

Dealing with Feelings

By Martine Batchelor

feelings

are so intimate and immediate, and feel so real and solid that we often cannot imagine how we could transform them or engage meditatively with them. However if we shift perspective and start to experience feelings, like sounds, as unpredictable, coming upon conditions, fluid and changing, we might be able to encounter and respond to them in a different way. To know our feelings, to experience their texture, their effects on our body and thoughts, enables us to explore the mechanism by which they become emotional patterns and then become exaggerated into disturbing emotions.

Each person has his or her own emotional patterns. People are described as kind, aggressive, or passive even when they are not exhibiting these emotions because over time they were observed as being repeatedly loving, angry, or indifferent. Some people in difficult circumstances have a tendency to sink, and others to fight. It depends on outer conditions but also on inner feeling streams. If one is not aware of these streams, they will expand and make one act reactively and blindly, and lead to pain for oneself and others.

When we are in the grip of a strong emotion like anger, fear, loneliness, or grief, it is so encompassing that we feel overwhelmed and disturbed. It colors our whole being – body, heart, and mind. Sensations can reinforce feelings, which are reinforced in turn by thoughts. Feelings, sensations, and thoughts come together in a powerful mix to create disturbing emotions. If we look closely at feelings, we can see them emerge and metamorphose into these disturbing



emotions. We can also start to recognize the feeling patterns that contribute to them becoming disturbing emotions.

Once I woke up feeling strange, a little grey and somewhat low in mood, which is relatively unusual for me. I looked around in my circumstances for why I would feel that way. I could not find anything. I saw this as an opportunity to explore this feeling. There were sensations in the body, which were somewhat unpleasant, but there was no hook in the mind to identify with them and exaggerate them. For the

next two weeks I observed this feeling, which showed me that it was possible to observe feelings in the same way one would sounds. This low feeling dissipated when I met someone in great difficulty. I opened to that person with focused attention and compassion. The power of compassion was stronger than the energy of that feeling and it totally disappeared.

By not feeding nor identifying with this grey feeling, I did not create the conditions for it to become a disturbing emotion and then transform into an emotional pattern over time. To feel sadness when someone dies, anger when confronted by injustice, anxiety when in a difficult position, fear when there is danger, loneliness when one is on one's own for many days are natural responses to specific circumstances. As a human being, it is essential to have the capacity to feel – to cry and to laugh. It enriches our life and our relationships.

Sadness

I used to see Master Kusan cry in two situations: when he officiated for the death ceremony of people he knew and when he talked to lay supporters about the “ten gratitudes” one needs to cultivate toward one's parents. It would not last long, just a few tears and then he would resume his normal composure. I was moved to see that a Zen master could be sad and cry in public, but also inspired by the fact that one could have feelings without being overwhelmed or disturbed by them.

Master Tahui, a twelfth-century Chinese master, replying to a disciple's letter, wrote this: “I take it that your fifth son is not recovering from his illness. It is precisely when afflicted that you should carefully investigate and inquire where the affliction arises from. If you cannot get to the bottom of its origination, then where does the one who is afflicted right now come from? If you want to think, then think; if you want to cry, then cry.”

Master Tahui is acknowledging that his disciple is sad and in pain. He suggests four different ways of

dealing with these feelings. The first is to inquire into the sadness itself, its form and shape, and to see if he can discern what is at the root of it, what is its source. If it is too painful to do that, then he can look at himself in this moment. Who is he? How did he come into being? By so doing he can see that he arises out of a flow of conditions and that everything that is conditioned is impermanent. If he cannot do that, he can think about his son and the joys his son had brought to his life. He can reflect that illness can happen to anyone at any time and he can also appreciate that he is able to be with his son at this difficult time. But he can also cry and express his sadness at the fact that his son is very ill and may be dying.

When I saw my father die, I felt great sadness but also in that intense emotional moment I experienced fully for the first time the reality of impermanence. Thereafter I started to relate to people in a different way, because I knew for myself how precious they were, that their life rested upon a single breath, the last breath I had seen on the lips of my father.

