

Accepting *All* Our Thoughts and Feelings

All the thoughts and feelings we ever experience in life are - at the most fundamental level – simply energy moving in waves through our system. We instinctively label certain thoughts and feelings as unacceptable or even sinful, but this labelling is actually a type of storytelling through which we try to make some sort of sense of the roller coaster ride of normal human experiences.

Unfortunately, rejecting certain thoughts and feelings as unacceptable causes us all sorts of problems. For example, if we learn at an early age that being angry is wrong or even wicked, we may spend our whole lives trying to suppress our anger by subconsciously pushing it down into our physical body. Then in the long run, this toxic, fiery energy may even make us physically ill.

On the other hand, we may decide that it is OK to be angry as long as it is someone else's fault. We may then insist over and over again that some people in our world are behaving so badly that our angry thoughts and feelings toward them are perfectly justified. Think of all those Twitter users who write vile, abusive comments about those whose politics differ from their own. One recent post for example suggested that it was a shame that Covid had not culled all those who voted for Brexit. Some individuals may even take this projection to the extreme and physically attack someone whose behaviour seems totally unacceptable to them. What a mess!!

But anger is by no means the only problematic emotion that can cause us a lot of angst. If someone we love leaves us or dies, it is perfectly natural to be broken hearted for a while. In fact, some individuals can feel broken hearted at the loss of a loved one for many years. But a grieving widow or widower who has not bounced back to 'normal' after a few months may be told by well-meaning friends that it is time to put their grief aside and to get on with their life, even though the energy of grief has not yet subsided in their system. Big mistake!

If someone does not grieve a serious loss in their lives for as long as it takes for that particular wave of energy to flow fully through them, they may well end up trying to suppress that energy by closing up their heart. They may then find it almost impossible to feel anything much at all from that time forth. For example, after my adoptive mother died when I was 17, I found it impossible to fully grieve her death – for reasons far too complex to explain here – and partly as a result of this, I became chronically depressed for almost a decade of my life.

Rather than constantly attempting to suppress or project all those thoughts and feelings that we reject as dangerous or unworthy, great Buddhist teachers from long ago came up with a cunning plan. What if we converted all our fears, anger, jealousy, frustration, grief and so on into unconditional compassion for ourselves and all other human beings experiencing similarly uncomfortable or painful thoughts and feelings?

The other evening, I was doing a Zoom meditation with Choden, a highly experienced Buddhist practitioner. He led us through a meditation that really opened my eyes to the idea that all human emotions are totally acceptable because at heart, everything – yes everything! – is pure energy. In this meditation, we first tuned into any feelings we were having at that moment. Choden then guided us to visualise breathing out our feelings whilst imagining that they were fuel to create a healing and empowering energy field of compassion that we visualised as a stream of golden light.

At the time of that meditation, I was feeling some strong waves of frustration with the everlasting Covid lockdown. So I followed Choden's guidance, and as I breathed in and out quite vigorously, I imagined all the powerful energy I was generating turning into waves of pure compassion for all suffering sentient beings. At the end of this brief meditation, instead of still feeling frustrated, I actually felt elated.

Now this practice is an advanced Tibetan Buddhist practice with quite a few specific steps to it and I am not suggesting that you try it at home on your own. But I do think that it can be really helpful to at least entertain the idea that if we bathe any feeling whatsoever in a wave of unconditional love or compassion that feeling will be transformed into a pure life-supporting type of energy. When we really get this idea, we no longer have to be frightened of any negative thought or emotion. We can simply allow that thought or feeling to be there whilst we focus on embracing it with a warm, healing glow of compassionate energy. This definitely seems to take the sting out of our anxiety, anger etc.

Of course, if we bathe a long standing hatred or phobia in the energy of compassion that negative experience will not necessarily disappear as if by magic never to darken the door to our mind and heart again. We may have to do this compassionate mindfulness practice a thousand times or more before we notice that we are less bothered by any waves of anxiety, jealousy, anger or hatred that still pour through our system from time to time. However, in time, it can be as if a raging river of anger or hatred becomes just a trickling stream that no longer threatens to overwhelm us or to harm those around us.

I have been practising bathing my endless negative thoughts and feelings in unconditional self-compassion for some time now. I love the way that all the volatile thoughts and feelings that are an integral part of human life on this planet can be gently transformed into beautiful, pure, love energy. All I have to do is to allow every single one of my dark thoughts and feelings to be there for a while as I spend a few minutes bathing them all in the light of unlimited, totally non-judgemental compassion for myself and all similarly troubled human beings.

This idea is beautifully expressed in Rumi's poem The Guest House. So I will leave you with Rumi's wonderful words that sum up this life-saving practice so much better than I ever could.

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all,
even if they are a crowd of sorrows
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight. (RUMI)*

Peggy Foster
May 2021

