

Bhante Buddharakkhita

*Overcoming Difficult Emotions in a Chaotic World*

Week 2: “Learning to Let Go”

August 8, 2020



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

In this series of dhamma talks about overcoming difficult emotions in this chaotic world we have already covered a few methods. In this session, I'll give two more methods. One of them is the reinvestigation of emotions themselves. The conditionality of emotion, the mindfulness of the conditions of the arising of emotions. Another one is letting go of the emotion itself, not holding onto the difficult emotions.

Let us start with the first method, reinvestigation of emotion. There are many ways we can approach this method. The first one is to look at the conditions for the arising of the emotion itself. Let's say anger, fear, anxiety is arising. How did it come in the first place? According to Buddhism, everything arises due to causes and conditions. I'm here talking to you due to causes and conditions. COVID is here due to causes and conditions. Rioting, racism, domestic violence, all those happenings, all those situations, have causes and conditions. We have to be mindful of those causes and conditions. Once we know its present condition, then we know why we are angry, why we have fear in the first place.

Let's give an example. How does anger arise? Is it because of your neighbor, is it because of other people? According to Buddhism, anger arises due to unwise attention to the theme of irritation. Whenever there's irritation and you pay unwise attention, surely anger will arise in your mind, in your thought process. So then the key is to practice mindfulness and wise attention to lovingkindness. You wish people to be happy, to be free from suffering and its causes. Lovingkindness is very important. You have to practice mindfulness of lovingkindness because we know why anger is arising; because we don't have lovingkindness towards beings.

The conditions for the arising of fear are similar to the conditions for the arising of anger. Fear arises because we are trying to push away a present danger in front of us. Desire, or attachment, also has conditions for arising: paying unwise attention to the theme of beauty. All emotions have their causes and conditions, and if you miss the causes and conditions, then it will be very difficult to deal with your difficult emotions because you don't know where they're coming from. Most people deal with the symptoms of emotions, not the causes of emotions.

I remember when I was young, I was told to remove a lot of debris around our house. Every evening when it rained, it meant I had to remove the debris—silt, soil—that came from uphill. I did it for one month. I was so exhausted! But one time I said, "I have to know why is this soil

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deposited on the veranda of our house." I started tracing the causes and conditions for this soil on the veranda. I found out there was a trench where water was coming from faucets that leaked all the time, and also when it rains. I was following a certain trench and it came to our veranda. So the day I found out that this is the cause of the dirt being deposited on our veranda, I was so happy! What I did is I went and changed the trench and stopped the trench from coming to our house. I closed it, and that was the end of me working very hard to remove the debris! So the same thing applies to emotions. Once we trace the causes and conditions of a difficult emotion, then we'll be dealing with it and it will not overwhelm us all the time because we know how it arises.

Before an emotion even arises, we know the distal cause. Dealing with the effect of an emotion is like having a headache and going to a hair salon. You get some nice hairdo, but that's not gonna help you with a headache! You have to deal with the cause of the headache. Perhaps you haven't had enough water, perhaps you have indigestion. Whatever the cause of headache, if you address the cause the headache will go, but perming your hair and getting a nice hairdo won't make it go away. It looks nice from the outside but it's not going to help you with the headache. So it's the same with difficult emotions, we have to know the conditions for the arising of the difficult emotion and the conditions for the removal. How do you remove it? What are the conditions?

For anger, you pay wise attention to lovingkindness. So you start cultivating lovingkindness. You think, "May all beings be well." You may send lovingkindness to yourself, to your friends, your family, your parents, to difficult people. Many people ask how they can send lovingkindness to difficult people who are harming them. Yes, those people are actually harming you. They are hurting you because they are suffering. Because if people are not suffering, they're not harming you! Those people might be dealing with a lot of suffering, and that's why they're hurting you. So you can send lovingkindness so they can be free from their problems so they don't cause a lot of harm.

When you bring mindful attention to the causes and conditions for the removal in the future—that means, in the future, preventing that difficult emotion from arising in your mind. That requires you to attain some levels of enlightenment. Before that, you have to practice mindfulness. For anger not to arise in the future, you have to attain the third level of enlightenment, according to Theravada Buddhism, because that's when you overcome this fetter of ill will. That means your will is ill, no? So you have to develop what's called goodwill. So these are some of the conditions.

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I'm citing anger because it's so common. You're angry with riots, with people, with the police; here in Uganda, we have so much anger with political leaders who don't do what they're supposed to do. We have to pay attention because anger has many cousins. Fear, sadness, sorrow, lamentation, anxiety, they are all actually related.

So that's one of the ways we can pay mindful attention to causes and conditions. We can investigate in terms of their nature: we ask ourselves, "What is the nature of these difficult emotions?" So we need to investigate, we need to be mindful of the nature of all these different emotions.

