Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:01

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The subject of our exploration this evening is working with difficult emotions. The Buddha's teaching, as you know, is all about suffering and the end of suffering.

When I'm in daily life and living that busy life in the world, the question of suffering seems really complicated. You can just talk to people in your circle of friends and family and you hear all the different situations that people are dealing with—there's such a range. Maybe somebody's son is using drugs and they don't know how to help, or somebody's aging parent has contracted Alzheimer's but they don't have the money to pay for a good care facility, or a family loses their jobs and their home in the economic downturn and they wonder where to turn for support. Looking more broadly, I think everybody these days tends to feel that the other political party has gone crazy—whichever political party you're from, you feel that about the other side. Or looking on a broader scale, it's just hard to believe that human beings are ruining the only planet that we have to live upon through the effects of climate change. It's really disheartening.

So there are so many problems on so many levels—personal, societal, global. The question of suffering seems very complicated.

But then we come into a situation like this and it gets really simple. When I'm in retreat, it seems clear there are only three things that cause us pain.

There's the body, and that's often present. Physical discomfort probably comes in a number of times during the day, and we've talked some about how to work with that.

There's emotional pain. As we start to pay attention and go through our days, we see the movement of different states—loneliness or anxiety or hopelessness or judgment—move through the mind, some of them more difficult than others.

And then being here, we're privileged to have a different kind of pain: the pain of frustrated meditation. So if your mind wanders, sometimes that's really the most difficult thing in a day. I can't stay connected to the present moment. If you were to go into the outside world and talk to the man or woman on the street, they wouldn't even notice that their mind was wandering, much less care. But here, through our aspiration, we generate a new type of dukkha—so it's a very privileged kind of pain that we enjoy. That's our third kind: wandering mind, restlessness, lack of stability, lack of concentration.

So in retreat, these are the only things we really have to deal with on a difficult level—body, emotion, meditation. Really simple.

We've talked some about working with the body. We talk a lot about the craft of meditation, how to work with the third. Tonight I want to talk specifically about this middle portion: how to work with the difficult emotions that come.

Again, whether we look in retreat or in outer life, this area of pain is one of the greatest that we can see. In the world, we probably know a lot of people whose lives have been really affected by depression or anxiety or panic or serious loss and grief that comes from that, self-doubt, lack of self-confidence. In retreat too, some of our most difficult experiences are dealing with these kinds of feelings that come up for us.

When I first came into meditation, I didn't feel I knew this terrain very well. When one of these difficult states would come up—like fear or anger—the only thing I wanted to do was to get rid of it. I thought, "This is not why I came to meditation. I don't want to have this be happening while I'm here on retreat. How can I make it go away?"

You're all sophisticated meditators and you know that that doesn't work. In the short term, we can't just push these states aside. In the long term of practice, it's said that they do all disappear. It's said that the very roots of them are uprooted and they never arise again. But that's a high attainment. So for us, it may not happen this week, and we should probably be prepared to have them around for a while.

So the aim is not for them to go away, but rather: How can we find freedom while these states are present?

I think that one of the biggest and most immediate benefits of our meditation practice, our mindfulness, is in this area—that through the understanding and working with difficult states, we can immediately find a lot of freedom, both in our meditation and in our daily life. This is a very, very fruitful area for our practice.

Pema Chödrön puts it this way: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every black hole and bright spot, whether it's creepy, grisly, splendid, frightening, joyful, inspiring, peaceful, or wrathful. We can just look at the whole thing."

There's a lot of encouragement to do this, and meditation gives us the method. This is really key. Meditation gives us the method, and the method is mindfulness—paying attention in this area and learning from the experience, learning from what we find out.

In the teaching of the Buddha, this falls into the third foundation of mindfulness as described in the Satipatthana Sutta. This is the foundation of the mindfulness of mind. The word that we're translating as mind is the Pali word citta. Most often translated as mind, sometimes translated as heart-mind to

emphasize the fact that this word citta includes both emotional components as well as thinking or intellectual components.

So we may translate it as mind, but in Buddhist teachings generally, mind includes both the emotional and the cognitive aspects. Don't think when we say mind that we're just thinking about thought.

