Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:18

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Being human, we all have a very wide range of emotional life and experience. Some emotions are beautiful and quite enjoyable—love and compassion, joy and elation, and even calm, neutral as it is. Then some are really difficult and take us to an edge: qualities like fear and shame, anger, loneliness, grief, wanting, despair, self-judgment, and humiliation. These are things we don't really want to feel, but sometimes they visit anyway.

These difficult emotions can be a primary source of suffering in our lives. We may go through periods where life is easy, tranquil, and enjoyable, or these may be frequent companions for us all along the way. But sooner or later, they're going to be visitors for almost all of us.

Outside in daily life, life is complicated. There are so many people, so many situations, so many facets to what's going on in our lives. But here in meditation it tends to get simple. There are times when things are going well, and then there's bodily pain and emotional pain. We need to learn how to work skillfully with both of these. These times of emotional pain may well come at any point, and it's good if we can learn how to relate to bodily pain and emotional pain. Then, of course, in meditation there's also the wandering mind—occasionally painful, but that's a first-world kind of problem to have. It's not so bad.

Usually we want to get rid of these painful emotions. I certainly did when I came into meditation. They started to arise and I thought, "This isn't what I came for. I came to get peaceful. I don't want this stuff." But the resistance doesn't help. That's just more aversion and it tends to lock them in place. We really can find another way to work with them, to be with them. In the process of that, we unfold and discover a lot of strengths that maybe we didn't even know we had. In doing that investigation and exploration with them, we can really transform not just our relationship to them in terms of being more welcoming, but we transform the emotions themselves. We transform how often they come and how strongly they come into our experience. But it begins with really opening to being willing to feel them.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "The basic obstacle is that we don't like the way reality is now and therefore wish it would go away fast. But what we find as practitioners is that nothing ever goes away until it has taught us what we need to know. If we run a hundred miles an hour to the other end of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

With all these emotions, they're part of our human package. They're going to be around in one form or another for probably a long time. So it's really good if we can clarify our relationship to them and come to

understand them.

This whole field goes into what's called the third foundation of mindfulness. The third foundation is called citta in Pali, and it's usually translated as mind, but we often translate it as heart-mind. The term citta in Pali really includes both cognitive aspects of mind—knowledge and thinking—and also affective, emotional aspects of mind. They're both together. So neither the word heart nor the word mind quite captures it. I think the best translation for citta is psyche. Psyche really includes that whole realm, but not many English translators use that for citta.

At any rate, citta does include moods, emotions, and states of mind. You can get a flavor of that from the Satipatthana Sutta where it's described like this: "How does a practitioner abide contemplating mind as mind? Here one knows a lustful mind to be lustful and a mind without lust to be without lust. One knows an aversive mind to be aversive and a mind without aversion to be without aversion. One knows a deluded mind to be deluded and a mind without delusion to be without delusion."

One of the things you'll feel in this description is that the Buddha includes a balance of wholesome and unwholesome qualities. He almost always does that when he's describing our experience. He doesn't usually just focus on one or the other—sometimes, but very often he'll point to both. So this foundation is pointing to the wholesome qualities of mind as well as the difficult or unwholesome.

The unwholesome states are characterized by greed, aversion, and delusion. The wholesome states are characterized by non-greed, non-aversion, and non-delusion. The Buddha often spoke in these kinds of negatives, but if you think about it, what does non-greed mean? It means giving up or giving away—renouncing or generosity. I like to think of it simply as generosity. Non-greed is generosity.

Non-aversion means we don't carry ill will. The opposite of ill will is loving kindness. So I think of it as loving kindness. Non-delusion means we're seeing clearly, or you could say there's wisdom. So the wholesome states are made up of generosity, loving kindness, and wisdom, while unwholesome states are composed of these roots of greed, aversion, and delusion.

The whole point of the path is to increase the wholesome states and decrease the unwholesome. This is the very definition of right effort in the Eightfold Path. I think it's amazing that we have the tools in this lineage—the meditative tools to develop any of these qualities to any degree that we want.

This process is called in Pali *bhavana*. It means mental development, development of heart and mind, cultivation of the wholesome. Sometimes it's translated as meditation, but it really has this sense of actively developing these beautiful qualities. Any way that you want to shape your mind—which means to shape your life—there are practices to do that.

