Part 4 of 5: Working with Emotions

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I'd like to talk for a few minutes about working with emotional states, or sometimes difficult states of mind, in our meditation practice.

The point of working with these states isn't to get rid of them. I think I said this earlier—it is to understand these states: how they come to be, what holds them in place, what allows them to release. That's a kind of shift that's helpful to contemplate as we engage in working with difficult emotions or difficult states of mind. An attitude or inclination of curiosity about these states, not an attitude of wanting to get rid of them but an attitude of interest, is supportive. So bringing an interest to these difficult states of mind.

When I was on retreat with Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma—the first time I was there I spent six and a half weeks with him—maybe a week or so into the retreat, I went into his room for my interview and said, "I'm seeing a lot of defilements." He said, "That's right attitude." For me, that was such a refreshing approach to these states of mind.

At least in my experience, and I think as meditation teachers often we—well, we talk about working with these states of mind, these difficult states, the reactivity—but underlying it there seems to be a subtle way that we are saying the effort is to get rid of these, or that we are trying to settle the mind past these states so that you can get down to the real practice. With Sayadaw U Tejaniya, I got the strong sense that no, he was actually really, really interested in my understanding of my difficult states of mind.

This was reflected in our interviews with other people as well. All of the interviews with U Tejaniya are group interviews, about ten people at a time. Hearing people talk about what's going on for them, how they're observing their reactivity, how they're working with their reactivity—it just frees up this whole idea that these are something to get rid of and turns it instead into an interest, a curiosity about how this comes to be.

With just that shift, there's a big movement towards non-reactivity about these states of reactivity themselves. That may sound like a bit of an oxymoron, but it is possible to be non-reactive while observing reactivity. Essentially what we're doing is looking at the mirror. The mirror of mindfulness, the reflecting power of mindfulness, can reflect anything, including reactivity.

It's almost like we can think about every experience as having two sides: there's the knowing side, and there's the thing that we are knowing. That thing we are knowing might be reactivity—it might be anger or aversion, or it might be greed and excitement—but the knowing side of that can simply reflect it.

The more we learn to understand and appreciate this knowing quality of our mind, this reflective quality,

the more we gain the benefits of that reflective quality. It inherently has some beautiful qualities. It's inherently non-reactive. Like a mirror, it simply reflects. If you have a mirror, it doesn't care what's in front of it. The reflecting power of the mirror is unchanged by what's in front of it. It equally reflects a beautiful landscape and a dead body. The reflecting power of the mirror is unchanged by what it reflects.

Likewise with our mind, the capacity of our minds to know what's happening—it doesn't care. That aspect of our mind that simply knows what's happening simply reflects what's happening. As we more and more touch into that aspect of our mind, we see that there's a kind of natural balance or equanimity that goes along with that reflective power of the mind.

So as these two things come together—the difficult state of mind and the knowing of it—if we can recognize that we are knowing the difficult state of mind, it gives a little bit of distance. We can reflect that difficult state with a balanced mind, just be with it. That's like taking off the lenses and looking at them instead of looking through them.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya often says, "Nothing I tell you is something to do." When I talk about things, it's actually just information, just supposed to settle and percolate through your mind. You don't have to try to do any of the things I'm talking about.

In the next few minutes I'm going to say some things that sound like things to do around emotions if they get challenging or difficult. But hold them lightly. These are a set of things that, having heard about them, may occur to you as things to work with in your meditation practice. If that happens, that's great. If not, don't worry about it. You don't have to try to think, "Well, what were those three things she said about working with emotions?" Just let this filter in, and then if you have a difficult emotion in your practice, some of this may arise for you to work with. It's grist for the mill.

The basic work when there's some difficult state arising, a difficult emotion arising, is to allow there to be that kind of curiosity, to investigate what's happening around it. You could ask yourself some questions. What's happening in the body? How does it make me feel? Then kind of recognize what thoughts come along with the feeling.

If there's a lot of thinking around the feeling, it's often helpful to see if you can not engage so much in the thinking, as opposed to just recognizing that these thoughts are coming up. There's a way you can recognize: these are thoughts, these are just thoughts. These are fear thoughts, these are anger thoughts, these are frustration thoughts, these are greedy thoughts, these are excited thoughts.

It's also really helpful to check the attitude, particularly if it feels like there's a struggle around the emotion. If you are working with a challenging state of mind, it's really helpful to check the attitude. You might find resistance if it's a particularly challenging state of mind. Resistance is a very common attitude that sometimes goes unnoticed in our meditation practice because we are so focused on the meditation and being with something that we don't notice we're resisting being with it.

