Morning Instructions—Mindfulness of Moods and Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 46:35

Yesterday in the meditation instructions and in the dharma talk, Bonnie talked about how to work with these five hindering energies that the Buddha said can obstruct our meditation and weaken wisdom if we don't know how to relate to them skillfully.

In the instructions today we're going to extend that field of mindfulness to take in, in addition to the five hindrances, the whole area of moods, emotions, and states of mind.

I want to talk a little bit about the vocabulary I'm using here. All these terms—mood, emotion, state of mind—are all pointing to experiences that happen on the mental level, but they have slightly different significance.

A mood is an emotion that's kind of light and a little bit in the background. I don't know if you've ever noticed sometimes you wake up from a dream and even though the images of the dream may not be clear, there's some kind of lingering feeling from the dream. It's like a pervasive or ongoing mood. Sometimes we'll pick up one of those from different places. It could be a mood of being a little nostalgic. You could be feeling just a little blue. There could be a mood of being pleased, waking up and seeing a sunny day. There could be a sense of a little bit of apprehension, just not sure how the day is going to unfold—which of course we never know. But moods tend to be light, kind of cloudy and in the background, not as strong as a clear emotion.

One level up from that, what we call emotions—the whole field of affect—would include things like feelings of happiness, feelings of sadness, feeling of joy or love, a feeling of fear or anger, feeling of loneliness, feeling of compassion. These are stronger expressions that come into the heart and mind. You notice how Bonnie used those terms together a lot last night—heart-mind or mind-heart. The word in Pali is citta, and this is the third foundation of mindfulness. To me, I think the best translation in one word might be psyche. The psyche contains both thoughts, emotions, moods—a whole range of experiences. So this is the area we're moving into today, the whole range of the third foundation: moods and emotions.

This third term that I'll use, states of mind or mind states, is the broadest. It encompasses moods and emotions, but it also extends to what I'd call subtle meditative states that aren't so familiar to Western culture necessarily—states like mindfulness, concentration, calm, equanimity. These states that are developed out of our deepening mindfulness we also want to take in in this third foundation, and we'll include those in states of mind or mind states. They're usually quite subtle and it takes some learning to

tune in and to recognize them. Some of them are similar. I know the difference between calm, concentration, and equanimity may not be clear until you've practiced with them all for a while.

In the instructions this morning, I want to go through a review of what we've covered so far in a way that I hope will make it clear how you can be practicing. Sometimes when we offer many different instructions over several days, people say, "What am I supposed to do? Just tell me what I'm supposed to do and I'll do it."

So this morning, I'm going to tell you what I think you could do. It's not what you have to do, because many of you have come in with a practice you're familiar with, or you may be doing a specific practice that you've talked about with your teacher, and that's fine. But I'm going to suggest one path that I hope will be a clear set of instructions for you to follow if you'd like.

Please begin by sitting comfortably and also at the same time upright, finding this balance that we've talked about. If you can, begin with a mental attitude of relaxation as though your work is already done right now. You just have to be here and feel what's here. No real task to accomplish. You're not trying to get from here to there; you're just trying to get more here. However here is, is fine.

We may notice a certain mood, may notice the body being a certain way, may notice certain thoughts that have come along from just before. That's all fine. Just relax into the experience of being here now.

Let the body relax as much as possible. Let the forehead be smoothed. Let the eyes be soft. The jaw can be dropped. The shoulders can be let go. The belly can be soft. The hands don't need to be tight.

First, just settle your awareness into this experience of the body and sitting. The mind is relaxed. The body is relaxed as possible. Then let the attention open in a wide way to take in all the sounds that are coming and going.

Sounds all around you, front and back, left and right. Notice that hearing doesn't require any special effort, but if you just rest in the present moment, all the sounds are known spontaneously. All you have to do is be present and receive.

Now bring the attention back into the body, letting the attention still stay very receptive. Receive all the sensations connected with breathing. Each in-breath feels a certain way in the body. What does that feel like? The out-breath feels different. How does that feel?

We don't need to control the breath. We don't need to make it long or short, shallow or deep. Just let the breath come and go as it will, and we're just there to feel it, to know it. Some people like to feel the breath at the tip of the nose, others at the belly or the chest. Sometimes you like to feel the breath through the whole body, staying in touch with the whole body and feeling the impact throughout. All these are fine.

Generally what we've been recommending is that one of these three styles—body posture, sounds, or breath—become an anchor for your sitting practice. What that means is if there's nothing else special

going on, you have a comfortable place for your attention to come back to, to rest in. Or if the mindfulness has been interrupted by a stretch of thinking, a comfortable place to reconnect to.

Let's say that you're practicing in this way. If nothing special is going on, you're with your anchor—body, sounds, breath. As you're doing that, other things will naturally take your attention. That's what it means when an experience is predominant. Something arises that naturally draws your attention. Could be a sound, could be another body sensation, an ache in the knee, a pleasant feeling in the chest.