We're also including the whole range of emotions. In fact, the best word to translate citta is the word psyche because it encompasses that same whole range of thoughts and feelings.

One pointer to this understanding comes from asking a person from Thailand where their mind is located. They don't point to their head, indicating the brain. They point here, to the center of the chest, or what we call the heart center. Their word for mind is jit, which is derived from citta, and they believe that the base of the mind is in the heart center, the center of the chest. Many Buddhist teachings share this same understanding, that the center of the mind is really in the center of the chest.

Here's a little story that illustrates this beautifully. There's a lot of neuroscience research going on these days around meditation, and one of the foremost researchers is Richie Davidson who heads a lab at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Richie is a longtime Vipassana meditator and developed his approach to experiments in order to validate what he had experienced firsthand from meditation, which is a lovely thing to know.

We have a meditator on this retreat who works at the university in that field and knows Richie well. At one point, Richie was going to Dharamsala to give the monks around the Dalai Lama a little taste of the kind of work and research he was doing. He couldn't take his whole equipment—his basic equipment is an MRI machine, which is a little too big to ship to Dharamsala. So what he took was one of these caps studded with electrodes that make contact with the scalp and signal the activity in the brain underneath each electrode. You get thirty or forty electrodes all sending signals to a computer, and you can get a map of where the brain activity is happening.

There was this meeting with the Dalai Lama and Richie and about five hundred monks. Richie modeled this leather cap studded with electrodes for them. He felt kind of silly with it on because, truthfully, it looks kind of stupid. But he explained what he was doing and then took the thing off.

All the monks burst out laughing. Richie thought it was because he had looked so silly. But one of the monks spoke up and said, "Oh, that's so funny! You're trying to measure the mind through the brain when everybody knows the mind is located here," pointing to the center of the chest. "Like, what a joke, you guys." So they talked a little bit about how you might measure mind activity around the heart, but he hasn't figured that one out yet. It's a later experiment.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, in the third foundation of mindfulness, this is how the Buddha begins: "And how, bhikkhus, does a bhikkhu abide contemplating mind as mind?" Just to mention this word bhikkhu, which we normally translate as monk—many of the commentaries say that bhikkhu here should be

understood as a sincere practitioner. Anyone who's sincerely practicing the path of meditation is a bhikkhu. So all of you are bhikkhus tonight. Some of you may be bhikkhunis if you prefer, but either way.

"How does one abide contemplating mind as mind? Here, a bhikkhu understands mind affected by lust as mind affected by lust, and mind unaffected by lust as mind unaffected by lust. She understands mind affected by hatred as mind affected by hatred, and mind unaffected by hatred as mind unaffected by hatred. He understands mind affected by delusion as mind affected by delusion and mind unaffected by delusion as mind unaffected by delusion."

Again, greed and aversion tend to be more on the affective side, more on the emotional side. Delusion tends to be more on the cognitive side of not understanding things the way they are. So again, in this definition of the foundation of mindfulness of mind, we have both the emotional and the cognitive aspects coming in.

Just a word on vocabulary—I think this was mentioned a few days ago. In this talk, I'll be discussing emotions, which are the strongly felt affective components: fear, anger, loneliness, jealousy, rage, happiness, joy, sympathetic joy, compassion, and so forth. I'll be discussing moods, which are sort of softer or lighter forms of emotions, kind of the cloud-like backdrop. You might be having a mood that's a little melancholy someday, or feeling a little tender or a little blue or a little nostalgic. It's not quite strong enough or fully formed enough to be called an emotion—it's just kind of a background flavor in the mind.

And then broader than that are these things we could call states of mind, which include emotions, moods, and refined meditative states. Qualities like calm or peace or concentration or equanimity. So states of mind is the most inclusive. Moods are a little bit lighter. Emotions tend to be the stronger expressions.

We'll talk more as the retreat goes on about working with positive states of mind, pleasant states that lead to happiness. But for tonight, I'm going to focus mostly on the difficult ones.

In finding greater freedom in relation to the painful emotions—we might call them difficult, we might call them afflictive—we need generally two things to develop through practice. And many of you have already spent time developing these.