If you want to go in the direction of wisdom, there's insight practice. If you want to go in the direction of love, there's the *metta* practice. If you want to go in the direction of stillness, there's concentration practice. If you want to go in the direction of joy, there's the practice of *mudita*—altruistic joy. It's just

beautiful that we have all these possibilities to bring out the most beautiful human qualities to whatever degree we want to develop them.

That's what we're doing here. We're actually developing all these qualities together. But if you like, at any point in your practice, you could pick one or two and go down that route for a while. The potential is unlimited.

I don't want to talk much more about wholesome states now, just to say two things. One, notice them. Be mindful. Two, don't cling. We'll talk more later.

But I really want to talk tonight about the difficult states of mind, and there are two things we need to do here. One is to shift our attitude. Instead of resisting them, we need to become much more open and allowing. This means on a moment-to-moment basis. It's not that we decide tonight, "Oh, I'm going to be open to these things." We need to move in that direction every time they come. This is something we need to keep learning and doing.

Sometimes a difficult state comes and we have a judgment: "Oh, this shouldn't be happening." But it is happening, right? Someone commented that if we fight with reality, reality is going to win. This is reality. So we need to open to it, allow it to be the way it is. A shift in attitude.

The second is greater understanding. We need to understand the mechanism of these difficult emotions. We also need to understand their nature—their basic nature, which is that like all conditioned things, they're impermanent, they're unsatisfactory, and they're not me or mine. They're impersonal. We all have all these states because they're part of the human package. So why claim them as I or mine?

Third, we need to cultivate acceptance. It's all of ours—this is part of being human. We learn not to take it so personally. As we see the impermanence, we understand that we don't have to make these difficult emotions go away. They're going to go away by themselves. But there's one way you can make them stay: resist them. If we resist or suppress, we just push them lower, and then they can hang around for a long time. But if you open and let these states come, they will arise and they will also pass away, because their nature is impermanent.

So this is what we have to do in practice. We have to accept, and we have to observe to learn what these emotions are like. The first step is knowing what we're feeling when we're feeling it. You can't sort of think through these things before they arrive. "Oh, let's see, I think tonight I'll work out fear." It doesn't happen like that. You've got to work with fear when fear is present. You've got to relate to it in real time.

So the first step is to know what we're feeling, and this isn't learned in our culture. Jill mentioned this morning—wouldn't it be wonderful if kids were taught to know what they're feeling?

We have a friend who's a Sangha member in California, a longtime meditator and very devoted practitioner who ran a preschool. This meant kids who were before kindergarten—three to five-year-olds.

She ran that preschool along Buddhist lines, basically because she wanted to teach kids meditation. She had a long waiting list, but one of the requirements to get in was that the parents also had to meditate. She didn't want to just train the kids to be smarter than the grown-ups; she wanted the grown-ups to be along for the ride and support the kids in meditating.

So she had these three-, four-, and five-year-olds, and she was teaching them to meditate. Now, if you've worked with children this age, you know you don't just say, "Sit still and watch your breath." That doesn't work—they'll be bouncing all over. So she got very creative.

First, she would teach them yoga. They liked that—moving their bodies around, stretching, rolling around on the floor. After she got them good and limbered up through the yoga, she'd have them lie down on their backs on the floor where they'd just been practicing. They were relaxed by then. Then she'd lead them into a visualization.

The visualization was this: "You're a big lake. Feel how big your lake is. It stretches all around you. And you are the water. Now in this water, there are many different fishes swimming. I want you to notice all the fishes that are swimming through your lake." Of course, water is an ancient symbol for consciousness, and the kids relate on that symbolic level.

"Notice all the fishes that are swimming through your lake and just let them swim. There's a happy fish, there's a sad fish, there's a mad fish, there's a kind fish, there's a lonely fish, there's a joyful fish. Just let all those fishes swim through." She'd guide them in this for several minutes at a stretch, and they had fun with it.

After one of the meditations, she asked them, "How was that?" A five-year-old boy said, "That was great. You know, I could let all the fishes swim through, except I couldn't let the mad fish swim through."

"Well, why not? Why couldn't you let the mad fish swim?" she asked.

He replied, "Well, when you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt people."

Five years old.

