Mindfulness of Emotions

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So yesterday, this morning, the place of our body in *Dharma* practice: how much fidelity can we have to our body? It is not exactly the case that losing our body is synonymous with delusion, but it is often the case.

Today, I want to, in a sense, emphasize another facet of body, namely emotion. So we will explore emotion: its signal and its noise. Sometimes, we are maybe a little dismissive of it, or somebody might say that it is just psychotherapy, the realm of something else. On the one hand, yeah, if the only thing we ever want to do is wrestle with emotion, we miss something important about the path. But emotion, feeling, affect—this is very central in our practice and our freedom.

There are deep connections. At some level, suffering at its core involves emotion. Clinging at its core involves emotion, and freedom at its core involves a kind of resolution of feeling. The Buddha said, "All phenomena converge on feeling; all *dhammas* converge on feeling."

Neurologist Antonio Damasio said:

> Regarding feelings as occasional visitors to the mind, or as caused by only typical emotions, does not do justice to the ubiquity and functional importance of the phenomena. Most every image in the main procession we call mind has a feeling by its side. Images are so desperate for affective, emotional company that even the images that constitute a prominent feeling can be accompanied by other feelings, a bit like the harmonics of a sound or the circles that form once a pebble hits the water surface. There is no being, in the proper sense of the term, without a spontaneous mental experience of life, a feeling of existence.

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Right now, right now, something is happening in the emotional circuit of your body. Right now, we can tune into that energy of leaning forward or pulling back, wanting more or less, pleasant or unpleasant. What is sometimes called the hedonic tone of this moment ranges anywhere from extremely unpleasant to extremely pleasant. What is the hedonic tone of this moment, and what does that tone do to your view, your thought, your behavior? What does the hedonic tone do to your attention?

What is the emotional current? How does that shape where and what you look to? What becomes more prominent, more salient, when we are in the grip of something unpleasant? In what way does that infuse the view? The ways in which our wanting suffuses the knowing—this involves feeling.

So when I talk about this, technically I am talking about affect. It is broader than joy or sadness, or some concrete emotional state. I am talking about physiological arousal, the circuits in our body that seem emotional in nature. I am talking about facial expression. Sometimes we do not even know it, right?

But there is a little smile, or a little grimace, or a little frozenness, or a little something. I am talking about tendencies, action tendencies, urgencies, subtle and obvious. I am talking about mood. We do not notice the onset of moods; we notice feeling, emotion, but we do not really notice the onset of a mood. Then that flavors most everything.

And I am talking about emotional experience: anger, fear, sadness, joy, gratitude, love, all of that. The Buddha said, "Oh, oh," kind of pointing to the feeling tone, or the *vedanā*, the hedonic tone of this moment. And 2,500 years later, Lisa Feldman Barrett, an emotion scientist, wrote that valence—meaning positive, negative, or neutral valence—and arousal, emotional affective arousal, might be better thought of as properties of consciousness rather than properties of emotional episodes per se. Valence and arousal: she is saying essentially exactly what the Buddha said. These are properties of consciousness, not discrete episodes.

Our life unfolds within that affective space—our suffering and our freedom. This arousal is often along the front axis of our body: face, throat, chest, belly. But it can be very broadly spread across the body. It can feel on the surface of the body. It can feel like it is at the core of our body.

It is hard to think of our life, or to remember it, aside from feeling, emotion. In other words, it is part of what makes life memorable. What makes experience memorable? We just do not remember experience that is not charged with emotion. The chapters of our autobiography, however we tell the story of our life, are knit together by feeling: stories of longing and

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heartache and joy and exploration and all of it.

The chapters of this retreat—of arriving, even before arriving, preparing and travel and arriving and settling and thawing and waking up and all of it—are chapters, chapters of feeling. Our life is a kind of story we tell largely about how it felt.

I remember being young, being a kid, and I was, as Gil shared, kind of very high sensitivity, very low equanimity. That is quite a combo. My parents would say, "I don't remember this so clearly," but they said my main childhood mantra was, "It's too much." There I was, in my own precocious way, grappling with the *First Noble Truth*. Very poorly.

Even when I was happy, I did have some intuitive sense of its fragility. I remember the peaks and valleys of adolescence and young adulthood: excitement and uncertainty and insecurity, and these jumbled attempts to build a life that might work. I remember encountering *Dharma*, and that was also a kind of emotional experience. It was sort of like, "Oh, okay, I'm homesick for a place I've never been."

