

Surfing the Wild Ride Part Two: Basic Principles of Applying Mindfulness to Emotions

By Peter B. Williams

In working with emotions mindfully, there are some basic principles that help one stay balanced and present and I describe them below. Each description is headlined with a phrase, or slogan, that one can use in the midst of working with an emotion. My hope is that these slogans are simple and pithy enough to be remembered in the midst of such emotional storms as fear or jealousy or shame. While this material is geared to working with difficult states, the guidance can be helpful in working with pleasant emotions and avoiding the attachment to them that is so easy.

“Better to see it than to be it.”

It can be quite humbling to see in meditation how often difficult states arise like fear, irritation, greed and anger. This can feel depressing if one does not hold such arisings in the proper perspective. Wisdom says that if you run from your emotions, then they are running you. When our deeper emotions remain unconscious they drive us. Carl Jung was very clear about the power of such shadow material to bring harm into the world when he said, “The greatest tragedy of the family is the un-lived lives of the parents.” The good news is that when we see our dark states we gain choice over how we want to act, on what motivations we want operating in our lives. In addition, says vipassana teacher Joseph Goldstein, the arising of a difficult state is good news because for the state to get transformed into useful energy, it has to first be seen in the light of awareness. So the next time you feel shame or jealousy, soothe yourself with the reminder, “Better to see it than to be it.”

“Accept it more, believe it less.”

We often are troubled by our emotions because we believe them to be the honest truth, the ultimate reality. In fact, they are just conditioned responses to specific circumstances. When Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was asked what gets reborn in a future life, he said, “Your bad habits.” According to Buddhist theory, our habitual tendencies to react with fear, anger, and greed carry such psychic momentum that they not only muck up this life, they propel us

forward into the next one. Such habits are the reflexive way we respond to circumstances not going our way. The arising of fear is often not so much a reflection of actual danger, but of how strong the habit of fear is. In a sense, the fear habit is looking for a place to land, and the perpetual uncertainty of life gives it plenty of opportunity. After twenty years of teaching in various capacities, I can still get nervous when speaking in front of people. It is obvious to me that believing this fear is folly. Mindfulness allows me to just feel the fear and do it anyway, as the saying goes.

Because we believe our emotions to be the honest-to-God truth when they arise, we have a lot of trouble accepting them. We can't let ourselves feel afraid in a tense negotiation because to admit it will be the same thing as abdicating our power. In fact, if we could accept fear in such a situation without acting from it, we might actually represent our needs better. Acceptance of our mind states allows us to stay in touch with our tenderness, which in turn might foster empathy for and responsiveness to another person's humanity. Such openness tends to bring about dialog and mutuality rather than hostility and defensiveness.

Mindfulness allows us to accept difficult emotions because we don't have to be run by them. When we stay in genuine and open witness to them, they eventually lose their energy and dissipate, much like a hurricane dies out when reaching land, leaving behind the wind-fueling power of the warm ocean. It is amazingly freeing when we see dread disappear on its own accord, simply because we became the steady shore of attention against which it lashed its fury.

“The way to let go is to welcome.”

We avoid our emotions in two modes: by suppressing them or by acting them out. The first mode is easy to see as avoidance, but we may not think of acting out an emotion as a form of avoiding it. We might think this is being spontaneous and “getting into” the emotion. In fact, if you investigate, you may find that you lash out in anger because you want to get the

emotion out of your body, or that you act on a desire to get rid of the tension in your body. See if this is true for you.

Mindfulness allows us to walk a middle path between denying and indulging. Before we can let go of emotions, we must welcome them and be curious about them. Rumi advises that we become a guest house for whatever arises, that we "Treat each guest honorably." Emotions are like pesky guests that lurk on your stoop and are willing to stay there forever. It is only once you invite them in and get a good look at them as they poke around the house that they decide to leave you alone, sidling out the back door. When we watch fear or anger with kind attention, staying grounded in the body sensations of the feeling, its energy dissipates by its own accord. We don't need to "let go" of an emotion like jealousy when it arises, we just need to "let it go" on its merry way by watching it. Its nature is to arise and pass away when it is not fed by our resistance to it. What you resist persists; what you allow takes a bow.

"One moment at a time."

