

Foundations of Zen 13

Forms of Meditation

Class 3: Emotions

October 16, 2021

We began our exploration of meditation and its relational forms with our relationship with ourself. We investigated meditation with breath awareness, body scans, walking meditation, and awareness of our body in everyday activity. These are quite concrete and specific practices, easy for us to access.

In the second class we went a bit deeper, considering our perceptions, which are the interface between the body and the world, including our sense organs, an external phenomena related to that sense organ, and the sense consciousness that arises in contact between them, which we call perception.

You can hear the echoes of this in the Merging of Difference and Unity (in the chant book):

*Eye and form, ear and sound,
nose and smell, tongue and taste”*

And much later declared in the Heart Sutra as “empty,” in Tanahashi’s translation “boundless,” or [my preferred meaning] “open” “

*Therefore, given emptiness there is no form, no sensation,
no perception, no formation, no consciousness;
no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind,
no sight, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch,
no object of mind; no realm of sight, to no realm of mind consciousness.*

This is quite explicit: external stimulus, sense organs, the process of sensing through their contact, and even the consciousness arising from our senses are utterly unbounded, empty, open, undefinable. Go ahead, try to refute this from your own experience. We have only labels that attempt to create definitions, attempt to include and exclude, to form some kind of boundary that encircles what we are trying to describe. And ultimately, they all fail.

So last week, we experimented with hearing, both alone and with a partner. In this inquiry we began to extend our concrete, internal relation between our self and our world, and explore how our perception leads to emotions, both in ourselves and in relation with another.

Simple perception, especially with another, is quite difficult because we immediately begin layering onto it our negotiation of meaning, distance or closeness, relational well-being, judgments and interpretations and all the rich texture of our human relating. We need to keep returning to the question: what am I actually perceiving?

As we continue our exploration, we consider this week the baffling and complex world of all that arises, continuing on from our perceptions, and leading to our emotions. Our emotion states begin with perception, and generally some sensation in the body/mind system. These perceptions give rise to an experience the Buddha called *vedanā*. This Pāli word, as Anālayo explains, is derived from the verb *vedeti*, which means both “to feel” and “to know” He writes:

In its usage in the discourses, *vedanā* comprises both bodily and mental feelings. (p. 156, *Satipatthana*, the Direct Path to Realization).

They are not themselves emotion states, but the catalyst for emotion states, which the Buddha taught as states of body/mind. *Vedanā* refers to that immediate primal experience of our perceptions as positive, negative, or neutral. From *vedanā* emotions are formed as aspects of mind and body in mutual interaction.

We may or may not be able give language to emotions, which in turn crucially shape our understanding of our perceptions, our understanding of them, and our actions in ways that are characteristic of our conditioning, layered up from past experiences and our interpretations of them.

Our emotions don't just arise in situations, they also drive our response to them. They are immediate, seemingly unbidden, real, and compelling. It's important to practice with feelings (positive, negative, neutral) and their resulting emotions since they have a profound influence in our internal universe, our construction of a self, our relationships with others and with the world. But we are still quite naïve about our emotions and their systematic arousal.

Let's talk first about what emotions we share with the animals. In doing so, I'm going to draw on the research by Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Bivens, and their book *Archaeology of Mind*. Panksepp, who died in 2017, had joint appointments as a professor in three disciplines: Psychology, Animal Well-Being, and Molecular Therapeutics, and had extensively studied emotions, brain chemistry, and their evolution. His research identified seven emotions that we humans share with animals, specifically mammals. In the book he details the neurobiology and biochemistry, as well as the evolutionary development associated with these emotions we share:

1. The SEEKING system: brain sources of eager anticipation, desire, euphoria and the quest for everything

2. Ancestral sources of RAGE
3. Ancestral sources of FEAR
4. LUSTFUL passions of the mind: from reproductive urges to romantic love
5. the CARE system
6. the PANIC/GRIEF system and the genesis of life-sustaining social bonds
7. PLAYful Dreamlike circuits of the brain: the ancestral sources of Social Joy and Laughter.

(From *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions*, Panksepp and Bivens)

These emotions arise spontaneously through our brain's limbic system, our brain chemistry, and our relationship with ourselves, others, and the world. Because we have bundles of neurons surrounding our heart and gut, these are also implicated in our emotions. As I've said before, there is no way to prevent the spontaneous arising of these emotions, as so many religions have attempted to do. Not in commandments from God, not in torture by Inquisitions, not in Confession and repentance, not in monastic isolation; these emotion-states cannot be prevented. 2,000+ years of failure just for Christianity!