When someone dies, we are sad for a life ending but even more so for our loss, that this cherished person is no longer in our life. At that moment, if there is a habitual feeling stream of lack, of something missing in our life, the feeling of sadness, which is due to circumstances, will expand, spread, and connect to an emotional pattern of hopelessness or meaninglessness. It could be called the Poor Me syndrome, which expresses itself with such thoughts as: “I am alone in the world,” “nobody loves me,” “nobody is there for me,” “I lose everything of value,” etc.

This is a painful loop that seems to exist at least in some form in most human beings. It can be easily triggered by a simple feeling of sadness and can quickly take us down into the dark hole of hopelessness. It is quite painful and paralyzing and at the same time we seem to wallow in it – “Poor me, poor me, life is so terrible.” I

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wonder if we wallow in it because although it is a painful state it absolves us of any responsibility. We become like a helpless child again and there seems to be an odd comforting feeling about this.

Can we see through that “Poor me” spiral and catch it before it starts and takes us down? It is difficult to be with unpleasant feelings: we do not like them, they are painful, and we want them to go away. But we need to know them because otherwise we will be caught and blinded by them and moved swiftly from the unpleasant feelings caused by certain conditions to being lost in the disturbing emotions that follow and are reinforced by the emotional habit.

Feeling Low

If we have different habits, frustration will lead to feelings of paralysis and stagnation, which will turn into a mood of hopelessness instead of gathering energy into anger.

Then we become listless and feel ineffective. We have the conviction that nothing is working and nothing will ever work. This feeling-stream is powerful in a negative way in that it makes us feel lethargic and without energy. It often starts out with just a faint feeling of being slightly low, not feeling like doing anything, then it morphs into not wanting to do anything and then into not being able to do anything. This is a very dispiriting mood to be in. It is not in general dangerous for others but very much for ourselves.

It is sometimes hard to come out of this listless state unless one has reached the bottom of it and then there is only one way, to go up again. However it is difficult to go back up from so deep down. It is for this reason that it is essential to be more aware of the low feeling when it starts and use creative means to alleviate it so it does not settle and spread. Because the feeling itself hinders any ability to do anything, it would be even more beneficial to catch it before it even starts to appear. As the Buddha suggests in two of the four great efforts: Cultivate conditions so that negative states that have not been created yet do not arise and cultivate conditions so that positive states have the possibility to appear.

With anger, you have to create space; with low moods, you have to create energy. What is it that uplifts you? It can be as simple as walking or gardening. If I feel low or cooped up, I know that I need a good walk outside. Once I felt depressed in winter in England where it is pretty dark and wet at that time of the year. I felt that the solution was creativity so I went on a ten-week wood-carving course. It worked and made a big difference. I never did wood-carving again but it answered the need at that moment.

Meditation and Depression

When I lead retreats, I encounter people who have come to meditation because of depression. Meditation helps them to deal with this illness and its symptoms. However it is essential to see that each person is different. Some people can “treat” their depression just with meditation—but they are quite rare. Generally people with depression might take anti-depressants and often also see a therapist, and at the same time practice meditation. These three different methods are not opposed but, rather, are complementary. When someone is in the depth of depression, prostrate and incapable of doing anything, then one needs to take anti-depressants to emerge from the depth of the depressive state, reach a plateau in which one can start to be more active and then do meditation and go to a therapist. Depression is an incapacitating disease that has a tendency to recur and can become chronic. Sometimes the experience of a depressive state seems to create a groove in one’s whole being.

Research has shown that some people who have experienced one episode of clinical depression will be likely to have further episodes. It is estimated that 50% of patients who’ve had one depressive episode will suffer again from depression at least once. If depression occurs more than twice, then unfortunately there is a 70–80% chance for depression to recur again and again. Some people seem to develop a long-term vulnerability to this disease. Some data from a five-year study point out that the sooner one relapses after recovery, the greater likelihood there is for depression to become a habitual condition.