These are not new to you, but I want to single them out.

The first is we need a shift in attitude. To go from the attitude like when I came into practice—I just wanted to get rid of these states. I didn't want to feel them. And every time they came, I thought something had gone wrong. We need to shift that attitude to one more of acceptance and allowing and non-judging.

The second thing that we need is a greater understanding of the nature of these emotions—not just the particular nature like the flavor of desire, rage, or terror, but also their universal nature.

All emotions can be seen as having what the Buddha called the three characteristics of phenomena, which are that they're impermanent—none of them lasts forever. They're unsatisfactory, especially as we talk

about the difficult ones. You know they're not satisfying in themselves. And we can't really claim them as "I" or "mine" because we all have them. It doesn't make sense to try to own an emotion like anger because it's part of the whole human makeup. It's in every human being who hasn't practiced to be free of it. So it's not yours or mine—it's part of human nature, just part of all of us. Nothing personal really about it. So we need to understand these three marks of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness as they apply to our emotions. These three together make up what we sometimes talk about as the emptiness of emotions.

Emptiness doesn't mean that emotions are boring or vacant. It doesn't mean they're absent. Emotions can be rich and vivid and lively and energetic and energized, but they're also impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless. And that sort of expresses their empty nature.

So attitude shift to acceptance and an understanding of the empty nature. These are the things that can free us in the near term.

As we start to relate with emotions in our practice, the first step is really to know what we're feeling. This sounds easy, but it's not. I know growing up, nobody told me how to explore my emotional landscape. Not my parents, not my teachers, not my favorite TV shows, not my siblings. Nobody explained it to me, that there's a whole world in here that's very rich, partly beautiful, partly difficult, but a world that's really worth exploring.

So we have to practice. Most of us have to practice knowing what these are.

There's this beautiful program that's happening now in the public schools in Oakland called Mindful Schools, where a number of trained Vipassana teachers are going into public schools at the elementary level, spending, I think, fifteen minutes at a time, taking a whole classroom and teaching them mindfulness and teaching them to be aware of what they're feeling.

To me, this is really revolutionary. And it's beautiful that the public school systems are opening to allow this to happen. Of course, it can't be called Buddhism, because then somebody else would have to come in from every other religion, but it can be called mindfulness. So nobody really has to know about what the roots are. That doesn't matter. The point is that these kids are getting to know how to explore their inner landscape.

And I just remember the kids wrote back a number of letters on what was so great, and they said things like, "I love mindfulness. It helps me be nicer to my baby sister." Or "I love mindfulness. Watching my breath helps me to go to sleep at night." So they're really getting a firsthand taste of meditation kind of under the radar, and it's beautiful.

I have another friend and student who runs a preschool in the Bay Area that she runs as a Dharma preschool. So she takes kids who are three to five. She has them five days a week for the mornings. And the whole time that they're with her, she's teaching them Dharma through yoga, through spiritual stories,

through guided meditations.

And she said that in dealing with kids of that age, you can't talk about things like mindfulness or awareness or phenomena of the six senses. Way too abstract. So what she does—she's had them lie down and imagine their mind like a big lake. So just imagine that there's this big lake. You open your mind, there's this big lake and all kinds of fish are swimming through it, all different colors.

She said there's a happy fish that can swim through, there's a sad fish, there's a loving fish, there's an angry fish. Just open yourself to this lake and let all the fish swim through. And she'd guide them along those lines for a while.

And then at the end of the meditation, she asked the class one day, "Well, how was that? Could you let all the fish come? Could you know what fish were there? Did you let them swim through?" And this one young boy, I think he was four years old, raised his hand and said, "I could let all the fish come through, except I couldn't let the mad fish come."

And she said, "Well, why was that?"

And he said, "Well, when you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt other people."

When I finally recognized there was anger present, it became anger plus awareness. And that's a completely different state. The awareness doesn't eliminate the anger right away, but it creates space around it. It gives us options. It prevents us from being completely consumed by it.

This recognition is what the Buddha called "clear comprehension" – knowing what's actually happening in this moment. It's such a basic teaching, yet incredibly profound in its effects. When we can clearly see what's arising, we're no longer completely identified with it. There's a part of us that remains free, observing.

