

# Befriending Emotion

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(from Awakening the Heart)

Emotions are our most common experience of being moved by forces seemingly beyond our control. As such, they are among the most confusing and frightening phenomena of everyday life. People often treat them as a nuisance or a threat, yet failing to experience them straightforwardly undermines sanity and well-being.

How can we begin to relate to emotions in a more direct and fearless way? Can we ever befriend our emotions and accept them as part of us? Why is emotion so hard to come to terms with in our culture? What is the difference between uselessly going around in emotional circles and working with emotions in a more healthy way? Is it possible to go more deeply into emotions, go toward them, face them as they are? If we could let ourselves feel just what we feel, instead of reacting against it, condemning it, or trying to manipulate and suppress it, perhaps we would develop greater confidence about facing whatever life confronts us with.

## EMOTION IN WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY

The subject of emotion is one of the most confused chapters of modern psychology. Anyone wishing to learn about emotion from the literature of Western psychology finds a bewildering array of conflicting theories about what it is, how it arises, and what it signifies. James Hillman, at the end of an exhaustive study of these theories, could only conclude that "no matter how thoroughly amplified, the problem of emotion remains perennial and its solution ineffable."<sup>1</sup>

In Western culture we have a history of treating emotions with suspicion and contempt, as alien, "other", separate from us. The "passions" have usually been viewed as our "lower nature", from Plato onward. Viewing the source of the passions as Freud did, as an "it" (translated in English as "id"),<sup>2</sup> "a primitive chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement,"<sup>3</sup> makes it more difficult to befriend emotions and accept them as a part of ourselves. This view of emotions as primitive and alien seems to be a classic Western way of separating ourselves from them. This is in sharp contrast to the meditative approach, which considers that it is precisely our alienation from emotions that makes them so domineering and uncontrollable.

A dualistic attitude toward emotions, which sees them as something "other", can lead to trying to get rid of them by impulsively acting them out, or by suppressing them. However, neither of these strategies allow us to experience our emotions as they are, face to face. Acting them out and suppressing emotions often only keep us separate from them.

Before exploring how to work with emotion in a different way, it is important to understand what emotion is and how it usually arises.

## THE SPECTRUM OF FELT ENERGY

Our feeling life has a whole spectrum of expressions, from global and diffuse to sharp and intense. This spectrum of felt energy could be pictured, as in Figure 1, in a cone shape, with a broad and deep base, which gets more narrow and intense as its peak:

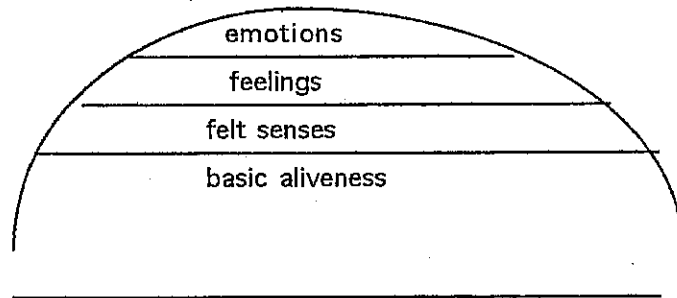


Figure 1. The Spectrum of Felt Energy

### *The Ground of Feeling and Emotion: Basic Aliveness*

All our feelings and emotions grow out of a basic life stream coursing through us. The biologist Rene Dubos describes this basic aliveness as a wholesome feeling persisting beneath all the ups and downs of circumstance:

About the experience of life, most people are under the illusion that they can be happy only if something especially good happens. Oddly enough, there is only one phrase I know to express that life is good *per se*, that just being alive is good ... the French expression, *joie de vivre*. *Joie de vivre* simply means that just being alive is an extraordinary experience. The quality of that experience anyone can see by watching a young child or a young animal playing in the spring. It is totally immaterial what goes on, except for the fact that you are alive. It does not mean that you are very happy with the way you live. You can even be suffering; but just being alive is a quality *per se*.<sup>4</sup>

Our basic aliveness is also the source of our sensitivity and tenderness. Because we are fundamentally open and receptive to life, we are vulnerable. Our soft skin, the intricate workings of our senses, brain, and nervous system are all geared toward *letting the world in*. Feeling and emotion are what arise in response to letting the world in.

