

DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

Difficult, painful emotions is probably the single deepest thing that brings us to a spiritual practice. It is one of the cruxes of practice, and a good measure of effectiveness of a spiritual teaching.

It's not whether or not you experience challenging circumstances in life, or how to avoid them. We all have them in our lives. That's the point of the first Noble Truth. Pain is inherent in life.

The work is about how we relate to them.

Dealing with difficult feelings and stress is not about getting rid of them, or sailing above them. It's about understanding: meeting them with courage, kindness, compassion, and curiosity. It is the heart of practice, what makes us kinder, softer, more compassionate. It's what gives our practice heart: connection with ourselves and others.

In Carlos Casteneda's ground breaking work, "The Teachings of Don Juan", Don Juan's simple yardstick in measuring any spiritual path is this: "ask yourself one question, and one question only: does the path have heart? Does it make you more loving, more compassionate, more accepting? If yes, it's worthwhile. If not, leave it. It has no value."

The emotional center of the brain (the amygdala), works on different time (is faster) than the logical or thinking brain (the frontal cortex). By the time the front brain registers an emotion is arising, we are flooded with it. That's why we lose perspective when we feel an emotion, and there is not much relativity. It's because of the way the brain is wired.

In experience, it feels like the emotion colors everything. It feels all encompassing, no way out. In reactivity, there is no sense of time.

How do we meet these moments?

On the psychological level, we shared skillful coping mechanisms that help to have more perspective):

- understanding this is how the brain works
- reminding ourselves of impermanence
- reminding ourselves we have come through these things before
- understanding when we might be in a refractive period (overwhelm), and just sit out and wait

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- doing something different - physical labor - exercise, cleaning out the garage, raking leaves, glowing out for a walk - has a proven effect of helping emotional overage to digest in the body. This is because the emotion is a physical response in the body, so attending to it on a physical level meets it squarely
- giver to a higher power
- journalling
- talk to a friend
- be out in nature

These are skillful, helpful and common sense things to keep in mind.

But the dharma teachings focus on something different: actually practicing with the things we want to push away from ourselves, using stress and difficulty to be more fully and fearlessly alive.

What do the teachings in the dharma tradition offer us in terms of actually being present with the things we dislike and fear?

The mountaintop view: The reason these difficult emotions cause us so much stress is that we are mistakenly identified with the conditioned mind. We think we are the content of our minds: the thoughts, feelings, reactions, perceptions, memories, and so on. In the dharma, this is called "ignorance". We are ignorant of what we truly are.

Ultimately, as we move beyond this innocent misunderstanding and understand ourselves to be the pure, aware emptiness in which the whole world is created and has its being, these feelings diminish in direct proportion to how much this understanding permeates our lives.

Luckily, the dharma teaching also understands we need tools as we are working through these layers of confusion. We can't wait until we get to the top of the mountain to have effective means to live more fully and with more ease.

Here's the basics: When you experience stress, or a difficult emotion, three things actually are arising together. It takes some practice to be able to see each element as distinct from the others.

1) The emotion itself - an unpleasant sensation in the body.

What does anxiety feel like? Being scared? Angry? Jealous?

This is the felt sense of the emotion in the body. The fluttering stomach, the tightness in the throat, the knot in the heart.

Emotions like this are usually in response to a stressful thought or perception. We remember something embarrassing or painful, or see that we are late for an appointment, or see someone we dislike. Without mindfulness, the thought and the emotional response in the body tend to escalate each other in a spiral.

Mindfulness practice allows us to be aware of this spiral, not following the triggering thoughts.

It's helpful to be aware of what different feelings bring up, so we can recognize the more quickly. Here's some of our shared experience:

- Anger feels: heat, inner pressure, shallow breathing, tightm clinching, tunnel vision, rigid, an accelerant
- Fear feels: sweaty palms, falling off a cliff, heart pounding, frozebn, stuck, dis-integrated, nauseous
- Anxiety feels: ungrounded, shaky, things are being taken away

In general, one word that describes most of this is: contracted. It feels like there's a tight spot.

2) **The aversion, or resistance** - this is the oh no, not this! reaction. Aversion happens in the mind. It feeds the spiral the with thoughts it produces. Thoughts it produces might be:

- Ooh no, not this! How can I make it go away?
- judgement of self or others, blaming
- how to run away, avoid, disappear
- acting out
- How can I move away from this? I will turn on the TV, check my phone, eat something, or other distractions to move away
- How can I fix it? This is not being present with it, this usually has a component of urgency underneath it that needs it to be different, that can't stand it. For me, there's a taste to it that is very familiar and usually leads to more complications, not ease.
- Denial, numbing: I will not feel this. Shutting down the system. A very popular method in my background, pretend it did not happen. The problem is that now you are shut down. It is no longer possible to skillfully respond to resolving a situation if called for. Shutting down to things that are unpleasant also has the corollary: you are also shutdown to happiness and joy.

In general, all of these include the inner voice starting up: a repetitive story justifying, blaming, rehearsing, complaining. It is trying to find a place where things are more comfortable, which doesn't really work, so goes on and on. It is an incredible energy sink.

