

The Wisdom of Emotions

An extract of a Dhamma talk by Ajahn Sundarā

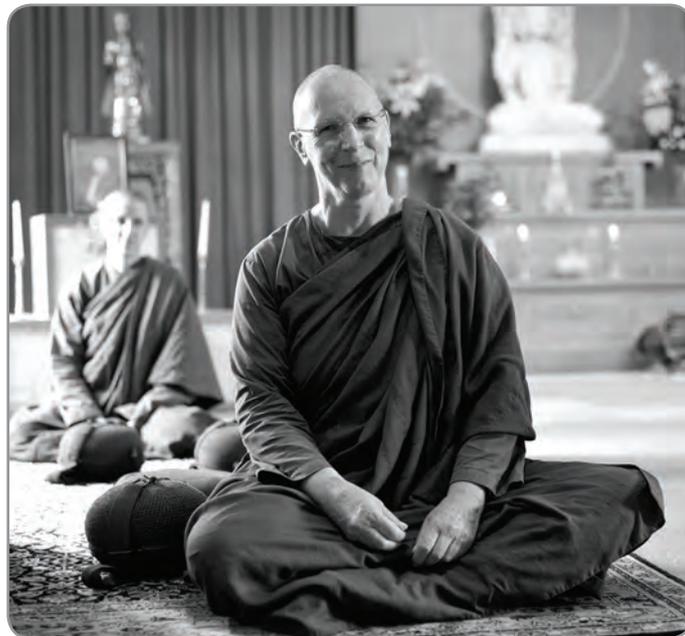
OUR EMOTIONS CAN BE TRIGGERED BY SOMETHING VERY SMALL: A PHYSICAL SENSATION, A PASSING THOUGHT, A SENSE CONTACT, A FEELING. In the context of Dhamma we begin to notice that in fact emotions are constructs:

amalgams of thought, feeling, perceptions, past conditioning, trauma, family stories; all these things come together to generate emotions. Sometimes we are in a situation where for no apparent reason we start crying, or we become angry or confused. When we search for a reason but can't find one, we may think there is something wrong with us, that it's our fault. We make ourselves miserable because we don't understand that there is a bigger picture. Being human is like that.

Modern psychology has not been able to define emotion. Decades of brain research have failed to pin down what an emotion is. It fluctuates constantly; it is indefinable. So we may be sitting calmly in meditation, surrounded by a lot of other people, but when somebody else comes into the room our sense of calm changes. We are aware of a new feeling tone, perhaps an emotional charge in the body and we soon realize that letting go of it requires more than just awareness and willingness to let go. It also calls for wisdom, for understanding, so as to see deeply its true characteristics of *anicca-dukkha-anattā* – that it is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self.

The terms 'wisdom' and 'emotion' seem to be foreign to each other. We don't usually associate emotion with wisdom. Interestingly, emotions are closely connected to the water element. A well-known teacher in the Forest Tradition has pointed out that we are very concerned about ecology and the purity of the elements on the planet, but we rarely consider how polluted our inner water element can be. When we are not mindful of our emotions, they can become septic. Unfortunately, through that lack of awareness, they can also become extremely powerful and affect our whole inner environment, just as water can filter through and pollute its natural environment.

However, it can be difficult to look clearly at some emotions – anger, jealousy, envy, greed – because they are so painful. But the Buddha's path begins with the recognition of suffering. It is only when we are able to see suffering that



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we can know there is an end to suffering. *Dukkha*, suffering, is sometimes translated as 'stress'. This is a good translation. When we look at our emotions we are looking at stress, at tension. But we may find that although we study our mind and our body, our inner stories or the way we relate to other people, we are not yet actually seeing the stress associated with them. We know there is something stressful in us, something miserable, something sad or sticky, but we can't yet see it clearly. Very often that's because it is too close to us. It's like a second skin, there's not enough space between us and that emotional resonance.

I often recall that for many years I did not think that I was angry in certain situations. I was just right! It took me a long time to see anger as an objective experience, as something separate from me. I thought I knew all about anger: I taught other people how to deal with it, I studied it, I meditated on it, but it still wasn't completely clear. I did not know it totally, without any doubt. However, once anger is clearly seen as toxic, any idea of 'righteous' anger goes out the window.

Greed is another strong emotion, not just greed for food, but greed for anything. In fact it was the energy of greed that brought me to the Dhamma. I realized that desire is a bottomless pit; it would never be satisfied. No matter how many delicious things you eat, how many wonderful holidays you have, how many wonderful relationships you enjoy, dissatisfaction is always around the corner. That's what the Buddha calls *dukkha*. Now, when you see desire clearly, you also see its characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. Ask yourself who is the 'I' who desires and is constantly dissatisfied? Who is seeking sensory gratification? Who is the 'I' who is righteously angry? Until you see through the illusion of 'I' you will be trapped in desire. Of course, even when there is some insight

into the nature of desire and the emotional suffering which results, that doesn't mean the habit of desire doesn't continue, or that you won't be blinded again. But you have seen and known the patterns of desire and begin to realize the importance of developing wisdom with regard to your emotions.

