# Working with Difficult Emotions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:02:01

The subject of tonight's talk is working with difficult emotions. This array of states goes by different names in the Buddhist lists—sometimes called the hindrances, or the kilesas, or afflictive emotions, or disturbing emotions, or the taints. By whatever name, they cause a lot of suffering. It doesn't matter what you call them, but they are responsible for the primary sufferings in our life. When we don't understand how to work with them or to relate with them skillfully, we feel we are the victim of their onslaught. Coming to learn some skills in relating to these emotions is one of the avenues to open up a huge amount of new feelings of freedom in our life through the direct application of our vipassana practice. This is one of the biggest, most immediate benefits I think people can see from mindfulness practice.

This is from Pema Chödrön: "In all kinds of situations, we can find out what is true simply by studying ourselves in every nook and cranny, in every dark hole and bright spot, whether it's murky, creepy, splendid, spooky, 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.

It's interesting when we look at children—they are not worried about their emotions. Whatever comes up, they're just right there with it and they don't hold back. It's not necessarily mindfulness, but there's a fearless quality with children that's really beautiful. By the time we've grown up, we may have been harmed in different ways by the world, by society, or by our own emotions, and we become more tentative in relating to these emotions. But before children are harmed, they're very open to experiencing their emotional life. So as meditators, we can regain some of that kind of openness and fearlessness in the emotional field.

As Joseph talked about this morning, if you can simply let emotions arise, pass through, and fade away, that's great. There's no problem. However, at this point as adults, we've generally become tangled up in certain emotions. We resist them, we're afraid of them, they make us uncomfortable, and we really struggle with them. So learning how to find the right relationship to these emotions is a really important part of our dharma path. You might say that becoming free in relation to disturbing emotions is the central journey of the path that we're on.

At first, as we get to know the terrain, we want to make these things go away. But we soon learn that's not possible in the short term. There is the possibility of that with true liberation. It's said that all these afflictive emotions go away—the Buddha said, "cut off like a palm stump, never to arise again." This is the possibility of the path, but for most of us that's still some way off. But we can find much greater freedom in relation to them even when they arise by learning some pretty basic skills.

Again 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 100 miles an hour to the other side of the continent in order to get away from the obstacle, we find the very same problem waiting for us when we arrive."

So this area of work is very central. The Buddha talked about this in terms of meditation as the third foundation of mindfulness. The third foundation is known as the foundation of citta, which is often translated as mind, but as Bonnie has been translating it in her talks and instructions, she's been calling it heart-mind, or sometimes mind-heart. What that points to is that in the Pali word citta, both affective or emotional elements and cognitive or thought-rational processes are both involved in the field of citta.

In the West, if you ask somebody where their mind is—an ordinary person in the street—where do you think they'll point? Up here, right? In the West, we tend to take the mind to be equivalent with the brain. In Thailand, if you ask somebody where the citta is—the Thai word for citta is jit—they'll point here, to the center of the chest, what we call the heart center. So they'll point to what's known as the heart area, emphasizing the heart aspect of citta, heart-mind. So it really is both of these.

Just a little postscript for those of you who are interested in this: The Western concept of the brain as the ruler of everything is quite deep for us. I was sitting with a Tibetan teacher, a bright young Rinpoche, and he was describing a human being with an analogy to an airplane. He said the stomach is kind of the engine and the legs are like the jets and the wings. He said the fuel is the food that we eat. And he said the brain is just the computer—the brain is the airplane's computer. The pilot is awareness. And awareness is often equated to citta at the heart center.

So I thought that was interesting. His view: the brain is just a computer. Nothing special.

So citta encompasses moods, emotions, and states of mind. I mentioned this the other day in the instructions, so I'll just repeat it briefly.

Emotions are the kinds of feelings that we often talk about—feelings we can experience strongly. Things like love and jealousy, loneliness, despair, joy, and so forth.

Moods are similar to emotions, but they're more toned down. They're more subtle, maybe more cloud-like in the background. So we might say that we're feeling a little melancholy, we're feeling a little nostalgic, or we're feeling tender right now. It's not quite strong enough to be called an emotion, but it's definitely in the affective realm and we feel it through our heart-mind.

