

Introduction to Mindfulness (15 of 25)

Centering on Emotions

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Gil Fronsdal

Thank you for the comments, and I'll read more of them at the end. I certainly sympathize with those people who felt there were a lot of words during that meditation. But that's the trade-off between being able to be in silence that helps us settle versus receiving some teachings and approaches in the guided meditation – going along with and experiencing them rather than explaining them in the talk afterward. There's a long history of receiving teachings like this and then going off to meditate with them afterwards.

This week the focus is on mindfulness of emotions. I hope I offered different perspectives on how to be present for emotions so that while learning the art of it, you can have choices for different ways to be at different times. The teaching was also a little bit progressive. We are building the container and the context so that we can do something that is often quite difficult: to sit in the middle of our emotional life without being caught in it, entangled, or reactive, and without feeling that we're victims of our emotions and we're collapsing under the weight of them.

We are trying to find a way to sit in the middle where we feel at ease, or free, or strong, or capable, and we have the capacity to be present with emotions. When the time is right, we want to be able to be really intimate with emotions. We want to get close and feel what the exact present-moment experience is.

With emotions, especially difficult emotions, there's often a very strong connection to thinking, reacting, believing, interpreting, and predicting. Somehow we relate the emotion to our sense of self – what this means for me, and how this defines me, or what I have to do. In mindfulness practice, the idea is to learn a radical simplicity where many of the reactive, interpretive, judging, and analytical ways of being with emotions recede into the background or become quiet.

This is like doing some kind of craft at home with a loud radio blaring all kinds of stuff, maybe political speeches and opinions, so it's difficult to be absorbed in your craft or in reading your nice book. Then the radio goes off or gets turned down. Now you can really be with what you're doing.

We can really be with the emotion, whether we are sitting in the middle of it, coming from underneath it, or in some intimate way being the emotion – making room for it to be all of us, if it's really strong. We can be with it in all these ways with a simplicity of attention and with the capacity not to react, not judge, and not interpret. We just breathe with it and make room for it to be what it is.

That intimacy and that capacity to make room are invaluable, I would suggest, for two main reasons. One is that our emotional body has a lot of wisdom about how to let our emotional life unfold in a healthy way. Sometimes our emotional body has much more wisdom than our thinking mind, where we predict, judge, and interpret based on life experience. If we can relax and feel safe enough to drop into our body and feel intimately what's happening, then there is an inner wisdom through which emotions can process themselves in a healthy way. That's one advantage of doing this. The more closely we're connected, the easier it is for us to allow what's happening to unfold on deeper levels.

The other advantage – sometimes even more important – of being with our emotions with intimacy and presence and close attention is that in the cracks of them, underneath them, or behind them, we start seeing

that whatever is going on is the surface emotion. It is the louder expression of something that's more core – an underlying source.

For example, when there's a lot of anger, sometimes what's underneath the anger is fear or maybe a sense of hurt. We stay close to it and feel it closely so that we can begin to see what I like to think of as the message underneath – what's really going on underneath. That can be a game changer. We thought we were dealing with anger, and we've had opinions about anger and the importance of expressing it (we're going to give people a piece of our mind, and we have the right to do that). All this stuff is just really a surface thing. We want to be able to drop into a deeper wellspring and see what's really bubbling and activated in a deeper place within.

We want to be able to see below that. Maybe we see the hurt or the fear, and that is more primary. That's more useful to deal with. Sometimes there is sadness. Sometimes anger doesn't have fear or hurt underneath it. Sometimes it's a deep sorrow and grief. The anger might be directed outwards toward others, but it's a way of ricocheting off the difficulty of being with our own grief and pain. Certainly, we want to be very respectful of how difficult the emotion is, and not rush to connect to it. But we might be able to feel it from a distance, like a soft cotton ball that gently touches it and strokes it, "I know you're there," and then pull it away.

Two very helpful processes can happen. One is that the emotion can unfold the way it will naturally do. Generally, emotions unfold in appropriate ways. They know how to unfold if we get out of the way and allow them to be there without fueling them with stories, beliefs, and reactivity.

The second process is that we start seeing through the emotions to what's deeper. The examples I gave were all difficult emotions, but sometimes there might be something beautiful underneath. Maybe there's anger, but we find that underneath that there is love. For some reason, the love, the care, and the compassion have taken the direction of anger. But there is really compassion underneath there. Maybe there's another way than anger to let the compassion be expressed. Maybe underneath the sadness is also love or care. Maybe there's a sadness that our generosity or our friendship is not received.

Sometimes there are beautiful things to discover. Sometimes underneath the fear, there might be a very wholesome sense of wanting to protect oneself, care for, and support one's well-being, which feels very satisfying to touch into. Feeling that underlying care and desire to be safe and independent of the fear can also be a game changer. Then we can ask ourselves, "Is there another way of becoming safe, if that's what I want, as opposed to contending with the fear?"

The world of our emotions is very rich. As we learn in mindfulness meditation to be present for emotions in a mindful, non-reactive way, the greatest potential result of learning how to do this is that emotions become just one more thing to be aware of as things unfold and move through us. The emotions do not become more valid or more important than anything else. Rather, with the ability to settle down and be simple, whatever arises in attention, we just say, "Oh, that's what it is. This is going on now."

We leave it that simple so that the capacity for simple, ongoing recognition and presence with what's happening in the present moment becomes uninterrupted. The emotions are not prioritized or taken to be more important than anything else. They are just one more thing to recognize and know. The simplicity of just letting emotions be as they are allows for a deeper settling into the path of mindfulness.

I hope all this is supportive. Remember I'm emphasizing the importance of respect for your emotions. Respect them, care for them, and be wise about them. Hopefully, what we've done this week will help you to understand how to better take care of yourself when these emotions are here and how to not be caught in them too much. I hope you can learn to take a break or talk to a friend when you need to.

Next week we'll talk about mindfulness of thinking. That overlaps quite a bit with mindfulness of emotions. Hopefully, you'll see that being able to be mindful of emotions is really helpful for getting a handle on how to be mindful of thoughts so that being mindful of thinking doesn't prompt you to think more. Thank you very much, and I look forward to our time next week.