In Buddhism we do not try to prevent emotion states from arising, but to use them as dharma gates to awakening. How so? By staying present with our emotions, studying them, recognizing them as embodied, present moment experience, we can wake up to the underlying conditioning that feeds and distorts them, turning them into karmic thoughts, words, and actions. They are the energy of life flowing through us. But we have the capacity to manage that energy wisely or unwisely, compassionately or selfishly. So how do we practice this?

Anālayo writes:

Thus to contemplate feelings means quite literally to know how one feels, and this with such immediacy that the light of awareness is present before the onset of reactions, projections, or justifications in regard to how one feels....The systematic development of such immediate knowing will also strengthen one's more intuitive modes of apperception, in the sense of the ability to get a feel for a situation or another person. (p. 157, *Satipatthana, the Direct Path to Realization*).

The Buddha further identified feelings as either worldly or unworldly, so that his monks trained in this way:

When feeling a pleasant feeling, [one] knows “I feel a pleasant feeling”; when feeling an unpleasant feeling, one knows “I feel an unpleasant feeling”; when feeling a neutral feeling, [one] knows “I feel a neutral feeling.” When feeling a worldly pleasant feeling, one knows “I feel a worldly pleasant feeling”; when feeling an unworldly pleasant feeling, one knows “I feel an unworldly pleasant feeling”; when feeling a worldly unpleasant feeling, one knows “I feel a worldly unpleasant feeling”; When feeling an unworldly unpleasant feeling, one knows “I feel an unworldly unpleasant feeling”; when feeling a worldly neutral feeling, one knows “I feel a worldly neutral feeling”; When feeling an unworldly neutral feeling, one knows “I feel an unworldly neutral feeling”; (p. 156, *Satipatthana, the Direct Path to Realization*).

Worldly feelings are those related to the five senses and the material world; unworldly feelings are those related to spiritual experience, renunciation, and the path of the Dharma. How many of us have this precise, present mindfulness? Basically, you would be aware of exactly what you are experiencing, moment to moment, exactly what your situation is, moment to moment. This is being awake. It is calm abiding not without feelings, but quite awake in them, and quite aware of the sense contacts that are fueling them, the stories, judgments, plans, words, actions, ideas, theories, self-making, and so on that they spark.

You can notice: *anger is present now, or sadness is present now, or contentment is present now*, even if you are caught up in it and swamped or overwhelmed by its force. You can be aware of its rising, its appearance, and its ultimate dissolving throughout. Notice that simply abiding in emotion states, without suppressing them or venting them, we gain insight into ourselves and our own conditioning. To be patient and compassionate with ourselves when we are overtaken by our emotions is the ground of practice. In that way, we train as well to be patient and compassionate and beneficial when we realize that others are caught in the riptide of emotion. We are free from reactivity, whether to our own emotions, or those of others. That does not mean we do not feel, do not respond, only that we respond from a different, more spacious, free, and open place, rather than from our limited conditioning, judgments, fear, blame, and shame.

Activity: Short meditation practice: Allow yourself to rest in stillness, and check in with your breathing. Notice whether the breaths are long or short, deep or shallow, without judging them... Check in now with your whole body, head to toe, noticing any contraction, tension, pain, or ease, just observing without manipulating your experience in any way... With this mindful, whole-body awareness, simply begin labeling whatever you notice as pure experience: positive, negative, neutral. Continue mindfully naming: positive, positive, neutral, negative. As bodily sensations arise, as thoughts appear, perceptions, emotions, simply return to labeling them, without doing anything about them. Your practice is this simple noticing in bare awareness. It is very challenging at first, because we have lots of

ideas about how we *should* feel, but just set those aside and observe with a kind of friendly curiosity, as a scientist of your own experience.

It's worth noting that research has demonstrated that in terms of neurophysiology, emotions have a maximum duration of about 90 seconds. We can of course amplify or extend those emotions using these great big brains we have. We have the capacity to experience emotions by recalling past experience, or anticipating future experiences, outside of our current situation. We have the capacity to create emotions using our imaginations, conditioning, or memory. I think this may be a unique capacity in humans. Empathic response to emotions of others, however, is something that animals clearly share with us; it's been observed in elephants, in primates, in horses, in dogs and cats. Even rats laugh, as Panksepp discovered.

Personality traits shape our interactions with ourselves, others, and the world— our feelings about it—in important ways. Psychologists have a saying: states repeated become traits, traits become character. And they say about neurons in our brains: what fires together wires together. For example, in childhood, if we have a cranky neighbor with red hair, we may unconsciously associate red hair with anger, criticism and blame, even as adults, when we ought to know better. We all have these associations, continuously forming through our lived experience.