Our aliveness is not only the source of feelings; it is also contained within them, just as water is the cradle of life as well as a universal element in all living tissues. Like earth, our sense of aliveness encompasses and nurtures us, with specific feelings growing out of its ground. Like air, which, when breathed in, quickens the whole body with a fresh source of energy, our aliveness, provides an open space at

the core of feelings, which keeps them from ever becoming totally fixed or solid. And like fire, our sense of aliveness has an all-encompassing warmth. Connecting with this aliveness, in which lies our basic sanity and well-being, is to discover our most intimate sensitivity, from which all our feelings and emotions arise.

### *Felt Senses*

Between this pure aliveness and the specific feelings and emotions we are most familiar with, we have more global kinds of "felt senses" about the life situations we are in. For example, I may feel anger toward someone, but anger is never all that I feel toward him. My anger is only the tip of the iceberg of a much larger sense of how I relate to him, what bothers me in our relationship, and many other sense for how he affects me and how I have related to similar people and situations in the past. This larger "iceberg" is much wider and deeper than my anger, and can actually be experienced as a global felt sense in the body. We can tap into such a felt sense by asking ourselves, "How does this person feel to me as a whole?" or "How does this whole situation feel to me?"

Because a felt sense includes many different aspects of how we relate to a situation, it may seem vague or fuzzy at first, appearing for instance as a tightness in the chest or a heaviness in the stomach. Yet we can begin to unfold its meaning by asking questions of it and letting it speak to us. For example, with the client I described in Chapter 4, the felt sense of heaviness in his stomach turned out to contain frustration, disappointment, holding back, and desire to communicate and care more deeply. Unfolding a felt sense can help open up the basic aliveness underneath and reconnect a person with positive life directions that may have been dammed by the entanglement of the situation.<sup>5</sup>

### *Feeling and Emotion*

In contrast to a felt sense, which is often unclear at first, feelings, such as sadness, gladness, or anger are relatively familiar and recognizable. Emotions are more intense forms of feelings. The feeling of sadness may build into grief, the feeling of irritation can become a fierce rage. The distinguishing characteristic of emotion is that it dominates our attention and cannot be ignored, while a feeling can remain in the background of awareness.

## **THE BIRTH OF EMOTIONAL ENTANGLEMENT**

I have suggested that feelings and emotions themselves do not have to be a problem if we can relate to them directly. How then do they turn into such a problem, becoming tight, claustrophobic, or explosive? Suppose I wake up feeling sad. Instead of letting this sadness touch me and put me in contact with what is happening in my life, I may concentrate on how it punctures my self-image of being a together, successful person. In that it seems to undermine the self-image I would

like to maintain, I stand back from it and judge it as bad. But when I judge sadness negatively and cut myself off from it, it becomes frozen, losing its tender quality that connects me to life. I get caught up in sad "story lines" -- sad thoughts and fantasies which I project in the past and the future (e.g., "What is the matter with me? I'll never get it together, etc."). The more sad story lines arise, the sadder I become -- a vicious circle that eventually starts building into more intense emotions of depression and despair. As a heavier depression grows out of simple sadness over a specific incident, I may begin to see the entire world, my whole life history and future prospects in this light. My depressed thoughts radiate out in all direction and lock me further into my depression. In this way, my sadness has become thick, solid, and heavy.

Actually, the word "sad" comes from the same root as the words "sated" or "satisfied" which indicates that it may actually be a kind of fullness, in this case fullness of the heart. We often feel sad when our heart -- that part of us where things touch us -- is full. This fullness, which may want to spill over in tears, is still very tender and alive, as opposed to the frozen state of depression that results from putting away our sadness rather than opening to it. The cycle of feeling giving rise to thought solidifies and freezes feeling and causes us to go around in emotional circles, getting nowhere. As we spin around in this emotional confusion, perception becomes cloudy, and we often say or do things we later regret. Cutting through the tendency to get caught up in emotional story lines takes a certain discipline, which psychotherapy and meditation can provide in different ways.

### **THE THERAPEUTIC APPROACH TO EMOTION**

Therapeutic work provides one way to free ourselves from emotional spinning by going underneath the emotion to unfold a larger felt sense -- which expresses our whole connection to the situation about which we are feeling so strongly. For example, with the client described in Chapter 4, finding a deeper caring underneath his anger released him from his anger's grip. That rather simple example illustrated what may happen in greater depth over a longer time in therapy. Venting emotions may be necessary along the way as well, but what often seems to release an emotional tangle is not catharsis per se, but letting our feelings speak to us and reveal what they are asking us to look at, what they are telling us about how we are relating to our life situation. It often helps in therapeutic work to separate oneself from an emotion, to personify it and give it a voice, so that it can speak freely to us, without the censorship that might arise if I regard the emotion as "me". Letting emotions open up and speak to us allows "felt shifts" -- gaps in the mental logic of emotional story lines -- which break up the logjams in our life stream so that it can start moving forward more freely again.