And then states of mind include moods and emotions and also all the more subtle meditative qualities: mindfulness, concentration, interest, equanimity, peace, and so forth. So citta includes all of these. In fact, when I say states of mind, it includes everything you can notice as a quality of mind or heart—this entire mental range.

In Buddhism, as most of you are familiar, the states of mind fall into two basic categories: wholesome and unwholesome. Now this might sound moralistic or judgmental, but it's not meant that way. It requires discernment, for sure, but discernment is not the same as judgment in my vocabulary. For me, judgment implies a sense of condemnation, a strong moralistic outlook that says it's bad. So discerning wholesome and unwholesome is not necessarily to be taken as bad, but it's more understood as not skillful. These are not helpful states.

The unwholesome states lead into suffering for ourselves and others. The wholesome states lead toward happiness for ourselves and for others. So of course it's skillful to cultivate the wholesome states and to decrease the unwholesome states. This is essentially the heart of our Dharma practice: grow what is wholesome and leads to happiness, decrease what is unwholesome that leads to suffering. This is in fact the definition of right effort. If you look at right effort as part of the Eightfold Path, this is basically what it says: grow the wholesome, decrease the unwholesome. And there are many meditative tools in order to do that.

In fact, one of the things I think is so beautiful about the Dharma—I had no idea of this before I encountered Buddhadharma—these tools give us the ability to shape our heart-mind in any direction we choose and to shape it to any depth that we want. We have tools and practices within our tradition to do that.

Do you want to become more loving? There's a practice for that. Do you want to develop compassion? There's a practice for that. Do you want to develop liberating insight and become as free as the Buddha? There's a path for that. Do you want to develop psychic powers through concentration? There's a path for that.

So in whatever direction we would like to shape this heart-mind, we can do that. The tools are there. We just have to pick the path and do the work.

I find this amazing and part of the genius of the Buddha—that he could see the mind so clearly that he could separate out these wholesome and unwholesome qualities and direct us to the cultivation of any one of them or all of them.

This process of cultivation is what's known in the tradition as bhavana. Bhavana is often translated as mental development, sometimes cultivation. It literally means bringing into being. So we can bring these wholesome qualities into being. That's the purpose of our effort.

We'll talk more about wholesome states as we go. In the beginning, we tend to lay the foundation with working with what is difficult. But just briefly about wholesome states for now, two things.

One: notice them when they come. Sometimes we take them for granted, like, "Oh, this is what's supposed to be happening." When things quiet inside, how often do you note clearly, "Oh, the calm, peace, tranquility, serenity"?

Not so much. We tend to take that for granted—"Oh, this is what should be happening. Now I'm peaceful. This is what it's supposed to be." We should notice that because peace is also conditioned, the outcome of prior causes and conditions. And as we notice it more, we appreciate it. Then we learn how to steer there. That's one thing: notice the wholesome states.

Second, of course it's obvious—don't cling. Or be mindful when you do cling, because we will tend to. But clinging to the wholesome leads to suffering as well.

With the difficult states, we also need two things. The first is a shift in attitude. When I was first practicing in long retreat, some difficult emotion would come up—for me a lot it was fear and anger. I side on the aversive personality type, so it was a lot of fear and anger. Desire wasn't so strong for me. And when one of those emotions would come, I'd think, "This shouldn't be happening. This is wrong. This is a mistake. Meditation's not going right. This thing should go away." That only led to more conflict because it was there and it was real.

So the first thing to notice is we need not to have a judgmental attitude toward these difficult emotions. They're part of the human package. They come about because of causes and conditions. They don't come because you're a bad person. They come because of their own conditioned life. And when they come, it's not a mistake. As Pema Chödrön said, they will come until we've learned from them what we need to know, which is how to be free in relation to them.

The attitude often to these states is very rejecting: Don't want it. It's not what should be happening. I'm bad if I have it. They're bad for coming. And we try to push them away. So we really need to work toward an attitude of acceptance. This is an important thing to check: What's your attitude when these states arise? Work with acceptance, which is the A in RAIN.

The second thing we need is a greater understanding of their nature. Once we can just start to observe these things pass through—like Joseph said, like clouds, they don't have roots, they don't have homes—we can start to see that their nature is to come, to persist for a while, and then to pass away. When we trust in that, we see they're not problematic. They may not be pleasant, but they're not problematic. We don't have to try to make them go away because their nature is to go away.