In other words, as Joko said, we become good at what we practice, and that practice can be conscious or unconscious. Some people faithfully practice anger, in all its range from annoyance to rage; some people faithfully practice woundedness, nursing slights, recalling past injuries, and imagining wrongs to fuel their practice. Judgments, dissatisfaction, grasping, fear and anxiety, worry, impatience, distractions, loneliness can all be practiced until we are habituated, true experts, and the qualities we practice form the inner world we inhabit and the outer world we interact with. But we can equally practice contentment, connection, delight, wonder, creativity, curiosity, appreciation, and so on. In the beginning it might feel a bit awkward, especially if this practice is new to you, but gradually it can be fostered and cultivated through mindful intention and care.

As Dan Siegel notes: We are all born with a temperament, an innate proclivity of the nervous system to shape our inner and outer responses, propensities that interact with our experiences to shape our personality as we grow.

These tendencies, present even at birth, have cascading effects in our lives, particularly when they are amplified, suppressed, or distorted by our surroundings, including our caregivers, siblings, social milieu, and environment.

[See Personality Traits handout]

In an even more recent book from 2018, Panksepp and Davis explored these famous “big five” traits in research that takes a neurobiological and evolutionary approach.

How do we bring this understanding of our emotion states into our relationship with ourselves, with others, with the world? Let’s find out!

Activity: Naming present moment experience, with threes. In this activity, there is one speaker at a time, and each person will have a turn as a speaker. Meanwhile, the listeners simply observe as compassionate witnesses, both the speaker, as well as what is happening in themselves as they listen. Speakers, focus on your ongoing experience using “ing” words or phrases: breathing, remembering my brother, hearing birds, heart beating, thinking about lunch. It’s ok to pause to check in with your body or breathing, but you want to capture the stream of experience as it is ongoing. Don’t make things up, just name what is present: worrying about my project, shoulder aching, breathing in, breathing out, heart beating.

We’ll be in breakout rooms, and we will begin with a minute of silence, just so that we can settle into the present moment. Decide who will go first, second, and third, and listeners keep track of the time for each speaker. In turn, each person has two minutes speaking, and when everyone is complete, sit in silence for one minute together. Then take about 10 minutes to discuss your experience, both as speakers and listeners. What emotions did you notice? We’ll return to the whole group and then share whatever you would like to offer.

Some additional practices with emotions:

- Emotion inventory: physical sensations, energetic experience (high, middle, low, scattered or focused, hot or cool, fast or slow), dullness or sharpness, thoughts, stories, asking “what does this make me?”
- *“How should it be?”* and *“How is it really: what is actually happening in fact?”*
- How do I do [this emotion I call “anger,” or “anxiety”]? What are its physical sensations, beliefs, physical expressions, thoughts, stories about myself or others? Is it positive, negative, or neutral—and how am I actually so sure? What other feelings are present in it? How common is this emotion for me?
- Prairie meditation. First, pay attention to the sensations in your body, then expand your awareness as though you are standing on a vast prairie, stretching as far as you can see in every direction. It has been here for thousands of years, grasses bowing in the breeze, great sky above. The prairie is alive with wildflowers, beetles, jackrabbits,

wild horses running free. Your mind becomes the ground of this living prairie. Allow your emotions, thoughts, sensations, the words and emotions of others to simply move across this spacious, open prairie like wind, like clouds passing by, a thunderstorm, the lashing of rain and wind, a thick snowfall settling. The passing weather, no matter how turbulent, how bitter cold, how sunny or cloudy, does not trouble the prairie, where there is nothing to obstruct or resist them. It does nothing to escape the forces of the elements, and nothing to repel them. It experiences them without open equanimity.

- Ocean meditation. Allow your breathing and your body to settle, as much as possible. Envision yourself on the open ocean, nothing but ocean as far as you can see in every direction, nothing but clouds and sky above. Notice the waves of emotion-thought on the surface. Maybe the water is roiled up in great waves, maybe it is calmer, almost still. The waves crash together in huge rolls of surf, lined with froth, or lap together in little wavelets. You begin to sink below the surface, breathing easily underwater, and simply allowing the weight you are carrying to settle you deeper and deeper, the sunlight and waves at the surface farther and farther away. And as you easily drop deeper and deeper into the warm bright water, you feel relaxed and peaceful, the placid fish passing by, the world quiet and easy.
- Sky meditation. Find a place outdoors (or in your mind) where you can comfortably observe the sky, day or night. This is a favorite meditation in Tibetan Buddhism. Allow your awareness to expand to the fullness of the sky and whatever is there; the rose edges of dawn, with a few stars gradually winking out, the brightness of midday, the color of the clouds and their changing shapes as they race across the sky, the sky filled with thunderclouds and lightning, the rich velvet darkness spangled with stars, the calm abiding as the sun sets, shooting great rays of gold and scarlet through indigo clouds, while behind you, the sky begins to deepen into sapphire and cobalt. How long has it been since you have witnessed these spectacles, taking your time to lean back and really allow yourself to be absorbed in them? Allow your emotions to rise into the sky, to freely expand and move there. What changing shapes do they take?
- A quick, simple meditation you can do anywhere, alone or with others: Put 30% of your awareness in your feet, or some unaffected part of your body: your thumbs, your elbow, your forehead. Obviously the percentage has to be estimated! Continue whatever you are doing with this awareness.
- Notice the way we characterize ourselves often by our emotions: *I guess I'm just an anxious person; I am always pretty happy, or alternatively, I am sad even when others seem happy; I'm afraid of being abandoned/overwhelmed/humiliated/left out; I worry*

