

Emotions (1 of 5) Relaxing with Emotions

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With this talk, I begin a five-part series on mindfulness of emotions. The topics of these talks will include relaxation, recognition, respect, restoration, and release. All these are important aspects of mindfulness, including ways to practice mindfulness and ways that mindfulness practices us. Giving careful attention to what is happening tends to evoke or bring about these kinds of relationships to our emotional life. Today's focus is relaxation.

One of the remarkable things about mindfulness meditation is that you're allowed to have your emotions. In many places in public life, at work, or other places, sometimes if we have very strong emotions and feelings, it might not be so appropriate to show them. If we get angry at someone at work – our boss, for

example – maybe we want to be a little careful about how we express it.

I remember when I was a relatively new parent, there were some times when I felt angry at what was going on with the children. But I could see that it was mostly my inner struggles, not really about them. And so I found it best not to express the anger. Sometimes I even left the room and came back a few minutes later when I had cooled down.

There are many places – in some families and some cultures – where the idea of expressing emotions is not so welcome. You might feel that you have to keep them in check – that emotions are something internal that we process, but not something we are allowed to talk about.

However, in mindfulness meditation, you are allowed to have any emotional state that you have. You're allowed to feel whatever feelings are there. This is especially true when we're doing mindfulness in meditation.

Meditation is a wonderful laboratory for investigating, getting to know, and understanding our inner emotional life. That laboratory works best if we allow ourselves to feel whatever emotions are present. Meditation is like a special time when you're allowed to feel anything at all.

You could have murderous rage, and as long as you stay in your meditation, you don't move and go out to hit anyone. Just don't move. Don't speak. Discover what it's like to let the anger course through you and relax with it. Relax around it.

I'm very fond of the idea that the word emotion comes from a Latin root. "Motion" means movement. And the "e" means out, moving out.

All emotions are processes. They are not static things. They are things that are in process. They are ways in which we process our lives, the ways in which we respond to life, the ways in which we understand what's happening in life, the ways in which we express ourselves.

Emotions are a very important part of our life. Some of them are afflictive. Some of them are suffering-producing. And some of them are not. Some of them are actually part of the wonderfulness of life – the joy, the happiness, the well-being. The beautiful feelings that can arise are the non-afflictive ones. These are sometimes called beautiful emotional states.

There is a very interesting phenomenon: afflictive emotional states come with tension, stress, contraction, or tightness – a kind of directedness in which we lose a certain kind of freedom and peacefulness.

Sometimes the directedness and the power of afflictive emotions can be seductive. The power that comes with anger, for example, or the allure and promise of lust, can be quite compelling. But if you're mindful, deeply mindful – this is why meditation is such a good place for this – you can feel how it's also afflictive and stressful. The idea of relaxing around the afflictive emotions begins to settle some of that stress and tension.

On the other hand, the non-afflictive emotions, in their simplest form – before we react to them or have agendas of what to do with them – tend to be nourishing, comforting, and comfortable in and of themselves. They tend to have a nice feeling to them. If we relax, the simple aspect of these non-afflictive emotions provides more space for them to grow. They are able to be more open and settled in a nice way.

But if we are attached or clinging to positive emotions (the beautiful emotional states), then they don't necessarily grow when we relax, because what we might be relaxing is the extra fuel we're giving them by our agendas, attachments, or desires. We're trying to feed the emotional state and pump it up.

As we meditate, that pumping up might relax. Now a person might feel like they're much less emotional. In fact, they might be less emotional in an expressive way.

But hopefully, as we settle and allow for the emotions to be there in their simplicity, we actually feel them more fully. They become more exquisite. They become more embodied, more open to a deeper sensitivity to what's happening that can't be there if we're spending a lot of time celebrating our joy or indulging in emotional pleasures.

The idea in meditation is neither to indulge nor push away. Neither celebrate nor condemn. Neither be for emotions or against them. When we relax around emotions, one of the things we're relaxing is the way we get caught in them.

Indulging, getting involved, jumping on board, justifying, holding on to the emotions – or the opposite: resisting, pushing away, condemning, being angry, feeling shame or embarrassment – these are secondary reactivities we can have. It's those secondary reactions that we learn to relax.

One of the ways to relax is to feel the physical expression of our emotions. It has been said that all emotions have a physical expression, a physical corollary that's part of them. Without having some physical basis for feeling our emotions, we might not know what the emotion actually is. Whether that's always true or not, I can't tell you. But certainly, I've found it is predominantly true, regularly very true.

I make it a regular practice when I feel some emotions, especially in meditation, to find the location where it is in the body. I might feel fear in my belly, a tightening or butterflies there. I might feel some kind of aversion, a little bit of tightening in the face, an upwelling, tightening in the back of my neck. I might feel love as a kind of warmth in my heart area, or a softness in my cheeks that might come along, an easing up of the tension in my eyes.

There are all kinds of little subtle changes that happen in the body. Maybe part of that is because emotions are meant to help us engage and be actively involved in life. In some ways, they are adjusting the body for some new way of being.

But that new way of being might not be healthy for us. It might be misplaced. It might be an unhealthy way of relating to what's happening.

So find out where the emotion is in the body, and then breathe with that area. Feel it and sense it. See if there's any tension or any tightening in that place that can relax. And if it's easy to relax it, relax the tension. Soften it. If it's not easy to relax the tension itself, maybe it's possible to relax around it, to soften around it.

Sometimes the resistance we have to fear might be where we can relax. Maybe we can't necessarily relax the fear or whatever it might be. Or maybe it's just kind of a softness around it. A softness that comes with allowing ourselves to feel what we're feeling. "Okay, I'm just here with it. This is what's happening now. I'm here with it now. I'm meditating. I'm not going to cause any problems in the world with how I'm feeling." This is the time to allow for the emotion and be mindful of it.

Sometimes it's not possible to relax the tension or the tightening around an emotion. But if we simply breathe with it, allow it to be there, and accompany it with our breathing, maybe we can remove some tension. Maybe in a subconscious way, this approach can remove some way in which we're reacting to the emotion's presence.

Shifting our focus to breathing rather than feeling – breathing through it so we're not ignoring it – can sometimes allow something to settle and relax. If it's an afflictive emotion, it might dissipate. If it's a beautiful emotion, and there's no extra attachment we overlay on top of it, then we might find something delicious happens. It might grow, swell, and expand through the body in some nice way. The emotion might transform into a different emotion, mind state, or mood, which may have a wonderfully different expression – something different that's beautiful.

So the theme for today is relaxing with your emotions, relaxing through and around your emotions. The more you can do so physically, if you have a physical location for it, I think the more effective this can be.

I'd encourage you today, during the next twenty-four hours, when you have a strong enough emotion that you feel it, to practice relaxation and see what happens in the wake of that relaxation. If you have the opportunity to meditate, or just stand still, close your eyes, sit down, and do this relaxation in a kind of attentive and meditative way, all the better.

Developing the skill of this kind of relaxation will help a lot with the further deepening of our relationship to emotions, which we'll talk about these next few days.

Thank you. May you enjoy your emotional life.