

# Emotions (2 of 5) Recognizing Parts of Emotions

October 26, 2021

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

emotion, entangled, recognition, story, naming, angry, motivation, mindfulness, grief, anger, feeling tone, sensations

## **Gil Fronsdal**

This is the second talk on mindfulness of emotions. The focus of today's approach to mindfulness is recognition. Recognizing what's happening is really a central feature of mindfulness, of the kind of careful attention that we're providing to the world and ourselves.

So, recognition. Maybe some of you have had the experience of something being named, and then of things getting relaxed, let go of, or settled when they are named.

For example, someone might notice that you're running around frantically doing something, and they tell you, "Oh, you're tense." And you say, "Oh yes, oh yes, I am

tense.” And only then do you stop, relax, and shake it off a bit.

Or you’re in a difficult social situation with several people, and everyone’s in the full swing of the social storm. Then, someone says, “You know, there’s a lot of tension in the room right now.”

Somehow, in naming that tension, everyone makes space. Everyone stops. Everyone thinks, “Oh yes, that’s what’s going on.” Then, there’s a chance to take that in and adjust accordingly.

The naming of something – the recognizing of something – can be phenomenally useful. And mindfulness practice builds on the power of recognition. “Oh, *that’s* what’s happening.”

Even something as simple as recognizing the inhale and the exhale, or recognizing that the mind is drifting off into thought, “Oh, thinking.” Something happens: “Oh, *that’s* what’s happening. I’m thinking. I’m no longer with my breath. Oh, now I am with my breath. This is good.” The recognition of our experience.

In terms of emotions, it’s helpful to think of emotions not as single, unitary things, but rather as composites, as made up of different elements.

If we just have a general overview of how we're feeling – what the emotion is – it's hard to see where it is that attention – recognition – is most usefully placed. Or it's hard to see if there's attachment, clinging, or resistance, some complication in how we're relating to the emotion. It's hard to see if we just see the general state. But if we notice some of the detailed aspects of the emotion, then we say, "Oh, that's the part I'm attached to. That's where the resistance might be."

What are some of the different components of emotions? One of the things I find particularly useful to notice is the physical aspect of it.

Emotions are pretty much always expressed or felt – energetically, emotionally, sensation-wise – someplace in the body. Some of these sensations are agitated ones. Some of them are peaceful and settled. It depends on the nature of the emotion.

If you don't feel it in your body now, someday you will. As mindfulness gets more settled, and you become more and more sensitive and embodied, you then start noticing: "Oh. Look, there it is. There's tension in my hands whenever I get anxious. Oh, that's where the tension is, in my hands. My fingers are ever so slightly pulled in." It could be all kinds of places in the body.

A physical manifestation of emotion is one way to feel it. A second way is there might be a story connected to it. And the story might be what is fueling it. We're telling ourselves a story, reviewing what happened in the past. As we keep repeating it, we're triggering and fueling the emotion.

If your anger is about something that happened in the past, you might be sitting very peacefully meditating, and then you remember this anger-evoking experience from a long time ago. Now, you get angry. You weren't angry a few moments ago, and now there is anger.

The anger arises with the story. There's something about the story that triggers the anger. The story is part of it. Even in the moment, when it's not a story, but a living experience of the moment, the mind makes up stories about it. Often, the mind interprets in ways that cause us to have the emotions we have. So, the interpretation – the assigning of meaning, the story that goes along with it – is part of the emotion.

Part of the value of feeling the physicality of an emotion in the body is that the body is not a story. It's a way of stepping out of the story – a story that is fueling the emotion and keeping it going – into a place where the emotion can be processed in the body. It can't be processed as well by just repeating the story.

Some emotions have motivations as part of them. There's something we want. We want something to be different. We want to have more of something. We want to have something. We want to push something away. There are "approach motivations" and there are "pushing or pulling away emotions." What's the motivation? What's the relationship being expressed through this emotion?

Again, if it's anger, it's something like wanting to push something away, assert something, and make our point to someone. There is a motivation that's part of it.

If there is something seemingly quite beautiful, it could be love. But maybe the love has a desire. It's a longing, a wish, and that's the motivation part of it.