So that's wisdom. First, we have to practice knowing what we're feeling, what fishes are swimming in our water, in our awareness. This is not as easy as it might sound.

A story from my practice here. One of the three-month courses I was sitting in—I was not a new meditator. I was ten years into practice. I was sitting in this hall, and after the 8:15 sitting, I would go out and walk on the grass down below, down where some of the fruit trees have been planted since then. But there was a lot more grass back then. I would walk back and forth for the period, come back in here and sit for the next sitting, then go out and walk again. So basically every walking period, I was down walking on the grass down there.

I was about two weeks into the retreat. I'd been walking there every period for two weeks. The 8:15 sit comes to an end. I go out the back door, head for my walking space, and I'm being really mindful. I'm two weeks in. I'm being really mindful. Lifting, moving, placing. Walking slowly. Lifting, moving, placing.

I get out the door. I look down to my path. There's somebody else there. I couldn't believe it. I start going, lifting, moving, placing, and I start thinking, "What's that person doing there? Don't they know that that's my walking path and I've walked there every period for two weeks?" Lifting, moving, placing. "Did I cut in front of them in line this morning? Are they trying to play some kind of head game with me?" Lifting, moving, placing. Very present, right?

So I got down to the grassy area, and my place was taken, so I found another patch of grass to walk on, which, to my great surprise, worked just as well as my own. I started walking back and forth—lifting, moving, placing—but I was still sort of running on about this guy. And it took me thirty minutes into the walking period before I realized: I'm angry now.

While I was caught in that, while I was telling myself the story about how they were in the wrong place and it was my path and why didn't they see it—as long as I was running that story, I was totally bound up with being irritated at the person. As soon as I could recognize that I was angry, then I had a way to work. Oh, I know how to release anger. I would drop the story, feel it in my body, feel the mood of the anger, feel the sensations, and then very quickly it dissipated. But as long as I was involved in the story, it wasn't going anywhere.

This points out a few things about working with these difficult emotions. If we have a belief about the situation—like mine was, I'm right and they're wrong—it locks the emotion in. We keep telling ourselves the story, and every new sentence, like anger's like a fire, right? Every new sentence adds another log to the flame. I'm right, they're wrong—basically saying it over and over. When I could drop the story and drop those thoughts, the fire wasn't being fed anymore. And what happens when an emotion isn't being fed? It just faded away.

Basically, my attention was in the wrong place. The Buddha said this about the hindrances—it's kind of an interesting observation tucked away in one sutta. He said every hindrance is a case of unwise attention. We're putting our energy and attention in the wrong place. So where was I putting my attention? Into the person and the story. That was unwise because it just kept it going.

What happened when I turned it to the emotion of anger itself? Poof. That was wise attention.

I think Brian said this the other morning when he was talking about giving instructions for the hindrances: take the attention away from the situation that's causing the hindrance and put it on the hindrance itself. When we become mindful of the hindrance or the emotion itself, that's when there's the possibility of its releasing.

The other funny thing in this story is that I thought I was being really mindful. I was with "lift, move,

place" all the way. And I was missing the most important thing that was going on, which was this emotion of anger and all the thoughts around it.

This is how hindrances happen. We feel like we're connected to the present moment, but they slip in under our radar. They get established in some viewpoint, some belief, some story. And the more we dwell on the story, the more we sustain that hindrance energy. Until at some point—I think what finally woke me up was I was getting bored with it, or it was uncomfortable or something—and then I was sort of forced to notice, oh, I'm angry.

So this is delusion. The force of delusion is we don't notice what's happening to us. And this happens a lot with emotions. We don't see clearly exactly what emotion is catching us up.

The first step, when you're starting to feel something stirring, is to name the feeling. I think Jill said this was a real education for her to note the emotions. And that's the way it felt for me too. I hadn't been taught how to recognize or name my emotions. But this practice made me do it. And so I would just keep exploring. What is that feeling that's there? Until I developed a pretty good vocabulary for the things that showed up. And then it was really helpful to know, because if we don't know what we're feeling, it's difficult to release it.

