

Bhante Buddharakkhita

*Overcoming Difficult Emotions in a Chaotic World*

Week 1: "Applying Mindfulness to Difficult Emotions"

August 1, 2020



*Namo Buddhaya, Namō Dharmaya, Namō Sanghaya.* I pay homage to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha.

My name is Venerable Buddharakkhita and I was born and bred in Uganda. I became a monk in 2002, so I've been a monk for 17 years. In 2005 I started the Uganda Buddhist Centre, the first and only Buddhist temple in Uganda. Currently, I'm involved in teaching in the United States, Sri Lanka, and many other countries.

I'm going to lead a series of talks about overcoming difficult emotions in the chaotic world. The world we are living in today is full of chaos. This talk is important because everywhere in the world seems to be out of control. There is a lot of confusion. Starting in my own country, the county is under lockdown [for coronavirus] and there is a lot of domestic violence. We haven't had any COVID-19 deaths, but we have many positive cases. Lake Victoria and some rivers flooded, killing people, we've had locusts in eastern Uganda. So within a short period, there are a lot of problems.

When you look at the rest of the countries in the world, like the United States, there is a lot of violence, racism and its implications, riots, and many cases of COVID-19. These big problems in the world are causing a lot of fear, anxiety, anger, rage, even despair, and hopelessness. In short, it's really overwhelming to see what's going on in the world. That's the bad news.

The good news is that we can change our relationship with what's going on in the world. I'm going to give 10 new ways of overcoming difficult emotions based on Buddha's teaching. In this first talk, I'm going to talk about three: mindfulness of the six senses, mindfulness of emotion itself, and developing a right and proper attitude towards difficult emotions.

So we'll start with the first way, mindfulness of the six senses. We are bombarded by all these sense objects at the moment of seeing. There are many good sights and sounds. Some of them are pleasant, others unpleasant, and others are neutral. If we're not mindful, then these objects become a problem. The object itself isn't the problem per se, but the way we relate to these objects of senses. So with the Buddha's teaching, we apply mindfulness, then there is no problem. When you hear sounds, you just become aware of hearing. When you see an object, you become aware of seeing. When you think about mental ideas, you just become aware of "thinking, thinking." This is a very practical method because it can even prevent difficult emotions from arising.

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When I was young I was allergic to meat. I got sick whenever I ate it. I didn't know how to meditate then. But what's interesting, because of the six senses, every time I thought of eating meat I got sick. Every time I could smell roasting meat I got sick. I could not even touch meat because I had a strong aversion towards it. But when I started meditating, I brought mindfulness to it. At the moment of seeing meat, I would just become aware of seeing. When I smelled roasted meat I would just be aware of smelling. When we do that, we don't allow these emotions to take over. We are aware of it. We are not hijacked by emotions. But if we're mindless, then difficult emotions such as fear, anger, and so on, can actually take hold of our mind.

So being aware of the six senses—thinking, smelling, tasting, touching, seeing, hearing—is a very simple but very effective method. So this is a way we can ground and control our senses so that we do not feel bombarded by all this stimulus, so we don't overreact. So now, when you hear about COVID cases in the USA and Europe and you aren't mindful of hearing, then you get swept into the content of the story, instead of the process of the story. So we need to deal with the process of the story: think, "Okay, hearing is arising; hearing is passing away." But if you get so caught up in the story, then you start worrying, you start developing fear and anxiety, then you will become over-reactive with what you're hearing.

There is a saying in English, "Prevention is better than cure." Here we are trying to prevent difficult emotions from arising in the first place. But if they arise, we are going to go to another method, the second method on how to make these difficult emotions the object of our meditation.

This is a very important method, and I find it very effective as a monk walking around here in Uganda. Every time when people say about me, "Oh, he's a Maasai. Oh, he is going to the mental hospital. Oh, he's coming from the mental hospital." I just become aware of hearing. If I think I don't like whatever I'm hearing, then I'll be emotionally hijacked. So stopping at just hearing has helped me a lot.

There's a lot of information circulating in this chaotic world. In fact, when COVID-19 started they were talking about an "infodemic," not "pandemic." There was a lot of information. Some of it was not true. Some of it was exaggerated. So the first method is guarding our senses, mindfulness of the six senses.

The second method is called mindfulness of the presence or the absence of a particular emotion such as fear, anger, anxiety, or guilt. All of these kinds of difficult emotions can be handled easily when we become mindful of the presence or absence of a particular emotion. What this

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means is that once an emotion arises in your experience, let's say anger, just mentally notice anger, or anxiety, fear. You can also become aware of the absence of it. The opposite of fear is courage; if courage arises, you can be mindful of it. The opposite of anger is lovingkindness, the opposite of cruelty is compassion. When you hear people dying, maybe of COVID in Italy and other places, you should have compassion. So you can be actually mindful of the absence of emotion or the presence of it.

This method is very effective. Let's say anger arises and you become aware of anger as an emotion, then you are going to be the object of anger. Because these are two different things: the object of anger and anger itself. Most of us forget this. When anger arises, when fear arises, we pay attention to the object of fear or anger, not the emotion itself as it is arising from the mind. This is very important because mindfulness of the presence of anger, as opposed to the object of anger, can make a difference between being free or being caught up with a particular emotion.

