

Josh Korda  
Week 1, *Cultivating Emotional Intelligence*  
February 2, 2015  
“Getting to Know Our Emotions”  
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So, welcome. We're here at Maha Rose in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, which is a spot that I teach at regularly on Mondays. And it's a lovely Friday afternoon in the winter and I'm going to be giving a four-part talk on the regulation of difficult emotions. And this is going to be a bit of an unusual series in that we're going to be tackling emotion regulation from a variety of different angles including the traditional Buddhist—early Buddhist insights and tools from the Pali canon and onwards—and we'll also be tackling it from some more contemporary models, such as the thoughts of Freud and Jung and Ainsworth, Bowlby, Winnicott, a lot of wonderful 20th century insights into what emotions are and how they arise.

So we'll also be tackling emotion regulation from both internal contemplative practices to external practices that involve communicating emotional states with others, and how we develop those relationships that allow us to safely express our emotional activations. And this is important: Emotional regulation involves not just knowing what feelings and energies are going on inside of us and being able to process or modulate those feelings so that we can safely hold them and talk about them, but the final stage of emotion regulation involves finding wise friends and therapeutic alliances—sometimes with qualified people—where we can talk about our internal states, what we're feeling, and we can develop a better way not just to hold difficult, painful emotions but also develop real secure bonds with other people where we openly and honestly discuss these states.

When we learn how to regulate and express emotions we're given a tool that really allows us to connect deeply with other people in a way that's far more substantial than just the sort of day-to-day mundane ways that we connect with others, which are often just based on talking about the events of our lives. When we can express painful and difficult emotions we connect with others in a way that not just involves one could say the heart but also using all the regions of the brain including the right hemisphere where so much of our emotional states are stored. So you could say that bonding with others, using and expressing difficult emotions, is a way that we employ all of our bonds to connect.

So let's talk about emotions. The first talk I'll be giving will be an overview of exactly what are emotions and how we get to know them and the basic process of regulating them. So I like to describe emotions as coming in two basic families. There are the core emotions, which are universal and transcultural. You will find them in everyone pretty much and they are employing the same facial expressions and outward signals pretty much in everyone everywhere. I like to break them down into the five basic emotions: anger, fear, sadness, happiness, and disgust. There are different neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists who say there are four to six different basic emotions so you can go with whichever model you like. For the sake of today's talk, I'm just going to say there are five basic emotions.



And then there are a whole realm of complex emotions which vary from culture to culture. They're expressed differently and, unlike the very basic core emotions, the complex emotions are not just primarily about survival and—as we'll see—also involve a much greater thinking or cognitive tone to them, but let's talk first about the basic emotions. When we are infants we are very vulnerable. Infants cannot survive on their own and so what we do—what our core programming is when we are in our first months of life—is to establish a secure connection with adults around us who will then provide security and basically provide our needs. So how do we communicate and establish these bonds with adults around us? Well, when we're first born we don't actually talk using language. In fact, those skills don't develop for about three years so what we do use are actually expressing our very core states via gestures, facial expressions, sounds, body movements, and all of these messages or signals are actually the prototypes for the emotions that we will continue to experience throughout our adult lives.

So emotions in their first iteration are essentially a way to communicate with the world around us. They basically say, “I'm hungry”; “I'm scared”; “I'm cold”; “I'm frightened”; “I'm content”; “I'm not enjoying something I just ate.” So they're basically just messages expressing how we are and emotions then also develop into a series of impulses that, as we get older, help us to not just connect with others but help us survive. So when I express or feel a state of fear, for example, it's not just something that you can see—a scared look on my face, tension in my body—but also I'm going to be experiencing inner feelings that are pushing me to run if I'm frightened.

What will happen is the blood will start to flow, my midbrain will trigger all sorts of stress hormones that will change the way I breathe. I'll actually experience blood flow to the limbs so I can run, there'll be a release of endorphins, and I'll be primed, in essence, to flee. The same goes for emotions like anger, which will prime me to fight, and if I'm happy there'll be different primings. A lot of wonderful contemporary insight views contentment and joy as a broadening emotion. Unlike the emotions of fear or anger or sadness, which are essentially about survival states, happiness is an emotion that allows me to respond to you and the situations I'm in in a variety of ways. Disgust will be an emotion that will urge me to expel or to push out something that I have eaten or something that I've seen that I don't like, that I find repulsive.

So, to sum up, emotions so far have basically two core components. One is that they allow us to connect and establish a secure base with adults around us so that we can convey our needs. And two: They also push us towards behaviors that will help us to survive. So how do we learn to identify and hold these emotions? When we're infants and we first experience fear or sadness or disgust or anger they all pretty much feel like unknowable energies in the body and mind that can feel very foreign to an infant and unknowable; we don't really know what's happening. And so just as we signal these emotions we look to the caretakers around us to tell us essentially what is going on when we feel these shifts of energy in the body, these states of mind, these

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activations. The child looks to the caretaker to understand what emotion or what state is going on.