Letting go of an emotion can take time. Even though it may have completely ended in your mind, your body can still be filled with residual feelings of rage, greed or sadness. The body and mind don't always talk to each other. You may need to be really patient and conscious of how the body absorbs and releases emotion much more slowly than the mind. You may think that these emotions are happening because of something you did, but actually they are reactions to what we find pleasant or unpleasant, what we like or dislike. We don't need to blame ourselves, but simply to recognize that when mindfulness is not present, life happens on automatic pilot! This is an aspect of *anattā*.

Sometimes the mind can be so filled up with emotion that the brain loses the capacity to think, and we cannot express ourselves. At such times of heightened emotion the mind seems to have a kind of protective mechanism, the capacity to disengage. When we have a strong emotional experience, we tend to over-react and lose clarity. Because we don't have the ability to respond to the situation, the mind simply shuts down.

If we were truly in charge of our mind, we would rather have a calm and peaceful mind instead of the agitation and disturbances that we often have to experience. Yet when an emotion is present, we can see it as a priceless opportunity. Even though it may be a painful moment, when we stay very present and connected to the heat and energy coursing through us, we will see it change and lose its emotional charge. We will be able to let it go. But if we're not aware of it, it will revive a lot of old stories. If we believe our emotions, they drag countless stories along with them, everything associated with that particular emotion. And emotions are not choosy; any old thing may come up and until we see through and understand those associations, they are a terrible burden. Sometimes you may wonder how our emotional nature and wisdom can come together.

A great master like Ajahn Chah would set up situations where his disciples would see their emotional nature. He would push their buttons to the point where they would become really angry, driving their minds into an intense emotional state. This is perhaps not the kind of teaching you would ask for right now, but if it came your way how would you respond? Would you start complaining and blaming the situation? Would you criticize the people involved? Or would you use the situation as a teaching? In fact, you may have noticed that life gives plenty of opportunities to challenge and test us. Somebody always seems to be 'stepping on our toes'. In that respect life is our great teacher. You may think: 'No, I'm going to meditate so I can calm down. I'm going to stay away from

all that.' But remember that the state of calm is just one aspect of the practice. In Buddhism the mind is compared to a clear lake, but when we observe it we may overlook the rubbish at the bottom, and lose our chance to be free from delusion.

Walking the Path isn't hard in and of itself. But it is hard for the sense of self, that illusory entity called 'me' who is so resistant to liberation. Again, this self is a collection of habits, it's not a fault. You don't have a 'me' because you wanted one. It just happened. You didn't want to have an ego, a deluded ego which you may hate right now: 'My personality – I'm terrible!' We are very good at self-denigration; indeed, it may even have a comfortable feeling.

So how can we start befriending our emotional nature? Perhaps at first the head leads. We know what to do, we may have read all the teachings on emotions and we are filled

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with good intentions. Then as Dhamma practice becomes part of our life, we draw closer to our heart. This may be frightening because the heart has a soft, vulnerable, fluid quality, unlike the mental energy in our head, which can be hard and quite rigid. When we come into the heart area we begin to be in touch with a much more nebulous world as we move from the mental energy towards a more sensitive aspect of our mind and body. We begin to feel and connect with our emotional

experience directly, without confusion. We discover that in the realm of emotions things are much less defined. There are no clear partitions and boundaries. Emotions can be treacherous because they can spread and affect other beings. For a mind which is attached to logic and intellectual clarity, practice can be difficult, because seeing clearly has nothing to do with having an idea about things; it is the ability to see things as they are, here and now, with presence of mind.

As we become very present with our emotions, it's amazing how this presence of mind can cool down our reactions in a very natural way. Just by staying fully present when emotions arise, we can witness how they change and fade away. Whereas if we are not aware of this straightaway, our emotions can turn into an enormous story involving 'me' and 'him', and 'them' and 'us', and 'how dare you?' Then emotions can become a mountain of problems. But I'm sure none of us want to have a mountain of problems. We don't ask for them, they just happen to us. This is *anattā*. There is no self in control, just the results of habits. When we say, 'I wish I was not so angry. I wish I was not so jealous', we still think we're in control of our emotions, but actually we are not. We are only in control when we start looking at them through the lens of mindfulness and clear understanding. In Dhamma practice, mindfulness and clear seeing are simply allowed to take charge. When we are able to look at ourselves in that calm, quiet light of mindfulness, without judgement, compassion naturally arises and we can accept ourselves just as we are. That moment is a complete acceptance of what is. ☸