This is seeing the emptiness aspect of the emotion. Empty here doesn't mean that the emotion is meaningless. Emotions are a rich source in our life, but it means they're ephemeral. They're as light as clouds. They come, they persist, they pass away. This is their essentially empty nature. They're not fixed in us and they're not who we are. They're temporary visitors.

So the first step in working with these emotions is to know what they are. It's like there's this terrain in here that if we haven't been trained, we have to learn about. And I wasn't trained when I came into meditation. My upbringing hadn't taught me to know and understand these states.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if children learned these skills from the start? There's a beautiful movement

spreading across this country through organizations like Mindful Schools and others, bringing mindfulness teachers into elementary and middle schools to teach children how to recognize their emotions and observe their effects.

One of our sangha members in California, who ran a preschool for many years, discovered she could teach these fundamental principles to three- to five-year-olds. Of course, they wouldn't sit down for traditional meditation instruction using terms like mindfulness, stillness, and concentration. Instead, she would begin with yoga sessions—children naturally love moving their bodies, stretching, and feeling into their physical experience.

After yoga, she would have them lie on the floor with their heads pointing toward the center, creating a sense of community. Then she would offer meditation instructions that went something like this: "Your awareness is like a big pond of water. Within that pond, all kinds of fish are swimming through. Start noticing what fish are swimming through your pond. There are happy fish, sad fish, angry fish, loving fish, friendly fish. Just open up. You be the water and let all the fish swim through. No problem."

The children could relate to this imagery beautifully. After one session, she asked them to share their experience. A five-year-old said, "I could let all the fish swim through, but I couldn't let the mad fish swim through." When she asked why not, he replied, "When you don't know you're the water, the mad fish makes you do things that hurt people."

Five years old.

This understanding can indeed emerge when children are young, and there's a growing movement in this direction. But if we didn't attend that preschool, we can learn these skills now. It's essential we do, because the mad fish can make us act unskillfully too.

Understanding our emotions begins with recognizing what we're feeling as we're feeling it. Without this awareness, our emotions act unconsciously through us. This practice sounds simple, but it's more challenging than it appears.

Let me share an example from my early years of practice. I was sitting a three-month retreat here, about two weeks in, and had developed reasonable concentration. My mindfulness felt fairly strong. When the 9:15 morning sitting bell rang, I walked out the back door for walking meditation. In those days, I practiced on the lawn below what's now Bodhi House.

I had walked in the same spot every period for two weeks, so I was very mindful—noting lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing as I walked slowly outside. But when I looked down at my walking path, someone else was there.

"What are they doing in my walking path?" I thought. "They must have seen me walking here every period for two weeks. Did I cut in front of them in line this morning? Are they trying to play games with my

head?" All the while continuing: lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing.

I walked down there anyway, internally steaming. I found another patch of grass which, to my great surprise, worked just as well as my original spot.

And I continued with my walking practice, but internally, I was still stewing about why that person had stolen my walking path. Honestly, I thought I was being mindful, but it was thirty minutes into the period before I realized, "Oh, I'm angry."

I thought I was mindful, but these thoughts had come in. The hindrances sneak in like under our mindfulness radar. We've got our mindfulness radar up. We think we're really present, and these things slip under and take us over.

So once I saw that I was angry, then I could start to relate with it. "Oh, I know how to work with this. This is anger. I'll feel it in my body. I'll make space. I'll look at the thoughts. I'll open to it with allowance." And then it just sort of passed through. But until I could identify it, I couldn't relate with it. I had no way to work with it, and subconsciously it was just pushing me. I had no freedom. I was compelled by the force of it.

So we see that when we don't know what we're feeling, we tend to just react blindly out of it. And this is what the Buddha called unwise attention, misdirected attention. I was putting all my attention on the other person and the story that I'd created about them. The story was they shouldn't have been there. They were in my path and they were wrong and I was right. And when I believed that story, I got all worked up.

But as soon as I turned the attention back inward to the experience of anger, then I could relate to it with mindfulness and it could be released.