So for instance, if a child is toddling around and runs into a dog and is frightened it runs to its parent and the parent seeing the fear will say, “Oh, you’re frightened” and the parent will in that moment help the child identify the emotion. And then the parent will hopefully tolerate the emotion; they won’t reject it or say, “There’s nothing to be frightened of” in a scolding way. Instead the parent will hopefully mirror the emotion back to the infant, “Oh, you’re frightened. You saw a doggie” and then the parent will, after mirroring, build a regulation in. They’ll smile; they’ll hold the child. In essence they create a safe container to be with a difficult emotional state. So, at first, children look to the adults around them to help identify and hold the emotions.

When we’re angry and frustrated, we haven’t gotten our food we kick and we make gestures and the parents say, “Oh, you’re hungry. You’re frustrated. It’s okay.” They’ll mirror back the emotion and then they’ll eventually provide food, but in all this process what’s happening is the child is being provided by the adults around the infant a way to know what’s going on during emotions—emotional activations—and know that it’s safe to be with these energies and that other people can tolerate.

Now unfortunately no matter how good a job our caretakers did all of us to a certain degree or another have emotions that we don’t particularly tolerate well in others. My parents were very supportive with a number of emotions but my father was not very tolerant when it came to anger or frustration. He didn’t model it very well nor did he allow other people to express it, even myself as an infant. So where there’s a caretaker who cannot tolerate or hold a difficult emotion what will happen is the child will—instead of learning how to identify that emotion—the child will feel, if the parent is scolding or shaming or turns away when the child expresses a core emotion, the child will learn these energies and feelings are not safe.

When I experience this my parents pull away and I’m vulnerable, I’m disconnected, I’m no longer feeling secure in the world. So where our emotional—early emotional states are not securely tolerated and held by our caretakers, very quickly what happens is a need to suppress or get rid of these emotions because we begin to associate the emotional states that we experience that lead to rejection from others, from our families, and then later on in life from other kids we begin to associate these emotions with abandonment and nobody likes that. So in my case I learned to very quickly suppress any impulses, urges, feelings, states, energies, activations, ideas that at all reminded me of the anger that my father was very, very intolerant of.

So how do we push down or suppress emotions? Well, we can use a number of different methodologies. I for many years used drugs and alcohol as a way to get rid of my anger. Other



people use what's known as reaction formation or essentially masking the emotion. In my family when people were angry we very often turned it into a joke. We replace our anger with humor, laughing about it; or we minimize it. For instance, when somebody would mistreat me—before I learned how to hold the energies of anger or frustration—when somebody would mistreat me and they would come to apologize, instead of accepting their apology and saying, “Yes, that was a difficult experience for me,” expressing my frustration or my disappointment, I'd immediately say, “Oh, it's okay. It's fine.” In essence I was minimizing or pushing down the anger because I couldn't hold it very well. Finally, we'll also use behaviors that are meant to get rid of the emotion altogether.

Some of us when we feel lonely we'll turn on the television immediately or we'll seek out Facebook, put up a selfie and hope to get a lot of likes or we'll text somebody. In essence we'll turn to any kind of pseudo connection that the world provides to alleviate the feelings of loneliness. We might when we feel different emotions shop or eat as a way to get rid of those emotions. Many people binge eat as a way to handle feelings of frustration or a sense of purposelessness in life. So it would all be fine if these emotions we suppress simply went away; if we never had to deal with them again there'd be no problem with emotional repression, inhibition, suppression. Unfortunately, it's not that simple.

Emotions don't just go away. They wind up actually suppressed into the unconscious realms largely held as what are called inner working models in the brain's right hemisphere; they're also associated with core midbrain levels. And when we continue to repress natural, completely human emotional states whether they're fear, sadness, anger, melancholy, loneliness, grief, if any emotion is not attended to eventually over time it will seek any way to express itself possible.

It will attach itself or piggyback onto current events as a way to have their energies known by us so let me give you an example because that can sound pretty abstract. Suppose you know somebody who's been in a two-week-long relationship and the relationship breaks up and your friend after this two-week-long relationship has ended completely falls apart. They can't get out of bed, they're weeping and sobbing and completely distraught, and you might well wonder well, why are they so activated and so deregulated by a two-week-old relationship—what's going on here?

Well, in fact what's happened is their older experiences and emotions—associated with abandonment and rejection and disconnection from others—have been activated and are now flowing up to the surface to be felt because we didn't learn how to experience those emotions when they actually arose originally. So they didn't go away; they just seek a way to express themselves in the present using any contemporary event that seems suitable. Some people will suddenly lash out at coworkers or roommates or friends with anger. The reason is because they've been suppressing their frustration for a long time; they haven't learned to hold it and

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instead they wait for the smallest little slip-up or error and all of the repressed anger comes flowing up. The same goes for sadness. If we haven't attended to our grief, a loss, and we've pushed down those emotions we'll wait until there is a unpleasant, disappointing event in the present and we'll again feel the floodings of emotions that we didn't learn to hold.