However, one limitation of the therapeutic approach to emotion is its tendency to overlook the larger sense of aliveness that often opens up in moments of shift and release. Exploring feelings may become an endless project, an end in itself, often obscuring the larger aliveness, tenderness, and openness that we can discover through them. Insofar as a primary purpose of psychotherapy is to untangle emotional problems and strengthen identity, it often does not provide means for gaining full access to this larger aliveness, which overflows our personal boundaries.

### THE MEDITATIVE APPROACH TO EMOTION

The practice of meditation can provide this access, partly through helping us to face and work with our emotions more directly. While meditating, the meditator does not try to discover the meaning of his feelings, but simply acknowledges their presence and returns to the breath. When surges of emotional turbulence arise, he practices "keeping his seat" and riding them out. In so doing, he may start to glimpse how, underneath the whitecaps of emotional frenzy and the broader swells of feeling, all is quite calm in the depths of the ocean, where our personal life problems empty into larger, universal life currents.

Mindfulness practice helps us become more aware of the gaps and discontinuities that are always opening up spontaneously in the logic of our story lines. For instance, even in the midst of the most intense anger, we might begin to notice flashes of "Why am I so angry? Do I need to make such a big deal out of this? Is this really as important as I am making it?" Meditation allows us to notice how big mind is always available and flashing into awareness, even when we are most caught up in our stories. Although we often feel most alive when involved in emotional dramas, meditation helps us realize our basic ongoing aliveness that is always present in both dramatic and undramatic moments.

### TRANSMUTATION

By neither suppressing emotions nor exploring the meaning in them, meditation teaches us a way to feel their naked aliveness and contain their energy, apart from any story lines they suggest. This approach to emotion as a vehicle for self-illumination, for seeing through oneself and one's mental fixations is called *transmutation* in Vajrayana Buddhism as well as in other traditions. The notion of transmutation, going back to the ancient alchemical traditions, implies converting something seemingly worthless into something extremely valuable, like lead into gold. The following exploration of transmutation is simply meant to be suggestive, without presuming to capture or conceptualize its subtleties, which are much more

experientially vivid than could be described here.

The first step toward transmutation is to cut through the struggle of self-judgement by accepting emotion as an expression of our own life energy. Instead of seeing emotions as a threat, it is possible to befriend them by allowing them to be just as they are. By not getting caught up in judging them, we can directly feel their actual texture and quality. Transmutation in the Buddhist tradition becomes possible only through meditation practice, in which one learns to face and accept everything that arises in the mind, without losing one's sense of presence. Chogyam Trungpa outlines several aspects of this process:

There are several stages in relating with the emotions: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and transmuting. In the case of seeing the emotions, we have a general awareness that the emotions have their own space, their own development. We accept them as part of the pattern of mind, without question. And then hearing involves experiencing the pulsation of such energy, the energy upsurge as it comes toward you. Smelling is appreciating that the energy is somewhat workable. Touching is feeling the nitty-gritty of the whole thing, that you can touch and relate with it, that your emotions are not particularly destructive or crazy, but just an upsurge of energy, whatever form they take. Transmutation is [to] experience emotional upheaval as it is but still work with it, become one with it.<sup>6</sup>

For someone accustomed to struggling against emotions, this might seem an impossible task -- "If I let myself really experience my emotions, maybe I will go berserk!" In most situations this fear indicates how alienated we are from ourselves. By alienating our own energy, making it "other" and then judging it negatively, we may come to believe that emotions are demonic, that we have "monsters" inside us. By treating emotions as an autonomous power, we grant them dominion over us.<sup>7</sup> In their raw state, emotions are fluid expressions of our aliveness, and they are constantly changing, in-process. But our reactions against them and the story lines we weave out of them ("My anger is right because ...", "My sadness is bad because ...") turn their fluid aliveness into something solid and heavy. The irony is that in trying to control them, we become controlled by them all the more. So we find ourselves stuck in their grip -- which leads to more attempts to control them or to explosive eruptions that leave us further alienated from them.

