

Wise to Emotion (2 of 5) Component Parts of Emotions

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Today I will continue with this five-part series on getting wise to emotions – wise relationship to emotions.

Wisdom is realizing that an emotion is not a singular unitary thing. Emotions are composites made up of different parts. The different parts make up emotions in different ways. Maybe this is partly why it's not so clear exactly what emotion is.

We don't have to know exactly what an emotion is. As a category, we might want to know what anger is or sadness, happiness, or love. But whichever ones we include under the umbrella term “emotions,” they are

composites made up of different parts. This is important because people will sometimes have attitudes, beliefs, and relationships toward emotions based on the idea that emotion is a singular thing.

For instance, people may think that anger is just anger. But anger justifies actions; it drives us. We may relate to anger as good or bad. When we begin to see anger as not a solid singular thing, we start seeing its different parts, and we can have a relationship with the parts. Then our relationship with the whole changes.

We might realize that some of the elements that can make up an emotion are important for our motivations, our understanding, our healing, and for finding our freedom. Sometimes it is hard to work with emotion when we only see it as a singular solid thing in and of itself. By itself, an emotion can be kind of overwhelming. But once we drop down underneath the veneer, underneath the label or the general concept, we begin seeing it differently and can have a whole different relationship to what's happening.

I would like to offer you some of the components that make up emotions, and maybe you can think of some more. One part of emotion is the bodily experience – a physiological shift and change that happens in the body when emotion becomes present. For some people, the physiological change is very strong and clear. For

others, it's very quiet, and they might notice no physiological change. But with emotion, I think there is always some change, and the quieter we become in meditation, the more attuned we can be to even the subtlest changes in physiology. There are activations of muscles, energies, probably hormones, and biochemical changes. All of these begin to shift and change in the body as emotion arises, as it persists, and as it dissipates.

Some of that physiological change might precede the actual arising of the emotion itself. If we have a lot of stress, the stress hormones and stress sensations (that tightness in the body) are a condition for the arising of anger or fear. The condition in the body that precedes the emotion is often the way to heal it as well, because as the body relaxes and settles, the fuel for that particular emotion is not being provided. Physiology sometimes drives the emotional life. So it can be very important to drop down into the body and really get familiar with all the different bodily expressions and manifestations of emotions.

Another component of many emotions is cognitive. We might start with our stories. It is kind of a classic occurrence in meditation to be relatively calm and peaceful, minding your own business with your breathing, and your mind for some nonobvious reason produces a thought about a person from long ago,

maybe someone who harmed or annoyed you. And just thinking about what happened with that person, your physiology changes.

The energy in the body might go from being centered in the torso to up into the head. Maybe the hands or the jaws get tight, or you feel a contraction in the mind because the story still has a lot of juice, a lot of impact on you. It is fascinating to see that movement from the story arising to the story as a condition for the bodily manifestation. The body was fine by itself, but then the story evoked something very powerful, bringing the bodily expression.

Telling and retelling the story can perpetuate the emotion, strengthen it, and strongly influence the course of it. Sometimes the stories change as we tell them, so then the emotions change as well.

For example, you might have started off being angry, and you tell yourself a story about how you were slighted by someone. Then you tell yourself another story: “If that person knows that I am angry, they will probably retaliate. Now I’m afraid” – and suddenly fear arises. Then another story: “That person is moving to another continent and is never going to come back to this country.” Then you can feel yourself relax, and happiness might arise.

We tell ourselves stories, and the stories have meaning and associations. Another component of emotions that is sometimes more obvious in a story is that there is a self in relationship to the emotion. This includes how we view ourselves, how we think other people see us, how we are personally affected by the events in the story, what the emotions mean for us, and what is going to happen if. Maybe you feel happy, and the story might be: “I am the one who is happy; I'm so happy that I'm happy; this will be great; my life is made; I am going to be happy forever.”

There can be a lot of I-making and me-making. Part of the happiness might relate to the thought, “I am the one who is happy.” The self-identification with emotion – the role of “I” and the understanding of “who I am” – is a component of emotions as well.

Another aspect of emotions is motivation. I talked about that with *mettā* earlier: loving-kindness is an emotion that has motivation built into it. It means wishing someone well, wanting them to be well, and wanting to support that to happen. If there is anger, there is perhaps a motivation to get rid of something, to push it away. When you get angry with your computer, you throw it across the room to get it away.

Some emotions come with motivations and intentions: wanting something to happen. Sometimes it is helpful to

notice what motivation comes along with an emotion – what motivation comes along with sadness or joy, for instance. Just noticing the motivation or the desire connected to the emotion shifts and changes our relationship with it.

Emotions are also connected to perceptions, which differ a little from stories but overlap with them. Perceptions are the ideas we have about things.

There is an ancient Chinese story about a man who is in a sailboat going across a big lake, and another sailboat comes along and unexpectedly bangs into his sailboat. The man gets furious. Then he looks over the edge of the boat and sees that there's no one in the other boat – it has somehow gotten loose and is floating around. The anger was there while he thought there was a person in charge that he could be angry with. Then he realized, “You should always pay attention to what is floating around.”

We perceive things a lot differently when they are done by another person, versus when they are a natural phenomenon. If a beautiful deer walks across your garden, maybe you get upset. Or, maybe you have never seen a deer on your property – they haven't been seen for hundreds of miles – so rather than being upset, you are just amazed: “Wow, there's a deer with its fawn.”

But if a neighbor walks across our garden, maybe accidentally, we perceive and interpret it differently. Are the perceptions we make the most useful perceptions? Are they optional? Are they personal interpretations of events? Maybe they are good perceptions and interpretations, but we see them as interpretations, not as facts.

Spend some time looking at your emotions as they occur. What is the physiology of the emotion? What are the stories related to it? What are the motivations related to it? How does your identity – your idea of yourself – come into play? What perceptions and ideas operate when an emotion is present? Is it built into the fabric of the universe that that is the right perception or interpretation to have? Or are there others you could have? Are there others that are more appropriate or more peaceful? Maybe there is a range of interpretations, and maybe they are all equally valuable. But why choose the one that is stressful for you? Why not choose one that brings you a sense of awe, delight, and joy?

For the next 24 hours, take some time to sit down with a piece of paper and map out the different parts that make up your emotions. Do it with different emotions, especially the ones that are occurring, but you can also review other ones you've had. You could lay them down on a piece of paper like a little mind map or a mandala.

Then consider the components themselves. What kind of permanence, what kind of solidity, what kind of arc do they have? What kind of relationship do you have with the parts? As you begin looking more carefully at the parts of an emotion, what happens to the emotion? Does the emotion shift and change when you survey the parts that make it up?

I hope your emotional life is rich, valuable, and supportive for you. If it is not, I hope that this deeper investigation into it will be supportive. Thank you.