And then there's something a little bit more amorphous, maybe the emotion itself, which is the overall feeling tone of the emotion. And that has different details as well. Some of it just might be, is it pleasant or unpleasant? Some emotions are pleasant and some are unpleasant. Sometimes the hook – how we get detached, involved, how we resist, or get entangled with the emotion – is nothing more or less than reacting to it as being pleasant or unpleasant, comfortable or uncomfortable.

Then another element of emotion to look at and be interested in is your relationship to the emotion. What relationship do you have to the emotion? Are you defining yourself through the emotion? Are you evaluating yourself in some way?

If you're angry, are you now considering yourself a bad person because you're angry? "I shouldn't be angry." Or: "I should be different. I should be loving." All of these refer back to how you should be, and how you shouldn't be.

Or we justify why we're feeling some way because we want to be justified. We want to be someone who's right, doing the right thing, or someone who knows we're doing the right thing. There's all this "me and myself" concern in relationship to it.

You're walking down the street and across the street, on another sidewalk, you see someone who's clearly angry. Maybe they're talking into their phone and they're angry. You might look at them, wonder what it's about, or find the angry person talking loudly interesting. But you don't. It's across the street, the person doesn't see you, and it has no bearing on you. So, you say to yourself: "Oh. That's interesting. A person's angry." Can you do the same thing with yourself?

Can you allow there to be anger without relating it to yourself, almost as if it is someone else's? Of course, it's yours, but you can add this extra component part.

All these things come together: the physicality of it, the energy, the sensations, our stories and thoughts, judgments, interpretations, and ideas we have around it. Ideas of what should and shouldn't be. Our values. There's also the motivation that's connected to it: what we want to see happen. And there's the way that we define ourselves by it, get hooked by it, or want more of it – our preferences. There is also the pleasant and unpleasant aspect of it. These are some of the component parts that all get rolled up into one big ball of a particular emotion.

If you say you're feeling grief, that could be a very accurate statement to make. But then pay attention to detail. What are the different component parts of it? You might go through the list of everything, and find that the discomfort which comes with it is part of why it's so difficult. The discomfort seems to be with your interpretation of something being wrong if you're uncomfortable. "It's not okay to be uncomfortable." That's where the complication is.

So, the grief is not just simple, clean grief. Now it's complicated with judgment: "It should be different. I shouldn't be uncomfortable." Or perhaps the grief is

genuine in many ways, but there's a story connected to it. The story might be, "Now I'll never..." and you fill in the blank, "Now I'll never x, y, z."

Sometimes it's accurate enough that something will never happen again. That's why we grieve. But when we recognize, "Oh, *that's* what I'm grieving. I'm grieving about futures that will never come." Then, "Well, that's what it is." That's a fascinating perspective on grief: grieving futures that will never come.

Or it could be that we're telling ourselves a lot of stories, and it's the repetitive stories, rumination, that is, somehow, driving our emotion, keeping it going, and keeping us entangled with it.

Maybe how I'm saying this today is not as articulate as I wish it could be. Our relationship to our emotional life is such an important topic, something for each of us to respect a lot. I hope the principle I'm pointing out is useful.

The principle is: emotions are not unitary events. They're made up of different elements. They're composites. There are components to them.

As we settle into mindfulness, it's helpful to look around and see what these different elements are. How is it in the body? How is it in the feeling tones? Pleasant?



Unpleasant? What's the quality and mood of the mind as I have this emotion? Is it contracted or is it more spacious? Are there hindrances in relationship to it? Is there identification in relation to it? What's the motivation connected to it?

And as you begin looking around, you might ask yourself, are there places where I'm caught, where I'm entangled? If so, maybe without denying the emotion or getting rid of it, it might be a lot easier to be with the emotion if the one place we're caught up and entangled is no longer entangled. Then, there can be a cleaner relationship to it. There can be clean emotion – clean anger, grief, joy, even clean desire, in a certain way.

You might do that before we meet again tomorrow. You might spend some time, maybe even with paper and pencil, trying to map out or understand the different component parts of your emotions.

What are all the different streams that come into play to build this singular thing: the emotion you have? You might even do it with a friend. It might be interesting to brainstorm together. What are all the different pieces and elements of your emotional life which contribute to the whole?

Then, see where you get tripped up the most. Which among those components is the place you most often

get caught? Recognition: recognizing our emotions carefully with attention to detail.

Thank you very much.