Mark Williams, John Teasdale, and Zindel Segal, who specialized in studies of psychological models and treatment of depression, developed a maintenance program of cognitive therapy to prevent further relapse for people who had had several episodes of depression. (Cognitive therapy was one of the therapies found to be as effective as anti-depressant medication when dealing with depression.)

There seem to be many common points between Buddhist practice and cognitive therapy. They deal with and are concerned with the same material – namely human suffering and how to relieve it. They have in common a pragmatic approach that sees and finds a deep value in acceptance and compassion. Dr. Aaron T. Beck, one of the founders of cognitive therapy, believes that Buddhism and cognitive therapy share a commitment to self-responsibility and that both methods focus on immediate experience, trying to separate anguish from pain and use a kind of meditative awareness.

In the course of their research, Williams, Teasdale, and Segal decided to bring in the mindfulness approach of Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn to complement the cognitive techniques. Over the course of a few years they developed what is now known as a Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) program for depression, an eight-week course for groups of patients who have suffered several occurrences of depression. They found that their group treatment halved the relapse rate for people who had had three episodes of depression previously and was equivalent to other treatments if people only had had two episodes of depression.

In *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression: A New Approach to Preventing Relapse*¹, the authors state, “the MBCT program was specifically designed to reduce the extent to which patterns of depressive thinking reactivated by sad moods could feed the factors responsible for relapse/recurrence.” They assumed that “such sadness-linked thinking resulted from repeated associations between the depressed state and characteristic negative thinking

patterns within each depressive episode.” They were afraid that “the strengthening of these associations with repeated episodes contributed to making relapse increasingly autonomous or automatic, so it took less and less to actually trigger the return of symptoms.” Further, they thought “the preventive effects of MBCT arose, specifically, from disruption of those processes at times of potential relapse/recurrence.” So they deduced that MBCT would be more effective with the “types of depression not so much brought about by unpleasant events but by prolonged rumination.”

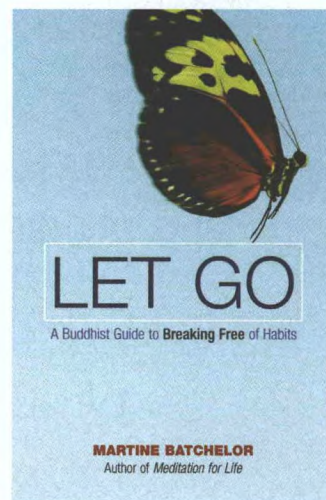
When I read the book on MBCT, I was struck by the fact that the course that had been developed was totally in accordance with the four great efforts as taught by the Buddha:

- To cultivate conditions so that negative states that have not been created yet do not arise
- To let go once the negative state is present
- To cultivate conditions so that positive states have the possibility to appear
- To sustain positive states once they are there

During the eight-week course the participants are taught various tools of awareness, mindfulness, enquiry, and concentration with an emphasis on awareness in the body as a means to take the focus and energy away from the negative mental ruminations that, combined with low moods, will trigger a depressive state. People are encouraged to explore, accept, and let go of their negative feelings and thoughts, and recognize and build on good feelings, their capacity for joy, and the ability they have to accomplish something of value and meaning.

MBCT is an important treatment that anyone suffering from depression should be aware of. ☸

Excerpted from the chapter entitled “Lost in Emotions” in Let Go: A Buddhist Guide to Breaking Free of Habits by Martine Batchelor. Published by Wisdom Publications www.wisdompubs.org. Other emotions discussed compassionately and helpfully in this chapter are anger, boredom, loneliness, anxiety and lack. This is a wise and sensible book by a kind, gentle woman who spent ten years in a Korean monastery studying Zen Buddhism.



¹ Segal, Zindel V., J. Mark G. Williams, and John D. Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*. New York: The Guilford Press, 2002.