about what others are thinking of me, I hate being alone, I am often bored, and so on. Many of our notions about who we are, our well-being, come from our identification with emotion states, which are, after all, fleeting, unreliable, and skewed by our conditioning. You are not your emotions, any more than you are your passing physical sensations: cold, achy, hungry, sleepy, energetic. See if you can identify the ways or situations in which you identify with your emotion state in the moment.

Emotions serve as hindrances in our practice when they have the effect of clouding our bright, clear awareness, classically by arousing sense desires, ill will, restlessness and worry, dullness and torpor, or doubt. The Buddha identified these five hindrances in particular in his teaching. I like that term, hindrances, which suggests some difficulty that can be overcome, rather than serving as obstacles or character flaws.

However, these hindrances can also be, as I mentioned, dharma gates for our spiritual inquiry, trailheads that can lead us to deeper understanding of ourselves and others. We can deepen our wisdom and compassion profoundly through these practices, since we and others are so often driven by our emotions.

So this week, focus your meditation on one of these practices with feelings or emotions. Notice the impact of feelings and emotions on your quality of relating with others, with the world. If you identify an emotion, such as anger, investigate it with these questions: how do I do this thing I call anger? Take first a physical inventory and locate what changes in your body, then what thoughts and stories get attached to those sensations. Is it really anger? Ask yourself: what else is here? Emotions are rarely singular; usually other feelings accompany them or are also moving under them: fear, anxiety, grief. Keep asking: and what else is here? until you are completely satisfied that everything has been recognized.

[A story of panic. I've told the story before of being in a plane approaching Dallas airport, on my way back from a conference. I was in the front row of this small jet, and the stewardess was sitting facing me in the jump seat. The pilot announced we would be on the ground in 25 minutes. Suddenly we found ourselves in a thunderstorm, with extreme turbulence, tossing the little jet around. Half an hour passed as we lurched and bucked, and we were still not on the ground. I grew anxious, thinking, they are flying around to use up fuel so that we won't explode when we crash. Still we did not land, and no word from the pilot.

I looked at the stewardess, worried, and she seemed worried too. I could feel her apprehension, and I began to panic. but I am a good Zen student, so I thought: I almost never have a chance to experience and study such extreme emotions: how do I do "panic?" I began taking an inventory, the short panting breaths, the knot in my stomach, my hot forehead, and the persistent, recurring thought: please don't let my child be an orphan, please don't let my child be an orphan. As I was noticing these embodied sensations and thoughts, they dissolved,

disappearing completely. I'm sorry to say my thought was, wait! I'm not through studying this! Soon we began to land, and then we were safely on the ground. I said to the stewardess as I was leaving, that was scary! And she said, why? I said because the pilot said we were would be on the ground in 25 minutes and we circled around for much longer than that. She said, oh, it's always like that at Dallas airport, so much traffic. I said, but you looked so worried! She said, oh, I was worried about you, because you looked so anxious.]

We are sensitive, social beings, who react not only to our own emotions, but to the emotions of others, and this effect is exponential depending on the number of people we are with. That is why mobs get violent, why we are more scared at horror films in movie theaters, and why compassion and care amplify compassion and care with others. Our emotion-states are hard-wired for mutuality, whether in cooperation or conflict or calm abiding with others. So this week, pay attention to how your own emotions states both influence others and are influenced by others in relational dynamics. We are also actively engaged with our world: the natural world, the built environment, social structures and dynamics. Look for patterns in your emotional experience. Think about how your emotions are activated by the media you consume; think about whether you are intentionally or unconsciously fostering certain emotion states through choices you are making.

Next week, we will put these concentration practices we've explored so far together in a comprehensive way, establishing mindfulness of body, mind, and intention. This will conclude our practice in relating with self, and prepare us to begin our practice of inquiry into the Dharma, investigating for ourselves the radical teachings of the Buddha.

Please observe, too, whether these concentration practices, focusing on our internal experience, our relationship with ourselves, seem to have any effect on your relationships.

Sources:

The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions, Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven. 2012

The Emotional Foundations of Personality: A Neurobiological and Evolutionary Approach, Kenneth L. Davis and Jaak Panksepp. 2018

Handouts:

Personality Traits—Revised

Class 3 Notes