

Chapter 7

FREEDOM FROM TROUBLED EMOTIONS

*“Give me everything mangled and bruised,
and I will make a light of it to make you weep,
and we will have rain and we will begin again.”*

— Deena Metzger

Freedom does not mean fighting against or suppressing troubled emotions. That would be another form of tyranny. To be free, you need to be conscious of them and then you can learn to work with them wisely.

Praying for Our Enemies

Several years ago I helped coordinate a meeting about prison reform and human transformation, bringing together the Dalai Lama and twenty-five former convicts, all recently released from US prisons. Most had done long years in state penitentiaries, and were invited because they had been changed by joining one of the Prison Dharma Network mindfulness programs offered by volunteers around the country.

The Dalai Lama brought two young Tibetan nuns, part of the Drapchi 14 who had been imprisoned as teenagers for reciting prayers in Tibet in public. The American prisoners spoke first, telling their stories of suffering and transformation, informing the Dalai Lama about the benefits of wisdom-training programs, and offering eye-opening details about the horrendous, overcrowded cruelty of American prisons, the largest prison system in the world.

They told stories of inner struggle and the years they'd worked courageously to transform their lives. One of the former prisoners, Anita, was a thirty-nine-year-old woman whose warmth was immediately apparent. She'd been released two years earlier after serving fourteen years as a reluctant accomplice to a botched armed robbery. Anita described how hardened and territorial she and the women around her became in the degrading conditions of prisons. To stay sane sharing their tiny, high-security cells, the women established simple routines and strict boundaries. Periodically their routines would be disrupted by the intrusion of short-timers, women serving less than a year, who because of overcrowding, were forced to double up in long-term cells. The short-termers were usually pushed away and ignored.

When Noni, a quiet woman, came into Anita's cell for four months, Anita was wary of her. “This is where you can put your things, here's the part of the cell you use, and don't go beyond it,” she told her new cellmate. For many days, Anita observed as her new cellmate sat sick and depressed on her bed and would

hardly take food. Then she began to throw up, especially in the mornings. Finally, it dawned on Anita that Noni was pregnant.

Anita thought about this young woman and the baby. It didn't seem right for this depressed young mother-to-be to starve herself. She was hurting her baby. Anita found herself comforting Noni and listening to the story of her life. Slowly she became her confidante, her protector, her supporter, making her more comfortable and making sure she was eating. Word about the pregnant girl got out, and women up and down the maximum-security cellblock began to help with special food and comfort. The compassion for Noni and her baby became communal; it brought the prisoners together.

Some months after Noni was released, news came back that her child, named Julia, had been safely delivered. The prisoners, who felt themselves to be Julia's aunties and grandmothers, cheered. New life had touched the sorrow of their cells. More than anyone, Anita was changed. The new life in Noni had opened Anita's barricaded heart and started her on a six-year path of healing and redemption. Anita, who had felt so hard and closed off from others, discovered new life in herself. Now Anita works full-time on projects that bring hope to incarcerated women.

After the American prisoners spoke about the trials of their years inside, the Dalai Lama invited the two young nuns to talk. They described living through years of being beaten, starved, tortured with electric prods, and how through it all, they kept reciting their prayers. The Dalai Lama asked them if they had ever been afraid. They said yes. Their greatest fear was that they would lose compassion and allow hatred in their hearts. There was only one thing we could do, they said. "We prayed for the enemy." Then one of the burly, tattooed ex-cons from Louisiana spoke with moist eyes, "I've seen brave in prison, but nothing like you girls."

These stories, whether descriptions of extreme circumstances or of common difficulties remind us what is possible this very day. Amid your own joy and trouble how is your spirit today? Are you caught, defeated, sad? Have you lost faith? Like Elija, who had been in prison since becoming a teenager, are you in some way stuck waiting for the light and the circumstances to change? You can step out. Whether you're at work, in your family or community or just within your own body, your spirit is free. It's important to remember this when we're face to face with trauma.

Powerful Inner Forces

Modern psychology catalogs 300 mental disorders. Psychoanalysis speaks of the primitive id. Neuroscience describes a reptilian brain below every human cortex. Spiritual traditions have lists of deadly sins, destructive emotions, inner demons, temptations, and poisons of the mind. We all recognize how the human mind can be taken over by greed, lust, rage, pride, jealousy, envy, delusion, hate, miserliness. These powerful forces sweep through people, across communities, and nations.

The first step in working with these difficult energies is to see them clearly. Use the power of mindfulness, of loving awareness. Chloe, a young woman who came to a teen retreat, recounted that she had often gotten lost in depression, drinking, cutting herself, and other self-destructive behaviors. She had rejected every suggestion offered by her parents, but, one desperate afternoon, picked up a book in her mother's library on mindfulness and yoga. "It was like finding an amazing, powerful medicine in my hands, almost too good to be true. It showed me I could be aware of my thoughts and feelings but not have to believe them!" she said. By mindfully acknowledging her feelings, Chloe found that she didn't feel so stuck, and things began to change.

