Moods, Emotions and Feelings

Bhante Bodhidhamma · A Foundation Course in Buddhism · 27:56

If there is one thing we are generally aware of, it is our prevailing state of mind. The mood and emotional states with the feelings they cause us to experience in the body. Moods, emotions and feelings tend to dominate our lives and we often gauge our quality of life by how much we are enjoying or not enjoying the way we are living.

If a person has a continual problem with depression, lack of energy, listlessness, life seems useless, pointless, and hard to bear. If a person is fiery, ebullient, energetic, goal-orientated, life is a constant challenge, a fight, and it is somehow worthwhile, even when it's bruising. If a person is well-adjusted, not experiencing deep lows or great highs, problems don't seem to affect their emotional life so much. They can take things in their stride.

We can go on delineating different personality types till the cows come home. It is a good exercise, by the way, to try and see what our own individual make-up is. But here we're interested to see if there's any inner pattern of mental states common to all humans. Is there a rationality, a viable syndrome of emotions and moods? If there is, perhaps it will be easy for us to see where we are in the scope of things. Perhaps it will make the job of purifying our minds a little easier if we can see our particular behaviour within the whole realm of human emotional experience.

After all, this is the purpose of the middle path. This was the Buddha's avowed aim, to see what suffering is, what the cause, the way out of it, and the final experience of a state beyond suffering. We shall concentrate on a particular area of those moods and emotions and feelings, those that are associated with sensual pleasure and pain.

Before we go on, we need to be clear in our minds what we're talking about. For the sake of clarity, let us call mood generalized states of mind that do not seem to be under our control. I may wake up depressed for no apparent reason, although all the outward signs of life are very comfortable, supportive and happy. A happy family, close relationships, good job and such like. Even so, my general mood is depression. Or it might be irritability. Or again, anxiety. No matter how much we try to calm ourselves, everything makes us feel more depressed, more irritated, more anxious. These moods just hang about sometimes all day, perhaps months.

These are all part of the *saṅkhāra* group, the volitional conditionings that belong to the five skandhas, the aggregates. They are states of mind that are consequences of past actions. They are the karmic results of past behavior. That's why we can't do anything about them. That's why we have to sit patiently in the midst of these conditionings and just allow them to burn out. That's why we must be wary of our reactions

to them. Depressed about being angry, angry about being anxious, anxious about being depressed, and so on. These reactions are only fueling the process, either by indulging, entertaining these states, or by repressing them. And of course, it is of little help to take drugs. They just repress those states of mind, though there are times they can be used wisely to take the heat off.

Now, emotions, also belonging to the saṅkhāra khandha, the aggregator of volitional conditionings, I'd like to define as less stable states of mind that surface and disappear fairly quickly. For instance, I might be fearful crossing the road, but the fear disappears once I'm on the other side. Someone may say something that triggers off an angry response, but I can just shrug it off. I put music on that creates an emotional state, but it passes quickly once the music stops. I'd like to include here those emotional responses we have to moods. So emotions may be less stable and we may be able to exercise some control over them.

As for feelings, I'd like to define them as the effects of these moods and emotions on the body. It's the biofeedback. Heavy feelings associated with depression, hot feelings with anger, wobbly weak feelings of fear, tight feelings of anxiety and stress and so on. It's these feelings that drugs change. Drugs are only chemicals affecting the chemical composition of the body. They stop the expression of mental states in the body and so its feedback to the mind. In so doing, they repress it. That's why they don't help cure the state of mind, the actual moods and emotions themselves. But they do help in crises and in psychotic states of mind where they give back sufferers some control over their lives.

For the meditator, these feelings are important, for they are the easiest things to center our attention on. By experiencing our states of mind, moods and emotions at the bodily feeling level, there is no indulgence, no repression going on. We are experiencing these states of mind at their raw issue. We are really experiencing these states of mind as they really are. If moods and emotions begin to affect our thinking, then our thinking becomes an expression of those moods and emotions. Unwittingly, the thinking develops those states of mind. We have to be careful not to let moods swamp our lives. To do that, we have to keep them at arm's length, so to speak. The easiest way to do this is to experience those moods and emotions as they manifest in the body as feelings. Concentrating on the feelings stops the mind thinking. This is what we are trying to do in meditation, in the meditative life, to develop a way of experiencing our moods and emotions in an objective way.

