

Harmony of Zen and Vipassana (3 of 5)

The Suchness of Emotions

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Emotions are probably not what we think they are. Perhaps, the way we think about and conceive them keeps us from being liberated and free. It may even keep our emotions from having a certain kind of freedom.

I am very fond of the idea that “motion,” the Latin root of the word “emotion,” means movement in English. And the prefix “e” means out. So emotion means moving out. I like to interpret this as all emotions are processes. Emotions are activities or movements, and they want to move out. They want to spread or process themselves. Our inner life has an amazing capacity to process

emotions – to let our emotions unfold or dissolve in a way that includes wisdom. We often interfere with this wisdom. We interfere with a natural process.

I love thinking about it in this way. While chopping vegetables in the kitchen, I may cut my finger, causing it to bleed. I have a responsibility or opportunity to take care of my finger, maybe by washing the wound and putting on a bandaid to protect it. However, I cannot do the actual healing. Physiologically, healing is a much more complicated event than I could possibly engineer or understand. I cannot intentionally send the right antibodies, proteins, hormones, or whatever is involved in the right combination to heal the finger. What I can do is to keep the wound clean, safe, and protected. The body usually has the wisdom to heal the wound.

The same happens with our emotional life. Our hearts, our inner lives, know something. If we get out of the way and allow our emotional life to unfold, it can move to some resolution, solution, or unfolding, depending on the emotion that is there. Many times, we do not allow that because we are so involved with the emotion, reacting to it or spinning the story even more.

They say one of the leading causes of depression is rumination. Rumination is not the only cause – I don't want to give that impression. One thing that makes grief more difficult than it needs to be is rumination –

thinking, rehearsing, remembering, feeling guilt and blame. These get in the way of trusting and respecting our grief. It is like we are constantly kicking a beach ball before we can pick it up and hold it gently in the palms of our mindfulness. Instead of keeping the momentum going all the time, we learn in mindfulness practice how to get out of the way, with a deep respect for our emotions.

I very much like the word “respect” as a synonym for mindfulness or vipassana. In “respect,” “re” comes from the Latin prefix “again,” and “spect” means to see, like in the word “spectator” or “spectacles.” So respect means to look again. To respect our emotional life is to give it a second look. “What is this?” And then see it clearly, allowing it to unfold and be there.

I do not know whether that is useful in all circumstances of life. But it is a very powerful, effective thing to do in certain circumstances, such as meditation. Sometimes when I have strong, difficult emotions, I will go for a long walk in the mountains. I find walking very useful. Something about the movement of walking keeps me from getting locked into emotions and thoughts. I can let all of them just flow and do what they need to do.

Sometimes when I have strong or difficult emotions, I will sit in meditation. I do not try to stop anything. I do not even try to stop my thinking mind per se. Rather, I

will constantly come back and compost the strong emotions in my body. This means I will keep returning to feel what is happening emotionally in my body, to make space and really feel it. When I do that, I am stepping away a bit from the thoughts that are spinning. If I only thought, I would probably go crazy and get into all kinds of trouble. I step away from the thinking – not to stop it, but to change the context – and feel what is there. It's as if the body knows how to process and unfold the difficult emotion. I will do it again and again as I compost what I am feeling.

Some emotions are clearly a byproduct of what we think. I have sat in meditation having a perfectly lovely, peaceful time, and then, for whatever reasons, I thought about some conversation I had with someone 20, 30, 40, or almost 50 years ago. Somehow a thought came through the mind and – boom! – I got angry, irritated, or afraid. As I kept telling the story – “She said...I said...I should have said. Why didn't I say...?” – I could feel the emotions and the heat operating. It was clear the thoughts were central to keeping the emotions going.

There were times when I learned to quiet the thinking mind and just be with the feelings and emotions. Clearly, I was no longer feeding them. I was no longer pouring gasoline on the fire. Then something different began to happen. Some things cooled, quieted, and

settled. Rather than me solving my emotional problems, sometimes they just dissolve.

Some emotions we feel have nothing to do with our external life. They may have to do with physiology. It is not a matter of what we are thinking. But we feel the emotions in the body – rather than identifying with them or making a story out of them: “Oh, poor me. I’m bad or I’m wrong to feel this way.”

We can make a lot of space for our moods or emotions so that they are not a filter through which we see ourselves and our life. To not let an emotion be a filter for what is going on has to do with our ability to stop, look, and respect what is happening. We acknowledge, recognize, feel, and know it – maybe teasing it apart. Just letting it be simple for itself.

That is a kind of liberation. That is where freedom can happen – where we are no longer entangled and caught up in it. We can allow everything in its uniqueness to be there for itself. It is beautiful and generous to grant all the particularities of our life their freedom. We can give an emotion its freedom to emote, to be there in the quiet and safety of just being present for it. We can allow our reactions and identifications with it, to let those be free. This means we do not get involved by continuing to think about it, like scratching a scab. We just let it be: “Okay you’re there. Okay, you’re free, but you’re free in

the sense that you are not casting a light back on me. I am not defining myself by this emotion.”

A wonderful part of mindfulness practice is bringing mindfulness – careful, respectful attention – to the fullness and richness of our emotional lives. This is not to be involved with our emotions, not to celebrate or denigrate them, but to allow our emotions to be here in their simplicity.

What happens then is that, at some point, we start seeing that there are two classes of emotions or attitudes we can have in our emotional life. One class is the emotions that are clearly involved. These emotions arise out of our reactivity, contraction, resistance, pushing, wanting, and not wanting. They arise out of how we build ideas of self – me, myself, and mine – and out of our attitudes towards others. They are compulsive, automatic, and involve what in early Buddhism might be called some level of craving, drivenness, or lack of freedom.

The other class of emotions comes when there is no reactivity. They are the free and unfettered response of our psychophysical system – some people might say of our hearts. These feelings and emotions seem to grow and expand the more we are present for them – rather than dissolve – because we are not feeding them anymore with our attention, stories, and rumination.

Such emotions like compassion, kindness, warmth, generosity, and love are wonderful states, which can be pure and simple. They can spread throughout our bodies – seemingly throughout the whole world – spreading from us in their simplicity.

We can learn to get out of the way and not be entangled with our emotions, the shoulds, the shouldn'ts, and defining ourselves by them or trying to do something with them. We can relax and allow the simplicity of the good states and the sensitivity to be there. Beautiful capacities for heart-centered emotions can grow and develop.

One of the great benefits of vipassana practice is to develop heightened respect, sensitivity, care, and attention for our emotional life. It is a great gift. Life seems so much richer with a liberated emotional life.

Thank you for today, and I will continue tomorrow with mindfulness of thinking. Thinking is also not what you think it is!