When you become aware of that new object, that new sensation, let that become your meditation focus. Easily let go of your anchor and let the attention begin to relate to this new experience. For a sensation in the body, connect with its bare physical nature. You don't need to make a concept, but just feel its elemental quality.

Is it pulsing or vibrating or tingling or itching? Is it warm or cool? Is it pressing or stabbing? Is it heavy or light? Is it aching or throbbing? Let the attention stay with that object, letting the mindfulness be established there for as long as that sensation seems strong, seems to naturally draw the attention.

At some point it may fade or the attention will be drawn to some new arising, a new sensation. If a sensation is strong, you could be with it for most of a meditation period. If it's somewhat fleeting, you might only be with it for five or ten seconds. Either way is fine.

When the attention lets go of that sensation, you could return to your anchor, or there could be a new sensation that draws the attention and becomes predominant. Then easily move to that, letting the mindfulness be established there.

From time to time, the attention will be drawn to the mood or emotion or mind state that's present. There's always some state of mind that's present. A lot of times we don't pay attention to it, but there's always something there. You might just check right in this moment: What is the mood, emotion, or state of mind? Could be a light emotional flavor, could be a strong emotion, could be one of the meditative states like calm or equanimity. Just notice there is always some state of mind going on.

From time to time that arena will come into the foreground. You'll notice, "Oh, this is what's happening now—a mood, emotion, or mind state." When that happens, make that new experience the focus for mindfulness.

It could be one of the five hindrance energies: sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, or doubt. Could be a subtle mood—nostalgia, apprehension. Could be a strong emotion—joy, love, anxiety. Could be recognizing the meditative state of interest.

These states of mind are not always easy to attend to because they can feel so light and insubstantial. When you check in with the mood in the mind, it can feel very cloud-like, almost ethereal. If you connect with it and find it difficult to sustain attention, that's perfectly fine. You can return to the anchor and

notice what's predominant.

When emotions are strong, however, they will have a clear impact in the body. With emotions like fear or anger, or strong happiness and joy, feel where they're expressing themselves physically. Let your attention go to the bodily sensations and allow that to be the place where you feel both the sensations and the mood or emotion together.

What you'll discover is that strong emotions have two distinct aspects. There's a physical expression through the body, which manifests as certain sensations. And there's the coloring or mood or flavor that exists in the mind—the pure mental quality of the mood or emotion.

With difficult emotions, it's particularly helpful to use the RAIN practice that Bonnie described earlier: Recognize or name the emotion, Allow or accept it, become Interested and investigate, and see it as Nature with non-identification. As we become familiar with difficult emotions, we discover we don't need to fear feeling them. We can completely allow ourselves to let them in, touch them with mindfulness, envelop them with mindfulness, penetrate them with awareness. They cannot harm us as long as we remain conscious and present.

We begin to notice that all emotions have the natural quality of impermanence—they arise and pass away. We don't need to force them to leave because their very nature is to change and dissolve. We simply open to them, feel them fully, recognize and allow them, then let them go when they're ready to go. From there, we either return to the anchor or turn attention to whatever is next most predominant—breath, sound, sensation, emotion, or mood.

In this way, meditation becomes quite natural and organic. You simply allow the attention to go where it's drawn and notice where it's going. You establish mindfulness there. If nothing particularly compelling is happening, there's always your anchor to return to for restabilization.

What's happening in this moment? Where is the attention naturally drawn? Can mindfulness be established in relation to that natural part of our experience? This approach allows the practice to unfold with ease and authenticity.

This meditation on emotions and mind states is tremendously important for several reasons. First, we come to know our inner terrain intimately. We learn how to direct the mind, to skillfully shape consciousness and cultivate wholesome mind states while abandoning those that are unwholesome.

Additionally, difficult mind states are responsible for much of our suffering in life. You might say that all of our suffering actually emerges from these challenging mental formations. Even our relationship with illness, physical pain, aging, and death—the real difficulty lies in the emotions that these experiences evoke rather than the experiences themselves.

Learning to bring mindfulness to these states offers us profound opportunities for freedom. It's one of the

most significant pathways to greater happiness and ease in living. I encourage you to work with these states directly, to explore this terrain and discover what's contained in this aspect of human nature that we all share.

Sometimes when people are introduced to this practice, they worry that if they're not experiencing strong emotions, the meditation isn't working properly. This isn't true at all. Meditation paths unfold in remarkably different ways. Some practitioners have very emotional practices, while others experience very little emotional intensity. Both approaches are perfectly valid—it's deeply individual.

If you're not having strong emotional experiences, it doesn't mean the practice isn't effective. It may be working beautifully. Take time to appreciate what is actually present. Perhaps you're experiencing a state of calm or equanimity. According to the Buddha, calm was indeed a very positive quality worthy of cultivation and appreciation.

We have time for a few questions this morning. I'm going to try something different with our question period. I've noticed over the last few days that I've had difficulty hearing some questions, especially those from the back of the room or when voices are particularly soft. So I'm going to ask that if you'd like to pose a question, please use the microphone. Jared has kindly offered to serve as our mic runner today.

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