

Instruction: Mindfulness of Emotions and Deep Feelings

Gil Fronsdal

March 04, 2026

Keywords: mindfulness of emotions, feeling tones, Buddha, unification, Buddhist meditation, rumination, stability, reactive mind, Zen, sensual pleasure

So today's instruction centers on mindfulness of emotions.

And one of the connections to mindfulness of emotions is mindfulness of feeling tones.

And sometimes emotions can be easier to have a... to be mindful of in a calm, clear way, if we recognize that they're pleasant or unpleasant, or neither, and relate to them for a few moments that way.

Oh, this is unpleasant.

How can I just hold the unpleasantness of it?

This is pleasant.

How can I hold the unpleasantness of it?

And then, if we're a little bit more holding it a little bit more, with breathing room, a little bit more non-reactively.

Then mindfulness of emotions, we can look more deeply into them or get to know them better and have a clear recognition of the fullness of what they are.

And this emphasis the Buddha gave on knowing could also be called recognizing and feeling, sensing, the experience.

There's a nice kind of middle step, and that is to allow, to recognize what's happening, and as we recognize it, to allow it to be there for a little while.

Mindfulness is very respectful of our emotions, so all emotions have a place.

Nothing is wrong for the purposes of mindfulness meditation.

So there's a movement.

Can we give it breathing room?

Can we just allow it to be the little bit?

Can we be its friend?

Can we gaze upon it kindly?

And then, if we can do that, then maybe the next step would be to feel it more in the body.

Okay.

And yesterday I talked about what I called shallow, not shallow, but surface feelings, sensations, and deep ones.

And it might be that that sets up a dichotomy where one is considered better than the other.

I don't want to do that.

But what happens is that often the surface phenomena... dominate so much, we don't connect to what's deep down.

The deeper is shyer, it's quieter, and it's not something that's easily validated by the world around us because it's so personal, not seen as easily.

And there's some ways in which we prioritize certain ways of thinking that obscures our capacity to feel or sense what's deeper.

If we have a lot of anxious thoughts, for example.

But we're overemphasizing them.

It feeds the anxiety, and we don't have access to the deeper support, the deeper ways in which our whole body, deeper mind can support our attention to the anxiety.

So to be very careful with your emotions, to not over-emphasize the stories, the discussions.

Some emotions are there because we repeat the same kind of story over and over again.

Sometimes therapists point out that a leading cause of depression is rumination.

Sometimes the stories are like the mood music in movies, that if the same mood music is said over and over again, we start... reacting, responding emotionally to what's going on.

So we have to be very careful about these surface thinking that we have, which has a place in our life, but we don't overemphasize it.

And as I'm doing this prose part of the instructions, I want to... sometimes there's such good news in the news every day that I feel like I have to tell the retreatants.

You should know this.

And so this is the kind of amazing, earth-shaking kind of news that I want you to know.

The headline says, Intelligence emerges when the whole brain works as one.

Intelligence emerges when the whole brain works as one.

So the journalists don't quite know what they're saying when they make that a headline.

Because the brain, it shouldn't be the brain, it should be the mind.

Because the brain is just a little thing.

But the intelligence when the whole mind...

And so a very important part of Buddhist meditation is something called unification.

The integration, the collective coordination of all of who we are.

And that's what this article talks about, that intelligence turns out to be a deep coordination of all parts of the human being.

And if we get too preoccupied, too caught in certain trains of thought, maybe surface thoughts and surface feelings, then we don't have a chance to integrate into the system the deeper capacities for intelligence, deeper capacities for compassion and love.

And the whole system of who we are doesn't talk to itself.

The article talks about the communication.

That everything's communicating together in all kinds of networks that they have seen in these kinds of scans of the brains that they've done.

So what I was saying last night was an encouragement to begin feeling your way, sensing, is there some greater depth inside of you?

Are there sensations of depth?

Are there sensations that contribute to the wholeness of who you are?