Vipassana teacher Sharon Salzberg likes to remind her students that in the grip of a strong emotion one often projects the feeling out into the future and imagines that one will always feel this way. This makes the emotion that much more scary. Be on the lookout for this distortion as you work with challenging mind states. In fact, all you really have to do to get through a difficult mind state is to be with one moment at a time of it. A great question to ask yourself in the grip of a difficulty is, "Is this moment something I can handle? Can I be with this moment of fear (anger) (desire)?" Ground your attention in the body and recognize that the thoughts are what keep pulling you away into some kind of catastrophe. The thoughts think they know so much about the future, but really they are often so wrong! "We'll see," is a very wise response to such catastrophic thinking. "Let's just be with what's happening right now, and see if it is workable in the moment." In the space of such mental composure and attention, it usually is.

"Only don't know."

This slogan comes from the teachings of the late Korean American Zen master, Soen Sa Nim. "Only don't know" encourages one to constantly investigate their actual experience, rather than get lost in their ideas about it. Not knowing is

the key to a wise relationship with thoughts. Thoughts are a miraculous ability of the human mind to represent the world symbolically and this is extremely useful in guiding our actions. However, many of our thoughts are misrepresentations of reality and cause us much suffering. For instance, past and future exist only through conceptualization. Think of all the suffering caused by past and future! In addition, thoughts freeze the changing; separate the connected; connect the separated; make comparisons that are always relative and therefore always unreliable; and biggest surprise of all, are only true while one is thinking them. For instance, think of Australia for the next five seconds or so. Now think of Ghana for another five seconds. What happened to Australia? It did not exist in your mind, and neither did the other 193 countries in the world. Thoughts exist only while they are being considered. When you remember something irritating that your partner or a dear friend did, the action is over. It only exists as a thought. You are not actually irritated with the person; you are irritated at a thought. As soon as you move onto some other thought, the irritation ceases.

So our thoughts are not true in any kind of objective sense. Better than representing the world, they represent our subjective biases, assumptions, and perceptual limits. Thoughts are about us. But since the contents of thoughts are so often externally focused, they mask the subjective filters that shape them. So it is best to take a "don't know" attitude to thoughts. Sure, some are useful and will need to be acted upon, and mindfulness will surely catch those. The rest can just be seen from a "don't know" perspective. This attitude can help one let go of thoughts much more easily and letting go automatically leads to well being.

"Look for the hook."

As we become mindful of our difficult emotions, we can learn the basic storylines in each of them that seduce us. In my experience, the basic hook of fear is "Something terrible is about to happen." When such a thought arises in something as innocuous as playful banter among friends, drastic action might be called for. We might bite someone's head off just because they teased us a little. The basic hook in anger, for me, is "I am so right and they are so wrong." And boy does it feel good to be so right, to obliterate a person in our minds because they are so clueless. When you are mindful of anger, you often see that while the thoughts are

pleasant, the sensations in the body are unpleasant - tightness, burning, short breaths. The basic hook in desire is, "I have to have that." That third doughnut sure seemed to glisten with the glaze of permanent joy before I ate it. Why could I not remember that in four seconds it would turn into a brick in my belly? As you explore each emotion, be on the lookout for the basic storyline that hooks you.

"Pile on."

We tend to greet our negative emotions with more negativity, says vipassana teacher Guy Armstrong, a kind of pile on. We tend to fear our fear, be mad that we are angry and judge ourselves for being so hard on ourselves. Mindfulness helps us do a graceful pirouette that short-circuits this cycle. When we simply turn our attention towards our difficult emotions, we replace reacting to them with interest in them. What is it actually like to be angry? Where is it in the body? Are the sensations pleasant or unpleasant? Just how damning are the thoughts about the person we are so self-righteously accusing? Is this the best time to "speak our truth?"

"Brain sprain."

The world is not a pre-given objective reality, but more of a canvas we paint with the emotions we are feeling. In the midst of grief we might paint the world in very somber tones, seeing only suffering and hardship. The brightest beds of ruby red tulips can't hide the dog crap that is the true nature of all parks. When we are afraid, we tend to be able to think only thoughts that confirm our fear. In the grip of fear before a competitive soccer game, I will probably only review my past errors, rather than my successes.