So when the hindrance comes, when an afflictive emotion comes, the most important thing is to notice that the story is taking your attention somewhere else and direct the attention back to the direct experience of the emotion that's there. Because when we're with the emotion, with mindfulness, there's not just the emotion. There's the emotion plus mindfulness, which carries a bit of wisdom. When mindfulness even recognizes, "Oh, this is anger," there's a bit of wisdom or intelligence coming in. So now you're not just caught with the afflictive emotion. There's the afflictive emotion plus your own wisdom. And that shifts everything.

The first thing it does is it lets you feel more space around the emotion that you're feeling. And discovering space around these emotions gives us choice. We can choose how to act in the world. We can choose how to respond through our meditation tools. So as soon as we can name it with mindfulness, we create some space and that makes it workable.

It's a very interesting fact. There are so many research studies now on mindfulness and the tools of

mindfulness. One study took a group of people who were working with anger management techniques—and there are a lot of them out there in the psychological world. But this one took a group of people and what they had them do was very simple. They just instructed them that every time they were angry, just note by using the word "anger." It's all they were instructed to do. And they found that that simple technique of noting the emotion they were feeling was as effective as any other technique and more effective than most. Just naming the emotion they were feeling really helped the people to restrain actions based on that anger.

So there are these different lists of the difficult emotions. Bonnie talked about the hindrances. Of course that's a central one in the Buddha's teaching. When I look at my experience and the experience of meditators that I talk to, I come up with a little bit different list of what I'd call maybe the top five difficult emotions. And four of them I want you to tell me about. I'm going to ask you some questions and I want you to tell me.

One of the curious things about difficult emotions is that they rely on grasping. Beautiful emotions don't rely on grasping. You can see someone in the moment, have an outburst of loving kindness or compassion that's not tied with grasping at all. But grasping means we've taken a hold of something in the past and we're still hanging on to it. So that implies continuity over time. So the afflictive emotions are bound up with time in a way that beautiful emotions are not.

We're going to take a look at time as one axis.

We're going to do an x-y graph. Do you love algebra? You've come to the right place.

We're going to do a chart with the horizontal axis, the x-axis, being time. And of course time is usually seen as moving from your left to your right, so that'll be the movement of time. The past is this way, the future is that way, the present is right in the middle.

The vertical axis is going to be from pleasure to pain, because a lot of our emotions revolve around what we like and what we don't like, what's pleasant and what's painful. So the vertical axis is from pain at the bottom to pleasure at the top.

We've now created four quadrants. Let's look at each of those four quadrants.

Let's start with the future—sometimes future is more fun, it's more open. So there's something pleasant that may be happening in the future. What emotion would come up around that? Excitement. Anticipation. Joy. What would you feel towards something that's out there that's not quite there yet? Craving. It's wanting, isn't it?

Pleasant things in the future evoke wanting—some form of desire. "Oh, we're going to have cookies for lunch tomorrow." I don't know that, by the way. Probably we're not, but that's just an example. So this quadrant, pleasant in the future, evokes desire, and this is one of the primal forces in our minds, in our

lives.

What if there's something that's unpleasant that's coming in the future? Fear. After you get home, you're going to talk to your boss and you're going to have to do a big presentation. Fear, anxiety, nervousness about unpleasant in the future. So fear is another very fundamental force.

Pleasant in the past. Something that was there in the past, very lovely, satisfying, agreeable, dear, not there anymore. What's the feeling? Regret. Sadness. It's gone. That beautiful thing we had isn't there anymore. Sadness, grief. You really feel this with the loss of a relationship, loss of a job, loss of a person in your life. There's sadness or grief—another very primary emotion.

And then what about something painful in the past? And let's say, to zero in a bit, connected with another human being. Resentment, anger. It's in that field, isn't it, when someone has done something unpleasant to you?

So these are, I think, as I see it, the big four that move us: wanting, fear, sadness, and anger. I see these come up a lot in myself. They're very powerful, and I think they're very primary for us as humans.

And then one wrinkle around the anger piece—if it gets directed at ourselves, it comes across as self-judgment. So we judge ourselves, we're angry at ourselves for something that we did that was not skillful in the past.

So these are the big five that I want to talk about a little bit more tonight.

*So the first thing is to say, as we meditate with these, when these states come up, start to investigate them in three aspects.*

All these difficult emotions will impact us in three ways. The first is that each of these is just a mental quality on its own. Desire feels a certain way, fear feels a certain way, sadness feels a certain way. Each of these has a distinctive quality, which is a quality of the mind.