The first step in taming the lion of emotions, in transmuting their fierce energy into illumination is to befriend it by letting it be, without judging it as good or bad. Running away from a fierce animal or trying to suppress its energy only provokes attack. The path of transmutation is to directly identify with the energy of emotions and become one with it. Although emotions may seem to have us in their grip, as

soon as we turn to face them directly, we find nothing as solid or fixed as our judgements or stories about them.

The Buddhist definition of ego as "holding on to ourselves" and controlling our experience helps us understand why it is so hard to let ourselves feel our emotions and let them be. We usually try to keep them from flowing through us because they threaten the control we try to maintain. Since ego by definition is the activity of holding on, "I" cannot let go, "I" wants to ward off anything that threatens this hold. What is possible, however, is to let the emotions wash through me, and in doing so, wash the controlling part of me away with them. If I can really open to the actual texture and quality of a feeling, instead of trying to control it or churn out story lines from it, "I" -- the activity of trying to hold myself together -- can dissolve into "it" -- the larger feeling process itself. If I fully become my sadness, it may intensify for a while, and I may feel the full painfulness of it. Yet really letting myself feel the pain and letting myself dissolve into it wakes me to the feeling of being alive. Emotions, we could say, are the blood shed by ego -- they start to flow whenever we are touched, whenever the shell around the heart is punctured. Trying to control them is trying to keep the shell from cracking. Letting ego bleed, on the other hand, opens the heart.

So, if I turn to face my own demons, they dissolve, revealing themselves to be my own living energy. Then I can begin to feel my tenderness, my vulnerability to life, which reminds me that what I really am is a living being who is exposed to the world, interdependent and connected with all other beings. Moving beyond my judgments and story lines to feel this naked quality of my life is a breakthrough that relieves pain and develops compassion for others.

With this kind of experiential understanding, a therapist can help clients face their emotions more directly as well. For example, one man I worked with felt terribly burdened by his extreme hunger for love. The first task was to cut through his critical judgments about his need. ("I should be more self-reliant; this need is terrible.") When he could let himself feel his neediness fully and directly, he was able to discover his aliveness in it, as the following condensed transcript illustrates:

Therapist: What happens when you let that need be there?

Client: It says: "I'm unhappy. I'm all alone. I'm scared. It's hard to make it on my own. I need someone to care for me."

Therapist: What if you let yourself have that need for caring 100 percent?

Client: (long pause) It really shifts things around inside me to do that... When I really go into it, it gives me a feeling of power ... like

I'm balanced ... grounded ... There's much more space ... There's not desperateness or fear ... Letting myself have this need is very nurturing, even though no one else is there .. I feel full.

Thus, in turning to face our emotions directly, we may get a glimpse of the fullness of life. Emotions, as something we judge and separate ourselves from, may appear overpowering. But as something that touches us, it expressed the dynamic energy of life itself. Transmuting emotions requires a gesture of opening to its energy without backing off or getting caught in emotionally charged thoughts and images arising from it. Tarhang Tulku, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher, describes this process quite exactly:

What we can do is concentrate on the anger, not allowing any other thoughts to enter. That means we sit with our angry thoughts, focusing our concentration on the anger -- not on its objects -- so that we make no discriminations, have no reactions. Likewise, when anxiety or any other disturbing feeling arises, concentrate on the feeling, not on thoughts about it. Concentrate on the center of the feeling: penetrate into that space. There is a density of energy in that center that is clear and distinct. This energy has great power, and can transmit great clarity. To transform our negativities, we need only to learn to touch them skillfully and gently.<sup>8</sup>

This may be a delicate maneuver at first. We may have a brief glimpse of a larger life energy, but then soon drift back into story lines. However, that sustained attention that is necessary can be facilitated by meditation practice, through which one can learn to stop being "hijacked" by one's thoughts.

Reacting against emotions --fearing our fear, being angry about our anger, getting depressed about our sadness -- is much worse than these primary feelings themselves, for it freezes them and turns us against ourselves. Befriending emotions opens us to ourselves and allows us to discover the intelligence and responsiveness contained in them. Anger can become a means of direct communication, rather than a weapon to hurt ourselves or others. Fear can wake us up to what is actually going on in certain situations, rather than just serving as a signal to run away or hide. We can appreciate loneliness as a longing to share and sadness as a fullness of heart; then they have a certain dignity rather than simply indicating some lack or failing on our part. In judging these feelings, we cut ourselves off from our own aliveness; in feeling them fully, their energy becomes available to us, enlarging our sense of what life is about.