Loving awareness allows us to step outside the praise-and-blame paradigm. When we are unconscious, caught in judgment, anger, rigidity, compulsion, and prejudice, we blindly act out these feelings. And then we blame these problems on others. Yet if we look more deeply at them, we discover that our own insecurity and vulnerability often underlie the blame. We blame because we find these states hard to tolerate. James Baldwin writes, "One of the reasons people cling to their hate and prejudice so stubbornly is that they sense once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with their own pain."

When you are unable to bear your measure of pain, unable to acknowledge life's insecurities and limitations, you see others as the cause. . As Americans we have a history of projecting our insecurity and fear onto a series of enemies du jour – the communists, gays, blacks, Jews, Muslims, immigrants—and racism, intolerance, injustice, and war follow. Satirist P. J. O'Rourke writes, "One of the annoying things about believing in free will and individual responsibility is the difficulty of finding someone to blame your troubles on. When you do find somebody, it's remarkable how often his picture turns up on your driver's license."

Befriending the Trouble

The good news about these powerful inner forces is that you can use awareness to understand and tame them. When you mindfully recognize your

fear, anger, desire, or loneliness, you come to know it, and then it begins to be workable. If you are lonely, for example, study it. The Sufi poet Hafiz warns, “Don’t surrender your loneliness so quickly. Let it cut more deeply. Let it season you as few ingredients can.” If you cannot bear your loneliness, your boredom, your anxiety, you will always run away. The moment you feel lonely or bored, you may open the fridge or go online, or do anything to avoid being with yourself. But with loving awareness you can endure, honor, and value loneliness and aloneness. And they can be informative. They can teach you about yourself, your longings, what you have neglected for too long. They can help you find a deeper freedom.

Grief is the same. The Lakota Sioux value grief highly; they say it brings a person closer to the Great Spirit. When they want to send a message to the other side, they ask a member of a grieving family to deliver it. Whether you feel grief or anxiety, jealousy, addiction, or anger, your freedom grows by turning awareness toward it. Zen teacher Myogen Steve Stucky told his friends and students, when he was in great pain, dying of cancer, “I’ve found relief from suffering not by turning away but by turning toward what is most difficult.”

In my own life, I’ve had to learn this with anger. My father was violent and abusive, a wife batterer who dominated all of our family with unpredictable outbursts of rage and paranoia. When he was most abusive, I would run away, and my mother hid bottles behind the curtains in every room so she could reach for one as a way to defend herself against his blows.

I determined never to be like him. I became the family peacemaker, mediating arguments when I could. So when I went to live as a young monk in a Thai forest monastery, I thought it would be easy and peaceful. I was unprepared for the intensity of my own restless mind, the uprising of grief, desire, and loneliness I felt. Most surprising was my anger. In not wanting to be like my violent father, I had suppressed all my anger—it had become dangerous even to feel. But in the awareness of meditation and solitude, all the things I was angry about came up. It was more than anger, it was fury. First at my father for being so hurtful to our family. Then, because it frightened me and I had denied it, I was angry at myself for all the times I had suppressed my anger.

Ajahn Chah told me to sit in the middle of it, to wrap myself in robes even on a hot day and learn to tolerate it. Later my Reichian therapist had me breathe hard, make sounds, shout, grimace, rage and flail, until I expressed fury’s pain and wept. In these years of meditation and therapy I learned to work with the anger and discovered that it’s an energy that can be known and tolerated, not

feared. I had to acknowledge when it was present and realize that I *could* feel it fully without becoming vengeful or violent like my father.

I also realized that when understood, anger has value. It is a protest when we feel hurt or afraid or when our needs aren't met. At times it even brings clarity. The ancient Greeks called anger a "noble" emotion, because it gives the strength to stand up for what you care most about. As I began to understand anger, I could see more clearly the frustration, hurt, and fear that were behind it. My sense of freedom grew as I became more intelligent about it, and slowly its energy was transformed into compassion for myself and others. Now help others with their emotions as a part of my profession.

Resolving Conflicts

Arturo Bejar, a friend, served as one of the chief engineers at Facebook. His job included responding to problems and complaints by Facebook's members. He laughs when he points out that because Facebook is so huge, it doesn't take long for even 1 percent of users to register a million complaints. When they had engineering complaints, it was simple; Arturo sent them to Facebook's engineers to fix them. But many of the complaints were about interpersonal problems and about anger, resentment, blame, and hurt that had come up: "Someone posted a picture of me I don't like." "Someone posted a story about my kids, and they have no right to do so." "Someone wrote things about me that aren't quite right."