So if you check in and notice that there's some kind of difficult state of mind, and you check what the attitude is, and you feel like, "Wow, I really don't want to be paying attention to that"—that's resistance. And it's really more helpful to open up to that resistance rather than try to force yourself through to somehow be with the difficult emotion when resistance is really the thing that's happening.

I often like to think about, or talk about, the way our minds are as being composed of these layers of experience. Many people have this experience of themselves—that within a state they know something is going on, there's a sense that something's underneath it, deeper. And there's often a feeling or a sense of, "If I could only get to that thing underneath, then I would figure this out." So there tends to be a kind of digging or trying to figure out the thing that's underneath, as opposed to just being with what's obvious about the state itself.

Just meeting the obvious about some difficult experience—over time, as we meet and touch the outer layers, what seems to happen is that we're seeing it from different perspectives. We see our experience of, say, anger. If you're experiencing something like anger over and over again and looking at that, you may see different ways that it makes your body feel. Or you may see different things that trigger it. Or you might see a kind of mood, a holding on to that anger—like, "Yeah, I really want to be angry." There may be different things that you see around that anger, the longer that you look at it. And some of that may start to reveal something that's underneath it. You might start to see, "Oh, there's actually some sadness here"—just by hanging out with the obviousness of it. No need to pick it apart or pry it apart. Just meeting the obvious.

The way I like to think about the attitude—if we think about our experiences being this kind of sphere of layers and we're just meeting the outer layer, just what's obvious—the attitude is often something that's actually going on that we're missing, that's actually a larger layer. So that resistance: there's this anger going on and there's resistance that's not really being noticed, and that's actually the outermost layer of what's happening. If we, in checking the attitude, recognize, "Oh, there's resistance happening," it becomes within the field of experience. Then just recognize: what's obvious in my experience, now that I have noticed this resistance? Again, there's no need to dig or try to get rid of the resistance. We can observe resistance without resistance.

So again, we're not trying to make resistance go away. We're trying to understand. This is an act of understanding that we are engaging in.

If a difficult state of mind is particularly sticky—if you feel like you keep getting kind of stuck to it, or it just feels like it's hanging on for a long time, or you feel like your mind is trying to figure it out—there's something that can help. This does sound like something to do, and I think if it occurs to you to try this, go ahead and try it. If you feel really stuck to a difficult emotion, it can help to open the awareness to what else is going on in your experience besides this difficulty.

In any moment of experience there are hundreds of things, if not thousands of things, going on. And this

difficult experience is just one of the things happening. There's hearing that's happening, and there's body sensation outside of the emotion. There are potentially other thoughts and moods. So open up your field of awareness to see, "Well, what else is going on?" Not to push away that difficult emotion, but to put it into a larger context—to put it into a context where there are many, many things going on here right now. What else is happening here? "Oh yeah, there's the feeling of warmth on my skin, and then there's the pressure of my seat, and oh, there's that anger, and now there's the feeling of my knee pressing down against the cushion, and the sense of my hand, and then there's that emotion." So it becomes more like that emotion gets put into a larger container.

I've often also found it helpful with particularly sticky states of mind to keep track of, or just notice, one of three states around it. For instance, if you're experiencing loneliness, you may just at times be experiencing that loneliness and there's not particularly a problem around that—just the pure state of loneliness. Then there might be times when that loneliness is there and you really feel caught by it. You feel the stickiness of the loneliness.

So that's two ways of relating to an emotion: essentially, when we're having an emotion, whether we are reactive to it or not. Just noticing that difference in the mind. When there's an emotion present, are we caught by it, or are we at ease around it?

The third thing to notice about that kind of emotion is when it's absent. Notice when it is not there. So if you're working with a very habitual pattern of loneliness, notice when you're caught by it, notice when it's present but you're not caught by it, and consciously recognize when it's absent as well. Highlight that to yourself: "This is what it's like to not be lonely."

That piece is actually really, really powerful. It's surprisingly powerful to recognize that, because it seems that some of these habitual emotions, these sticky emotions, carry a sense of identity around them, a sense of ownership. And what recognizing the absence of the emotion does is it begins to poke holes in that identity. We recognize, "Oh, here I am without that emotion. Here's what it's like to be without that emotion." So that's very helpful.

Then there's another way to work with some difficult states of mind, and that's by using reflection. This aspect of the Sayadaw U Tejaniya style is quite different from most mindfulness practices, where you're actually using thought in the mind to support the meditation. I've suggested some of this already through checking the attitude—"What's my attitude?"—and through using questions: "What am I aware of?" Not as things to think about, but as a way to drop them into the meditation and see what happens as you orient your mind around a question. As the mind is oriented around a question, it naturally takes in information almost through the perspective of that question, and may begin to understand things in a way that it didn't understand them before.

So this use of questions is kind of just a way to incline the mind towards some understanding, but then letting it go. You don't need to think about it. If you find yourself thinking about these questions, let go of

the questions. Just don't go there for a while.