And are there ways in which the ways that being with emotions that supports a sense of wholeness, like a wider communication, coordination of all of who we are, that this article calls intelligence?

Or is there a way in which we limit ourselves too much by the how we get caught and preoccupied.

And one way is by repeating the same story a lot.

So, to begin...

And a very interesting way of beginning meditation is to assume the meditation posture you're going to sit in and close your eyes and then do nothing else.

Okay.

Just do nothing else.

Don't start a meditation technique.

Don't do something on purpose.

Do nothing.

Maybe there's even a way to kind of stop your ordinary trains of thought enough.

So the nothing is a little bit more full and complete.

Even if it's for a few moments, do nothing.

As if you're okay, as if you're safe.

Yeah.

As if it's invaluable now to simply notice what's here before you start doing your practice.

And to gently know and recognize just how you are when you're doing nothing.

Maybe looking around so you can see the different parts, different aspects.

Noticing if your mind prioritizes certain things over other things.

Okay.

And as you sit, kind of doing next to nothing, is there a way that you can allow for greater allowance, just allowing things to be as they are?

Or do you notice there's ways in which you react, or want to make something happen, or is there a way to allow your experience its freedom to just be as it is, as you know it?

And then to feel it, to sense, allow yourself to be as you are, doing next to nothing, except now sensing it in your body.

Maybe there's a simple way to let your body be available to the sensations which are moving through it.

And then knowing...

Whether what your experience is like is be pleasant, more on the pleasant side of things, or more on the unpleasant side.

Or neither.

Maybe the tension roams around being available.

Some places where it's pleasant, and some places it's more unpleasant.

It's all okay to allow, as an attitude, it's okay, to know and feel.

Your experience for a few moments in it.

You know your experience as either pleasant or unpleasant.

Maybe letting the thinking mind become quieter so you can be more sensitive to the sensations of pleasant and unpleasant.

And then look within to see if you can find wherever in your body you feel most stable, where is the deepest place of stability, subtleness?

It doesn't have to be dramatic, but some modicum of here, the weight of the body contributes to stability, a place of inner warmth, maybe a gathering place around an inner stillness, and then to breathe with that stability.

To breathe through it.

And if there's some feeling of pleasantness for that inner stability, letting that pleasantness be the invitation to stay close.

And then see if some simple way of thinking, of recognizing your experience, knowing, can arise in connection to this stability.

A very different form of thinking than the top-heavy thinking, the spinning thinking, discursive thinking.

And if it's easy enough from this deeper reference point to now know what you're feeling emotionally, your mood, your state of mind.

Could be very subtle, could be anything, any mood or emotion, even an attitude and know it, to recognize it.

As simply as you can, from this deeper place of stability or stillness, allow yourself to allow the emotion to be there.

Give it permission to be there, whatever it might be.

And then feel in your body the emotion.

There's some... some way that it registers or is alive in your body.

Is it more pleasant or more unpleasant?

How is it to be with an emotion as pleasant or unpleasant as opposed to being with the story and the meaning, ideas about it?

And then returning to some place within... of stability or stillness that's associated with breathing, where breathing, the body's sensations are breathing, is the gathering place, the place of integration, coordination.

And if there's anything pleasant about breathing, let that be the invitation to stay with it, to stay close to breathing, allowing yourself to feel that pleasantness.

And if an emotion becomes compelling, more compelling than the breathing, know, allow and feel the emotion for a while, maybe for four or five breaths, and then return to breathing.

As we come to the end of the sitting, do once again doing nothing next to nothing.

Nothing you have to fix or change, nothing you have to attain, make happen.

Nothing you need to think about and doing the closest you can to nothing.

What do you know deeply from the depths of your being?

What is known from the depth of your being?

What can be allowed to be present?

And what are the sensations of this deep knowing place?

Is there something pleasant or satisfying, deep, deep within that gives you a different orientation, perspective, for how to be aware here, now.

There is a logic to how we do the instructions here, a time IRC.

Hmm.

