

Emotions Instruction

Ines Freedman

January 28, 2026

Keywords: vipassanā, dukkha, sutta, Dalai Lama, mindfulness practice, insight practice, meditation, walking meditation, factors of awakening, emotions

So as we observe the mind, we tend to notice, we can be aware of the breath rising and falling away. We might be aware of physical sensations that again come and go. Thoughts arising and disappearing, and sometimes emotions might arise, peak, and fall away. And those are all objects of the mind. This is what tends to show up when we pay attention to what's going on in our minds.

When emotions arise, we can see that they're more complex than physical sensations or watching the breath or thoughts that come and go so briefly. And so, you know, an emotion includes thoughts, includes physical sensations, includes how we feel about the emotion that affects the tone of it, what our responses are. And there's usually associated with some pleasure or displeasure. So they usually have a... And they can be wholesome emotions, you know, pleasurable emotions. But they can also be afflictive emotions that cause a lot of suffering.

And they can be very intense, like anger, or, you know, maybe we've just seen a long-lost friend, you know, this like this rush of joy that arises. But they can also be, you know, pretty mild and yet have quite an effect on us. You know, we might feel frustrated. These are things that I've commonly experienced in the meditation hall. Frustration, irritation, you know, they're not intense. They're easy to kind of stay under the radar because they're not intense.

I rarely, I've rarely missed noticing fear or noticing anger, but being a little bit irritated at the person next to me or something that happened on the retreat or, you know, those things can like stay really under the radar and affect us without us really noticing. And, you know, and things might be mildly, you know, not the joy that arises, you know, with a long-lost friend. But they might be just amusement, a little bit of amusement that, you know, maybe my own

thoughts. That happens a lot, you know. It's like, oh yeah. And, you know, gladness, just very simple kind of quieter emotions.

Right. When emotions are intense, it's very easy to get caught by them, to stop being mindful, to just be like right in the fire of the emotion without much mindfulness. But they come and go like any phenomena. And, you know, anything we experience, it's a strong emotion, you know, it's long forgotten. I mean, you know, I don't remember any of the tantrums I had as a kid or barely remember any times I've been angry in my life. You know, they just come and go and, you know, not much different than any other sensation.

But, you know, we can, you know, they're short-lived. You know, emotions like, you know, people talk about a wave of grief. You know, they may be experiencing a series of waves of grief, but the grief itself, when it arises, it comes in a wave, which has a peak, an intensity, and then it begins to release itself, to fade. But the thing with any emotion that's short-lived, anger, for instance, we can trigger it and re-trigger it with our thoughts. So for the purpose of insight practice, formal insight practice and meditation, we want to drop the thoughts. We want to, you know, favor the body. You know, drop the story that's in our minds, that keeps re-triggering it, and go to the body.

Sometimes, you know, these emotions are so intimate that sometimes people get very lost in trying to analyze them. And why did that come? It must have been from my childhood and they start thinking back. Or, you know, it's not the time for therapy. You know, it's the kind of, we might reflect on emotions. At some point, there's nothing unwholesome about reflecting, okay, this had come up and maybe, you know, I should consider it a little bit more widely and broadly. But it's not what we're doing in *vipassanā* practice. It's not forward-leading in terms of freeing the mind.

And in particular with juicy emotions, you know, I've seen in myself the tendency to really want to think about it. You know, this real strong craving to just want to think about it. And noticing the craving and then dropping the story eventually and coming back to the physical sensations in the body. You know, we're all wired differently. You know, some of us are very emotional, you know, and some of us don't have a strong emotional nature. You know, there isn't the right way to be, you know, and, you know, I'm very, tend to be very emotional.

You know, I cry easily and I laugh easily, but it's all very, you know, it's right near the surface for me, very close to me. And, you know, and I was so relieved when I saw the Dalai Lama, went to this presentation he did, you know, and I remember him, you know, somebody had told a very, very sad story, you know, and he just had tears going down his face. You know, here were like, you know, 500 people, and, you know, he was just totally at home, you know,

and... And then there are these little kids, they did a dance for him. You know, they're really cute. And he's just giggling. He's like giggling. And so, yeah, yeah, you know, we can be that way.

And I've also known Dharma teachers who, you know, known them for decades who have never seen them cry. You know, I've never seen them giggle. So we're all different, you know, and so we don't need to try to have an experience or try not to have an experience. You know, the practice is whatever shows up belongs. Whatever's here, it's not right or wrong or favored.

And the other thing is that sometimes we're very emotional people. Like people say, you know, I'm emotional all the time. I can't wait to do a practice with mindfulness of emotions. And then during the sittings, nothing comes up. Their emotions just don't come up. And that's common, you know, and it's common the other way. People who see themselves as very unemotional, even after periods of real quiet, sometimes very strong emotions arise.