And all the kind of Dharma tears, the pain and the poignancy, and the fear and the love and all of it—reverence, kind of surrender. So, a lot of feeling. I am beginning in this way because I do feel like emotion marks our life and our path in a deep way.

Emotion is at the heart of, at some level, *dukkha*. Suffering, this longing for protection from sorrow, grief, and lamentation—this is *dukkha*. Usually rendered as suffering, but sometimes as unsatisfactoriness or stress or anguish, this is pointing to an affective state, an emotional state. To suffer is to suffer emotionally.

Greed and hatred are affective states. Clinging is a kind of bodily affective experience. We know what it is like to hold. There is a lot of activation in the emotional circuits of our body.

And letting go is a kind of—once we can actually do it. Who knows how we do it, or what grace is required to do that? What effort is required to do that? What seeing is required to do that? But once we do let go, it is the kind of simplification, the resolution of feeling, that is left in its wake.

In the Tibetan tradition, it is said that the essence of this realm, the essence of *saṃsāra*, is the urge to fix. That sense of wrongness, the subtle wobble of the moment—it is feeling that makes conditions seem urgent. It is feeling, it is emotion, that signals something needs fixing. Something could get better. Something could be more secure. Something in *saṃsāra* needs to be rearranged.

Then our growing freedom involves feeling the bliss of blamelessness, the blessing of being

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aligned with one's own deepest values. The joy of a mind that gathers, that unifies. The relief that comes as we become less and less intimidated by our inner life, less and less intimidated by suffering. The freedom where the mind is, in a sense, maybe unstimulated by feeling—not numbed out, but the resolution of feeling.

The Buddha said peace is the highest happiness. That too is a kind of resolution of emotion.

Retreat here, our time together, is an emotionally charged experience. It is a simple life, but retreat—the form, the rhythms—is such that it generates a great amount of energy in body and mind. Even when you feel sleepy or numbed out or disconnected, there is actually energy being generated by the silence. That is an opportunity.

The intensity of retreat and meeting our heart and mind in this way, having this current run through our system, a lot of voltage running through, is an invitation. It leads us either to cling more tightly to our view or to reorder our perception, to discover a new way of perceiving. We often have to go through a measure of chaotic fragmentation where the ordinary modes of coping and sense-making do not work. The ordinary ways of striving and efforting and accomplishing do not work.

Then there is a kind of—sometimes we just double down with fidelity to the old view, old methods. But all of that energy and emotional disruptiveness is an invitation to see: Is there a new perception on offer here?

There is great intelligence in our emotions, and delusion too. A lot of our practice does not mean we reject delusion. A lot of our practice is untangling the pearl of wisdom and intelligence from the static of delusion. There is static because our emotional system, you could say, is engineered and optimized for safety rather than freedom.

So we are here to explore in the tremendous refuge of the precepts and the care that we are all taking with each other. The reassurance and trustworthiness of the field. It is in that state of protection and seclusion and refuge that we can begin to see and trace out the baseline emotional habits that animate our life.

We come and we are just living this very simple but sacred life. When we are having to navigate and be social and meet responsibilities and do all of that, one can perceive one's mind, but it is harder to perceive one's mind when one is supposed to be accomplishing things. Here it gets simple. So we are here to perceive the emotional grooves and habits that animate our life.

Those habits are neither your fault, nor are they an accident that they are arising. In a sense,

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we try to make retreat as blank a canvas as possible against which one sees the shadow of one's holding. We can never do that perfectly; that screen is never going to be perfectly blank. But we try to keep it clean here, just in the way we set up retreat, such that we can begin to see the shadow cast by the mind. Shadow not in a pejorative way.

It is not an accident what arises for me versus you. We are called to meet our conditioning, and it may have roots that extend back deep into your life, into your childhood, before you were born, before the last generation. It may extend back far, but you are now asked to hold this conditioning and to bring it to a certain kind of completion.

We are coming to appreciate, you could say, that not-our-fault component. We appreciate the fundamental innocence of our feelings. Those feelings do not belong to you any more than the rain belongs to the atmosphere. Our emotional life feels like it means something so profound about who we are, but it is not a commentary on who you are.

I have come to think of this as something like forgiveness. Forgiveness. That is a peculiar word for the context, perhaps, but the impulse that I have, or the way that captures it for me, is something like: we are forgiving all phenomena. We are forgiving the urgencies of feeling, the longing, and even the love. We forgive all of it.