Of course, this logic isn't the right for everyone.

But the idea is that first day we do mostly keep it very simple.

First day is often very mind is scattered and a lot of more challenges to be with as we kind of unwind and arrive here.

And to have something very simple, just the breathing.

Just come back to the breathing in a simple way, and let the breathing be the connection to the present moment.

And then with the kind of the breathing as the maybe the... the center of it all.

Then we open up to the body.

The body is phenomenally important for this practice that I think it should have been called bodyfulness rather than mindfulness.

And then with breathing and the body as a reference point, then we begin opening up to include emotions.

And the direction we're going is to be able to include all of our life as part of the practice.

This movement of becoming whole.

And that's kind of the overall goal in this practice, is not so much to attain something, but rather return to some sense of wholeness that all of us is included.

When we cling, when we react, we tend to limit the wholeness.

We kind of narrow it to our particular preoccupation.

In this practice, we're learning to open up partly by knowing, allowing, and feeling more and more.

And so, it means that all emotions are allowed.

This is one of the few places in life I like to think where it's okay to have any emotion at all.

Things that maybe in society you have to be a little bit careful for if you have murderous rage.

Maybe don't do it around your boss or something.

But here you can just sit quietly.

You might look serene, but on the inside it's a volcano.

It's okay.

And so there's a way of learning to work with and be present for emotions.

And some emotions are reactivity themselves.

And so what we're learning also is to recognize our reactivity and allow for that even.

But the allowing of it is so we don't add more reactivity on top of reactivity.

We say, oh look at this, look at this, let me look at this, everything wants to be seen.

So see this, know this, know, allow, and then feel.

But as you feel more deeply, we have deep places of feeling, deep feelings of sensations that can be a place of stability, of support.

So it's easier not to go up into the reactive mind and be caught in those stories and spinning.

And so one of the unusual... I call it, I think of it as an imitation or offering of this practice that I didn't understand, especially when I did Zen practice, this was almost forbidden in Zen, was orient yourself around the pleasure.

Not the ordinary sensual pleasure, but the deep pleasure.

Of being at home inside, the ways in which breathing can feel pleasant.

It doesn't always feel pleasant.

Parts of the cycle of breathing might not feel pleasant, but you're allowed to kind of take in the point where it is pleasant, be nourished by the deeper pleasures that this practice can provide.

Because that helps support the mind, the awareness, to stay present.

The mind kind of wants to stay with where it's pleasant.

It's easier for it.

And so you can use that as a support.

It doesn't always work, not always available, but when it is.

And generally, as practice deepens, we open up and become more inclusive and include more of who we are, including the depth of who we are.

We're no longer living in that surface mind so much.

The more you'll start availing yourself of some pleasure, something that feels good, feels nice, feels satisfying, you're allowed to be nourished by that.

You're allowed to be nurtured by that.

And you're allowed to let that be kind of the gateway into a fuller opening, allowing feeling.
And at some point you might be totally amazed that you'll have the... worst thought you've ever a human could have.
You'll have the worst emotion a human could ever have.
You'll be the greatest book world records for the worst emotion.
It'll be great, because you know how to know it, feel it, open to it, make space for it in such a wonderful way.
It's not a problem, it's not a weight, it's not a burden.
It's not something you use to define yourself by.
It's just, oh, just a difficult emotion.
It's an unpleasant emotion.
I know how to be with that.
I don't have to make a story on it.
I can just let it be.
And it just, it feels kind of like a miracle.
Oh, look at that.
This deep knowing.
Can you even know this?
That's so difficult.
And if it's too difficult with emotions, you're always welcome to... do something to stabilize yourself or to somehow do something that makes it easier for you.
And you could go down to the dining room and get tea, get a snack.
You can go for a walk in the woods here.
You can go to your room.
If you need something, the ordinary way of taking care of yourself or it's getting too busy and you need too difficult and you need some kind of break from it all, please do.
That's part of wisdom too.
So thank you very much and I hope you enjoy this day.