You know, so there's nothing, there's no need to figure out a rhyme or reason for any of it. And being mindful of our emotions is really a simple recognition of what's there. A simple yes, it belongs. And a simple feeling, just like we did with the breath, we know the breath, we feel the breath. So it's a simple feeling, the physical sensations as they change. And just again, you know the breath, you know the emotion.

You sense, you feel the physical sensations of breathing or the physical sensations of the emotions. And you allow them to release, you know, relaxing the breath, relaxing the whole body breath. Just like the *sutta*, but in relation to emotions, the same thing is true. We allow the emotion to release. We don't try to hold on to it.

So let's, if your eyes aren't closed yet, go ahead and close them. Check your posture if it's relaxed and alert. And begin with taking a few deep breaths. And with each breath, just relaxing a little bit more, a little bit deeper, and allowing the breath to return to its normal rhythm. You might get a sense of your whole body just sitting here.

Take a few moments, a few minutes to allow your attention to wander around your body, relaxing any tensions, just feeling whatever's there that might use a little bit of relief. Anything that doesn't relax, that's tense, you can just soften around it. No need to force anything. Now you might notice your general emotional state. How do you feel right now? What's the flavor of the emotion, the feeling in the mind?

Just a bit, might be a very light, just feeling pleasant or unpleasant. How do you know that's what you're feeling? Now bringing an open, relaxed attention to the sensations of breath-

ing and allowing our attention to rest on the breath, to settle there, keeping the breath in the foreground. So keeping the breath in the foreground, widen your attention to include any sensations, physical sensations that arise, any strong physical sensations, to include any emotions that arise. There's no need to look for them, just be receptive to them if they show up.

And if sensations, emotions show up, turn your attention to it, allowing those to be in the foreground, without judgment or reaction, and allowing the breath to be in the background for a while. But if nothing compelling arises, just resting on the breath. If a compelling emotion arises, know it, recognize it, allow it, give it room, feel the sensations in the body, stay with that felt sense of the emotion until it fades. If it feels complicated when an emotion arises, notice the difference between the body sensations and any thoughts or ideas about it, what we call the story or the commentary. Emotions fade on their own if we don't keep them alive with our thoughts, if we don't keep feeding them.

If nothing compelling arises, just resting on the breath, on the physicality of the body. If the attention has drifted, gently bring it back to the breath or body right here, right now, welcoming at home. So mindfulness practice can allow us to learn to trust our emotional life, however it is, to allow ourselves to feel the full range of human emotion without repressing it, without necessarily acting them out. Some of the wonderful emotions are nice to act out, you know, hugging someone, smiling. If afflictive emotions arise in meditation, we need to recognize that they're *dukkha*, they're painful, and that we can meet them with compassion.

There's nothing to fix, just to allow them. Sometimes, some emotions are very similar to physical pain in that when we have very strong physical pain, we can give it attention and stay with it as long as we can stay interested, as long as we can stay curious about it. When the mind starts getting grim... it's not very helpful to stay with physical pain. You know, okay, I'm going to sit here till the rest of us sit, you know, and just bear it, you know. That's not mindfulness practice. You know, that's a big macho.

And so in the same way with emotions, sometimes emotions can be overwhelming. And if we can't stay mindful and present for them, we can meet them with, you know, in particular emotions like fear or grief, you know, can be very intense, and we're not able to meet them with any openness. And so at those times, we can very consciously move away from the emotion. One of the ways of thinking of it is we can meet them in bite-sized pieces. Like I've had what I considered overwhelming fear in meditation, come up in meditation. And I didn't know what to do with it, you know, and I ran away from it.

And my teacher said, you know, just treat it like with bite-sized pieces. You know, so the first

time, you know, it's okay to go away from it, just a little taste of it, and then it becomes familiar. And then the next time, maybe you can hang with it a little bit longer, you know, as long as you stay interested in it, curious, it doesn't have to feel good, you know, but at least be able to be mindful of it. Then it's helpful to stay with strong emotions. And when emotions like delight and joy arise, we can be mindful of those too. We can allow ourselves to feel the joy a little deeper in our bodies, feel the affection, the light, you know, feel it a little bit more fully.

The mindfulness of the body makes the body more alive. So, you know, as you continue your day, you know, stay really close to your body, your body is always here. And, you know, I like to begin, like next will be a walking period, I like to, I consider the walking period beginning while I'm still sitting down, you know, so that as I stand up very, very mindfully, my first step, I'm already doing walking meditation. It may not be my path that I'm using back and forth, but all the way to the walking path is walking meditation. And this continuity that we can have in a retreat really allows that momentum to build, especially here we are on the third day.

Mind's getting a little bit more settled, more here, and this momentum can really keep growing. And this is how the factors of awakening really strengthen in us and grow in us. So thank you.