The noting is helpful because there's something that happens when we name an emotion. I think Jill mentioned the neuroscience of it. I feel a shift take place when I name an emotion. And part of what happens is there's not just the emotion, there's also the mindfulness. In the middle of an unwholesome state, we're bringing in mindfulness, which is one of the most wholesome mind states we can bring in. So we're not just with the anger. We're with the anger and mindfulness now. And mindfulness is what transforms it.

There was also a study which I think is really interesting. They took a group of people from an anger management class—people who had documented difficulty with anger—and they gave them different approaches to work with. One approach was simply asking the people every time they started to get angry to note "anger." Just to name it. Basic mindfulness practice, right? That turned out to be about as effective as any other strategy they worked with. And it showed a marked decrease in people's tendency to be angry over the course of the study. So it really does make a difference.

In these difficult states of mind, there are a few that I see again and again—in myself and in practitioners. Rather than just tell you what they are, I'm going to have you guess. I find this really curious: difficult states of mind are always connected with time. That means with past and future. I never quite realized that until I started to look at it. When we're caught in difficult emotions, we're caught in time.

Beautiful states of mind can just be totally in the present. Love is in the present. Compassion is in the present. Insight is in the present.

Peace is in the present. Concentration is in the present, and so on. But difficult states of mind are

connected to time—which means past and future.

So imagine an axis running from past on your left to future on your right. That's a time axis. Then we're going to bring in another axis, which is pleasure and pain. We're going to run that from the bottom up—pain down at the bottom, pleasure at the top. Now we have four quadrants. You loved your seventh grade algebra class, didn't you? I know I did.

Let's take the quadrant over here, which is pleasurable things that are in the future. What emotion do you feel for pleasurable things that are in the future? Craving, wanting, desire. That's one of the big ones.

What about painful things that are in the future? Worry, fear. That's another of the big ones.

What about pleasant things that were in the past? But in the past means it's not coming back. Grief. You lost something. Grief or sadness. Another of the big ones.

And then painful things that were in the past—think about this especially in relation to people. Anger. Resentment. So: desire, fear, sadness, and anger. These are four of the big ones that come up often, so I want to talk about all of those. One variation on the anger one is when it's toward ourselves—it turns into self-judgment.

In working with all of them, what we want to do is notice three aspects. First, feel it in the body. If it's a strong emotion, it's going to express itself somewhere in the body. By grounding the attention there, you can prolong the contact with the emotion.

Second thing to look at is the flavor of that emotion. Every mood has a different flavor in the mind. Happiness feels different than regret. Shame feels different than compassion. Get familiar with how it tastes—how the emotion tastes. It's a mental kind of flavor.

And the third is these difficult emotions do have some kind of underlying belief or story, like "I was right and they were wrong." Look for the belief. The belief props up the emotion. It sustains it. It feeds it. It keeps it going.

So look at these three areas, and we'll go through them with examples.

Desire is something that wants a pleasant experience to happen sometime in the future. This can come up a lot on retreat. You're here, but what you really want is to be at home or be with friends or to have a nice meal somewhere or go out to a party. These things pop up and can take our attention away.

Looking at the nature of desire, what we see is that the object that's coming up is to some degree comforting. We remember, oh, there's pleasure in life.

And when we're in a difficult space in retreat, that's kind of appealing. "Oh, there is pleasure." But it's mixed because we don't have it now. So with desire, there's always this gap between the pleasure that could be and the reality of sitting in the hall with your body aching. That contrast leaves a gap of

dissatisfaction. Desire always brings with it some dissatisfaction. "Yeah, there's a pleasure out there, but it's not here now." So there's a frustration that's inherent in wanting.

You can tune into that. You can feel it. You notice that you never want what you already have? Do you sit there wanting a hand at the end of your arm? No. We want what we don't have. And that's why it's frustrating.

I was teaching in Italy one time a number of years ago. It was so much fun working with Italian yogis, because as you might imagine, I found them to be very fluent with their emotions. They knew their emotions well, and they were open in talking about them. It's a lot of fun to work with them.

There was this one young man who came in for an interview a few days into the retreat, and I said, "How's it going for you?" He said, "I don't want to be here." I've heard that before. But I said, "Why did you come?" He said, "Well, this is August. It's our holiday month. We had free time. A bunch of my friends were going to the Caribbean, and they invited me to go. I thought, oh, beautiful blue waters and swimming—that would really be a lot of fun to go there." I said, "Why didn't you go there?" He said, "There were no more tickets left. So I came on this retreat."

