

Emotions (3 of 5) Respecting Emotions

October 27, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

anjali, relaxation, recognition, reactivity, permission, generosity, messenger, message, self-identity, self-definition, boredom, peace, resolution, bow, reverence

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Discussing mindfulness of emotion, the theme for today is respect. We started the week with relaxation and recognition, and now respect. As we relax, it is easier to recognize how we are relating to our emotional life.

Do we have an attitude towards our emotional life that makes things more difficult than they need to be? Do we strongly identify with our emotions – defining ourselves by them?

Do we have hostility towards our emotional life? Do we not like it and push it away? Do we have shame or embarrassment about it?

Do we have ideas that our emotional life should be different? Are we trying to get rid of things? Are we trying to have certain emotions, feelings, or attitudes about the world? Are we kind of forcing, or maybe sugar-coating experience by trying too hard? Or are we holding onto things? Maybe we were happy yesterday, and we were holding on to the idea that we should be.

As we start recognizing the component parts of emotions, we can see the extra reactivity we might have to them. Seeing that reactivity is the beginning of respect. I really like the word “respect” because in Latin it means “to see again,” like “spectacle” – “to look again.” So we start taking a deeper look at what is here. If we can see our reactivity, maybe we can put it aside enough to bring respectful attention to the emotion itself. We look as if the emotion is allowed to be there, because disrespectful ways of looking often involve trying to change something or hold on to something, not allowing it to be itself. The second look, the vipassana look, means really taking a deeper look, making space for it, and allowing it to be there.

I like the idea that we are giving permission for our emotions to be present. This is a little different than allowing. It's a little more active. It's like a choice. It's a decision – “I'm going to give. I'm going to offer.” It is a kind of generosity: “I'm going to offer permission to myself to be the way I am.”

Sitting in meditation is a wonderful place to do this because you're committed to sitting still, and not acting on whatever feelings might be there. There might be some very strong anger that seems very undesirable. In meditation, we give it permission to be there. If there is sadness or grief, or joy and happiness, we give permission for them to be there. As we give permission for the emotion to be there, we allow it to be there without our reactivity or judgment – with those put aside enough that we can really respect what's there.

I find it useful to think of emotions as either a message or a messenger. As a message, emotions are not random. They're not incidental or accidental phenomena that just come up. Emotions have some kind of message in them. Maybe the message is asking for respect. Maybe the message is saying to you, “Here's an opportunity for you to discover how to be non-attached, how to not cling or resist, and to make more space.”

But it might be a deeper message. Anger might be a message that we feel hurt or we feel threatened. Sadness might be a message that we feel really impacted, and we really care – we love something. The love now feels sad, but love is underneath the sadness, so sadness might be a message of love. Rather than thinking of grief and sadness as a problem, it's a manifestation, a movement, and a process that love needs to go through to be whole again, or to find its way again.

But sometimes emotions are messengers. I think this is especially true when the emotions are afflictive, when they are bringing suffering to us. Then, you don't want to kill the messenger. You want to really see what the message is here.

The ability to respect, give permission, make breathing room for, and allow emotions to be there is such a big part of mindfulness. Then we can start seeing more deeply into the cracks of the emotion. What else shows itself? This is not digging or analyzing. Rather, we feel our way deeply into the emotion. What else is there? With anger, perhaps, there may also be hurt. Or with anger, there may be fear, and that is what needs our attention. That is probably more primary than anger.

The messenger is pointing to the deeper underlying feelings that are there. If there is grief, sometimes the messenger is saying that there is love: "Hey, have you really taken into account how much love there was in what you lost?" Sometimes the message of despair is a message about feeling fear or feeling inadequate in some way.

Sometimes the message is that it's time to take a deep, honest look at our self-identity issues – the way we define ourselves, and the way that we insert ourselves (me, myself, and mine) into our life. Some emotions have to do with the self – our self-identity, self-definition – being threatened.

Boredom, for example, is sometimes a symptom that whatever is happening around me has no bearing on my self-concept – how I like to define myself or assert myself in the world. No one is praising me. I'm not getting any real kind of praise. Also, no one is criticizing me. Both of those can be very riveting for some people. Without either one of those, the situation has no bearing. Nothing is building up my sense of self, nor is it threatening it, so it's a boring situation. Boredom sometimes has to do with the whole complex of self-identity.

Sometimes hostility, or fear, and all the emotions are closely connected to how threatened or how supported our idea of who we should be is. By really respecting emotions, taking our time, making room for them, and allowing them, we can start seeing the deeper underlying processes that are going on. Sometimes you can ask, "What is the message here in this emotion?" This is very respectful of emotions, as if they all have something to say. They're not accidental or incidental. They all represent something deeper that's going on.

Vipassana practice doesn't require analysis. But it involves a more sensitive looking, a more sensitive way of being present, breathing with, making room for, and allowing emotion to be there so that we can hear the subtler messages that are going on with it. We can see the subtler processes that are going on.

Part of the permission for emotions to be there, part of respect for emotions, is that the emotions themselves have the wisdom to process themselves, and to find their way to peace – if we make room for them, if we really make space for them, if we don't interfere with them, or grab hold of them, or repress them. Acting on emotions, especially when you're in meditation, interferes with the deeper process of healing towards peace and resolution, which is inherent in the emotions themselves.

So, respect emotions. If you are challenged with an emotion, and it has really caught you in some powerful way, and you would like to try respect, you might put your hands together in *anjali*, and bow to your emotions. Just bow. If you want to really do something powerful, you bow and say: "Thank you. Thank you for what you're trying to do for me, or for the message you're bringing. This is the best I can do at the moment to try to work with this difficult world."

Bow to the emotions, as an alternative to being entangled, reactive, or judgmental about them. It is possible that one of the greatest goods you can do for your emotional life is to offer it deep respect, and maybe even a kind of reverence for it that gets you out of the way of it. In meditation, this protects you from acting on emotions in ways that may or may not be healthy.

For the next 24 hours, if the idea of bowing to your emotions is at all interesting to you, you might do it either physically or in your imagination. Try bowing to your emotions and see what happens.

The most important thing is to give room to your emotions. If you're in the middle of work or family life, and you can take a break when you have a strong emotional response, and you don't usually do this, see if you can take a walk around the block with the emotion. Take the emotion for a walk, and use that as a time to make room for it, to respect it, and listen to it more deeply. See what happens, if that is an alternative to how you usually are with emotions. Try this alternative, try respect, and see what happens over the next day. Thank you.