We forgive our need and our compulsivity. It is only in the context of that forgiveness that we can begin to develop a true relationship of connection with it. Michelle MacDonald would say, "Is the agenda to control or to connect?" To connect, there is a measure of forgiveness. That does not have to be some grand ritual, but it is like we forgive the arising of phenomena.

I finished a book recently, a kind of memoir of spiritual longing and addiction. It is grappling with the question of will, willfulness, and grace. It is titled *Will and Attention*, which is from this line from the mystic Simone Weil: "We must cure our faults through attention rather than will. Unmixed attention is the same as prayer."

This writer, Meghan O'Gieblyn, had had a decade of sobriety from alcohol. Then, for reasons she grapples to understand, after what had been a very fortunate period of her life and success with writing, she resumed drinking, relapsed, and kept it a secret from her husband and everyone else. She went out in the middle of the night to drink. Her husband heard something but did not come to get her; he had no suspicion at all about what was going on.

She blacked out and woke up, and wrote. This is the last time she drank:

> It was all coming out now. I probably went to a bar, but I didn't know. As soon as I said this, I saw a single image—the first and last that would appear from those lost hours—a

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> man picking me up from the sidewalk. No face, no voice, just a voice. Though it was clear he was not one of those men from the past, just a stranger trying to help, passing by.
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> Had I fallen or passed out? A stretch of sidewalk outside a sports bar downtown, two blocks from our building. A small relief; it meant I did not drive. "I've been drinking," I said.
>
> My husband sat next to me on the floor. He was remarkably composed, the way he always is in a crisis. I was grateful for this, even though I knew it was a sign of the depth of his shock. "How long have you been drinking?" he asked.
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> I said last spring, last winter. I didn't know. I added quickly that I'd never been unfaithful; that I'd only ever drank alone, as though this would somehow exonerate me. He asked how much I had drunk last night. I said I couldn't remember. I buried my head in my knees and begged him not to ask any more questions. Not right now. I was so miserable. I'd never been more miserable in my life.
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> I felt a hand on top of my head. I remember this moment so clearly. It is the only absolutely clear memory that remains of that awful morning, though it must be reconstructed because it is from a third-person point of view. I see us from the perspective of someone standing in the doorway of the kitchen. I see the two of us seated on the floor, my back against the oven door, his hand reaching out to touch my head, which is buried in my knees.
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> I knew immediately that I would be forgiven. It was going to be awful. The future was impossible. There would be more confessionals and more difficult conversations. But for right now, in this moment, I was being received with a mercy that I did not deserve.
>
> I leaned my head into his shoulder and cried for a very long time in his arms. It is the only moment in my life when I felt loved, so completely loved in the depth of my wretchedness and failure. And sometimes, though not always, I think I would choose to live through all that affliction again, to live it over just as it was any number of times, if it was the only way to preserve this moment of grace.

I read that and thought of practice and this retreat, and just how deep the forgiveness is needed for ourselves. Sometimes that needs to be offered by another person, and sometimes, genuinely, genuinely, we offer that to ourselves. Really, this deep, complete forgiveness for the fullness of our feeling life. All the phenomena you call me, whatever you call me,

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all of that can be forgiven.

Our emotions are trying to tell us something important. But, as I said, there is wisdom bound up with the delusion. If we take all of our emotions seriously all the time, that gets us into trouble. But if we do not heed the call of our wisdom, we are never actually able to also set down the muddle and the delusion.

There is a process by which we actually have to extract the meaning, the wisdom, the intelligence. The peaks and valleys of your experience here, the stories you tell about yourself or about Buddhism or about the retreat or whatever—it is feeling, feeling. To come to actually know the intelligence of what is arising, we have to get still. Generally, our moods function as devices of confirmation bias: we see what we are in, we see what we are in.

So we have to come into this deep contact with our body that Gil evoked so clearly this morning. Balancing our energy usually means a measure of tranquility, not as a fight against intensity, but as a way of making more space, a wider pasture, for that intensity. The Buddha suggests that truth is only accessible when we are in a certain state of energetic balance. Truth, in other words, depends on our body. It depends on putting our body in a state conducive to truth.

That involves a measure of deep aliveness and deep tranquility. We cannot see when we are flooded, and some sorrows are sometimes likened to a flood. The world is touching us moment by moment, and our brain gates much of this. Otherwise, it would be completely overwhelming.

Our brain gates much of the sensory phenomena, but the gates constructed by our brain are insufficient. They are too low, and too much still gets in. Life feels like it teeters at the edge, never too far from overwhelm. Because life can feel like too much, we develop this capacity for tranquility, for soothing.