So, if we accept these definitions of moods, emotions, with their attendant feelings for the purpose of this talk, we can now ask, where do these negative states of mind arise from in the first place? In the discourse on the turning of the wheel of the law, the Buddha makes it quite clear that the cause of all suffering is desire. This is the noble truth of the cause of suffering. The craving, which causes rebirth, accompanied by the pleasure of emotions, finds delight in this and that object. Want, desire, craving, obsession, all these attitudes, these internal dispositions, cause us suffering. Here we shall investigate how desire for sensual pleasure causes so many of our different moods and emotional states.

Let's take a simple example. The little girl who wants ice cream. There she is in the front room playing

quietly with one of those mind-boggling educational games. Suddenly the strains of the Italian gondolier music shatter the peace. She sits bolt upright. She's caught and snared. Once the vision of the ice cream cornet has arisen in the imagination, little Lily is in a paroxysm of desire. This new pleasure, fuelled by experience of past similar pleasures of choc-ice and lollipops, obsesses her. "I want an ice-cream." It is said with such force that Daddy is shocked and falls over. This "I" wanting the ice-cream is the ice-cream. The child, the "I" and the vision of the ice-cream are all one. The child at the younger age grasps this fact. "Me ice-cream." In that phrase is the kernel of all our problems. It encapsulates all our wrong identification and our obsession. Our identity. Me. Ice cream.

Let us take this path of indulgence. Daddy knows by past experience it's best to let her have her own way once in a while, or it's misery all morning. He gives in. It's Sunday. He's too tired to fight. Lily's off and back in delight. Desire has arisen with all its attendant emotions of expectation and excitement. With the first lick there comes ecstatic delight, and with the final lick, total satisfaction. That is, until the desire for ice cream arises again. So here we have the first particular little merry-go-round. Desire and surfeit. A rest period, and desire arises again.

If we investigate our lives, we shall see we spend a lot of time on this round. The regular cup of tea, desire and surfeit. The party once every so often. The TV programs, especially the soaps, live off this emotional round. A half hour is quite enough. Can you imagine attending a soap festival, Coronation Street, Dallas, for ten hours a day for seven days?

The second merry-go-round is when one such pleasure begins to predominate. Sharpened by past satisfaction, this desire wants a keener pleasure or boredom will set in. We slowly become slaves to that desire, we become obsessed by it, we demand it. That is what the Buddha meant by attachment. We can actually feel the compulsiveness of craving of this attachment even if we miss a morning cup of tea. But when we look at how people become dedicated to beauty, wealth, fame or power, we can begin to see the whole such desires as craving can have.

The reason is that desire has an inbuilt growth mechanism. Even Lily, the second time round, might want a different ice cream, or a bigger ice cream, and eat too much. We say in our consumerist society that we are spoiled for choice. The fact is, desire demands choice, for once a pleasure is had, its repeat is boring. The cycle, the round of pleasure surfeit, includes boredom, a demand for difference, and a difference that's better and more exciting. This comes home quite starkly when we look at popular films. The horror films of yesterday make us laugh now. Now we want real horror, real terror. But the next generation will be baffled at how such things were ever found to create fear. They'll laugh and demand even greater horror, a terror beyond terror.

This second round can lead to overdosing, to overindulgence, and then to disgust. That one curry dish too many that turns a good meal into vomit. That one glass of whiskey that makes Sunday morning lying a bed of nails. It is interesting to note that in children desires are not so highly developed. They seem to be

still in contact with their bodies. They seem to have a built-in body wisdom knowing when to stop. As we grow older we lose this distinction between bodily needs and mental greeds by way of continual overindulgence.

Now this third round of desire to overindulgence, to disgust, is of particular interest in the role it can play in spiritual growth. It was exactly this disgust and weariness with courtly life that is said to have been the final goad that drove the Buddha to seek the end of suffering. He realized the insatiability of desire and the emptiness and despair of boredom. In our adult life, we often have such feelings about our jobs, our relationships and our very life. But it doesn't mean we have to leave our job, our spouse, or commit suicide. It means we have to look at our situation, our whole life situation. We have to discover why we suffer such feelings of boredom, of emptiness, of uselessness.

