**Practicing with the Emotions We Don’t Want to Have**

**March 2015 class with Myoshin Kate McCandless**

**Mountain Rain Zen Community**

**What is an emotion?** a state of physical/mental arousal that moves us, prepares

us to respond to our environment

**Western view of emotions:**

Positive=pleasant negative=unpleasant

**Buddhist view of emotions:**

Wholesome/unwholesome beneficial/harmful or constructive/destructive

**Unwholesome or afflictive emotions**

Harm self or others

Disturb equilibrium

Distort our views

Result in excessive reactions

**Three poisons:** greed, hatred, ignorance all distort our view of reality "what is".

We form mental habits based on them that condition our patterns of behaviour.

**Emotions tell us:**

Anger-we are in danger or threatened in some way

Fear-we are in danger

Grief-we have been separated from what we love

Despair-we have lost a sense of meaning in life

Shame-we are cut off from the approval/acceptance of those upon whom our well-being depends

**Ways we cope with afflictive emotions:**

React: (not respond) fight, flight or freeze, act out

Supress/deny: endure, ignore, tough it out, without looking too closely

Space out, transcend: (not transform)

When suppressed/ignored afflictive emotions can become toxic.When attended to and transformed the energies of emotions have gifts to offer:

Anger: discriminating wisdom

Fear: joy

Grief: gratitude

Despair: faith

Shame: generosity

**Three practices for being with dark emotions** (Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions*)

Attending: learning to listen, noting body sensations

Befriending: facing, becoming familiar, intimate

Surrendering: letting go, releasing

**Buddhist practices for being with dark emotions**

(Goleman, *Destructive Emotions*)

1. Basic level: use antidotes: ie. patience for anger

2. Intermediate level: investigate ultimate insubstantial nature of afflictive

states through mindfulness/meditation

3. Advanced level: transforming emotions, using them as catalysts for direct

insight/transformation (into non-duality, impermanence, non-self)

“taking a jewel from a snake’s head”

**Timing of intervention**

1. After the emotion arises: we can see into harmful consequences

and apply antidote

2. As the emotion arises: face it directly, see into its empty nature, it

will pass and not escalate, giving rise to story lines, and obsessive

thoughts

3. Before the emotion arises: when mind and body are stabilized

emotion does not arise with the same compelling power, or

wholesome emotions arise, or afflictive ones are very quickly

transformed into wholesome ones.

**Three choice points**

1. Appraisal (usual not conscious) assessment of an stimulus as aversive,

pleasant or neutral.

2. Impulse to react.

3. Action

During the refractory period between impulse and action we are temporarily disabled, unable to take in new input accurately. May be a few seconds, minutes, or may extend over some time.

**Two types of anger in the Tibetan tradition**

*shedang* arises out of hatred/aversion

*khongdro* arises out of compassion, a clear fierce energy that is caring, not malevolent

**Pali-anusayas:** our conditioned tendencies to react in a particular pattern (anger/fear/despair at abandonment) (anger at/fear of criticism/blame/shame) being the reason we can react out of all proportion.

Three kinds of patience: (from Pema Chodron, *No Time to Lose*)

1. Reframing our attitude towards comfort, bringing awareness to our reactions to the many small frustrations, discomforts and inconveniences of daily life, our “bourgeois suffering”.
2. Seeing, as much as we can, the full complexity of a situation, and even when we can’t see it all, knowing and trusting that the big picture is much more complex.
3. Developing tolerance.

**Three basic prayers:** (Greenspan)

Help me.

Thank you.

I surrender.

These can be adapted to dharma gathas (verses) to support our practice with the afflictive emotions.

**Shame and guilt: definitions**

**Guilt**: the feeling of distress that tells us that we have done something against our personal moral code, or the code we believe we should adhere to.

Shame is about who we *are.* Guilt is about what we *do.*

**Shame**: the feeling of distress when we believe that in others’ eyes we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging. We take this belief and internalize it as a belief in our fundamental badness, ugliness, unworthiness, etc. What shame tells us is that we feel cut off from the acceptance, love and approval of those around us.

**Embarrassment**: the fleeting and much less intense feeling of distress in response to something fairly normal.

**Humiliation**: the feeling of distress from being put down, ridiculed, or belittled unjustly.

Brené Brown found in her research on women and shame that the most common areas were: appearance and body image, motherhood, family, parenting, money and work, mental and physical health, sex, aging, religion, being stereotyped and labeled, speaking out and surviving trauma.

Brené Brown’s four elements that support resilience in the face of shame:

1. Recognizing shame and understanding what triggers it in us.
2. Practicing critical awareness, understanding the roots and wider context of our shame.
3. Reaching out, connecting, since shame is a social emotion, a feeling of being cut off from the care and acceptance of others.
4. Speaking shame, bringing it out of the closet.

“Perfectionism is a self-destructive and addictive belief system that fuels this primary thought: If I look perfect, and do everything perfectly, I can avoid or minimize the painful feelings of shame, judgment, and blame.” Brené Brown

**Grief, Depression, Despair**

Grief: the natural distress reaction to being separated from who or what we love and need. Also the process by which we heal from/integrate experiences of loss.

Mourning: is the way we express our grief externally, highly variable depending on individual temperament and character, and on culture.