The hindrances are particularly tricky because they create their own kind of trance. They generate compelling stories that seem absolutely true in the moment. When I was angry about someone being in "my" walking path, the story seemed completely reasonable. Of course I should be upset – this was clearly an injustice! The mind creates this whole elaborate justification for why the emotion is not only appropriate but necessary.

But these stories are usually based on some form of delusion. In my case, I had unconsciously claimed ownership of a piece of grass. I had decided that because I'd walked there for two weeks, it belonged to me. How absurd! Yet in that moment of identification with anger, it seemed perfectly logical.

This is why the Buddha emphasized that ignorance is the root of all suffering. Not necessarily intellectual ignorance, but this fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of experience. We take things to be solid, permanent, and personal when they're actually fluid, changing, and impersonal.

The practice of mindfulness helps us catch these misperceptions as they're happening. Instead of getting swept away by the story, we can learn to step back and examine what's actually occurring. What does anger feel like in the body? What kinds of thoughts does it generate? How does it affect our breathing, our posture, our relationship to others?

This investigation isn't meant to be analytical or judgmental. It's more like the gentle curiosity of a scientist observing a natural phenomenon. Oh, interesting – this is what anger looks like when it moves through this particular human system.

When we can observe our experience this way, something remarkable happens. The emotion doesn't necessarily disappear, but our relationship to it transforms completely. We're no longer the victim of our own mental states. We become the witness, the space in which all these experiences arise and pass away.

This shift from identification to observation is one of the most liberating discoveries we can make in meditation practice. It's the difference between being caught in the storm and watching it from a place of safety.

Anger plus wisdom or intelligence or recognition or mindfulness or awareness—whatever you want to call it—creates a much better combination. When we can bring that quality in, we know there's not just anger there. There's an ally that's helping us work with the situation. That's the mindfulness, the wisdom, the awareness.

I want to focus tonight on a few states of mind that seem particularly powerful for us as human beings, for us as meditators. They're states that come over and over in life and in meditation. It's a little different list than Skye talked about last week. She talked about the five hindrances—the key list for meditators from the Buddha: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, and doubt.

I'm going to make a slightly different list, which is really the kind of big emotions that I see people working with in actual meditation practice—in retreat, out of retreat, in meditation, out of meditation and so forth. But rather than name them, I'm going to ask you to tell me what they are. And if you've heard this talk before, which some of you have, you can't participate. So this is for the new audience only.

To start drawing this out, I want to make a distinction between beautiful states of mind, as they're called in our tradition, and these difficult states. Beautiful states of mind can arise just in a moment and exist just in momentary being. For instance, you might see somebody and have a real feeling of affection or love that just pours out of you. You might see someone else and have a sense of compassion. You might walk out into the evening setting sun—the beautiful light and the warm air—and have this upsurge of joy. These are just momentary floodings of beautiful feeling that come.

The difficult emotions, on the other hand, for them to involve any degree of suffering, we have to be clinging to them with some concept of time. And as we go through some examples, I think this will become clearer. Time has to be a factor in a difficult emotion that causes suffering for us.

So one of the ways we're going to look at these emotions is using an axis system where we'll have the axis of time running from past through present to future. The other thing that difficult emotions are born around is the range of pleasure and pain that we experience as human beings. This is a very mixed realm. There's great beauty here. There's a lot of joy and love. There's also a lot of suffering and pain. Anywhere you look on the globe, on almost any level—personal, social, cultural—you see this whole range of experience. So our range of openness, our range of sensitivity as people to these extremes of pain and delight, are also a basis for the afflictive emotions to build upon.

So the other axis that we'll use—the vertical axis—goes from pain to pleasure. The horizontal axis is going from past to future. The vertical axis is going from pain to pleasure. That gives us four quadrants.

Let's start with the quadrant up here: past and pleasant. So I want to ask you to think about if there was something in your life that was really pleasant in the past and it's not here anymore. That's what it means about being in the past—not here anymore, not in the present. What emotion could get stirred up? What difficult emotion could get stirred up by that? Very pleasant in the past, not here anymore.