I can understand why he was having a little trouble adjusting. So I just suggested to him that he wasn't unhappy with the retreat itself. Maybe he was unhappy because he wanted the Caribbean. And that if he didn't want the Caribbean all the time, maybe he'd be happy in the retreat. I said, "Take a look at that. Maybe that's a possibility. Maybe it's the wanting that's making your time here so miserable."

So he went away, meditated some more, came back in a couple of days. He said, "I think you're right. It was the wanting that was stirring me up. When I let go of the Caribbean, the retreat was fine. I'm totally settled in. I'm good with it."

Desire has this quality—it creates dissatisfaction for us when there doesn't need to be. On retreat, that feeling of gap may come about daily life as you settle into the retreat. It comes more and more about retreat experience, so that what we're wanting is the meditation we had two days ago, or in the last retreat. We want a special experience, or we want that state of calm or stillness or peace or bliss or love or whatever.

Start to notice when the desire is coming in. Investigate that inherent quality of dissatisfaction that is with it—sometimes mild, sometimes big, depending on what is wanted. And in relation to meditation experience, see where your thoughts have been going. Sometimes it's the thoughts that will tell you what the desire is for.

It's easier to let go if you can see, oh, it's for that same experience I had two days ago—that experience of being really settled, open. It becomes a little easier to release.

I sometimes recognize that desire is happening in meditation by noticing myself sort of leaning forward

with tension in the body, like I'm trying to reach out for the next moment to be different. So tune into that tension. See if you can understand what it's about. And if possible, let go.

The next area I want to explore is anger, though the broader category is aversion, which manifests in many different flavors: ill will, anger, blame, hatred, impatience, irritation, resentment, despair, resistance. There are many variations of this fundamental quality.

How does it feel in the mind when aversion is present? Start to tune into this. Often there's a burning quality. With anger in particular—speaking of anger as one form of aversion—I feel it intensely around my shoulders, neck, and head. Energy seems to rise up and become constricted there, creating a burning, intense, hot quality that comes with the anger.

Feel it in the body: contraction, tightness, burning, energized sensations—these are the bodily manifestations of anger. The mood also carries that burning quality, and the thoughts usually follow the pattern of "I'm right and they're wrong." Get familiar with this—this is what constitutes anger. This is what's actually present.

As we continue the mental narrative of "they're wrong and I'm right," we add more fuel to the flames. You can feel how that fire keeps burning the more we think about it. Don't force yourself to change it at this point, but become intimate with it. This is the mechanism of anger, and we want to truly understand it before we try to eliminate it—understanding how it gets created, how it gets fed, how it gets prolonged, and the beliefs that underlie it.

One of the tricky aspects of anger is that when we say "I'm right and you're wrong," that may actually be true. We might be perceiving clearly someone's unskillful actions. But if we keep running that thought repeatedly with indignation, we continue adding fuel to the fire. How does that feel? Not so good.

I was doing a metta retreat here one year—a long six-week period of loving-kindness practice. I was deeply engaged with the practice and really connecting with the metta, experiencing those beneficial feelings. It happened that my difficult person was also on the retreat—someone I'd known for several years, and the previous year had been especially challenging.

They were on the retreat, and every time we'd cross paths, I'd begin thinking about what they had done, how they had acted, how they had spoken to me. The anger would start arising, building, intensifying. I would spin out for thirty minutes at a time. Not only would I lose my metta phrases—I would completely lose the metta feeling altogether.

Finally, I began to realize how painful this was. It was truly painful to keep entering this anger repeatedly. To tell you the truth, what made me let go—let go of the memories and the blame and all that was stoking the fire—was recognizing how much pain it caused me.

This is why it's so helpful to let yourself feel the fullness of anger when it's present, and to feel the pain of

it. Even if I was right—and in some ways I still think I was—it didn't benefit me to keep rehearsing it. It only created more suffering.

So that's what enabled me to release it. It's possible to recognize that someone acted unskillfully without burning ourselves up in the process.

In the Buddhist tradition, it's said that when we're angry at somebody, it's like wanting to pick up a hot coal to throw at them. But first we pick it up, and it burns us. Another way anger is described: we drink poison and hope somebody else gets sick. It doesn't work.