Depression: not a feeling, but a “syndrome” of cluster of symptoms that include feelings of despair, emptiness, guilt, and unworthiness, as well as effects on sleep appetite and/or motivation. For detailed description see: *What is Depression?*  Mood Disorders Society of Canada.

**Despair:** the feeling of hopelessness and loss of meaning in life.

**The process of grieving/healing** is open-ended. It does not consist of neat and tidy stages, and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’s 5-stage model is now understood to be more complex and subtle. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, may or may not be aspects of your experience, and may not occur in order.

It does involved, often in cycles:

Shock/numbness protected from full impact

Disorientation/disorganization

Integration-incorporating our experience of the person into our ongoing life and sense of meaning

**Similarities and Differences between grief and clinical depression:**

Similarities: effects on sleep, appetite, and/or energy, motivation

Differences:

Grief-more variable, more alive

Depression-more flat, lifeless

Grief-focus is on the loss

Depression-focus is on the self, negative judgements

Grief-may evoke pain, empathy in others

Depression-more likely to evoke aversion, impatience in others

**The despair of clinical depression** must be recognized and supported therapeutically, as the risk of suicide is significant.

**Existential/spiritual despair** is important to face and penetrate deeply using the resources of buddha/dharma/sangha and/or other spiritual/philosophical practices and traditions.

**A Selection of Quotes**

You can hold back from the suffering of the world ... but perhaps this very holding

back is the one suffering that you could have avoided.

-Franz Kafka

I am troubled by shapeless fears. My God, these anxieties! Who can live in the

modern world without catching his share of them?

-Vincent Van Gogh

Help us to be the always hopeful

Gardeners of the spirit

Who know that without darkness

Nothing comes to birth

As without light

Nothing flowers

-May Sarton "The Invocation to Kali"

Blessed are the men and women

who are planted in your earth, in your garden,

who grow as your trees and flowers grow,

who transform their darkness to light.

The Odes of Solomon

For grief has darkened my eyes;

my body is like a shadow.

My days fade like an echo;

the strings of my heart have snapped.

-The Book of Job

The Uses of Sorrow

(In my sleep J dreamed this poem)

Someome I loved once gave me

a box of darkness.

It took me years to understand

that this, too, was a gift.

-Mary Oliver

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.  
  
At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says. Or perhaps, hard to want to take it in. It is so uninteresting. Yet I want the others to be about me. I dread the moments when the house is empty. If only they would talk to one another and not to me.

-C. S. Lewis

For in grief nothing "stays put." One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles, or dare I hope I am on a spiral?  
  
But if a spiral, am I going up or down it?  
  
How often -- will it be for always? -- how often will the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty and make me say, "I never realized my loss till this moment"? The same leg is cut off time after time.”

-C. S. Lewis

Every one of us is called on, probably many times, to start a new life. A frightening diagnosis, a marriage, a move, loss of a job or a limb or a loved one, a graduation, bringing a new baby home… In my own worst seasons I’ve come back from the colorless world of despair by forcing myself to look hard, for a long time, at a single glorious thing: a flame of red geranium outside my bedroom window. And then another: my daughter in a yellow dress. And another: the perfect outline of a full, dark sphere behind the crescent moon. Until I learned to be in love with my life again. Like a stroke victim retraining new parts of the brain to grasp lost skills, I have taught myself joy, over and over again.

-Barbara Kingsolver, *High Tide in Tuscon p. 16-16*

**Resources**

Bennett-Goleman, T. Emotional Alchemy: How the mind can heal the heart.

Harmony Books, 2001 (Buddhist and cognitive psychology perspectives)

Brown, Brené. *I Thought it Was Just Me*. Gotham Books, 2007. On shame.

Chodrom, Pema. The Places that Scare You: A guide to fearlessness in difficult

times. Shambhala, 2001. (and virtually anything else by Pema Chodron)

Goleman, D. Emotional Intelligence. Bantam Books, 1995.

Goleman, D. (narrator). Destructive Emotions: How can we overcome them.

Bantam Books, 2003.

Greenspan, M. Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The wisdom of grief, fear,

and despair. Shambhala, 2004.

Hikmet, Nazim. Poems of Nazim Hikmet. Persea Books, 2002. (Turkish poet

imprisoned for 13 years and exiled for another 13 years for his writing. Read his

prison poetry!)

Kornfield, Jack. A Path With Heart: A guide through the perils and promises of

spiritual life. Bantam Books, 1993.

Lerner, Harriet, *Fear and Other Uninvited Guests: Tackling the Anxiety, Fear and Shame That Keep us from Optimal Living and Loving.* Harper Collins, 2004.

Lewis, C. S., *A Grief Observed.* Harper Collins, 1961.

Orr, Gregory. Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved. Copper

Canyon Press, 2005. (Wonderful book-long poem sequence on how we

transform grief into gratitude/memory)

Richo, D. Shadow Dance: Liberating the power and creativity of your dark side.

Shambhala, 1999. (Buddhist and Jungian perspectives)

Salzberg, Sharon. Loving-kindness: The revolutionary art of happiness.

Shambhala, 1995.

Williams, M. et al. *The Mindful Way through Depression.* Guilford Press, 2007.