I'll give an example. Let's say you're eating in a restaurant, and then you come out of the restaurant and see somebody has set fire to your car. As soon as you see the car start burning with your valuable things inside, the person who set the fire runs away. What do you do? Do you remove the valuables from your car or do you run after the arsonist, the person who set fire to your car?

It makes more sense for you to make your way to the car and remove your valuables first and then stop the fire. After that maybe you can look for the arsonist. But in life, what I've seen myself and other people doing, most people start running after the person who set fire to their car and they leave their valuables behind. So, this is the same way when anger arises. You start looking for somebody who caused your anger instead of trying to be mindful of the anger itself inside your mind—in other words, getting valuable things in your car. We normally go for the person who set the fire, the external object, the trigger, in other words.

This is a very important method because once we become mindful of anger itself then we can process it, we can see it rising, we can see it changing, we can see its nature, how it affects us in our body and our mind. So we can see the true nature of this emotion when we are mindful of it, but if we are not mindful of it, and then when we encounter triggers in life—people, situations, things—then we really let the anger go free, and then it affects us. We lose our peace of mind.

There are so many triggers in this chaotic world. Poor economic systems are triggering us to be angry about the systems that don't work, that don't serve us, or decisions that don't serve us. Most

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people are getting angry at the triggers. But actually, the priority is first to be mindful of the emotion itself in your mind. And then you can deal with the rest later on! So this is very important with the priority of what to do with a difficult emotion arises. So the absence of an emotion is also very important to be mindful of it because that can show us how mindfulness works. Because there's a moment when we are in a bridge, and that was that moment when we feel the freedom, that the anger has subsided and then you can see the taste of freedom, you know. Even though the world is chaotic, we can be free.

The next method is called cultivating a proper attitude. This method is about the way you relate to an emotions when they arise. Do you react? Do you suppress emotions? Do you express difficult emotions? Do you repress them or ignore them? For most of us, when we are faced with difficult emotions, such as anger or rage, it's very easy to push them away. That's the easy way, you know, just push it away. You don't want to face it. You ignore it, you suppress it, you replace it. But that's not the way the Buddha recommended to deal with difficult emotions. When you look at this way of facing difficult emotions, they are based on our biases, what I would call defense mechanisms, where we don't want to face things and we just push it under the rug.

When you suppress emotions, that's pushing out what you don't want. Expressing your emotions can be another problem because that's indulging, that's based on desire, right? When you ignore the difficult emotion, that's delusion, that's ignoring it. But the Buddha's teaching, which is what I recommend, is developing or cultivating a proper attitude towards difficult emotions. This proper attitude is about understanding emotions and developing wisdom to deal with it.

When we have wisdom, mindfulness, and understanding, then we can resolve emotions. Instead of pushing it away, you can understand it. That's the attitude. And this is given in a discourse the Buddha said, "This is the body, this is the mind state, to the extent necessary for further mindfulness and developing knowledge."

So, this is the way to deal with difficult emotions in a chaotic world. These methods also can make a difference between being free of emotion or being caught up in emotions. Because when an emotional arises and we react out of our prejudices, out of anger, out of our desire, out of our fear, then we are making it worse. We are making the emotion worse. But if we respond with understanding and wisdom, then we can begin to heal. So that approach can be very beneficial if we apply it properly, and we need mindfulness to know how to apply it properly.

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This is analogous to driving a car in the snow. Imagine you are caught up in a snowstorm as you're driving and then you start skidding, and you start struggling a lot and reacting. You keep on going into the skid, your car is skidding to the left and you're steering to the right, and you are overreacting. Then you get caught up in the snow. You can even cause an accident because you are reacting. But if you respond and not act on autopilot, if you just respond with understanding and wisdom, you can drive into the skid itself. If the skid is on the left, drive left, into it! In other words, respond with calmness, understanding, and mindfulness, don't react. You can actually be free from this kind of skid. That's a beautiful analogy about this method of developing a proper attitude.

So, today we have seen three methods of dealing with or overcoming difficult emotions in this chaotic world. The first one was mindfulness of the six senses. As you receive this information, you just become aware and think "Smelling," or "Thinking," like that. This method prevents difficult emotions from arising in the first place. Another method we have seen is mindfulness of the emotion itself, mindfulness of the presence and the absence of emotion. And another method we have seen is cultivating a proper attitude.

So, in the next of this series of talks, I'll talk more about mindfulness. I'll talk about how to know the true nature of emotions; in other words, how to develop insight and knowledge about the nature of emotions, or knowing the conditionality of emotions. How do they arise in the first place? I'll also talk about how to let go. How to release the emotion, not holding on to it, managing emotions. And whilst we do that, then we are able to be free from difficult emotions in this chaotic world. Thank you very much for hearing. *Namo Buddhaya, Namō Dharmaya, Namō Sanghaya*. I pay homage to the Buddha, dharma, and sangha.