There's another dimension to working with anger. The Dalai Lama used to meet with refugees who had escaped Tibet. After the occupation, when he fled in 1959, whenever someone managed to escape and reach India, if they came to Dharamsala, he would meet with them.

He would hear their stories and difficulties, often breaking down in tears upon hearing their accounts. One year, a monk came whom he had known when he was still in Tibet. The Dalai Lama had left in 1959, and it turned out this monk had been imprisoned for twenty years. His crime was being a monk, being a Buddhist monk. Many Buddhist monks and nuns were imprisoned for that crime.

When he came over and met with the Dalai Lama, he said that when he was in prison, he felt that he was in danger. The Dalai Lama said, "Were you in danger of being tortured? I could really understand that."

And he said, "No, I was tortured. I was in danger of becoming angry, but I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to reevaluate his opinion of that monk. He was a much more developed practitioner than he had remembered or imagined.

This sort of practice is possible with the difficult emotions. It's not a beginning practice—that's really advanced practice—but it shows a human possibility that we all have.

So in relating to anger, can we get to the point of just feeling the feeling and not continuing to tell the story? Feel it in the body, feel the flavor in the mind. If we can do that, that's what sets the condition for the emotion to show its impermanence, to decay, because it's not being whipped up further.

A variation on anger is when it's directed toward ourselves—self-judgment, where we feel we're not good enough. Either we've made mistakes or we've failed to meet people's expectations. We've gotten the message that we're not good enough or smart enough or good-looking enough or something. Sometimes these messages have come from parents, sometimes from teachers, sometimes from siblings or peers. But we take it in and we take it to heart.

The other thing that can happen is if you're part of a group that's been marginalized in society, you may have gotten the message from very early on in your life that you're not as good as everybody else—that you are, in effect, a second-rate person. This leaves an imprint because people in these marginalized

groups are often getting this message from the early days of childhood, at least by early adolescence.

It could be from racism, homophobia, or gender discrimination. The message goes out that if you're not conforming to the cultural ideal or the norm in the dominant culture, then you're not as valuable as those people. This message can be overt, like direct racism, or it can be more subtle—implicit bias communicates the same message. If it goes in at an early age, it can go in deeply.

So one can grow up with this kind of internalized sense of being second-rate or second-class. It's very painful. When people come into meditation, that which has been carried maybe a little subconsciously can really start to come to the surface. Same thing if the message has come from parents or teachers or other sources—you may have been taught that you're not good enough in these different ways. As you sit in meditation, this sense of not being enough starts to come through.

Whether it's come from a societal message directed to a marginalized group, or whether it's come as an individual message to you from people around you, this is something that comes up often in retreat. Many, many people feel it.

The Dalai Lama used to meet with groups of Western dharma teachers in Dharamsala. He'd invite about twenty Western dharma teachers over at a time. I never got to go, but I know a bunch of people who did. He would discuss with them over a couple of days issues that they found were important coming up in their teaching.

One year they asked him how to work with this feeling—let's call it lack of self-worth or sense of worthlessness or inferiority. He didn't understand what they were asking about. He didn't have any experience of it. He didn't know about it in Tibetan culture, because children there, apparently, are loved from very early on. Children are really dearly prized in Tibetan culture and get such an outpouring of love from the extended family that they grow up feeling valued and worthwhile. The Dalai Lama could not understand what this feeling was about.

And so he went around to all the teachers and asked, "Have you felt this before?" Yes. "Have you felt this?" Yes. Virtually every teacher there said they had experienced this kind of lack of self-worth in their upbringing and had to work with it in their dharma practice. He was shocked.

The first thing we must do is recognize this pattern, because if we don't, it operates subconsciously. It's not something that stands out as strongly as anger or fear—it's more subtle and underlying. As it arises, we need to appreciate how it makes us feel. We can experience it as a bodily sensation once we learn to touch into it.

I remember going through a period of working with this feeling. It was like carrying a weight on my shoulders that I had to support because I wasn't good enough to relax. I had to hold up this burden. We can work through this considerably—it's one of the things that can truly lift through sustained meditation.