Realising that it arises from this basic disposition to life, that of pleasure-seeking, is to liberate us from wrong view. It's a beginning. The struggle to free ourselves from its snares has only just begun, but this is the path of liberation. Liberation from what? From the belief that our desires can be satisfied. From desire, want, obsessions themselves. That lead eventually to dissatisfaction, suffering, *dukkha*.

Now the next round is caused by denial. There's our little Lily, jumping up and down all happy and excited, shouting, "I want an ice cream." Daddy's in a bad mood. "No." What happens in Little Lily? At first there's a sense of shock. All those visions of streaming cool cornet, it's burnt, melt down. All the excitement. The jumping is all suddenly squashed. The mind races. Options arise. She could try pleading bargaining ploy. "Oh, please, Daddy, please." As if the world were heaving with terminal sorrow. "No." "I won't have a big one, just a small one." "No."

Next ploy, anger. "Why not? I want one." Dad hasn't the stomach for a fight and tells her to go and ask Mum. On the way, Lily sweetens up. "Mummy, can I have an ice cream, please?" She knows Mummy's objections straight into bargaining. "I'll eat all my dinner." Mummy knows she won't. "No." Lily tries the angry stomp. "I want an ice cream." Then the tantrum, screaming blue murder. Mummy knows this gambit and decides on the counter of ignoring it. Past experience has proven that giving in at this stage can lead to regular tantrum use, and to smack her leads to a mortal fight to the death. Lily's very strong. Mummy ignores her.

Lily finally exhausts herself and ends up weeping. The weeping begins to sound genuine, real sorrow. Mummy tries to console, but Lily won't hear of it. Slowly, the sorrow remoulds itself into a quiet glowering, very glum, very quiet, very withdrawn. Full of resentment and self-pity, Lily sits incommunicado. The Great Depression is descending. She won't talk, and she certainly won't eat. She would have eaten if she'd had her ice cream, but now she hasn't, she can't eat. Can't, of course, means won't.

At this point, Mummy relents a little, not wanting to crush Lily's spirit. A little explanation why such tactics won't get her the ice cream. And if she hadn't have lost her temper, she could have had one after

dinner. And a little bargaining. She can still have one if she eats her food. Lots of pleas and cuddling. Little Lily relents. She accepts the situation. No ice cream now. With this acceptance, you can sometimes catch the relief as the desire, the obsession leaves. This is letting go. But of course, the desire, the demand for ice cream lies dormant like a wild tiger, ready to spring upon the next time the ice cream van chimes.

Now, as far as Lily is concerned, her desire for ice cream is proper and legitimate simply because the desire is there. Those who frustrate her desires are seen as enemies. They are seen as the direct cause for her suffering. The humiliation of begging and bargaining. The frustration and anger, the depression and sadness. All these are directly caused by mummy and daddy. This is the great lie we can't let go of. Even as adults, we still bear grudges against our parents. Even as adults, we believe the other is the cause of our unhappiness. But they are only the proximate causes, catalysts perhaps. The direct cause is ourselves, and the root cause is desire with its twin, aversion.

Although we followed a typical little child, that little child is in all of us. This is the problem. We're still playing these gambits. We're still getting caught up in the meshes of desires, greeds and obsessions. We play these rounds out time after time. Some people never get tired of them, even consciously build their lives around them. Like the person who loves to fall in love, but as soon as it's serious, they're off. Even though leaving in the midst of infatuation is painful, the beginning of a new infatuation is too attractive. The crunch for such people comes with the loss of beauty, the inability to attract.

We need to look at these little lilies inside us, see the child for what it is, remnants of past behaviour constantly cramping our lives with obsession for pleasure, for me, for mine. Somehow we have to change the child's behaviour, but not to crush its spirit. This re-education of the child in us is no easy matter.

As children, we also learnt how to repress and bury our painful moods and feelings deep in our psyche. We learnt how to swallow our bad feelings, our hates, frustrations, fears, anxieties and so on. And they sit there, burning all the time. The Buddha taught that the human was made up of two parts, the physical body and the mind. He said the mix was like milk in water. They were inseparable, the mind infusing the body. When the mind moves, so does the body. When the body moves, so does the mind.

