

Introduction to Mindfulness (13 of 25) Wisdom of Feeling Emotions

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This is the third talk on mindfulness of emotions in this 25-part introduction to mindfulness.

One of the challenges of developing mindfulness meditation is the degree to which we identify with our experience. "Identify" means that we define ourselves by it in some way. Or we relate to emotions or whatever is happening as if we are whatever is happening. So if we have an emotion, we must be that emotion. It defines who we are. It represents us in some important way so that who we are as a person can be judged based on what's happening.

With emotions, this gets very tricky. This is partly because emotions are so changeable, and so conditioned and dependent on so many factors outside of our own lives. Some of the emotions we experience are conditioned by our society. We don't even realize how much we've internalized the values of our society. These internalized values then become the basis by which we judge ourselves, about which we feel frustrated, and in terms of which we want things or we like or don't like certain things.

In the wake of liking and not liking, wanting and not wanting there can be joy and happiness in getting what we want. There can be anger and frustration in not getting what we want. There can be fear and worry about how we will be judged if we don't live up to certain societal standards. A phenomenal amount of our emotions are not unique to us but are strongly conditioned by society, the family, the friendships, and the ideas of people around us.

It's not necessarily wrong for this to happen, but one of the things that mindfulness is trying to free us from is being caught in the web of these societal values in such a way that we are debilitated by our emotions, our reactions, and our identifications with what's going on.

Getting free in relation to emotions is phenomenally useful. We are not dismissing anything, but when we can disidentify with our emotions, we can start seeing much more clearly what is actually happening. It gives us phenomenal insight into the way that the emotions are culturally conditioned and the values and beliefs from which they come.

We don't necessarily begin questioning the emotions, but we can start questioning some of the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and values that we don't even know we're carrying. These are the seedbeds for some of the emotions we have. This is especially true for the difficult emotions. With very strong grief, that grief is to be deeply respected. It has a very important place in the heart and we need to learn how to hold it carefully and lovingly. But grief can be entangled with identity – how we should be and shouldn't be, and with deeper assumptions about who we are and what a good life is. These things can add to grief so that there's unnecessary suffering connected to it.

One of the ways that we practice mindfulness is without the extra layer of identification, the extra layer of telling and perpetuating a story about the emotion. This is not to dismiss identification and storytelling, but we put it aside for a while so we have something more important to do with the emotion – to feel it and know it in a deeper way. There's a depth inside of us that is not easily accessible if we stay in the storytelling mind that's preoccupied with what this means about me, and who I am, and what I should do, and what other people will think about me.

We have tremendous reservoirs of wisdom, compassion, and love available deep inside if we can drop below the place where we're involved in navigating and negotiating identity in relation to our emotions. One powerful way of doing this is radically simple: we feel it in the body as physical sensations.

This is not the only way to be with emotions. There are a lot of other valuable ways to be with emotions. I love the idea that we can just go for a walk with a friend and have a chance to talk about what's going on and how we're feeling. That can be tremendously useful. It can be useful to journal. It can be useful to dance the emotions. It can be useful to express them in art.

There are many ways to work with emotions, and one way is mindfulness. Mindfulness has its own approach. It can be phenomenally useful, but it's not always useful. It's not the be-all and end-all of how to be with emotions. Knowing that, maybe it's easier to give oneself over to mindfulness of emotions because we're not trying to make it the only solution. "Okay, for these minutes, I'm going to do it the mindful way."

One of the mindful ways is meant to be very simple. We simply find the physical manifestation of the emotion in the body. As we feel the physical sensations, then we give the emotion permission to be there.

If we give the emotion permission to be there and we're caught up in our stories and reactivity, then we're just perpetuating the endless cycle of feeding our story and identity issues. This can actually make the emotion go on for a lifetime. Instead, we can drop below that and just feel the physical sensations. Physical sensations are not just physical. They are deeply connected to the heart, to the deeper psychology of who we are. Something profound can begin unfolding and showing itself when we just drop into the sensation level of the emotion.

It is there that we can give the emotion permission to be. We make room for it by making room for the physical sensations. One image I love is that of letting the awareness be like two cupped hands holding a difficult emotion. "There there, it's okay. I'm just going to be here with you. I'll hold you. I'll be with you. I'll feel you however long you need. You have permission to be here forever. It's okay."

We give that radical permission. Then we stay present and make room for and allow whatever needs to happen with the sensations. We let them move and shift and become stronger or weaker. We can just be with them. As we do this, we come to a vantage point where we can better see our relationship to the emotion. Perhaps, in fact, we hate it. Or we love it and we're trying to hold on to it. Or the relationship is one in which we're not just letting the emotion be there – we're telling stories about it. We're judging ourselves, judging it, or judging other people. We're seeing the world through the lens of that emotion. If we're angry, everything is aversive. Everything is wrong.

We begin seeing that it's not just the emotion. It's also how we relate to it, or how we're caught in it, or the stories we make about it. As we settle down into just being, breathing with the sensations of the emotion, at some point what begins standing out in highlight is that we can't do that. There is a layer of reactivity, a layer of judgment, and a layer of identification. Rather than seeing that as wrong or bad, reacting, or being upset because that's there, in mindfulness meditation we relax and say, "Oh, I see. *That's* how it is. That's what's happening for me."

Once we have seen it and known it, then we have the choice to say, "Okay, let me put that aside and just stay more simply with the emotion without that reactivity." Or, (we're still trying to be simple) we see, "Well, a different emotion seems to be the basis for this reactivity, this judgment, and this identification. Let me do simple mindfulness of emotion with the fear or the anxiety that seems to be fueling the way I want to identify or disidentify with what's happening." Or, "I seem to have a strong feeling of aversion that seems connected to not liking my emotion. Maybe that aversion needs the same kind of careful feeling at the sensation level. Let's make room for it to be there."

We are always stepping away from the story, stepping away from the interpretation, stepping away from the identification we might have with emotion. This is a way of giving lots of room, and lots of simplicity. Do that in the meditation posture where we're not going to punch someone out, grab someone, or run away. We just feel it with a guideline: keep it simple. Keep it as simple as you can. What is a simple way of holding the emotion and what's happening? Trusting: "It's okay. If I feel it in the body, maybe I can just allow it to go."

The exception to this is sometimes with some emotions like fear. Sometimes feeling it can reinforce more fear. Sometimes there's a loop, and every time we feel it, we get more afraid. We feel it again and we get more afraid. This can get out of hand a little bit. It is the same way with anger, despair, or grief. You have to watch yourself and monitor yourself. If you feel that there's a loop and it's getting stronger and stronger, then you want to find some way to switch what you're doing.

Maybe you can just go back to your breathing and not focus on the emotion directly. Maybe you can do loving-kindness meditation. Maybe you open your eyes to break the loop cycle. You can look around and do mindfulness of seeing or mindfulness of hearing. These can help us to disentangle from this looping that can make things get out of control.

If the emotion is not looping and getting too intense, we can learn a radical simplicity around emotions that's deeply respectful of them and allows them to do their own thing and to be there without interference, without analysis, without fixing, without making them go away. We allow the deep wisdom within us to show us the way with emotions.

For today, if you want to explore your emotions further, check in with yourself periodically throughout the day. See what emotions you have, and see how you feel them in your body – a simple, direct, embodied experience. As you do that, see if it helps you see more clearly what relationship you have with the emotion. Are you for it or against it? Are you judging yourself because of it? Are you telling a story like a prediction of the future? Are you storytelling, and that's what's fueling the emotion? Just see what the relationship is. Once you've seen it, relax, come back into your body a little bit, and then continue with your day. Thank you very much.