Then second, when they're felt strongly, they'll impact the body. Body and mind are very closely intertwined—they feel as though they're merged in us. But with training we can start to separate out what's mental and what's physical.

So when we feel a strong emotion—I'll take fear as an example—when it's there and strong, it often feels like a clenching somewhere. Could be in the belly, could be in the chest, could be a contraction through the whole body. So we feel the impact of fear in the body somewhere.

The meditation instruction is this: in order to remain mindful of fear, go to the point in the body where you feel it and pay attention there. And you might just alternate between feeling the physical sensation of contraction and tuning into the mental flavoring or color that is fear.

Now sometimes people say, "I don't see the mental side of what you're talking about. I go in the body and

there's this contraction and I feel the mood there also. I don't see two things. I just see one thing."

But let me ask this: Have you ever had fear in a dream? When you didn't necessarily feel the body at all? And yet you knew, oh, this is fear. So when we feel these emotions in dreams, we're not necessarily connected with the body. But we feel the emotion clearly and we know it. That's the mental component.

Another way to think about it is that the fear and the contraction are there together. It's a little bit like mixing cream in your coffee. If you can feel contraction from another source—maybe anger has a contraction that feels like that too, maybe you're doing an isometric exercise at the gym and you feel that contraction—then you notice what the contraction feels like on its own. That's the coffee. Then you pour a little bit of fear in there, they get stirred together, and that's fear plus contraction. And that's what you come to know as the emotion of fear.

So take some time and explore. See if you can find the flavor or the mood or the coloring in the mind of each of the emotions. Happiness has a flavor. Joy has a color. Fear has a flavor. And they're all different. You'll feel these in dreams. You know them just as they are. And then you notice how it mixes with the body. So go back and forth. Feel the body. Feel the mental mood or color.

And then the third aspect to pay attention to are the thoughts. When you're in a happy state, you tend to think happy thoughts. When you're in an angry state, you tend to think angry thoughts. So watch the thoughts that come that are connected to the emotion.

There's one kind of thought that's especially important. Sometimes it's not even conscious, but it's like a subconscious belief. So like with my walking meditation, when somebody was in my path, I hooked onto the anger because I had a belief. And the belief was, "They're wrong and I'm right." When I let go of that view, the anger couldn't stand.

So also, the afflictive emotions all have storylines or unconscious beliefs that we hold. So we'll look at those for each of these.

*Okay, so let's talk about desire.** This is a movement of mind that wants to have a pleasant experience. It can happen really frequently in a retreat.

For things outside—people, places, your home, food, drink—this can happen inside the retreat as well. You want to repeat a concentrated sit, you want calm, you want an insight to come again. It can happen in both ways, but it comes up a lot in retreat.

I was teaching a retreat in Italy some years ago, which was a blast. I loved teaching Italians because I found they seemed really fluent with their emotions. They knew what they were feeling when they were feeling it.

I was having an interview with a young Italian man on about the fourth day of the retreat. I asked him how the retreat was for him, and he said, "It's not going well. I don't want to be here."

"Oh, okay. Well, why are you here?" I asked.

"This is August. This is my holiday time. I could have taken a vacation—this is my vacation. Some friends of mine were going to the Caribbean and they asked me if I wanted to go with them. Or I could have come to the meditation retreat."

"So why did you come to the meditation retreat?"

"Well, I thought about the Caribbean, you know—beautiful beaches and warm water and great food. I really wanted to go there, but all the tickets were sold out. I couldn't get there, so I came to this retreat."

"Okay, have you been thinking about the Caribbean?"

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, a lot. I keep thinking about all my friends on the beach having a good time, and I'm here."

"Okay, now I understand why you're having a hard time at the retreat. What if you stopped thinking about the Caribbean? Then what would it be like being here?"

"I don't know, but I can try that."

So he went back into the retreat, and I saw him again a few days later. "How are you doing?" I asked.

"Fine. I let go of the Caribbean. I arrived here. And since then, everything's been going fine. I've been very happy to be here."