If an angry thought arises in the mind, electrochemical changes are felt in the body. If pain arises in the body, the mind knows it and reacts. Everything in the body and mind interpenetrate when we see this, and it can be easily observed in meditation. Psychosomatic diseases are not hard to understand. When repressed, the distorted energy of negative moods and emotions have no expression, so they leak out of the mind, causing neurotic behavior, at worst, a psychotic breakdown, or they leak into the body, causing illness.

Whenever suffering arises, be it physical or mental pain, our reactions of shock, of bargaining, of anger, of depression, will also arise. Maybe in different order, in different strengths, maybe with one or two missed out. In extreme cases, our reactions may lead to despair and suicide. But in happier cases, like Little Lily, we will come to accept things as they really are and be peaceful with our situation.

This is all part of what Buddhism calls samsara, the faring on, the going on and on, a continual moving from here to there, this restlessness that finds no peace. We need to see this vicious circle of pain-pleasure syndrome. This is samsara, the opposite of our goal, *nibbāna*. One of the meanings of nibbāna is nirvana, no desire. This particular round of shock-fear, bargaining-pleading, frustration-anger, depression, has been especially studied in people who are suffering from terminal illness.

Every individual will have a particular reaction syndrome to loss, be it to dropping their ice cream, to the discovery that they have a terminal cancer. Although here we have concentrated on the sensual pleasure part of desire, don't forget that there is also the desire for life itself, the desire to become, and the desire to annihilate oneself, the death wish.

The question now arises as to why some people suffer so much at death and dying. Others seek it and commit suicide, and yet others die peacefully. To understand this, we need to dig a little deeper and see exactly what happens when we desire something greatly.

When Lily is caught up in the idea of wanting an ice cream, that's just the first expression of desire. But once she actually has the ice cream in hand, there arises an attachment to it: my ice cream. Asking Lily to share some of her ice cream with her brothers and sisters is to ask her to let go of a bit of that "my," that "me." By being generous, Lily is coming to understand that the ice cream doesn't actually belong to anyone, or rather that the concept of belonging, of possession, is fluid, not rigid.

If when Lily's asked she won't share, and her brother and sister take by force, then we see how much Lily has invested herself in that ice cream. In other words, to take the ice cream off Lily is also to rob her of some of herself. It's to take a part of her away, hence the screaming, the fighting to the death.

Do we change as we grow older? Unfortunately, not much. In fact, most of us, as we grow older, tend to become more childish. Listen to someone who's had their car scratched by hooligans or stolen. Underlying these reactions is this self-identity, and whenever that self-identity is threatened, fear arises. That's what fear is. It's this self-identity, this ego, the "I," saying something is threatening it.

If that threat is real and actually attacks, then there is trauma and shock. The difference is seen with the reaction to nearly being run over to actually being knocked down, to knowing the next door neighbours have been burgled, to being burgled oneself. This is what this self-identity, this ego, produces. Ego says, "I am my house, my car, my jewellery. This is my wife, my husband, my child." The trauma, the shock is felt when such self-definitions are proved to be palpably untrue. When the car is stolen, when the spouse walks out, when the child grows up and leaves.

Closer to home, this ego identifies with the body and mind. In fact, in the ultimate analysis, that's what ego is, what self, person, personality is. That's why dying is such a suffering for us. For this ego, this "I," sees itself in mortal danger.

This is what Queen Malika meant when she answered her husband, the king of Kosala. He had asked her

whom did she love the most. She said herself. The king, far from being outraged, agreed that he too loved himself the most. Both approached the Buddha for advice. He said, unenlightened beings did indeed in the last analysis love themselves the most.

Ego protects itself. Any movement of harm towards ego is signalled by fear and anxiety. Any actual wound causes trauma and shock. So we see that underlying all this sense pleasure, all this desire to become somebody, to be a personality, all rests on an elephant trap: death. That's why fear is the champion and guardian of ego. It will cause ego to fly for its life or fight to the death.

However, quite paradoxically, when the body and mind become full of suffering, when ego, as it were, finds it too painful to live with itself, it wants to rid itself of this painful burden. What a wonderful trick we play on ourselves. First ego says, "I am my body and mind." But now it's painful. Ego says, "I'm not really this body and mind. I can escape it."