"Nostalgia." "Missing it." "Grief."

This is basically it. This is the basis for sadness. Nostalgia, missing, grief, loss—it's all about clinging to something that was very pleasant in the past that is no longer with us. So this is one of the things that human beings everywhere struggle with. You can read accounts of this in the Buddha's time of those who lost family members and were driven really into states of great suffering and distress.

What about something unpleasant in the past? And we'll circumscribe it a little bit more. We'll narrow it a little bit by saying something unpleasant to do with another human being that happened in the past. What emotion might you be feeling today in thinking about that?

"Anger." "Resentment."

If somebody hurt you, insulted you, offended you, stole something from you, took something away, you could be angry or resentful.

This is the second of these primal emotions that we all work with—grief and anger.

Let's move now to the future end of the spectrum. If there's something you're anticipating that's pleasant and lies ahead, what emotion might that condition? Desire. Wanting. Imagine if I told you that you were going to get ice cream sundaes tomorrow for lunch—though that's not true, by the way, and I don't want anyone waiting around for them. That would condition a response: "Wow, that would taste really good. I'd really like some now." This is how pleasant future possibilities give rise to desire—wanting, longing, yearning, lust. These are very strong primal forces.

And on the other side, what if there's something unpleasant that you think might happen in the future, something painful? What emotion arises then? Aversion or fear. When we anticipate something truly

painful—like a scheduled visit to the dentist for a root canal—we become anxious, fearful, nervous.

So these are the four primal emotions I particularly want to explore: sadness or grief, anger, desire, and fear. These are the forces I encounter over and over in myself and in other meditators.

We've discussed before how each strong emotion has two major components. First is the coloring in the mind—fear feels different than anger, which feels different than happiness or jealousy. Each mood has a distinct taste, a different quality of mental experience. When the emotion is strong, it also manifests in the body. Fear often brings contraction in the belly. Sadness frequently creates pressure or heaviness in the chest. Anger commonly produces a burning sensation around the shoulders or neck. So we have both the mental tone and the physical expression.

There's a third component that's equally important: thoughts. When we're in certain frames of mind, we tend to think thoughts that match that state. In fear, we think fearful thoughts. In rage, we think angry thoughts. This is helpful to notice because thoughts and emotions reinforce each other—thoughts can trigger emotions, and emotions can launch thoughts.

There's one particular kind of thought that serves as a foundation for these afflictive emotions, and I call this the storyline around the emotion. The specific storyline varies from emotion to emotion, and each of us needs to feel out what our particular storylines are. I'll suggest a few tonight, but the words that quite fit you might be different, so it's helpful to investigate: What's the belief or story underlying my difficult emotion when it arises?

In that walking meditation experience I described earlier, I believed that person should not have been in my walking place. As silly as it sounds, I really did believe that. And as long as I held onto that belief, I couldn't let go of the anger. The storyline was essentially: "I'm right and they're wrong." As long as I clung to it, the anger remained locked in place.

As we examine these other primal emotions, I'll point out the storylines that support them. It's really helpful to see that there's a conceptual underpinning to these emotions—they're linked to time, either past or future, and connected to specific beliefs. Understanding their nature this way helps us recognize their empty quality, how they're all fabricated from various causes and conditions. Once we see how the whole mindset is assembled, like a Lego set, we can understand how it can be taken apart. Then it's no longer such an overwhelming mystery.

Let's take desire as an example. Desire is this movement that wants something pleasant in the future. It's especially common on retreat, particularly during the adjustment period when we often experience homesickness—missing people, places, things, and comforts we associate with home.

As the retreat progresses, this desire force often attaches to experiences within the retreat itself. "I'd really like to have that meditation I had last week again." We don't ask why we'd want to repeat something that disappeared last time, but never mind—we want it again because it felt good.

So we desire things both outside and inside the retreat setting. When we examine the nature of desire itself—how desire feels while it's present—we discover that desire has an inherently bittersweet quality. It's pleasant and sweet to bring in an object we like, whether ice cream or concentration. This brings a sense of pleasantness into what's often a fairly stark environment, serving as a way of comforting ourselves.