One of the most effective tools for working with self-doubt is loving-kindness practice. We need this partly for ourselves, to soften our attitude and acceptance of ourselves, but also toward people we genuinely like and care about, because that brings the metta out more clearly and strongly. When metta starts to come alive in our hearts—genuine metta awakening in our hearts—we truly know the inner quality of goodness. Then we trust ourselves. There's not much better than metta in the human experience. When we feel that within ourselves, we really trust in our own goodness. We trust that we're capable and equal.

To illustrate how widespread this struggle is, I recently finished reading Michelle Obama's memoir, *Becom ing*. It's a beautiful book where she speaks very honestly about her trials and learning in this area. She was a young Black girl in a not particularly prosperous section of Chicago, receiving all the messages from television, newspapers, and movies that she wasn't in the privileged class, the favored class, the dominant class. So with everything she undertook, she carried this deep inner self-doubt: Am I going to be good enough? Am I going to be smart enough?

Fortunately, she had loving parents—I think that was enormously helpful. She just kept moving forward. She managed to get accepted into one of the best high schools in Chicago, went from there to Princeton where her brother had gone on a basketball scholarship, was admitted to Harvard Law, and then joined a prestigious law firm in Chicago, where she met Barack. Then things really changed. But at every step of the way, she had to keep answering this question: Am I good enough? Am I smart enough? She kept meeting it, facing it, and growing, becoming the amazing person we witnessed her become before our eyes.

Another difficult emotion for us to work with is sadness. This one is particularly challenging because often sadness or grief can feel overwhelming. There's sometimes a worry: "If I open to this, I'm going to drown in it. It's going to take me over and I'll never be able to get out." It feels so vast that we don't feel capable of opening to it.

With emotions of this magnitude, you may need to take it one step at a time. Go into it partway, come back out, re-center through nature, meditation, finding your anchor, creating spaciousness, walking—whatever works—and then go back in a little further. But this idea that overwhelming grief will consume us forever simply isn't true in my experience with meditators.

I had the privilege of observing one such process—a parent in California who lost a child to suicide. I believe that's one of the greatest losses a human being can experience in this life. She came to meditation and retreats partly to heal from that depth of grief. Watching her year after year as she kept returning to retreats, hearing her reports of what was happening for her—it was remarkable to witness that over a period of years, she emerged from that grief.

That grief really healed for her. And now she's leading a support group for other parents who have lost children through suicide because she knows firsthand that healing is really possible. She's become a wonderful source of support for others. This transformation came through her willingness to go step by

step through that level of grieving and sadness, meeting it with mindfulness and compassion.

The last difficult emotion I want to explore is fear. This is my personal favorite because it's one I worked with extensively in the early years of practice, becoming quite familiar with its nuances and challenges.

One pattern I noticed with fear was that when it arose, I would get scared of the fear itself. Fear would appear, and immediately I'd think, "I don't want this. That's too scary to investigate." Fear can be among the most unpleasant emotions we experience. I had to examine this fear of fear, this secondary layer of aversion.

The underlying story for me was something like: "This present moment is bearable—just barely, but it's manageable. But in the next moment, something truly disastrous will happen, and that won't be bearable at all." This anticipatory dread was what fueled my fear of fear.

Eventually I questioned this assumption. My teachers kept encouraging me to open to whatever arose and simply feel it. Little by little, I began to trust their guidance and experiment with this approach.

The doorway in for me was through bodily awareness. My teachers gave me the same instructions I've been sharing: Feel the physical sensations first, then explore the emotional flavor in the mind. Notice the mental story, then let it go.

My recurring story was always "the next moment is going to be unbearable." I practiced releasing this narrative and returning to direct experience. When I tuned into the sensations of fear, I found my stomach clenched, a fluttery energy rising through my abdomen, and an overall sense of feeling light and ungrounded. The fear was intense and genuinely unpleasant.

But then I began asking myself a crucial question: "Can I bear these sensations in this present moment, right now?" And I discovered I could. This realization opened a significant door. I found I could actually tolerate the experience of fear. It wasn't pleasant—I wasn't rolling out the welcome mat—but I could bear it.

As I continued opening to the sensations and moved deeper, I wondered, "What is this emotion really like? What's the bare mental nature of fear?" This investigation proved quite tricky. Fear is particularly challenging because its very nature involves moving away. Fear says, "Get me away from this—it's too dangerous." So attempting to move closer to the raw emotion of fear goes directly against fear's fundamental impulse.