But this "I" is the body and mind. This ego is that self-identity. But by a trick of thought, it believes that this self-awareness, which is in fact just another mental concept, exists as a separate substantial entity. In other words, that the consciousness can somehow leave the body and mind with all its emotions and thinking and go elsewhere. It says, "I think, therefore I am." The mistake of the philosopher Descartes, if he actually thought that the "I" was separate from the thinking.

So when this "I," this ego, decides to kill off the pain, to commit suicide, it thinks it will escape. But the Buddha taught that this consciousness is but another of the aggregate, and is part and parcel of mind, not separate from it, equally transient, not permanent, not a substantial entity. A closer look at the reality of our mental life reveals that consciousness is arising and passing away every minute moment.

Upon death, only the body slumps. The mind arises again. The body can be killed, but not the mind. The mind simply seeks elsewhere, just as it does in everyday life, to satisfy its passions or to rid itself of its suffering. Suicide turns out to be not an escape, but a further investment in desire, this time in its negative aspects of not wanting aversion. Annihilation in Buddhism is out of the question.

At base we are propelled through life and from life to life by these two desires: the desire to get, to have, to become, and the desire to be rid of, to annihilate. Our reactions to such extreme cases will also be dictated by our level of understanding. If we are but grown-up boys and girls, we will react very much the same way as Lily did when she didn't get her ice cream. "Why me? Why do I, not the other, have to die? I'm too young."

Buddhism should prepare us for these realities. Our meditation, our purification of the mind, the constant attempt to see things as they really are, should undermine these childish attitudes and reactions. Insofar as we have matured towards our death, so we shall die in peace.

People are always mystified when they hear of someone reacted calmly to the knowledge of their death, as if they wanted people to go screaming. The 18th century diarist and writer Dr. Johnson, when he went to

see the famous philosopher John Locke, was shocked by the man's cheerfulness even though he was dying. But I ask you, what did the Buddha mean when he said the middle path led to the end of suffering? Was he not also including the ability to die in peace? His own death is surely the great model. Even though he was about to die, he was still giving advice to his followers. He achieved his *parinibbāna*, total *nibbāna*, in absolute peace and equanimity.

How we react to loss, to being separated from what we love, will be individual and unique. But we can all reach a point of understanding and a purity of heart where loss is accepted with perfect equanimity. We can die at peace with the world and in perfect peace within ourselves.

So the question arises, how do we do it? Now that we've all been meditating full steam for three months or more, you'll know the answer. The answer is to catch it all in the bud. To watch it all pass. To become the objective observer of the mental and emotional life.

When that favourite TV programme comes, watch the desire, the gleeful expectation for it. Watch it rise, let it pass. When it's passed, ask yourself, do you really want to watch it? If you really ought to watch it. All the time we allow desires to pass and not get caught up in them. This is purifying the mind of its obsessiveness. By letting desire go we free the heart and with it the intellect, so that we can truly see what is wholesome for us and what isn't.

Some people think by losing desire they lose the spice of life. How mistaken. Desire is the unhealthy additive, like sugar on top of sweet strawberries. Like all those e-food additives. We don't know what food really tastes like. It's the so-called food enhancers we actually taste. They are what we come to like.

Desire and obsessional emotions are what we come to like. But just as sugar and ease distort the taste of real food, so desire and obsession distort our sensual experience. What is more, by letting go of desire, we are preparing for death. What is it that makes death so painful but our clinging, our obsession, our attachment?

Here's the Buddha in the Dhammapada: "From craving, grief arises. From craving arises fear. For one who is free of craving, there is no grief. From where will fear arise?"

When the Buddha talks of liberation, liberation from suffering, he does not mean a sudden windfall, a million pounds, so that we can go off and do anything we want. Mind you, how hard we would work if a million pounds were promised. No, this liberation is subtler. It is a freedom from. It is a release us from prison. It is an unburdening, as if throwing off a great backpack of bricks we've carried around all our lives. Freeing ourselves of desire and obsession with all the moods, emotions and feelings they manufacture is to rid ourselves of a huge, constricting, heart-crippling, painful burden.

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