

Guided Meditation – on difficult emotions

We can practice being with difficult emotions and thoughts, even intense ones, in an open, allowing, and accepting way. For many of us, this is the opposite of the more automatic model of pushing away uncomfortable feelings out of fear or annoyance, or doing everything we can to avoid painful experiences, at whatever cost. Very commonly, when something unpleasant happens, we project it into a seemingly unchanging future: *this is going to last forever, this is never going to change, things will always be this way*. Or we might have the habit of creating a whole self-image around it: *I'm a bad person, I'm a bad mother, because this unwelcome thought is happening in my mind right now*.

What we are doing in the meditation practice is looking at the difference between what is actually happening in the moment, even if it's difficult, and what we add to it in terms of future projection, or unfairly blaming ourselves, or feeling we should be in control of what arises in our minds, or creating a solid self-image out of something that's actually impermanent, all of which can add to the stress and challenge that we experience. In our practice, we look for these add-ons and see if we can let them go.

No one can absolutely control what arises in their minds. It's like saying to yourself, *"I've decided not to be afraid anymore, or not to suffer anymore,"* which is like saying, *"I've decided never to get the flu again."* We can't stop a thought or emotion from arising, no one can, but we can be empowered by our ability to relate to thoughts and emotions in a whole new way, learning not to buy into them, while at the same time, not unfairly blaming ourselves for what no one at all can keep from arising. We can have a whole new sense of space, and also some kindness toward ourselves, when these difficult things arise. We practice relating more skillfully to unpleasant experiences by recognizing that they're here and simply holding them in awareness, rather than adding so much more difficulty through the force of habit with all of these add-ons.

Please sit comfortably, with either your eyes closed or slightly open, however you feel most at ease. You can begin this practice by bringing to mind a difficult or troubling thought or situation, some situation that carries for you intense emotion, such as sadness, fear, shame, or anger. See where you feel it in your body. What does it feel like? Where do you feel sensations arising? How are these sensations changing? Can you experience them fully in the present moment, without getting hijacked by it, or without immediately or anxiously working to make it go away? As you see those kinds of reactions in your mind, settle back, come back into your body. Feel the different sensations being born of that emotion, in this moment.

If you find you're adding judgment, condemnation, future projection, anything like that, practice letting go of these reactions as best you can, almost as though they were birds now flying out of your hands into the air, and return your attention to the sensations of the emotion. Bring your focus of awareness to the part of the body where those sensations are the strongest. Once your attention has moved to the bodily sensations, perhaps say to yourself, *"It's okay. Whatever it is, it's okay."* I can feel this without pushing it away or getting caught up in it. Staying with the awareness of the bodily sensations, and your relationship to them, accepting them, letting them be, softening and opening to them.

Often the emotion is not just one thing, it may be moments of sadness, moments of fear, moments of frustration, moments of helplessness. Just watch them arise and pass away. None of these states is permanent, unchanging. They're moving, changing, shifting. No matter what story or add-on arises, come back to your direct experience in the moment. What am I feeling right now? What does it feel like? What's happening? What's its nature?

And when you feel ready, you can open your eyes. This is a good time to reflect. What was most interesting to you about this exercise? What was most challenging for you? And are there certain things that you learned that would be particularly useful to bring into your day, your work, your relationships, your life?

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New York Times guide to meditation: <https://www.nytimes.com/guides/well/how-to-meditate>