This is the way desire works. When we want to be somewhere else, we can't be happy here, because we're wanting something that we don't have. Do you ever find yourself wanting something you do have? "Oh, I want a hand at the end of my arm"—not usually the way it works. We want things we don't have, and that very wanting of what isn't there sets up dissatisfaction.

This is the problem with craving, with desire, with wanting. The unhappiness isn't from the absence of the object. The unhappiness is from the wanting. Let go of the wanting, and the moment is usually fine. Most moments in this retreat will be fine. There may be some physical discomfort. There may be an unpleasant mood. But overall, if you take a big view, the moment is not necessarily problematic. And yet we struggle because we want something different.

The storyline for the young Italian man was: if he'd been in the Caribbean, he would have been happy. That was the underlying assumption—he couldn't be happy because he wasn't in the Caribbean. So with desire, the storyline is something like that, and you can feel into it for yourself.

With anger, the challenging aspect is that our thoughts may indeed be accurate. The other person might genuinely be wrong, and we might genuinely be right. But here's the crucial insight: even when we're right, the anger still burns us. Even when our assessment is correct, the aversion still creates suffering

within us.

This is where we need to distinguish between being right and being at peace. We can acknowledge that someone has acted inappropriately or that a situation is genuinely problematic without carrying the burning quality of anger in our hearts. The wisdom lies in recognizing that our rightness doesn't justify our suffering.

When we hold onto anger, even justified anger, we become like that person who grasps a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else—we're the ones who get burned. The other person may not even know we're angry, while we sit stewing in our own painful emotions.

This doesn't mean we become passive or fail to respond appropriately to situations. We can take skillful action, set boundaries, or address problems without the internal fire of anger consuming us. In fact, we often respond more effectively when we're not clouded by the reactive energy of aversion.

The practice is learning to see anger clearly—feeling it in the body, noticing the thoughts that feed it, understanding its nature—without either suppressing it or acting it out unconsciously. We can say, "Anger is here. There's burning in the chest. There's tension in the jaw. There are thoughts about how wrong they were." We acknowledge it all without necessarily believing that our anger is telling us the whole truth about what we need to do.

Sometimes the most radical thing we can do is simply not pick up the hot coal at all. Even when we're absolutely certain we're right.

Somebody may have done something to us that's really inappropriate, awful, rude, or cruel. That may well be true. When you look at the impact of individual actions, when you look at the impact of systemic racism on people of color, you see that people have been harmed many, many times from childhood on by these factors that are widespread in the society, in the culture. So that harm has been real, and there are real grounds for saying, "Wrong was done to me. I was harmed by individuals, by the system. I've been harmed." So that is true. And so especially the work with anger is important for all of us.

There's a story from the Dalai Lama. He had known a monk back in Tibet in 1959, before he fled the country. He'd left and gone to India, but this monk had been captured by the Chinese and put into prison for the crime of being a monk. Especially when the Cultural Revolution was happening in Tibet, a lot of monks and nuns were put in prison for being monks and nuns.

The man was eventually released from prison and escaped from Tibet and made his way to India. The Dalai Lama likes to meet people who have come from Tibet and made it to India. So he had a meeting with this monk, whom the Dalai Lama had previously thought was a pretty ordinary guy, an ordinary monk.

In talking to him, the Dalai Lama asked how his time had been since he'd last seen him. And the monk said, "I really felt myself to be in danger." So the Dalai Lama said, "Oh, do you mean you were in danger of

being tortured?" And the monk said, "Oh no, that's not what I meant. I was tortured many times. I was in danger of becoming angry about it. But I didn't. I worked with loving-kindness and compassion and I didn't."

The Dalai Lama said he had to revise his opinion of that monk's practice. He was much more developed than he had thought.

As we investigate the phenomenon of anger, especially if we're thinking of acting out the anger towards someone who has hurt us, the texts say that it's helpful to investigate how the process goes. They say that becoming angry with somebody is like picking up a hot coal to throw at them. But when we pick up the coal, we burn ourselves first. It's also described as drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick.

It's really important not to suppress anger, whatever its source or cause. It's really important to let ourselves feel it and to work with it as skillfully as we can with mindfulness, to go through the steps of RAIN: to recognize, to allow it to be there, to become interested and investigate, and not to identify with it. Because this form of anger is very universal.