Desire has this comfort aspect. But the problem is that the thought of ice cream isn't ice cream. The thought of concentration isn't concentration. And we're still left without that thing we want. So desire always has this built-in frustration. It reminds us of what we want, but it doesn't deliver it. There's always an unsatisfying aftertaste with desire.

This is really what the Buddha was pointing to when he taught that the source of suffering is craving. Dukkha arises out of this force of wanting. And it's curious—we never want what we already have. Have you ever wanted a hand at the end of your arm? No. We take that for granted. We never think about that. We just want what we don't have.

When this hits a meditation practice, some really good learning can happen. I was teaching a retreat a few years ago in Italy, which was a delightful experience. Carol and I were teaching, and Sally was there also. First of all, it was just a delight to work with Italian yogis because they seemed to me very familiar with their emotions and were able to share them very openly in interviews.

There was a young man on the retreat who came in for his first interview. We worked through an interpreter. He said he was having trouble settling in. I asked why. He said, "Well, I keep thinking about being somewhere else." I asked what was up. He explained that some of his friends were going on holiday to the Caribbean, and they had asked him to join them. He could either go on the holiday in the Caribbean or come on this meditation retreat. When I asked why he came to the retreat, he said, "All the plane tickets to the Caribbean were sold out."

So we were the consolation prize. But while he was on the retreat, he kept thinking about his friends on the beach in the Caribbean—how much fun they were having, the people they were meeting. He said he just couldn't stop wanting to be there, so he couldn't really settle into being here.

What we talked about was how maybe the unhappiness he was experiencing was because of those thoughts about the Caribbean. Maybe the meditation retreat wasn't actually an unhappy environment, but he was making it unhappy by thinking about wanting to be somewhere else.

After he reflected on that for a couple of days and came into his next interview, he had settled down. This is a brilliant teaching—that the situation we're in may be totally fine, but if we want something else, it will make us miserable. Desire has this effect of stirring up discontent, taking a situation that may be absolutely fine and introducing a level of discontent to it.

The storyline that the young man was working from, I would say, was "If I had that, I would be happy."

That's the storyline behind desire. That's why it's so compelling. "If I had that, I'd be happy."

Of course, desire never looks at the next step. What happens when that's over? Whether it's an ice cream or a vacation or a concentrated sitting, what happens when that's finished? Oh, I'm just back to where I am already now. But desire never looks that far. It doesn't look at impermanence.

So when desire is present, feel it in the body. What I sometimes notice is a kind of tension, like I'm leaning forward to make something happen. That's what you sometimes hear described as "toppling forward into the next moment." There's some kind of strain in the body that's looking for something else, even with subtle movements of desire. I feel it that way.

Then get familiar with this bittersweet quality. The object brings a sense of pleasure or comfort, but also a built-in sense of frustration. It's really helpful to investigate the unsatisfying nature of desire as it's present.

The second quality I want to talk about is sadness, as a form of aversion.

Aversion manifests in countless flavors: ill-will, anger, hatred, impatience, irritation, fear, sadness, grief, judgment, blame, resentment, depression, despair, and resistance—to name just a few. Yet beneath their varied surfaces, they all share a similar quality, one that the Buddha illustrated beautifully in a story he once shared with his monks.

While the Buddha was meeting with monks in a forest clearing, a jackal suddenly ran out from the trees, stood in the open space for a moment, then darted into the underbrush. After sitting there briefly, it ran to the hollow at the root of a tree and lay down, only to jump up again almost immediately. Next it moved to a nearby cave, sat for a minute, then wandered back into the forest.

"Did you see that jackal?" the Buddha asked. "It couldn't find contentment anywhere. It ran from the forest—no contentment there. It stood in the clearing—no contentment there. It lay down at the tree root, went to the cave—still no contentment. Everywhere it went, it remained discontent. It blamed its discontent on the forest, on the underbrush, on the tree root, on the cave. It blamed walking and running and lying down and sitting."

The Buddha explained that the problem wasn't with any of these places or postures. The jackal had mange—an intensely itchy skin disease. Because of this condition, it was miserable everywhere it went.