The closer I got, the more strongly it protested: "Don't get close to me. It's not safe here." Fear kept trying to push me away from itself. But gradually I was able to get closer and open to the bare experience of the emotion.

Then one of my teachers offered a profound challenge: "You know, if you really accept something completely, you're willing to say it could be with you for the rest of your life, and you wouldn't mind." So I

asked myself honestly: "Could I be with fear for the rest of my life?"

The answer came back with startling clarity: "No way. I can't do that. I'm not ready for that level of acceptance."

If I was with fear for the rest of my life, I wouldn't enjoy anything again. I wouldn't enjoy music or a sunset or anything. So I said, no, I can't do that.

But then I started to see, if I was holding myself back from fear, I was still creating this distance. And that was going to make the fear hang around, still stir me up. So I said, okay, I could either be agitated the rest of my life, or I could take a risk and maybe find some peace. So I went for peace.

I said, "Okay, fear. If you want to stay around the rest of my life, it's okay." And I really meant it. I really meant it. When I made that move, and I really meant it, something broke in the fear. It lost some kind of hold that it had had over me. It's kind of like its spine cracked a little bit.

I went through a phase in my practice where fear was coming and going, and I really didn't care. I didn't care if it went, I didn't care if it stayed, didn't care if it arose, didn't care if it passed away. And for me, that was the turning point in relating to it.

Fear can still arise for me. Sometimes I have to remind myself, it's okay. It's really an old acquaintance, an old friend. But it really is okay with me now.

I was interested to read this account from Ajaan Liem, a Thai teacher who was a disciple of Ajahn Chah. When Ajahn Chah died, he named Ajahn Liem as his successor. So Ajahn Liem is now the abbot of Ajahn Chah's old monastery, Wat Ba Pong in northeast Thailand. Ajahn Liem apparently is also an arahant, a fully awakened being. There's a beautiful biography with some autobiography and reflections, and he recounts his awakening. It's inspiring. Maybe we'll talk about that later. But he's a very special being, for sure.

At some point, he was in conversation with another abbot. The abbot asked him, as one practitioner might to another, "What was the hardest thing in your practice?" Ajahn Liem said, "I would have to say that fear was the hardest thing for me." Then he paused. He said, "But just to say that it was hard isn't quite right. I would have to say that it was a worthy opponent. Working with it brought about the growth of a lot of wisdom."

That's what I would say about my working with fear also. I had to go really deep in order to accept fear just the way it was and to open to it that completely. I had to find a kind of strength and courage and wisdom I didn't even know I was capable of. But once I found that understanding and that strength, I felt I could work with any emotion.

So the learning wasn't just about fear. It was about any emotion that might come. I found out I could be with it. What looks like a disaster in your practice may turn out to be your lifeboat. It may turn out to be

the thing that really fuels your liberation and your awakening and your growth in the Dhamma. So don't mind it. Don't mind it. We all have this potential of tremendous growth through really opening to these challenging areas.

In the beginning you think, "Well, I'm going to wake up by getting rid of confusion." There's confusion on the one hand, which is our agitated state of mind, and there's awakening, which is wise, peaceful, and compassionate. You might think, "When I get rid of this stuff, then I'll be over here in awakening."

But what has to happen is we have to wake up in the middle of our difficulties. We have to bring the awakened mind or discover the awakened mind in the middle of confusion. It's not get rid of confusion first, then awakened mind shows up. It's find awakened mind in the middle of confusion. This is possible. This is what we're practicing for.

So I want to close with a quotation—a poem from Rilke, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, from a little book called *The Book of Hours*. He wrote this when he was in his twenties, some of his most accessible poetry. He was traveling around, mostly Germany but I think other parts of Europe as well, visiting churches and becoming very inspired and spiritual.

This poem is called "God Speaks to Each of Us."

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,
then walks with us silently out of the night.
These are the words we dimly hear:
You, sent out beyond your memory,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you:
beauty and terror.
Just keep going.
No feeling is final.
Don't let yourself lose me.
Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Let's just sit for a minute together, please.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror. Just keep going. No feeling is final. Don't let yourself lose me.

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