In other words, we need to develop insight and knowledge into the impermanent nature of the emotion, the unsatisfactory nature of the emotion, and also the impersonal nature of emotion. Actually, it's us who hold on to these emotions. They are changing all the time but we hold onto them. We hug them close. When it arises, we think, "This is my anger." We hug it. No, leave it! It has its schedule to keep. So, once we know we develop this insight and knowledge into the impermanent and changing nature of these emotions, then we are with the process of emotion, we are not caught up with emotion. Also, we have to be mindful of how we bring on suffering, stress, tension, distress. Then we are actually developing insight.

We also have to know how impersonal these emotions are. They come due to causes and conditions and they're changing all the time, so we don't have to personalize them. "It's my anger. It's me." We don't need to think like that. When we talk to people and say, "You're angry with somebody. Can you forgive them?" This person will say, "No, no, no, no. I have a right to be angry. It's my anger." We keep on hugging and massaging anger, and then they become a problem. But what if we knew that this is just an impersonal process which came due to causes and conditions and it will go due to causes and conditions. I found it very effective to be mindful of the conditionality of the difficult emotions and also the universal nature of these emotions. In other words, you develop insight and knowledge into the impermanence and unsatisfactory nature of emotion and the impersonal nature of emotions.

Another effective method is simply letting go. When the emotion comes, don't cling on to it, just let it go. What's very interesting for me is to see when people in this physical world touch something hot. They drop it, they don't hold onto it. Let's say it's a red brick or a hot ember. When people touch it, they drop it! But when anger arises which is touching their mind, or difficult emotions such as fear and anxiety touching their mind, they don't let it go. They hold on to it. Buddhist psychology says the function of anger is to burn the mind, to burn its support,

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right. So, since the function of anger is to burn its support, once you know that anger arises, the mind is on fire. It's under stress.

So, don't hold on to a difficult emotion. Just let it go. Very simple. I like what Ajahn Chah said one time, "When you let go a little, you become happy a little." For instance, to put it in a percentage, if you let go 10 percent you become happy 10 percent. If you let go 50 percent you become happy 50 percent. If you let go a hundred percent, you become happy a hundred percent. So, this "let it go" is not theory, it is actually very practical. You can see a degree of freedom when a difficult emotion arises and you're able to let go. It's that sense of freedom. You don't own the difficult emotion, you just let go.

I like Sharon [Salzberg]'s analogy that she uses when she talks about letting go. When you're on a lift (in Uganda we call them lifts, but in the US they call them escalators) and you have luggage—and I see this when I'm going to airports—then you see people rushing through the airport with a big bag. As they enter the escalator they continue to hold on their big luggage. And then the escalator goes when this person is holding it. But holding the luggage doesn't help, you know. So the best way is to get into the lift or the escalator with the luggage, put it down, and go! You will be free, you will be lighter.

Emotions really take a big chunk of our life, basically. We identify with our emotions, whether they are wholesome or unwholesome emotions. It's easy to identify with them. "I'm an angry person," "I'm a kind person." "I'm a happy person." So we identify ourselves with these emotions, even the difficult ones. So the key is to let them go. It's not about "oh, let it go, let it go, anger," no, no, no, no, no. Through the process that we have seen of investigating the nature and the conditionality of emotions, you naturally lose hold. Normally you're tightly holding on to emotions, but after using these methods you're no longer tenaciously holding on to these strong emotions. So you let go, you just process it in other words. That requires you to look at the method of investigation whereby we investigate how it feels in the body, how it feels in mind. Because when emotion comes they have biofeedback, right, we feel it in the body. We have embodied beings. So when emotion comes you might see heat or tension arising. So through investigation and seeing the true nature of emotions, you can start to relate to letting go instead of holding onto something you don't own in the first place. So, letting go is a very effective method.

In other words, don't cling to these emotions, don't think "These are my emotions," or "This is my self." You should look at emotions as not "I," not "myself," not "mine." Look at the emotion

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as any other arising state of mind. No need to freak out, just let go and move on with at least wholesome emotions, not difficult emotions.

So we have discussed two methods in this session. One is reinvestigation or mindfulness of the conditionality of emotions. There are conditions leading to the arising of emotions, conditions leading to the removal of emotions, conditions for the non-arising of the emotion in the future. We need to understand these conditions, we have to be mindful of these conditions. Then we have also seen another method: of letting go, of non-clinging to the difficult emotion, not holding on to them. These methods are very effective if you have to deal with difficult emotions in this chaotic world.

In the next session I will talk more about how we can replace emotions with their opposites. We'll also look at how we can reflect on emotion. And also we can also look at the reduction method and deal with emotions in an effective way in this chaotic world. Thank you for listening.

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