

Wise to Emotions (5 of 5) Reactive and Non-Reactive Emotions

June 17, 2022

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

upwelling, conceit, dharmic, non-dharmic, worldly, spiritual, distinction, naturalness, settledness, meditation, lake, triggered, stresses, contentment, ambition, sensual, collision, underground spring, healing, harmony, unification, contentment, peace, joy, non-dependent, independent, expansive, open, flow

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In the fifth talk on becoming wise toward emotions, I want to talk a little bit about attention to the source of our emotions: knowing where emotions arise from. There are many layers of sources within.

Certain emotions might have other emotions as their source or their immediate predecessor. For anger, the source might be hurt or fear. For joy, the source within us might vary. It might be praise, affecting our conceit (self-image) and resulting in an energized, joyful feeling about that. Or it might be the delightful sense of

freedom or ease that comes when conceit disappears, when it is not there.

In the teachings of the Buddha, there is a distinction between two sources or two kinds of emotional life. I call the first one dharmic and the other non-dharmic. Some people might call them spiritual and worldly. There are a variety of names for them. But at the heart of the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness is the distinction between that which belongs to the sensual world and that which belongs to something deeper, the non-sensual world.

The distinction between spiritual and non-spiritual is not a criticism or a denigration of the non-spiritual (or that which is sensual). But there is a distinction between those emotions that get triggered by our reactivity and those emotions that do not arise in reaction to something. Rather, they emerge and flow through us, arising almost independently of the conditions around us.

For example, if I am in a hurry to get somewhere, and someone is driving really slowly, my eagerness – my strong desire – to get somewhere is frustrated. Then I might get angry or feel afraid in reaction to the person who is driving slowly. But, in the same situation, I might drive in a relaxed, open way. And when I see someone driving slowly, I say, “Oh. They're driving slowly, and it

looks like they are old and are just trying to drive carefully.” So I let it be, and I use it as an occasion to just relax.

In that relaxation, just being with the situation, not reacting to anything, there is now a deeper sense of room. There is a feeling of contentment and a feeling of gratitude for the day and the sky. There might be a sense of care and love for the person who is driving slowly. These feelings are not being triggered by what is out there. They are just a natural upwelling of warmth and caring for someone who is driving carefully.

When we sit in meditation, we might feel very ambitious to get deeply concentrated right away. In that ambition, we might have a bad feeling about ourselves. We might feel as if somehow we are not succeeding very well in our lives, and meditation is supposed to help us. Practice is supposed to be an alternative to the challenges of life, but we think we have to be successful in meditation. When we are not getting concentrated, already there can be a built-up tension behind doing meditation. So when meditation is not going successfully, we react to that. We get angry at meditation, angry at ourselves, angry at Buddhism, angry at the world. We get reactive.

On the surface level of who we are, we are carrying emotional, physical, and mental tensions and stresses.

Those stresses get triggered when they are touched by the world. When we have a mature practice – lots of space and a great capacity and ability to be open, relaxed, and present without those surface tensions and stresses – then there are no triggers.

In Buddhism, there are teachings about holding up conceit (a self-image). If something comes along that threatens this conceit, there is a collision. Then there is a reaction to it. If there is no conceit and someone comes along and criticizes us, it does not hit our conceit. It just goes right through.

That capacity to not be caught or reactive, to not have something inside that the world hits, makes room for an upwelling of a lot of wonderful emotions. There is an upwelling of healing and a movement toward harmony and unification. There is an upwelling of contentment, peace, and sometimes joy and happiness.

That which wells up is not reactive – that upwelling is dharmic. Dharmic emotions are those that arise within an empty space in us. This space is empty of tension, empty of holding on to certain emotions, empty of demands on the situation, empty of expectations, cravings, and ambitions, and empty of a strong sense of self we are protecting or hiding.

Non-dharmic emotions are ones that arise when there is a collision with something hard inside us. Dharmic emotions arise when there is nothing inside except space, and things can go right through. But more importantly, there is space for something else to well up. The classic metaphor for this is that of a mountain lake. No rivers and no rain are filling up the lake. It is being completely refreshed from an underground spring welling up from the bottom and spreading fresh water throughout the lake.

In the same way, in order to have this upwelling, we do not depend on input from the world around us (the rivers coming into a lake), and we do not depend on the rain (all the thoughts and ideas in our mind). Rather, there is a settledness, relaxation, a sense of presence, and attention to being here. Then this upwelling has a chance to arise.

We have within us a tremendous dharmic capacity for a natural flow of positive emotions like love, care, joy, contentment, gratitude, delight, and compassion. These are beautiful states. But they are not states that we make happen through reactivity. They are like a gift that comes when our capacity to be present is expansive and open. They come when we are patient, available, and settled, without the stirring up or the agitation of reactivity, and without a lot of desires and aversion pushing us around.

There is a distinction between emotions born of our reactivity and emotions arising from a deeper upwelling. This upwelling is not a reaction but is the innate capacity of our psychophysical system to express and manifest something that is in harmony with our environment.

I do not know how well I have articulated this, but I think that this distinction can give you something to reflect on this weekend. Over the next few days, think about the source of the different emotions that come through. Are the emotions more reactive, even the joyful ones? Are they reactions to something happening in the world? Is the world touching or hitting something inside that reacts? Or is there a natural upwelling, as if you get out of the way and something wells up – dharmic joy, dharmic happiness – that does not depend on the conditions of the world? Reactive emotions depend on the conditions of the world (“the world” means ourselves, as well.) Dharmic emotions are independent: non-dependent.

Next week, I think we may continue with the theme of emotions, but we might choose five different emotions to reflect on and consider how to practice with. Perhaps we will consider how what we have been talking about this week might apply to specific situations. Thank you.