In a spectacular feat, neuroscientists have mapped the pathways of strong emotions in the nervous system. In the grips of intense emotion, neuronal signals, rather than flowing through the brain's thought center in the cerebral cortex, get deflected by the amygdala. This almond-sized organ in the reptilian mid-brain shunts signals away from the forebrain and back into the body in order to accomplish immediate action, bypassing all but the most black and white thoughts. In the grip of a strong negative emotion, the world gets boiled down to the simple law of eat or be eaten. Maybe this helped us survive the African savannah 4 million years ago, but in dealing with such modern dilemmas as not being invited to a friend's potluck, there

may be some options other than fight or flight. Mindfulness can help us avoid acting out of the stark view that grips us in an afflictive emotion. If we can stay with the emotion with kind attention and refrain from acting on it, sooner or later it will lose its charge. At this point, the amygdala relaxes its grip on the brain and, lo and behold, more options become available.

"It's not my fault."

Awareness of emotions leads to a very helpful and startling insight: We do not order up our difficult states. They are not our fault! Have you ever noticed yourself actually pausing and deciding to get scared when someone says, "Boo!" or to feel hurt when someone criticizes you. Not likely. What awareness shows you instead is that you just wake up in the midst of a painful reaction.

Difficult states arise not as an act of will, but due to conditions in the form of mental habits. Such states arise due to the incredible associative power of the brain, which spills out thoughts in an endless cascade of associations. For example, once on retreat there was this twang-like click from a thermostat in the meditation hall, almost like a bass, and instantaneously I heard the bass in a John Coltrane tune called "Africa." And I went into bliss, and the next thought that came was, "Ah, infant bliss." And the next thought was, "Infant, oh my God: I remember my godson, Luca, when he was an infant and loved sitting in a car seat in the house. Once when I was baby-sitting him I got this craving for a chocolate chip cookie. I was rocking him in his car seat and placed him a little bit hastily on a laundry basket full of clothes on the floor so I could walk to the kitchen. And the thing toppled and he fell on the carpet and hit his head and started bawling! I felt so bad." And the next thought was, "That happened because I was greedy, because I wanted a cookie." Then memories poured in about other times I was oblivious to others: the times I've rushed through a door and didn't hold it for somebody, or cut people off in traffic, or offended people with an offhand joke. I sat there in that unworthiness for a while and then it hit me: "Where did the unworthiness come from? From a click on the wall. It is that impersonal!" What a relief!

Such insights are greatly freeing because we often feel so bad about ourselves for having afflictive emotions. The New Age version of being hard on ourselves is to blame ourselves for

everything negative that happens to us, even stuff completely out of our control like being mugged or getting to the airport and having our flight cancelled. The belief is that negative thinking attracts negative events. A Bruce Kaplan cartoon parodies this view. Two ducks are sitting in a pond and one says to the other, "Maybe you should ask yourself why you are inviting all this duck hunting into your life."

While our thoughts and projections certainly create the world we live within, to blame oneself for everything that happens is a huge internal pressure. When mindfulness shows us our experience independent of any views about it, we see that we are not actually ordering up our negative emotions and that they are instead habitual responses. This insight helps us stop the negative self-talk and start feeling the pain of the difficult states. Compassion and softening will naturally arise when we contact this suffering. And painful states dissipate much more quickly in the space of compassion.

"Feel now, act later."

Mindfulness gives us a powerful new tool in dealing with our troublesome emotions: rather than deny them or act them out, we can simply

bear witness to them. When the storm clouds of difficulty pass and clear skies in the heart allow us to see a wider range of options, we are much more likely to take appropriate action, action that takes care of our true needs and fosters connection with others at the same time. Seeing that emotions are not commandments for action allows us to "Feel the fear and do it anyway." It might also allow us to feel the desire and not do it anyway, or feel the anger and zip the lips for a few sacred counts. It might allow us to feel generosity and do it anyway, taking the risk of exposing our care for someone.

Mindfulness gives us impulse control. It gives us the ability to choose what kind of actions we want to put into the world. We don't have to act on every fleeting emotion to feel alive and spontaneous. Awareness itself provides a sense of freshness and novelty. When you fully connect with a breath or a body sensation, life brims with possibility. Larry Rosenberg said on one of my first retreats, "You can't be bored and be mindful at the same time." Mindfulness has interest built into it.

May mindfulness bring all its blessings to you. Good luck with your practice!