Did some of you try, in the guided meditation before lunch, the request I suggested: "May the body relax, may the mind relax"? Did that have an impact for any of you? Did you notice a difference? It's like it's not anything you need to do—you just drop that into the mind stream and see what happens. These questions, these reflections are like that. So you could reflect, ask the question: "What purpose is this emotion serving?" Again, not to think about it. Or: "Is this emotion necessary?" These are questions that would support a kind of investigation of the emotion, essentially inclining the mind towards understanding an aspect of it. In one case, asking what purpose this is serving may reveal something you haven't seen that's underneath that emotion.

It's also possible to use reflection to incline the mind towards wisdom, towards a deeper understanding of the process of mind and body. For example, you could use the reflection "This is impermanent" just as a way to recall that truth. This state is impermanent. Just recalling that. This will end. This has an end.

A couple of other reflections that align with the truth of experience—one that Sayadaw U Tejaniya suggests, and that I have found extremely helpful, is: "This is nature." Whatever is happening in your experience is a natural phenomenon. It's just what has arisen based on causes and conditions. It has come into being based on your history of experience, the state of things arising in the present moment. It's this confluence of events that has created what has happened here in this present moment. It's no different than a tree growing out of a seed. There are natural laws that allow that process to happen. You plant a seed, and the appropriate conditions of water, sunlight, warmth, and moisture allow that seed naturally, based on just natural laws, to grow into a tree. Essentially, there's just this stream of causes and conditions that have brought this emotion into being. It's just like a tree. "Oh, here's a phenomenon that's happening. This is nature."

For me, the use of that phrase—"this is nature"—brings in the whole notion of impersonal conditions coming together. It really supported a letting go of me trying to do or manipulate or adjust or fix. "This is nature." It really allowed the mind to relax around the experience.

Another reflection you can use—this one I offer from the Buddha—he suggests that you can reflect: "This is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am." This is a way to align your mind with that truth, that these emotions that happen, these difficult states of mind that happen, are simply things that come and go. They are not who we are. This helps to remind us of that fact. And the noticing of the absence of that emotion also supports that recognition. This is not who I am. If it were who I am, it would always be there. But it is not. Here it is absent. So: this is not me, this is not mine, this is not who I am.

The last piece I'll bring in around working with difficult mind states is this: sometimes these difficult mind states can be overwhelming. The power of those mind states, the momentum of those mind states, is stronger than the momentum of our ability to be mindful of them. It's like we have a small wave of mindfulness and a tsunami of anger. It swamps our attempt to be mindful. Even just turning our attention

to it, we get sucked in. What I find most helpful in that state—and this takes some discernment of your own mind, to recognize, "Okay, if I try to bring mindfulness to this, I just get sucked into this black hole of emotion"—

So maybe it's not the time to pay attention to this. If you find that an emotion is overwhelming, if it swamps your ability to be mindful, see if you can consciously turn your attention to something else in your experience—without aversion to the thing that you're turning away from.

This is like a skillful ignoring of the state, simply turning your attention to something in your experience. Something neutral is helpful. I've found that neutrality is more useful than trying to find something pleasant, because if you're trying to find something pleasant, it's like that part of your mind which is struggling says, "No, don't do that to me. This is important. You better pay attention to me rather than pay attention to that pleasant thing." The neutral thing seems to be easier to turn to.

So paying attention to your feet on the ground. Hearing is a great door to open when there's difficult emotion. I usually do not recommend that people pay attention to their breath when they're experiencing a difficult emotion. In my own experience, and it seems like for many people, strong emotions have a lot of physical experience in this part of the body. If that's where you're trying to pay attention to your breath—somewhere in your torso—it's likely that you'll just get pulled back into the sensations around that emotion and get sucked back into it again.

I've found it helpful to cultivate, for difficult states of mind, something that's really neutral, that's not in the vicinity of the main place where emotions are experienced in the torso. Feet on the ground are good. Sitting bones on the chair—something grounding. Hands have pretty good sensation. Hearing is good. Something that will allow you to really move away from the emotion. But again, not trying to stop that emotion. It's not an act of trying to get rid of it. It's more like you're saying, "Okay, you can do your thing in the background. You can just do your thing. I'm just going to turn my attention to someplace else." Kind of like putting a child in their room for a timeout: "You do your thing in there, and we're just going to be calm over here." It's simply a redirecting of attention.

It's helpful to stay mindful in that space, though. If you let your mind just drift, if you just try to distract yourself through some fantasy or some non-mindful activity, it's likely that the power of that emotion will hook into your non-mindful state and just take over again. Staying mindful of something neutral allows that emotion to do its thing without your being engaged with it.

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