The aversion/resistance is the movement away from the moment, away from reality. It is a reaction to an unpleasant feeling tone. Note that pleasant feelings have the same push, only towards instead of away from. This is grasping, and is just as painful.

3) The witnessing presence or observer. This is what we cultivate in our practice. the place that can see clearly it is present, but is not actually feeling the motion itself.

From Thich Nat Hanh, we are familiar with his mindfulness instruction:
"Breathing in, I know that anger is in me. Breathing out, I am taking good care of my anger." Anger is present. Breathing in, I smile to my anger...
The observer is the difference between 1) I am so mad!! and: 2) wow, this anger is very intense.

Here's the dharma teaching:

All suffering happens with #2, not #1 or #3. All of it.

Flinching away, and following the urge to distance from anything unpleasant, is 100% of our suffering. If we stay put in the moment, and stay with it, suffering does not happen. It still feels unpleasant, but life does not tend to spiral around it.

Every tool in the insight tradition works on this principle: staying with, not following the energetic reactions and resistant thought patterns that want to move away from unpleasant emotions.

Important: This does NOT mean getting rid of, beating up on, deep sining, self criticizing, or pushing away.

The sutras use the word "abandon". This is gentle, no force. Like a stray dog that might follow you for awhile on the walk. If you pay it no attention, at some point, the dog stops following you. This means not feeding. How do we feed? With resistance, which keeps the difficult emotion locked in place and unable to dissolve.

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We abandon all the mental and energetic flow of aversion. We see it, and choose not to follow it. We stay present with #1 and #3.

So: when more resistance arises, we accept and stay present with that also. We feel the pull of resistance and stay present there also.

Not resisting, just not following. Resistance at any level pulls you back into the ego identification that caused the aversion to arise in the first place. The ego cannot transcend itself, so we stand on different ground, the ground of presence.

In time, this practice becomes like peeling back an onion, layer by layer, to the core. Present with each layer of conditioned reaction as it comes up. We see more and more deeply the human conditioning, ours and everyone else's, with understanding rather than judgment. Without needing the onion to be anything different than what it is.

The end result of the dharma: if you can present with anything, ANYTHING, and it does not make you shut down or control your response, you are free.

Consider that.

IN SUMMARY

Three things arise together:

1. the emotion
2. the aversion
3. the observer

All suffering is from following aversion. When we abandon aversion and remain present, it is life transformative.

AVERSION

Discomfort, and the aversion/resistance to it, or grasping (looking for something better, the reverse side of the coin) is reactive when we follow it.

We are all very familiar with this, correct? It often comes in the form of reactive thinking.

Any time you hear that voice in your head, it is being fueled by the need to move away from something in your current experience, either away from a discomfort, or grasping at something more pleasant.

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You'll be surprised by how low the bar moving us to flinch away can be. It can be simple boredom, the mind wants more stimulation, something more to entertain itself. It may seek out a pleasant fantasy or looking forward to some future event, or reliving something really nice that happened for you rather than be in the moment.

Aversion can happen with any kind of discomfort, both physical and emotional.

We shared a couple of exercises to find aversion, starting with a physical discomfort. Holding an ice cube with our arm outstretched. The discomfort of the cold sensation, the thought along the lines of "when can I put this down?", and the observer.

We then practiced using an uncomfortable emotion. Again, find the three elements. The emotion was the contraction in the body, the aversion was the story that came up around it, or the not wanting to think about it, and the observer were all present.

When we can see the three aspects arising, we can pick out the piece that is the suffering and not follow its outflow. Aversive outflow is so reflexive, we rarely see it and understand how it works to keep us stuck. Vipassana means deeper, clearer seeing. We see it and choose to abandon it, staying present in the moment with the feeling itself.

With this basic understanding in hand, the tool is to stay with the actual emotion itself. Drop into the body, find the emotion, and hold it. When you find aversion has arisen in any form, gently drop it and come back to the body.

Remembering, reviewing, rehearsing, justifying, complaining, criticizing, all that is the expression of aversion. It is trying to control, to feel better, to get away. But it has the opposite effect.

Thinking fueled by aversion forms a spiral of increase with the emotion itself, each re-triggering the other, so it keeps the emotion in place, giving it no space to resolve or dissolve.

When we abandon the thinking, or aversion, the spiral can reverse. Because there is no fuel, the spiral stops.

Another analogy is one of not watering a plant. It may stay alive for some time, but, eventually, it has no choice. Without the fuel of water, it will shrivel away.

Practice: You are simply keeping in company with. Not trying to change it. Notice if that expectation comes up (is it working yet?), and hold that as well. Another layer of the onion.

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Just stay present.

HOMEWORK:

When something difficult arises, or you find the inner voice has become active, find the three things that have arisen:

- 1) emotion or felt sense (in the body)
- 2) aversion or grasping (in the mind)
- 3) observer (the awareness)

Stay with #1, and #3. See, but do not follow the outflow of #2.