The path is about learning, but we only learn—we are only ready to learn—when there is a measure of soothing. We can be very highly activated; there can be a lot of feeling. But something in us needs to feel soothed, steady. That is what allows us to learn, actually, a measure of soothing.

To be mindful of feeling is to feel. The difficulty, the unpleasantness, the intensities, the old wounds, the compulsivity, our own sense of captivity—all of that can be experienced in the light of awareness, such that it is transformed. In a sense, painful feeling will either have the taste of suffering or the taste of purification. It will be one or the other.

The difficulty, the drivenness, the compulsivity, the self-harshness, will have the sense of,

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"Okay, it's moment by moment making my mind a little more brittle," or something is being softened. We are practicing such that we can meet emotional intensity and be softened. It is a kind of goodness that emerges from feeling bad in the right way, maybe.

Shinzen Young:

> The taste of purification is very hard to describe, but in essence, it's a kind of joy. You may be in great pain, but there's a deep joy because you feel blockages being worked out each time you greet the pain with equanimity. You can feel how the energy and the pain is wearing away this separation between you and your spiritual source. You sense that holdings from the past are being ground up, digested, and metabolized by the peristaltic and vibratory movements of impermanence. The grinding and digesting is both painful and liberating at the same time. This is the taste of purification.

We keep noticing the bracing, which both quarantines the pain but actually amplifies the distress. The way in which the body just becomes a little torqued or contorted by a kind of unwillingness. It is when we feel settled enough, curious enough, intrinsically interested enough to say, "Come what may. Here I am. Here's my heart. Do what you will with it."

When we suffer emotionally, we look for relief. But the choice is not often between feeling bad or feeling good. It is between feeling bad in a looping way or feeling bad in a useful, liberating way. For many people, that process can feel a bit like grieving, the process of the separation between you and your spiritual source being ground.

Then, through this process of feeling, we do begin to learn what we can trust in us. That is, at some level, the most basic question: How can I know? What do I trust? What is wisdom? What is delusion that looks like wisdom? What is true wisdom? What can I trust?

If we do not know what to trust, we get confused and tend to get more desperate for more information. We reach up into our mind and our stories for more information, but it is not there. So we are in a process. One researcher said meditation is increasing the signal-to-noise ratio in our brain. We are distilling the signal from the noise.

The power of the signal is measured against the background noise, like these speakers right now. There is a signal-to-noise ratio: a tiny bit of hiss, a tiny bit of distortion, and my voice—the signal—and the noise. Meditation is about amplifying signal and decluttering, putting aside noise. We are willing to hear it. The only way we can untangle is to hear it.

But there is much noise and static. Greed and hatred are noise. They are bad guides to our happiness. They are not wrong. They are just noise in the sense that they do not point us to

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happiness.

We tend to think our wisdom is in our imagination, but it is here now in our body. We have to listen in a particular way. We are learning to listen in a deep way. We are developing clarity with what is important. We are not losing the plot.

It is very easy to lose the plot. In a day or a week of practice, we can lose the plot many times. We are reducing unhelpful elaboration, overinterpretation, making some one thing mean too much. We are listening deeply, such that we begin to have a sense of what wisdom feels like in our body.

Wisdom—we have to test it out. We test it out by seeing whether it—wisdom is the capacity to make good predictions about happiness, yours and mine—and it bubbles up from silence rather than being a solution to some riddle of the words. It came up last night, a kind of sense of being a medium, and wisdom is working through you. It feels impersonal but like home.

When that comes up, there is no desperate need to convince ourselves, "Yeah, this is it," and there is no doubt either. It is just like something clicks in. This is a way to live. There is some relief.

So we keep following the thread of feeling. We keep listening. I would say that if we follow the thread of feeling, if we follow it through our body-mind, we stay. We stay. It terminates in love.

Now, you might ask, how could it be that my rage terminates in love? We listen. The rage, or whatever it may be, wants to come to some conclusion, but prematurely concludes something. But we just listen. We stay.

We follow that thread. We stay until the feeling ends. When the phenomena ends, when the feeling ends, what is left in the wake is something like the *brahmavihāras*. It terminates in love, terminates in compassion or peace or joy, kindness. Every emotion is an argument for love.

We do not realize it, but we are learning to listen and follow. Follow it to its terminus. A thousand different arguments for love, but all actually arguments, in one way or another, for love.

Sit for a moment.

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