This is precisely what aversion is like. When the mind dwells in aversion, nothing satisfies. Everything we try, everything we pick up, everything we touch feels somehow not quite right. The storyline behind aversion follows a familiar pattern: there's some unpleasantness somewhere in our field of experience, and because of that unpleasantness, we form the belief, "I can't be happy." With sadness, this manifests as "I can't be happy because I've lost this thing from the past." As long as we hold this belief, it blocks our ability to find contentment or happiness.

Sometimes opening to sadness feels daunting, especially when we've been carrying it for a while. It can seem enormous, and we fear that if we truly let ourselves feel it, we might go under—might drown in its depths. But this too is just another belief. With all emotions, mindfulness offers the skillful approach: touch the feeling, be mindful of it, and when it becomes too overwhelming, gently back away. Find refuge in a different object of attention, take a walk, practice loving-kindness—place the mind somewhere else that feels safer.

Anger represents one of the stronger forms of aversion. The body feels tight, the mind seems on fire or burning. The storyline, as I discovered during my walking meditation, typically follows the pattern: "I'm right and you're wrong." This becomes the foundation for all angry narratives.

Here's where watching our thoughts becomes crucial. When we're angry, we tend to string together self-righteous and blaming thoughts one after another. Each thought is like adding fuel to an already burning fire, making it burn hotter and hotter. We keep stoking the flames with our thinking, repeating "I'm right and you're wrong" in endless variations.

But if we stop feeding these thoughts to the fire, the emotion naturally dies out—this is the nature of every emotion. Unless continuously stoked, emotions fade away on their own. The challenge arises when our "I'm right and you're wrong" thoughts happen to be true. These are the ones that catch us most completely, because they feel so justified.

Sometimes it may be true, but that doesn't mean that it's skillful to keep telling ourselves that story.

The Dalai Lama in the early 1980s met a monk who had just escaped from Tibet. The Dalai Lama had known this monk back in the 1950s when he still lived in Tibet and had thought he was a monk of just middling capacity—a good monk. Then the monk had been put in prison for over twenty years and had finally escaped and made his way to India, where the Dalai Lama was able to meet him again.

In the conversation, freshly back in India, the monk said, "You know, when I was in prison, I really felt I was in danger." The Dalai Lama thought, as it happened to many people, "Do you mean you were in danger of being tortured?" And the monk said, "No, that's not what I mean. I was tortured. But what I meant was I was in danger of getting angry at them." He said, "But I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his estimate of this monk's practice.

So even in a situation like that—he was imprisoned for being a monk, that was his crime, he had done nothing wrong, he was not resistant or angry to his guards—nonetheless, he was tortured. Very clearly, he was right, and they were not. But he did not let that perception give rise to anger.

So just observe when anger comes, how we tend to feed it and create it through these thoughts that justify ourselves and blame the other. And feel the feeling. Anger is painful. That's one of the things that's really easy to see—it's such a painful state. In the texts, it's likened to someone picking up a hot coal to throw at

another person. But by picking up the coal, we burn ourselves first. And the other thing it's likened to is drinking poison and hoping that the other person gets sick. But we get sick first.

So we have to feel this pain of anger. For me, it was the only thing that really encouraged me to let it go. I didn't see any other way out of the pain except to let it go. So we need to feel that fire and dukkha and learn from it.

One of the forms of anger, you could say it's a form of anger that comes up, is that we judge ourselves. We feel angry about things we've done in the past or we blame ourselves or we put the wrong onto ourselves, and that's doubly painful. This form of self-judgment seems to be really widespread in our culture today.

Again, a story from the Dalai Lama. Some Western teachers were meeting with him a number of years ago in Dharamsala—Western Buddhist teachers—and were explaining this problem in the West of people not feeling good about themselves, of judging themselves, of being critical about themselves, of not really having self-love. The Dalai Lama could not understand what was being described. He said, "What are you talking about?" And when he finally got it, he said, "You know, we just don't have this in Tibet. Children are raised in an atmosphere of love, and they're given positive messages from their family and the culture. And people grow up really caring and trusting in themselves."

