

Practice Note: Noticing Emotions in the Body

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 27, 2010

This morning I wanted to say a few words about mindfulness of emotions, moods, mental states. Often there's always some kind of mood or emotional state that's present. Sometimes it's quite subtle; sometimes it's dramatic. When it's subtle, people sometimes don't see it as a mood, or an emotional state, or a mental state. They think maybe the emotional state is neutral, but it's really never neutral. There's always some little shade of something going on.

One of the effects that emotions, or mental states, have is that they influence us. They sometimes influence how we see the world around us. They cast certain color on the world. So if you're sad, it puts a certain color on what you tend to notice in the world, or on how you interpret things. If you're angry, you interpret things differently. If you're happy, you interpret them in a different way. Your emotions affect your sight, your perception, your interpretation of what goes on.

Our emotional mood also affects our motivations: what we want to do and not to do. If we're sad then, maybe we want to pull into ourselves. If we're angry, we want to lash out. If we're happy, we might want to be generous, and open a door for someone. It influences how we behave in the world as well. Those two influences on how we see things and how we behave also work internally. We see ourselves under the influence of the mood, and we behave towards ourselves in certain ways. We can often be subtly, or grossly, influenced by the emotion. It gives fuel for certain ways of being.

Sometimes, we are not so aware of our emotional state, and sometimes we're clearly hooked into it: reacting, involved, indulging in it, fueling it, resisting it big time. One of the great things to do in mindfulness practice is to be mindful of emotions, and to notice what emotion is going on for us, what the mental state is, what is the overall mood we might be operating in, and then try to step back. Take a step back, so that you're not in it so directly. But step back enough so you can see, observe, and recognize it. "Oh now I'm happy. Now I'm sad. Now I'm a little bit afraid. Now I'm worried." Really recognize what's there, and then explore, try to discover what happens to you when you step back and clearly acknowledge what's happening. This is what's happening now. And as you do that, drop into your body, and see what impact, or influence, the emotional state has on your body.

They say that it's almost impossible to know what your mood or mental state is, unless it activates something in your body. Some way your body is energized – in some parts of your body, whether it's the face, the shoulders, the chest, the belly, the hands, or some other part. It could be very subtle. It could be a very subtle, felt sense of energy. It could also be very dramatic, with tightening of the muscles. So to find out: how do you know? What symptoms or signs in your body say that you have this emotion? Then just breathe with that feeling in your body. Sense it. Stabilize yourself. Let the body hold that felt sense. Let the body help you not be entangled with your emotional state, but rather to just be present with it, and feel it. Then the interesting thing to do is to see what changes as you do that. Does the mood, or the mental state, change in some way? Does it get softer, weaker, more diffuse? Does it get stronger and more concentrated? Does it stay exactly the same, no change at all? It's very interesting to watch and see what changes there might be.

As you're present for one mood, one emotion, see if you can notice if there are other moods or emotional states that swim in and out of it as well. Is it just that you are really solidly stabilized in one particular emotion, or are other things going on as well? You might feel basically happy, and you're walking down the street, and a dog comes barking. You're basically happy, but then there's a little bit of worry that's flowing through that happiness.

Just notice the different terrain, and see if that noticing helps you not be so influenced by the emotion for better or for worse. Make sense? That's the instruction, and I hope you enjoy your morning. Thank you.