

# **Mindfulness Meditation Introductory class**

## **Week Three: Mindfulness of Emotions**

**By Andrea Fella**

In mindfulness practice, we take a middle way with respect to emotions. We neither repress them, nor do we express them. We don't try to deny them, nor do we act them out. We simply allow them to take their own course in our bodies and mind.

### **Starting to pay attention to emotions**

One of the best ways to do this is to feel the emotion in the body, to pay attention to the immediacy of the emotion in the physical sensations of the present moment, and to disengage from the content of the emotion, or the story of the emotion. Emotions, especially strong emotions, often have a very compelling quality to them, and they exert a strong pull on our attention. It can feel like the emotion is saying "Pay attention to me!"

But the way that we have learned to pay attention to emotions usually involves going through the story of the emotion, over and over again. If we remain engaged with the story of the emotion, these thoughts tend to fuel the emotion, and hook us to it. Rather than paying attention to it, we are consumed by it. By learning to pay attention to the emotion in another way, we can give the emotion its due respect, but not succumb to it and not become taken over by it.

For example, if we are angry with someone, we usually focus on the person we are angry with, and the story of what they have done revolves in our mind. In mindfulness, we turn the attention away from the person or situation we are angry with, and instead pay attention to what the experience of anger feels like. Instead of focusing outward, we turn our attention inward.

Emotions want to be experienced, but staying with the object of the emotion, or the story of the emotion, fuels the emotion. It doesn't actually allow the emotion to be fully experienced. If you turn your attention to the emotion itself, to the sensations it produces in the body, and the effect it has on the mind, the emotion has a chance to live its own life, to flow through us in a natural way. It will naturally wind itself out, like a breath flowing out.

All things appear, stay for a while, and disappear. Emotions are no exception. Being mindful of our emotions allows them to unfold and process themselves, in their own natural and healthy way.

### **Components of Emotions**

There are three basic components to an emotion:

- Thoughts (or the story)
- Physical sensations: how the emotion manifests itself in the body. All emotions have some physical correlate. This often clues us in that we are having an emotion.
- Emotional mood or tone in the mind. This can be subtle, or quite obvious. It can be likened to the mind putting on colored glasses, which tint our experience. Fear has one tint, joy another. Fear might feel like a sense of needing to be out of here, joy might have the sense of a lightness in the mind.

We can attend to any of these aspects of the emotion in mindfulness, but the thoughts or story that accompany the emotion often have a tendency to pull us in so that we lose our mindfulness. The story connected with the emotion almost always has to do with the past or the future – it's actually quite fascinating to see that so much of our emotional life is bound up in reflections about the past, or anticipating the future, rather than what is actually happening for us right in the present moment.

We will talk about paying attention to thoughts themselves during the fourth week of the class. Just as a little preview, one clue about attending to thoughts is that we do not attend to the content of the thought, but rather to the *process* of thinking. In meditation practice, we really need to understand that paying attention to the *content* of our thoughts is not helpful. This is not to say that it is never helpful to pay attention to the content of the

thought. But during meditation itself, we need to learn how to suspend our overwhelming preoccupation with our stories. I have sometimes used the simple reflection to just try it and see – try letting go of the thoughts and see what happens.

### **Practicing with Emotions: RAIN**

There are four basic aspects to practicing with emotions, and one of my teachers, Michelle McDonald came up with an acronym to help remember these four: RAIN, for Recognition, Acceptance, Investigation, Non-identification.

#### **Recognition**

Recognizing what the emotion is and naming it can be quite helpful. Sometimes it is quite clear what we are experiencing, and it is easy to name: anger, happiness, loneliness, or fear. There can be a power to recognizing and naming the emotion. This idea is found in some fairy tales, which talk about “naming the dragon.” In these stories, when the dragon is faced with its name, it loses its power.

In mindfulness, when we clearly recognize and name an emotion, it can help to disentangle us from the emotion. When we name the emotion, the part of our minds that simply recognizes and knows is strengthened. We strengthen our capacity for non-reactivity.

Sometimes it can take some time to discover what the emotion is, and it is not clear what the emotion is, but we know we are experiencing something! Sometimes it feels like a mixture of emotions, without one being predominant. In these cases, it is not so helpful to try to analyze the emotion, or to figure out what it is. You can simply name it “emotion,” or “confusion,” or, one of my favorites: “chaos.”

Also, we sometimes meet emotions we aren’t so familiar with in our meditation practice. Michelle tells the story that when she first encountered calm in her meditation practice, her note was something like: Calm?? She was so unfamiliar with the experience of calm that she wasn’t sure of what it was, initially.

#### **Acceptance**

The second aspect of mindfulness of emotions is acceptance. Know that in mindfulness meditation, any emotion is OK. You can give yourself unconditional permission to have any emotion at all, there is no need to censor or judge your emotions. Meditation practice is a very safe place to let yourself feel what is happening. Since you have a resolve to stay still during the meditation, you can let go of the idea of acting on the emotion, and simply let yourself be with it.