So this factor of self-judgment I think we'll talk about more because it's so common in the West. It comes up very often on meditation retreats, particularly because we're not getting the kind of supportive affirmations of friends and family and normal human contact. So in the silence often there's a sense of loneliness, and our fears about ourselves come to the surface. So often in retreats these judgments become really apparent, and we want to talk about ways to work with it.

In the classical tradition, the best antidote for all forms of aversion, including self-judgment, is the practice of loving kindness. So for self-judgment as well as anger, the development of loving kindness is a really powerful way to offset that.

One little word about the storyline behind self-judgment is that it has something to do with "I'm not good enough" or "I'm not lovable the way I am"—some underlying belief. And it's so ironic in a way that meditators feel this so strongly at times because you all are some of the best people that I know. Anyone who comes here and has the intention to make the world a better place by developing understanding and love is one of the highest aspirations. And just from knowing each of you that I've met and knowing what my colleagues are finding—you are all really good people. So there's not a rational basis for this kind of self-judgment in this group. And yet a lot of us carry it. And it's a burden that we don't really deserve. There are ways to work with it.

The last of the kind of primal emotions I wanted to mention is fear. This is the one that was my constant companion in practice for many, many years.

This is the one I would say I cut my emotional teeth on. I became so familiar with this state of mind. The

first thing that made it workable for me, I think it was after a Joseph Goldstein dharma talk on the topic of fear in this very hall some thirty years ago, was that he simply encouraged us to look into the direct experience in the body and see if we could accept it.

So my practice for a long time was: can I feel the body sensations that arise when I'm in fear, and can I bear them? Fear is this projection into the future, and there's some kind of belief like this present moment is bearable—just barely—but the next moment isn't going to be. Something unbearable is about to happen, or something disastrous is about to happen. So if we can set aside the future story, future thinking, and come into the present moment, the question becomes: can we bear the fear?

The first avenue in for me was could I bear the body sensations of fear? The contraction, the flutteriness, the sweat under the arms, the lightness and ungroundedness that came with the fear. So I worked hard at it. I couldn't right away. But little by little, meeting it time and time again, dozens of times, meeting it, feeling it, trying to open—eventually I could. And I said, I can bear this.

Then I went to the mental experience. Can I bear that mood in the mind? Again, it wasn't easy, but eventually I could. And finally, I could come enough into the present that I could let go of the future. Because when we're in fear and the world feels like a scary place, there's some kind of projection going on that isn't in this world. I was in a meditation center—it's got to be one of the safest places on earth—and I was feeling like something bad was going to happen to me. It was a total projection made up just out of that feeling of fear.

So over the years, just bringing mindfulness to this quality again and again and again, I've just seen its power ebb, ebb, ebb, ebb, all by the force of mindfulness and loving-kindness. It's kind of like mindfulness has this wearing away quality with these old habit patterns of mind and heart. It wears them down little by little, just like a wheel would get worn down if you put your hand on it every time it went by. It wouldn't wear away quickly, but it would get worn away. And mindfulness is like putting a hand on this churned up energy every time it passes. And every pass slows it down, weakens it, until it can pass through.

So this is our approach with the difficult emotions: coming into the present moment, feeling them, noticing them in the body, noticing them on the emotional level, noticing the connection to thoughts. This is how that whole complex has gotten constructed, and this is how it can dissolve and fall apart as we bring to the difficult emotions this investigative and curious attitude.

What we're doing is waking up in the middle of the difficulty. It's not that we get rid of this stuff first and then we wake up, but in the very moment of difficulty—of fear or anger or wanting or sadness—we bring qualities of interest, kindness to ourselves, presence, wisdom, compassion, investigation. All these qualities are waking up in the very middle of the difficulty. That's what transforms the emotion, and ultimately that's what transforms us. Our confusion gets woken up out of its own very nature, not by making it go away, but by bringing aliveness and awakeness into the middle of it.

So I'll just close with a quotation from the Tibetan tradition, which is kind of a supplication. The supplication could be to the universe, it could be to your own wisdom, it could be to the Buddha or a teacher—whatever you like. It's called the Four Blessings of Gampopa:

Grant your blessing so that my mind follows the Dharma.
Grant your blessing so that my Dharma practice becomes the path.
Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion.
Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Let's just sit for a minute together.

Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

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