Sometimes we have to practice strongly with metta and compassion in the face of anger. I was doing a long metta retreat here one time and my difficult person—you know that's one of the categories in the metta practice—was also on the retreat. So I'd be going through my day: "May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful." And my difficult person would walk in front of me and I'd start growling about what they did during that last year. "That was really not right." And I'd start winding myself up with being angry at them.

About thirty minutes later, I'd be spinning, spinning, spinning, and finally it would pass away. I'd go back: "May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be happy." And then later in the day, I'd see my difficult person again. I'd get all angry again. And I thought, "There must be a way to work with this."

I thought, "Somebody's told me I should do metta for my difficult person." And I thought, "I don't want to do that. That would mean I'd have to like them. I don't like them. I don't want to do that." But I was desperate. So I thought, "Okay, I'll give it a try."

So I started doing metta for them. And very interestingly, the anger did go away. And I found out I didn't have to like the person. All I had to do was wish that they could be happy. And if I could wish that they could be happy, the ill will went out and the goodwill replaced it.

So it was very interesting for me. And I really recommend it with difficult people and difficult situations. Try the practice of loving kindness or compassion. If you can just see a glimmer of possibility that maybe they could be happy and it would be okay, that can take the anger out of the moment.

When anger gets turned against ourselves, it manifests as self-judgment. We feel we're not good because

we've done things we regret, or we don't measure up in some way to standards that have been put in us by parents, teachers, siblings, or society. Self-judgment often starts with rational thoughts.

I was having an interview one time with a student who was a psychotherapist. The therapist had just been dropped by a client—this happens all the time—but it was becoming very personal for the therapist. They traced the thoughts they had after being dropped by the client. They said, "Okay, the patient dropped me and I thought, I guess I just wasn't the right fit for that person. I thought that for a while. Then it moved to, 'Oh, I really didn't have enough compassion or warmth.' Then it moved to, 'I'm really not a very loving person.' And then it moved to, 'Well, actually, I've never loved anyone and no one loves me.'"

It started out rational and specific, then became more and more general and judgmental. That's when it felt really heavy. So one thing—if you notice judging thoughts, try to make the thoughts become specific. You might have to ask the judge, "Tell me something specific about myself." Then it comes out: "Oh, well, I was unkind to someone last week in a group meeting that we had." Oh, okay. Well, everybody does that. We're not perfect. Everybody does that. So come back to what's true.

The storyline underneath self-judgment—the reason it's so oppressive—is that it feels like we're not good enough or we're not lovable. We question our very worthwhileness. Can we have the space to exist as a human being and take up space on the planet? Are we worthy enough to do that? We all are.

There's a lot of self-judgment in Western culture today. I'm not so familiar with other cultures, but in Western culture there's almost an epidemic of self-judgment. A group of about twenty Western teachers were meeting some years ago with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. They were having a meeting just to talk about how things were going—"How's the Buddhism going where you are?" "Yeah, pretty good. How's it going where you are?"—and learning from His Holiness.

Someone brought up this quality of self-judgment, or even in some cases self-hatred. The Dalai Lama had this mystified expression on his face. He couldn't understand what people were talking about. He had no personal experience or cultural reference point for it, because in Tibet, children are brought up with so much love from the extended family that they feel really valued and cared for and lovable from early on.

So he couldn't understand what it meant, but he went around to the Western teachers and asked, "Do you know what this is?" "Yes." "Do you know what this is?" "Yeah." He went around to all twenty Western teachers—they all knew what it was because it's so widespread in the West. I think it's because our community systems and our family systems are breaking down, and we don't have that coherent upbringing to hold us so that we know we're valued and really loved.

We may hear ourselves judging ourselves, putting ourselves down. Sometimes it comes out toward others, but it's more destructive toward ourselves. Joseph has this very nice practice when judging is happening. He hears a statement like "You're never going to be good enough," and he adds the phrase, "and the sky is blue." "You really messed up in that meeting last week, and the sky is blue." "That person at lunch took too

much food, and the sky is blue." That just puts a different container around it.

With self-judgment, I've found that especially the long-term practice of loving kindness is the best way to undo it. It doesn't even have to be loving kindness toward oneself, although that comes out of this. But when there is real goodwill and affection for others—and friend and benefactor are very good people to work with—then we look inside and we see, "Oh, there's something beautiful here."