Again, emotional activations are natural. They're impulses to help us survive and connect with others, and if we push them away they don't just evaporate. They actually will stay there and come up, often not only just in waves but they'll come up in unregulated forms, which means they'll be so much bigger energies that other people around us won't be able to deal with them. When we learn how to experience our emotions in the present as they arrive, to hold them, to regulate them and then express them they come out in a very modulated, easy-to-express form. But when—most of the time—we suppress emotions, what winds up happening is they eventually come out in a wildly deregulated form and we wind up pushing people away because the anger or the frustration, sadness, grief will be so much more disproportionate than they need be.

So the key is to develop a way to identify and hold these emotions when they're happening and then to be able to express them. Now before we talk about that it, you might be asking, “Well, these are all concepts I've been describing so far that are very contemporary. Where did the Buddha land on these ideas?” and in fact the Buddha had a very, very similar understanding to the way emotions worked. He had basically two different terms for emotions. He broke them down into the core feelings of comfort and discomfort that are largely physical and feeling states and those are called *vedanas* and the Buddha also described what he called *anasuyas*, underlying latent, often suppressed tendencies waiting just beneath the surface of the mind, waiting to come up when we make contact with an event that's triggering.

And he said there are seven *anasuyas*. I'm not going to go into all of them but they involve anger, self-doubt, pride, fear-based clinging for more life, craving for sensual pleasure—all essential emotions that we all experience. And Buddha said, basically they're there and the moment some event in our life triggers or a contact experience with something that gives these latent energies an excuse to rise up they'll come flooding up. And the tools he suggested are basic mindfulness techniques that allow us to create what I like to call a “safe container” to hold our emotions.

In the talks three and four we'll talk about how to express these emotions to others, but right now I'd like to talk about the tools that you can practice for the next week that will help you learn to identify and hold emotions. So this practice is one that can be done. In fact, I do practice this during my meditation so the way I do it is I first set up about ten minutes of basic concentration. I will sit; I'll focus on the breath or listening to sounds or just *metta* meditation, repeating a phrase that's very calming. I like phrases like “I care about you. I'll take care of you” or “May I

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feel safe. May I feel truly peaceful.” So any technique you like just that establishes a settled mind.

Then, for the second part of the meditation when we’re developing emotional regulation, I’ll bring up an event from life that was very difficult for me, an exchange with a friend that didn’t go the way I had hoped, a frustrating event, an out-of-the-blue insult that happens with a stranger. Who knows? It can come in many different flavors and I’ll hold the image that’s most resonant of this disturbing experience. Now I don’t hold or recite the complete story of what happened. If I’ve been in an argument with a close friend or a relative, I don’t replay that story; I just hold the most emotionally resonant image.

So if, for example I’ve been in an argument, I’ll hold the image of my friend’s face or the face of somebody that is—there’s been conflict with—and I’ll then ask myself, “How does it feel to be upset? How does it feel to not be heard? How does it feel to be mistreated?” These are open-ended questions, very emotionally wet questions in the sense that we’re trying to actually create emotional activations. And eventually, if I use the right combination of an image and questions, I’ll start to feel the emotions arise in the body. I’ll start with fear; if it’s a frightening event, financial insecurity, I’ll feel my stomach tighten. If it’s a feeling of abandonment, not being connected, having a relationship with another person become jeopardized, I’ll feel my chest become tight. If it’s anger, I might feel my muscles in my arms and my jaw lock and my forehead might become tight and I might feel a kind of bated breath.

So I’m looking for the somatic physical expressions of the emotions, which is what we’ll highlight in this practice, and then simply I create that container where I sit with the energies and I hold them and I give them space to arise. Now old difficult, painful, negative emotions can arise in very, very sharp, contracting pains; they can be very difficult to be with. So finally the last stage of developing what I call regulation—what people call regulation—is simply to send very, very nurturing, simple, reassuring messages to these emotions, which is, “It’s all right. I’ll take care of you. We’ll be okay. You won’t be abandoned. I’ll make sure we’re safe.”

Now the emotions really don’t understand the language but the reassuring tone of mind will definitely be felt by these core emotional activations, and this helps tone down the feeling states over time. Simply not resisting them, welcoming them and then reassuring them allows emotions to arise and sustain and eventually pass. It’s only when we really run again and again and again from certain emotional states such as loneliness or fear or grief that when they do come up they come up as monstrous, very difficult waves that are almost impossible to be with, but when we welcome them, when we turn towards them, when we encourage them emotions come up in states that we can hold.

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Finally, as you practice this meditation during the week I encourage you to not use an event that's too painful or difficult to process. Use an experience that you're fairly confident that you can sit with.

Two, sometimes the work when we're opening to different feeling states can be very, very challenging. If you need to take a break and pull back from an activation in the body, that's all right. Take time away. Feel the breaths. Bring an image in your mind of a place you feel safe or visualize someone with whom you feel secure. You can simply go back to concentration techniques, anything to restore a sense of ease and stability. We want to tiptoe into reconnecting with these emotions so that we don't re-traumatize ourselves or continue to file these emotions away as that which cannot be held and processed. So I hope that this opening talk was of some interest and that we covered stuff that might be of value. There'll be three more and I encourage you to listen to the entire set on *Tricycle*, which has been wonderful enough to allow me to do these online talks for now a second group so thank you for listening.