

Emotions (4 of 5) Restoration of Emotional Health

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We are continuing with the theme of emotions. I think that some English-speaking people might focus a lot on emotions. The reference point for their life is what they're feeling rather than what they're thinking about. Some people have composed manifestos, maybe in their head, about the importance and celebration of emotions. They get into them in a big way. Some people are afraid of their emotions, or they feel that they have to keep their emotions very private. They are very reserved about showing emotions or even knowing about their emotions themselves. They hold their emotions at bay.

We can talk about an emotion that way as if it is some thing. I've searched in the language of the Buddha for a word that's equivalent to "emotion," and it's hard to find. Maybe we could kind of "squeeze" out a word and say it's similar to the English "emotion." But the fact that there is no word that really fits points out that maybe the English word "emotion" is a convention, a label, a way of categorizing a realm of human experience.

For instance, if you consider the whole of the human experience to be a pie, it can be sliced into many different kinds of slices – many different sizes and different choices about where the lines of the pie pieces are made. So human experience can be divided and looked at in different ways. Maybe different cultures have different slices they take out. And for some reason, here, in the English-speaking world, we have this slice called emotions. But it's not something that's inherently a thing or a set thing. It has vague boundaries. What actually is an emotion?

I think one of the things to be looking at when we do this practice is not to have a clear opinion or a policy around emotions, but rather to always look more closely. To see emotions as a kind of pointer that gets us into the territory of something, and then we need to study it more carefully, be more present, and explore it more deeply.

As we explore it, one of the things to notice is: What are the emotions that come along with stress – come along with some kind of tension, tightness, contraction, something that feels unpleasant? What emotions come along with the whole realm of what could be called *dukkha* in Buddhism?

Which emotions come without stress, tension, unpleasantness, pain, suffering? When in your life is there an emotion that is kind of stress-free – a state of mind, a mood, a feeling that comes without any stress, tension, tightness, unpleasantness, *dukkha*, or suffering?

Which emotions are more painful, and which are more pleasant and enjoyable?

The emotions that are stressful, sometimes in Buddhism are called afflictive because of the pain that they cause. This is not necessarily a value judgment that they're wrong or bad. It just means that's what they come with.

And when they are afflictive – when they come with stress – the interesting question is: Does the stress need to be there? Is the stress in addition to the emotion, or to what's happening, or to the state? Does the emotion that you're having – which is in addition to something that's happening – even cover over or override it in such a way that you're not really in touch with your deeper wellsprings of wisdom, receptivity, registering, seeing what's happening?

Probably what we'll find is that there's a lot of extra doing when we are involved in these reactive afflictive emotions – the ones that are uncomfortable or stressful. If we can see it as a doing – as an activity – then we can put a question mark at the end of it and say, "Does this doing, this activity, need to happen?"

Sometimes even pleasant emotions – enjoyable ones or ones that are celebrated – are not stress-free because of the attachments, clings, agendas, wants, desires, or fears that come along with them as well.

So this idea of becoming sensitive to the stress – sensitive to the unpleasantness that comes along – has great value because then we can begin addressing it. Maybe “undressing” is a better word. We can begin undressing the extra layers of activity that we put on top of situations.

It takes a fair amount of trust to not do. It takes a fair amount of trust to settle back and allow ourselves to feel, sense, and step away from the doing – the activity, the straining – the directing of attention, of the mind, of feelings that go on.

But the gift of that is this psychophysical being that we are can move towards health when it's not stressed out. It moves towards a deeper sensitivity, a deeper wisdom, about our life when that wisdom is not overridden or eclipsed by an overactive, overstressed, or over-agitated mind.

I've certainly had an overstressed, over-activated, over-agitated mind. And at least in me, I could see that it fools me. It fools me into thinking: “What I'm thinking about is really important. What I'm concerned with is really important, and I have to be involved in it. I have to be thinking about it. I have to be chasing after it, or fixing, or doing something.”

That is kind of a self-fulfilling idea because as I feel stressed, I feel uncomfortable, and then there's a reaction: “I have to fix this discomfort, so I have to think more and get more involved in all this. Something has to happen here.” Sometimes part of the call of a stressful state is “something needs to happen here.” There's a pull into being more stressed.

If I go and relax, settle down, and meditate, then I find that I was actually tricked into thinking all that stuff. The stress had a huge influence and impact on how I saw the world, myself, and the situation, which was not wise. In fact, it might have been a little bit deluded.

So, to be able to undo – to *not* address something, but rather to *undress* something in the mind – to quiet down, settle down, become more peaceful. Practice a kind of undoing. Meditation is an undoing rather than a doing. Rather than addressing the issues of our life, meditation is kind of an undressing of the issues of our life. And then something begins to flow, move, or arise that restores us to emotional health. That is a restoration of a deeper sensitivity, a deeper understanding, a deeper wisdom that can only be there if we're settled and peaceful.

Or to say it differently so we don't over-emphasize the importance of being peaceful. That can be dangerous too if we hold on to that as being the way to be. So much of this ancient Buddhist wisdom is not so much about being something – even like being peaceful – but has to do with trusting *not* doing. Not doing greed. Not doing attachment. Not doing hate. Not doing delusion. Not doing stress. Not doing, pumping up anxiety. Not doing our emotions – not leaning into them, feeding them, and fueling them with the stories that we do. There's this deep undoing.

Then there starts being room for the blood to flow more freely in our body. It's not contracted by tension in the muscles. There's more ease for the neurons, perhaps, to flow more smoothly. I don't know what happens with them, but everything flows more. The feeling of flow is a very common experience as they settle in deep and well.

So, as we relax, which we talked about on Monday, as we learn to recognize more deeply, as we learn to respect these emotions that we have, then at some point we can begin to allow in a deep way, trust in a deep way, so that we don't have to do so much. It becomes an undoing, a non-doing that is not inconsequential. It allows the wellsprings of some of the best qualities we have to come forward.

And you know it's not your best quality if it comes with stress, if it comes with feelings of unpleasantness, tension, contraction, if it comes with forcefulness and assertiveness. The beautiful qualities are not assertive, but they are powerful. And they're freeing.

So, restoration of a healthy emotional life. It's one of the great things to do. Thank you very much, and we have one more talk on emotions tomorrow.