There's this friendly spirit toward others. I can feel good about myself because metta is alive for me. So in the long term, the practice of metta really, really undoes the tendency to self-judgment.

Briefly, with sadness, often we're afraid to open to feelings of deep loss, disappointment, and grief because we fear that they'll be overwhelming. Sometimes we feel, if I open to this sadness, I'll never come out of it. I'll never move through the grief and so we hold it at a distance. But that's just a belief - just a belief. We've got to have faith in the practice, faith in ourselves to open to that loss, to that missing, and we'll find out it does have an end.

One of the really moving things that's been happening at Spirit Rock is that a few parents have come on long retreats who have lost children in their teens, generally lost their children to drugs or to suicide. And that's, I think, one of the worst losses that a human being can suffer - to lose a child when they're still young and promising. And what's been amazing is to watch the parents go through the retreat cycle over a number of years and watch the grief slowly fade and be replaced by real acceptance, real warmth, real love. And then those parents are able to share that experience with other parents who have more recently lost children in the same way. So they become models and teachers for others who have gone through that kind of grief and that kind of loss. So grief is limited in time if we can let it come and be felt.

And then fear. With fear, usually when it arises, the first thing we feel is more fear. Oh, I'm afraid of the fear. So the first thing we have to do is come into the present and start to feel the fear directly and see, can we bear it? Because with fear, the storyline is something like, this moment is bearable, but the next moment is going to be unbearable. So we have to come into this moment, feel it, let go of that projection about the future. That's just the storyline. The next moment isn't going to be unbearable. And see, is this moment bearable?

I worked with this a lot. I came in first to the body sensations. Body sensations with fear are not pleasant, but I had to ask myself, can I bear them? Moving to allowing, moving to accepting, can I just bear them? And I found after touching them many times, I could. You know, contraction in the chest, fluttery feeling throughout the body, light, ungrounded feelings. I found I could bear those.

Then I had to open to the mood in the mind. It's hard to get in touch with the mood of fear because fear is to escape. So the mood of fear is moving away from, escaping. It was hard to touch that. But then I could. It was the fleeing impulse that is the heart of that mood. Then I could bear that and I could let go of the thoughts.

Slowly, slowly, I began to open to the whole experience, this kaleidoscope of fear. And it got to the point that I could totally accept it. I reached a point in my meditation where I didn't care one bit whether fear arose or not. I was completely equanimous with it. And when I reached that point of acceptance with fear, it lost some grip over me that it had had before out of my fear of fear. I got over my fear of fear. And when it came, it was okay.

Now, since then, I've had to meet it a number of times, but I now know that I can come to terms with it. I know how to meditate, allow it, be with it so that it's not overpowering and it's not fundamentally threatening to me. And that came out of the fullness of the movement to acceptance.

So whatever difficult emotion might be the strongest for you, this is really an encouragement to allow it in and even welcome it. Because what you'll find is you'll learn so much by working with it. You'll find levels of wisdom you didn't know you had. You'll find degrees of patience that you didn't imagine were possible. And you'll find you have a core strength that had never been brought to light before.

One Arhat in Thailand, a fully enlightened person, was asked late in his life what had been his biggest difficulty in practicing. And he said, "I'd have to say that it was fear for me personally. But to say it was a difficulty doesn't say it rightly."

It was my greatest adversary, but it brought out my greatest strengths. And I learned the most from being with it. So it was my greatest teacher as well.

This is the promise of these difficult emotions. We learn so much in coming to freedom in relation to them. We transform our ability to be with what's difficult. So in that meeting of mindfulness—greeting desire, sadness, anger, fear, judgment with kindness, with compassion, with courage, with interest—we're transforming a moment of suffering into a moment of clarity. We transform the unwholesome into the wholesome through this meeting. And there's a great liberation that comes out of this work.

I want to close with one prayer from the Tibetan tradition. This is called the supplication of Gampopa, who was a disciple of Milarepa, one of the great Tibetan yogis. He put this supplication to the Dharma—not to any one person, but to the Dharma itself. These are 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 sit together for a moment with these words: Grant your blessing so that the path clarifies confusion. Grant your blessing so that confusion dawns as wisdom.

Thank you for listening.

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