

## *The Reality of Emotions*

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There's a passage in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* where he raises an important question: Suppose you have a feeling of deep spiritual contentment, of oneness and connectedness with all the universe. To what extent is that feeling meaningful? Is it a sign that you've attained a heightened spiritual state? Are you in touch with some transcendent reality? Or is it simply a sign that you had a nice dinner and you feel rested, physically satisfied? This is an important question for people who want to read deep meanings into their feelings. They want to believe that their feelings constitute their true identity, and that their feelings tell the truth. But feelings can lie. A warm sense of interconnectedness may indicate simply that your digestion is good, and physically you're well provided for.

One way of getting around that conundrum is to look not at what feelings really mean, but at what you can *do* with them. This is the Buddha's approach. As he points out, our feelings are fabricated. Although the happiness of nibbana is not a feeling, every other form of happiness is a feeling, and every feeling is fabricated. This means that all feelings have an intentional element. We put them together for a certain purpose. We want a particular feeling if for nothing else than to establish who we are and what we want. There is a purpose—many times blind and unknown—that shapes what we feel.

A study was made years back of facial expressions, showing how every common emotion is expressed with a certain set of facial expressions regardless of culture. Grief, contentment, happiness, and ridicule each have their own way of getting patterned in the muscles in your face, and this pattern holds across all human societies. The researchers working on this topic wanted to master all the different expressions, so one day they were working on the expression for sadness. After trying to get all the muscles in the face together in expression of sadness, they found at the end of the day that they were sad. This shows that the emotion doesn't necessarily have to be real just because it's strong or pervasive. It may simply be a habit, a result of the way you carry your body, the way you compose your face.

So what do you do with the fact that feelings are fabricated? You learn how to fabricate them well. Instead of trying to dig down and see what your real feelings are, notice if you can create comfortable feelings in the body, good feelings, happy feelings through the way you hold your face, the way you hold your body, the way you breathe. This can cause feelings of pleasure, refreshment, and rapture to pervade the body. Admittedly, they're fabricated, but so are other feelings. The important point is that these feelings have their uses. If you can maintain these kinds of feeling, the mind is in a much better position to look at things from a calm, steady point of view.

So when you run across a good feeling like this—whether it just happens or you can induce it—learn how to maintain it. This is part of the duty of the path, learning how to develop the factors of right concentration: the ease and

wellbeing, even the sense of rapture, that can come from the way you breathe, from the way you focus on the different elements in the body.

Even uncomfortable feelings can have their uses. The Buddha gives an analysis of the different emotions that arise in people who are not on the path and in people who are. Take, for instance, what he calls householder grief, the grief of someone who's simply upset because he didn't get to see the sights, hear the sounds, smell the smells, taste the tastes, feel the tactile sensations, or think about the ideas he wanted to. He's disappointed in his aims.

For most of us, our way of overcoming that particular kind of grief is to try to find those sights and sounds and so on, to make them happen so as to feel householder joy. But the problem with householder joy is that you can lose it very quickly, and then you're back into householder grief. Things go back and forth like this, and never really get anywhere. It's like throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes it falls on that end. There's no real rhyme or reason to this, and you never get out of the cycle.

The Buddha's solution to this pattern is to substitute householder grief with renunciate grief, the grief that comes from realizing that there is a deathless but you haven't attained it yet. Even though this may create an uncomfortable feeling in the mind, it points to a way out. It acknowledges that there is a deathless, there is an escape. That in and of itself offers hope, gives you a sense of direction. It induces you to work in that direction. That's why this form of grief is a useful emotion.

Not every kind of grief or discomfort is bad. How many times have you heard people say that it's wise not to have any big goals in the practice because you'll get dissatisfied over the fact that you haven't reached your goal; you should just stay content with what you've got. That kind of attitude is like shooting an arrow without pulling the bow back and getting the string taut. The arrow's never going to fly anywhere. It just stays right where it is or drops on the ground at your feet where people can trample on it. There has to be a certain amount of tension in the practice, a certain sense that "I don't yet have the true happiness I really want in life." A sense of *samvega*, a dismay with the way you're living your life. And a sense of urgency that you've got to find a way out. Only with that tension will the practice take flight.

*Samvega* may be an unpleasant emotion, but you need it in order to spur yourself along the path, to do what needs to be done. The desire to be more generous, to be more virtuous, to be better at your meditation is not a bad desire. It's *chanda*, one of the bases for success. So take that desire and act on it. Decide that this really is important.

As you work on the path, you may feel deprived of this or that physical comfort, so you should remind yourself that that's not important. The important thing is that there's a deathless and you haven't found it yet. And ultimately, this sense of renunciate grief yields renunciate joy. You use it to spur yourself on to actually develop more mindfulness, more concentration, more discernment. Then you can experience the joy of having mastered these skills—and of ultimately gaining release.

So renunciate grief is a feeling with a purpose, and you can induce it. The fact that it's induced doesn't mean it's not real or that it's not your authentic self. After all, you know what the Buddha says about trying to find an authentic self in form and feeling and all the other aggregates: You're not going to find it. But

you can find things you can use. You take those aggregates and turn them into the path.

As you do this, your renunciate grief leads you to renunciate joy. You've got the breath, you've got all the elements in the body. How can you relate to them in a way that feels good? Explore the possibilities. Master them as a skill. When you can master this skill, it gives you a sense of wellbeing in the present moment that doesn't have to depend on conditions outside.

You could sit here and think about all the reasons that would make you miserable being here: It's hot outside. You don't have the comforts you might enjoy if you were living at home—all the long lists of potential grievances. But what do those grievances accomplish? They don't go anywhere at all. But you can also focus on the fact that you've got a breath, you've got the different elements in the body. The sense of liquid: You can focus on how sticky and disgusting the liquid in your body is or, for the time being, on the fact that liquid feelings in the body are cool. Focus on them so that you're not focusing on the heat. You could focus on the breath. What way is the breath light, totally unstuck, totally unfettered? It has nothing to do with heat or coolness at all. It's simply motion. Energy. Your mind tunes into that kind of sensation. You may find that you can start smiling, and then the smile on your face induces all the chemical reactions in the body that go along with smiling. You start feeling better.

So try to induce feelings that are helpful. Focus not on the issue of whether they're real, but on the fact that you've got all kinds of potentials for pleasure or pain right here. What you are going to do with them? What use can you get out of them? What's the wisest thing to do with them? In this way, instead of getting waylaid by the fact that feelings are fabricated and questionable, you focus on the fact that you can fabricate them with discernment, with knowledge. As the Buddha points out, fabricated feelings are often based on ignorance, which leads to suffering. But you can also fabricate them with the knowledge that leads to the end of suffering.

So look at where you are on the path. Sometimes it requires focusing on the grief, focusing on the discomfort. There's a passage in the sutta on transcendent dependent co-arising that traces all the factors leading up to suffering, but then states that from suffering you can develop conviction, and through conviction you develop the path. From developing the path, you develop joy. This is the Buddha's analysis of how you go from householder grief—the fact you're not getting what you want—through renunciate grief to renunciate joy. Realize that there's a goal in here, there must be a way out of suffering, but you haven't found it yet. There may be a certain amount of grief around that. But you can work with that grief until it develops renunciate joy. And then you can use that renunciate joy to get further along the path.

So these feelings have their uses. Focus on the fact that they're leading you somewhere, and you can choose the feelings that take you where you want to go. That way you get the most out of them.