At first Facebook's response was to send out their legal policy, which explained that they would take down photos that were illegal, copyrighted, lewd, lascivious, etc. But Arturo saw that this policy left most people dissatisfied. He felt they needed to talk to each other. So he began suggesting to users that, if they were unhappy with something another person did, they contact that person directly and try to sort it out. Then he realized they might need help with how to do this. "Tell them what you are concerned about." And then, to make the communication more complete, he also suggested, "Tell them how it made you feel."

Arturo then discovered that people often don't know how they feel, especially around difficulty. So he suggested users learn to recognize their feelings. He even sent them emoticons to prompt their acknowledgment of feelings of hurt, confusion, worry, anger, sadness, fear, or not being appreciated. Finally, to further solve the conflict, Arturo suggested sending a simple inquiry, posing a question like "What made you post that?" or "What was your intention?"

The results were phenomenal. Eighty-five percent of the difficulties were resolved just by this process. Often the offender would respond, "I thought you

looked good in this photo. Learning that it bothered you, of course I took it down.” Or, “I’m sorry, I thought it would be fun to post about your kids.” Arturo says, “I get a chance to teach emotional intelligence and conflict resolution to 950 million people!”

Facing Demons

When you face the inner energies that most frighten, overwhelm, and bind you, it is important not to identify with them, but to stay present with an observing mind that is not taking sides. Freedom dawns when you recognize the waves of emotions, see these energies for what they are, and you are not caught up in the dramatic stories your psyche has composed.

Wanting to be free from his own fear, the Buddha reflected in this way: “How would it be if, at the dark of the moon, I were to enter the most frightening places, near tombs and in the thick of the forest, that I might come to understand fear and terror. And being resolved to dispel the hold of fear, I did so, and remained facing that fear and terror until I was free of its hold upon me.”

Tibetan master Milarepa is said to have put his head into the mouth of the worst demon that haunted him. A troubled young man I know named Marv told me that, after reading Milarepa, he decided to try the same approach. On a retreat, Marv said it was impossible for him to count how frequently the demons of anger, unworthiness, and self-destructive thoughts appeared to him. They had haunted him since his childhood. So, instead of rejecting them, he determined to stay in this deepest hell until he experienced and understood them fully. He surrendered to deliberately bring mindfulness and kindness to this suffering and fear, and meditated this way for some hours. Finally, at the very bottom of the well of pain, he saw a large ball that was emanating light appear. He entered it and immediately felt changed, released from his self-destructive fear for the first time in memory.

It happens this way. When we face our demons, whether boredom or shame, anger, judgment or jealousy, they lose their power. We stop believing their story and start seeing them simply as human feelings. We stop wanting to get away or have something more, or feeling we did something wrong. Toni Murden, the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic, explains, “If you know what it means to be out in the middle of an ocean by yourself, in the dark, scared, then it gives you a feel for what every other human being is going through. I row an actual ocean. Other people have just as many obstacles to go through.” Believing that our worry and fear are real drains us of vast amounts of energy. The poet Hafiz wrote, “Fear is the cheapest room in the house. I’d like to see you

in better living conditions.” If you pause for a moment, you’ll see that fear is made of thoughts, and you can step aside and witness them as though they were anxious children. As you release fear, love and trust grow.

Dawn of Compassion

We all harbor troubling emotions. We all have shadows. Using awareness and compassion together can help us loosen their grip. Abiding in loving awareness, we become more spacious, and these unhealthy states begin to lose their power. As we learn to tolerate the feelings of pain, loss, and insecurity without expending all our energy to judge, retaliate, or push them away, a new feeling often arises. Freedom dawns as forgiveness and compassion enter your body and mind. Tibetan teacher Alan Wallace gives an example:

Imagine walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall over and your groceries are strewn over the ground. As you rise up from the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out, “You idiot! What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?” But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you actually is blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: “Are you hurt? Can I help you up?” Our situation is like that. When we clearly realize that the source of disharmony and misery in the world is ignorance, we can open the door of wisdom and compassion.

Sondra, a woman I worked with during a retreat, needed compassion to face her lifelong demon of binge eating. She described years of struggling with the compulsion, of wandering like a hungry ghost, full of self-hatred.

I believed that food had an unparalleled capacity to bring satisfaction and to free me from suffering. Time and again I have reached for the food, looking for it to do its magic, only to have it turn on me, fail me, bring me untold physical and emotional suffering and shame. I became hypercritical of myself and my situation, and then despaired.

Freedom has come as I have become more mindful of the intense discomfort I was trying to escape from. I started to find that I could recover more quickly and less painfully from bouts of compulsive bingeing if I could stay even a little bit kind and present with my pain. Instead of eating even more, just to try and avoid the effects of having eaten too much and the remorse of having done it again, I could actually watch myself start down that sad, old path. And as the loving awareness grew, I realized, “Oh, I don’t

have to do this,” and self-compassion could grow. I am deeply grateful for the compassion that has rescued me from the realm of the hungry ghosts.