Sometimes it can feel quite unpleasant to be with difficult emotions like anger – that is one reason we tend to respond physically, so we don’t have to feel the unpleasantness. But if you try it a few times, you’ll find that with acceptance, the emotion and the unpleasantness will simply flow through you, and eventually it will fade and disappear. That experience is one of the most rewarding of meditation practice, and it gives us a very strong sense of the power of mindfulness practice.

#### **Investigation**

The third aspect of mindfulness of emotions is investigation. That is investigating what the present moment experience of the emotion is. Take an interest in exploring the emotion. How do you know you are feeling a particular emotion? What tells you that you are feeling anger, or joy, or depression or surprise? One of the best places to do that is in the body. As I said earlier, all emotions have some kind of physical manifestation. Often the physical expression is what clues us in to the fact that we are having the emotion.

There are many sensations in the body that relate to emotions. Anger might result in tightness and heat, fear might result in a contraction in the stomach or the throat. Joy might produce delightful tingling sensations throughout the body.

The sensations in the body that are correlated with the emotion are not the story of the emotion. But they *are* present moment experience. Bringing attention to the physical sensations is one of the best ways to let go of the story, and bring ourselves into the present moment.

## **Non-identification**

The fourth aspect of attending to emotions is non-identification. We tend to strongly identify with our emotions. We take them to be who we are: I am an angry person, a depressed person, a happy person, a fearful person. We somehow seem to feel that these moods, which are actually visitors, are somehow lurking in our being. When we are entangled with an emotion, there is almost always some aspect of identification with it, a feeling of “I, me, or mine”, or identification with the story that it is associated with.

The tools of recognition, acceptance and investigation all support the aspect of non-identification, by helping us to become less entangled with the story, by bringing the mind and the body together into the present moment, by grounding the attention in the body, by taking an interest in what it feels like to be a human being experiencing this emotion.

James Baraz tells a wonderful story about a technique that he used to help him in the non-identification aspect of working with emotions. He pretended that he was an alien, visiting on Earth, and having taken up residence in a human body. His job was simply to report back to the mother ship what humans experienced when they felt emotion: “this is what they feel when they feel anger,” “this is what they feel when they feel bliss.”

## **Attending to positive as well as negative emotions**

Most of the emotions that cause us difficulty in our meditation practice are the afflictive emotions. But the meditation itself can bring about wonderful states of calm, peace, happiness, tranquility, bliss, and joy. We can also attend to these emotions. But in accepting these emotions, pay attention for the tendency to lean into them, to become entangled with them, and to identify with them.

There can be a subtle reactivity of clinging to the positive emotions: this is the way its supposed to be. Now I finally understand how to do this practice, I’m never going to be unhappy again... With pleasant emotions it is easy to get seduced, to not see so clearly that we are actually entangled with the emotion. This kind of reactivity can be a set up for later let down, when these emotions fade, as *everything* eventually does.

In my own experience, I have actually found that the experience of these positive emotions is actually more fulfilling when I’m not entangled with them. Something about the grasping or clinging to them actually prevents us from experience them fully.

## **Mindfulness instructions for attending to emotions**

In terms of paying attention to emotion in our meditation, we don’t actively look for emotions in mindfulness practice. Instead, the basic instruction still is to attend to the breathing.

Give preference to the sensations of breathing. But, if a strong bodily sensation pulls your attention away from the breath, let go of the breath and bring your full attention to the bodily sensation. When the bodily sensation is no longer so compelling, or if it disappears, then return the attention to the breathing.

If a strong emotion arises that makes it difficult to stay with the breathing or the bodily sensation, bring your full attention to the emotion. See if you can recognize it and name it. Investigate it in the body; take an interest in how the emotion plays itself out in your body. When the emotion is no longer exerting a pull on you, or some other strong sensation or emotion pulls your attention, pay attention to that. When the things that pull your attention become less compelling, or they disappear, you can simply return the attention to the sensations of breathing.

### **Exercises for the third week**

- (1) Continue your daily meditation practice. If you are so inspired, try adding 5 minutes to your daily sitting time.
- (2) At least once during the week "ride out an emotion." Sometime during the week when you are feeling a strong desire, aversion, fear, or other emotion, don't act on the feeling. Rather, bring your mindfulness to the feeling and observe the changes it undergoes while you are watching it. You might choose to sit, stand or walk around quietly while you do this study. Things to notice are the various body sensations and tensions, the changes in the feeling's intensity, the various attitudes and beliefs that you have concerning the presence of the emotion, and perhaps any more primary emotion triggering the feeling. If after a time the emotion goes away, spend some time noticing what its absence feels like.
- (3) The third exercise has to do with appreciating positive and wholesome feelings, such as gratitude, happiness, joy, generosity, kindness. The exercise is simply to notice and pay attention to what they feel like. Appreciating these wholesome feelings is part of cultivating the path. But appreciation does not mean getting lost in thought over them! Simply feel them in your mind and body for as long as they last. They will wane, eventually, don't try to extend their life, simply appreciate them. Sometimes these feelings quickly lead us into a tide of thoughts. See if you can simply feel and appreciate these feelings.

It can be as simple as appreciating the texture of a doorknob or a flash of ease in your eyes as you notice the blue sky after the fog has burned off. This is not an exercise for manufacturing positive states but rather discovering that these may be much more a part of your life than your preoccupations allow you to notice.