Various metaphors have been used to describe this transformation of emotional energy. Benoit describes it as a "process comparable with that which transforms coal into diamonds: the aim of this process is not the destruction of the ego, but its transformation. The conscious acceptance results in the coal which has become



denser, and so blacker and more opaque, being instantaneously transformed into a diamond that is perfectly transparent."<sup>9</sup>

This image of transparency and lucency, where emotion becomes a window onto the vitality of life itself, like a diamond metamorphosed from coal, is particularly prominent in Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. *Vajra* signifies the diamondlike, indestructible clarity of the awake state of mind. *Vajra* is itself seen as a quality of life, whose fullest realization is "mirrorlike wisdom." Because it signifies absolute clarity, the Vajrayana (literally, the "diamond path") sees the world in terms of luminosity, lit up with brilliance. Struggling to confirm our self-images creates a screen of confusion that dulls this natural brilliance. Transmuting emotion is one way of turning the dark, murky world of the confused mind into the radiance of clear vision.

This metaphor may make transmutation seem like a sudden change, but it is actually part of a gradual path of increasing friendliness with ourselves. Other metaphors emphasize the gradual, organic nature of this process:

Unskilled farmers throw away their rubbish and buy manure from other farmers, but those who are skilled go on collecting their own rubbish, in spite of the bad smell and the unclean work, and when it is ready to be used they spread it on their land, and out of this they grow their crops. And though it is very difficult and unhygienic, as it were, to work on, that is the only way to start. So out of these unclean things comes the birth of the seed which is Realization.<sup>10</sup>

Suzuki Roshi speaks in a similar vein of how the weeds of the mind may be used to enrich one's awakening awareness:

We pull the weeds and bury them near the plant to give it nourishment. So you should not be bothered by your mind. You should rather be grateful for the weeds, because eventually they will enrich your practice. If you have some experience how the weeds in your mind change into mental nourishment, your practice will make remarkable progress.<sup>11</sup>

What is essential in this approach is to identify fully with basic aliveness, the larger open space around and inside emotions.<sup>12</sup> By realizing this spaciousness, emotional turmoil begins to appear as a smaller drama in the middle of a much larger awareness. When we can dissolve into this larger awareness, this free energy, emotion becomes an opportunity to explore our depths, instead of getting tossed around by the waves on the surface of our being.

Overcoming fear of our own energy can help us develop fearlessness toward the whole of life, known in Buddhism as the "lion's roar":

The lion's roar is the fearless proclamation that any state of mind, including the emotions, is a workable situation. Then the most powerful energies become absolutely workable rather than taking you over, because there is nothing to take over if you are not putting up any resistance. Indian Ashokan art depicts the lion's roar with four lions looking in four directions, which symbolizes the idea of having no back. Every direction is a front, symbolizing all-pervading awareness. The fearlessness covers all directions.<sup>13</sup>

To summarize, this transformative approach to emotions involves: (1) keeping our seat in the middle of emotional turbulence; (2) cutting through judgments about emotions in order to feel them more fully; and (3) identifying with their energy in its power and painfulness. In so doing, we discover the intense tenderness of our aliveness.

In the Vajrayana tradition, genuine transmutation is not considered to be possible without the proper understanding and guidance. Since one could become overrun or inflated by the intensity of one's emotional energy, it is considered essential to have a firm foundation in meditation practice, which helps one to see through one's domination by thought and fantasy, and to develop the strength to no longer be carried away by them. It is also important to work with a living teacher who has an intimate personal understanding of the energies of life, and who can guide the student through the many twists and turns involved in the development of this deeper awareness. Then, through discipline and practice, the confusion of the emotions may become transformed into the wisdom of seeing things as they are.

## NOTES

1. Hillman (1961), p. 289.
2. See Welwood and Wilber (1979).
3. Freud (1933).
4. Dubos, in Needleman (1979), p. 59.
5. See Welwood (1982).
6. Trungpa (1976), p. 69.
7. "That which has become an object to me is something which has captured me." Hisamatsu (1960), p. 78.
8. Tarthang Tulku (1978), pp. 54, 52.
9. Benoit (1959), p. 143.
10. Trungpa (1969), p. 23.
11. S. Suzuki (1970), p. 36.
12. See Welwood (1977).
13. Trungpa (1976), pp. 69-72.