Sondra found that from kindness grew freedom. She realized she was free to stop believing her destructive thoughts. And you are, too!

You do not have to identify with the unhealthy inner habits that cause you pain. You are not your fear, your grasping, your anger or confusion. With compassion and courage, difficult states become empty phantoms, impostors, appearances that are not real. In their stead, an inner world of well-being and balance grows. Freedom is your true home.

PRACTICE

COMPASSION

To cultivate compassion, let yourself sit comfortably, in a centered and quiet way. Traditional compassion practice combines phrases of inner intention with visualization and the evocation of the feeling of compassion.

As you begin, breathe softly and feel your body, your heartbeat, the life within you. Feel how you treasure your own life, how you guard yourself in the face of dangers and sorrows. This is innate to all life. Now, bring to mind someone close to you whom you dearly love. Picture them and feel your natural caring for them. Notice how kindly you hold them. Then let yourself be aware of their struggles and fears, their troubles, their measure of sorrows, the suffering in their life, as in all human life. Feel how your heart naturally opens to wish them well, to extend comfort, to acknowledge their pain and meet it with compassion. This is the spontaneous response of the heart. As you picture them, inwardly recite these phrases:

May you be held in compassion.

May your pain and sorrow be eased.

May you be at peace.

Continue reciting these a number of times, all the while holding them in your heart. Let the feeling of compassion grow. Continue offering this caring intention for a time. You can modify these phrases in any way that makes them true to your heart's intention.

Then, after some minutes, imagine that this loved one is gazing back at you. Their eyes fill with the same spirit of compassion for your fears and troubles, your measure of sorrow and pain. They recite to you in return:

May you too be held in compassion.

May your pain and sorrow be eased.

May you be at peace.

Take in their compassion and care. Now offer this same compassion to yourself. Hold your fears and troubles, suffering and pain in compassion. If you wish, put your hand on your heart. Recite the same phrases for a few minutes:

May I be held in compassion.

May my pain and sorrow be eased.

May I be at peace.

Then, after a time, you can begin to extend compassion to others you know. Picture loved ones, one after another. Hold the image of each in your heart, be aware of their difficulties, and wish them well with the same phrases.

Next you can open your compassion further, a step at a time, to the suffering of your friends, to your neighbors, to your community. You can gradually extend your compassion to all who suffer, to difficult people, to your enemies, and finally to the brotherhood and sisterhood of all beings. Sense your tenderhearted connection with all life and its creatures.

Work with compassion practice intuitively. At times it may feel difficult, you might be afraid of being overwhelmed by the pain. Remember, you are not trying to “fix” the pain of the world, only to meet it with a compassionate heart. Relax and be gentle. Breathe. Let your breath and heart rest naturally, as a center of great compassion in the midst of the world.

PRACTICE WITH TROUBLED EMOTIONS

To practice with troubled emotions, sit quietly and choose a circumstance where you feel stuck. Notice the difficult emotions that are present, often making your problems worse. Observe kindly whatever troubled emotions are present. Breathe and let the emotions be. Fear and frustration, anxiety and worry, anger and rage, loneliness and sorrow may be there....are all natural to human life. Turn toward them. Feel how they manifest in your body, your heart and your mind. With loving awareness, simply acknowledge, “Fear feels like this,”

“Frustration feels like this,” “Pain feels like this.” Already by naming them you become the mindful witnessing, the loving awareness.

After a minute or two, focus on one of these difficult emotions. Acknowledge whatever it is: “Anger feels like this.” “_____ feels like this.” Notice wherever it is centered in your body. Now invite the emotion or feeling to become stronger, to expand and increase. Feel yourself making space for it to grow as big as it wants. Let it open and fill your whole body. Then sense or feel or imagine it expanding further, to fill the room, the space around you, the whole sky. Let the emotion or feeling grow vast. Take your time. As the feeling expands, notice what happens to it. At first it may intensify and grow stronger. Then, as it expands even further, it often becomes softer, and the energy of this emotion opens to other experiences. Sometimes it begins to feel less personal. It becomes simply an energy of anger, of fear, of loneliness moving through you. Sometimes as it softens, another strong feeling arises, anger makes way for sadness or hurt, loneliness gives birth to worry or to tenderness. The energy becomes more universal and can even open to its opposite. You may also notice that as you allow these energies to open you become less reactive. Their energy is freed to move. Now you can be present and gracious, but not so easily caught or swept away.

Of course some feelings return many times, reappearing like waves. Let them come and go. Do not be discouraged. They are the energy of life, come to teach you. They arise from how much you have been hurt or afraid, are vulnerable and how much you care and they can lead you to a more universal, deep tender concern and compassion. Trust this process. It is healing and liberating to the heart.