are happening in the world. I do not want, in any way, to say that we are responsible for our emotions because there are terrible things that happen to us. The stronger the reaction we have, the richer, more important, opportunity there is. The bigger the reaction, the deeper in our psyche (our mind, our heart) the attachments might be. The stronger the reaction, the more it is a doorway to understanding the depth of what is going on.

I have seen this a lot of times on meditation retreats. We try to make it a safe place for everyone, but occasionally something happens that is not so safe. The very thing we are trying to protect people from happens.

I remember once we were renting facilities at a university. There was a fire in a distant building of the university. There were firefighting helicopters that flew over really close to us, with a lot of noise and maybe some smoke. There was a woman at the retreat – this was many years ago now – who still had a traumatic legacy from growing up with the bombings in Europe during World War II. She got really frightened by the familiar sounds of the helicopters. Because she was on a meditation retreat, she kept practicing with it. Going deeper and deeper, and discovering where the knot was – where she was still knotted up, holding herself in fear, and protecting herself unnecessarily – she was able to let go of it.

When we respect our emotions, we are respecting our love, kindness, and compassion – we are giving them time. When we connect to that and use that as a message of what is deeper, maybe we connect to our freedom. We feel, we see, “Ah, this goodwill I have, this compassion I have, is arising out of freedom.” This freedom may be the greatest gift we can give. We can connect to this sense of freedom that we have discovered and let that be the vehicle for our care of the world.

You might try this. Whatever emotions you have today – if it is safe and appropriate – maybe step away a bit to be on your own and reflect more deeply. What is this a message of? What it is pointing to? If this is a messenger, what is more intimate, deeper, and more important here? What can I discover? Maybe all emotions are pointing to something deeper than themselves.

Thank you, and I will continue tomorrow.