

Introduction to Mindfulness (11 of 25)

Recognizing Emotions

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Hello. Today I'll begin the third week of this introduction to mindfulness meditation by focusing on mindfulness of emotions. Emotions are an important part of our lives, and mindfulness meditation is meant to have a lot of respect for our emotions. As I've often said, I love the word "respect" as a synonym for mindfulness because the Latin roots of it could be understood as "to see again" – to give a second look to what's happening. Respecting emotions means giving them a really good look. Don't just accept the first impression. Take a second look at what's happening.

One of the principles of practicing mindfulness of emotions is to have a deep respect for emotions. Emotions are significant movements within us. We are moved by something. We want to allow the movement without judgment, but also without participating – either by reactively pushing it away or by leaning into it and telling ourselves stories that perpetuate it and keep it going.

I'm fond of the idea that the word "emotion" has the word "motion" in it. The Latin prefix "e" means "out." Emotions are things that are moving out. They represent that we've been touched, we've been moved in some way. They represent our capacity to be moved, to be involved in some way with the world and ourselves. They mean that something deep has been elicited. I like to think that a tender place within has come alive and it's expressing itself, and somehow we're being moved.

Some emotions are unpleasant, and some are pleasant. Some are not helpful for us to live by or participate in, while some are very helpful to live by and participate in. But no matter whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, skillful or unskillful, emotions can be understood as providing information. Something is being expressed, and we want to be able to hear, see, and recognize what is happening, what's being expressed, and what there is to learn with a particular emotion.

I sometimes think of all emotions as messages, and we want to read the message. We don't want to kill the messenger. We want to see, "Okay, this too is carrying some message." If it's an unpleasant emotion or one that might be harmful to us or others, it's still carrying a message, maybe from someplace deeper than the emotion. We want to respect it and make room for it, so we can hear deeply what's really happening here with us. There is a kind of truth-telling or truth-finding in this process.

I like to say that mindfulness meditation is meant to be one of the safest places to feel your emotions. To say it differently, it's meant to be a place where we can allow whatever emotion we have to be there so we can feel it, see it, know it, and find our freedom with it. Now, that's a tall order sometimes. Emotions can be quite difficult and overwhelming at times.

So, being with emotions non-reactively is a learning process. It's a process of building the skill and the capacity to have this kind of mindful attention and openness to whatever emotion we have. This cannot necessarily be done overnight or immediately, but the North Star for this practice is to build the capacity to be present in a non-reactive, non-entangled way with any emotion that we have.

I like to think that mindfulness practice is one of the few places in our society where there's no need to be ashamed of our emotions, to repress them, to condemn them. There is no need to participate in them, lean into them, or collapse into them. When there's murderous rage, we're committed for the duration of meditation to not move, more or less, and just allow it to course through us without punching someone out. We just sit there feeling it and allowing it to be there.

If we have great beatific feelings of love, it might be problematic sometimes in daily life if we have that on the wrong occasion. But as we learn how to experience whatever emotion it is, we're learning how to know it and recognize it from a place of stability or calm, where the recognition of it is free. One of the freedoms is to be just free enough to be able to listen deeply to the emotion – to not be so involved in it, reactive to it, and overwhelmed by it.

Then we have the capacity to see the emotion, to know it, to listen deeply, and ask, "What is this?" That is where the earlier parts of this intro to meditation are very important because all emotions are expressed, one way or another, in the body. If there were no body sensations at all, it might be hard to discern that you're even having an emotion.

It is vital to be able to feel the little or big movements in the body – the contractions, the tightness, the agitation, the energy, the suffusion of warmth or goodness that come with some positive emotions. Feel how the breathing is affected. Some strong emotions make the breathing tight, shallow, or fast, while others help it relax, settle, and become slow and expansive. Recognizing what's happening with the body and the breathing is a support to stay in the present moment with the emotion.

In mindfulness meditation, we see any emotion as a present-moment event, almost as if, for the purpose of meditation, it has no past and no future. We don't have to connect it to the story of why it's there, nor do we have to predict what it means for our future. We're learning to just hold it and be present for it respectfully, as it is, here and now. This means without a lot of thinking about it, without analysis, story-making, or associating it too closely with the self.

One of the interesting things about emotions is that there can be a lot of identification with them, as in, "I am this emotion," or, "This emotion defines me," or, "I am this kind of person who always has this kind of emotion." This is an added layer that, over time, we learn we don't need in meditation. We can keep things very simple, even if it's a very strong emotion. I've sat in meditation with anger that felt like a volcano, but I didn't identify with it or make myself out to be the "angry person." Instead, I made room in my body and kept coming back to my body and feeling it.

On this first day of teaching about mindfulness of emotion, I want to keep it somewhat simple. I suggest the practice of one-second or three-second mindfulness throughout the day. This is an art form, a craft you can cultivate until it becomes stronger for you. It's the practice of simple recognition of what emotion is happening in the moment. The importance lies not in the recognition itself, but in *how* we recognize it – without being entangled, caught, or reactive to it, without defining ourselves by it or telling ourselves a story that this means I am some way or other.

This is a stepping back out of the swampy mud of the field we were crossing, onto the stepping stones. We are still able to cross the field. We are still an intimate part of this beautiful natural landscape that the field is in. We are not removing ourselves from the world or becoming disengaged. We are just stepping onto these wonderful stepping stones so we can walk across the field without getting stuck in the mud.

The stepping stone is the simple act of recognition – recognizing sadness or grief as just that. "Oh, this is grief," without feeling as if you have to not grieve, or that things should be different, or that you need to change the emotion in the next second. Just for that second: "Oh!" It is like the sun has come out. "Oh, this is grief. This is joy. This is love. This is hatred. This is boredom. This is calm. This is agitation. This is fear. This is confidence."

Whatever mental state or mood we have, we can experiment with just naming it, almost as if we are pausing for one second or three seconds. "Oh, this is how it is." We recognize the emotion clearly enough, fully enough, and definitively enough so we can step out of the current of whatever it is. We don't try to stop it, but to see it clearly – to have a moment of truth-telling: "Oh, this is how it is."

The recognition has tremendous value, but in this exercise, the way we recognize it is more important. That is where the experimentation and the training are. Find a way to recognize it so for that moment, you are free. For that moment, you are not identified with the emotion, entangled or reactive to it. The recognition is very simple: stepping away, stepping back, and seeing it for what it is without getting entangled.

You might experiment with this throughout your day. Perhaps set a timer to remind you every 15 minutes to check in with yourself and name your emotion. You could do this a few times over a minute or so. Experiment. Ask yourself, "What is Gil talking about, with this recognition that is free, not entangled or caught? See what you learn from this exercise. If it becomes easy or you're looking for a bit more challenge, try recognizing the emotion at the beginning of an exhale or inhale. After you've made the recognition, allow for it and make room for it. Relax with the emotion on the exhale, and make room for it on the inhale. See what happens to you with this practice.

This is just the beginning, and we'll continue to develop this important area of mindfulness of emotions over the next four days. Thank you.