

Spring Washam
Week Four, *Beginning Again*
March 20, 2016
“Working with Difficult Emotions”



Welcome back, everyone, to the final class in our four-part series. Thank you for joining me. I'm Spring Washam, and this four-part class has been called *Beginning Again*. We've covered a lot in the last three sessions, and today I want to cover some important material.

I want to talk more about what is often challenging in mindfulness and meditation practice: how to work with difficult emotions. I lead a lot of retreats at Spirit Rock and in the community, and I look into my own mind all the time, so I feel confident in saying that often there are challenges.

Sometimes people come on retreat at Spirit Rock and they see the flyers of this beautiful woman, blissed out in meditation. I'm sure you've seen those pictures; they're everywhere. We think that's what we're going to experience when we come on retreat or when we have a consistent daily practice.

At times, we do experience that. We experience the heart opening. We experience love. We experience equanimity. We have a sense of letting it all go. We love those experiences. But often, and more than likely what people experience, in the beginning or after years of practice, is a lot of challenges. What happens when we meditate is that everything arises, all of our emotions and the unfinished business of the heart. My teacher, Jack Kornfield, used to say: “The heart, whatever you haven't dealt with in your life—when you sit down to meditate, it all arises. It's all in there.”

While we're sitting, we can experience fear, loneliness, sorrow, memories of trauma, difficult situations that might be happening in our life, anxiety, or restlessness. We work with that as we learn how to be mindful. We learn how to open to our emotions.

As we sit and things begin to arise, we are present with them. Now, this is very counterintuitive, because usually the habitual reaction to unpleasant things is to push them away. “I'm feeling sad”—stop it. “There's something going on, something is wrong”—get rid of it.



But on the path of meditation and working with mindfulness, we want to learn how to open to our emotions and our thoughts—the negative stories and the pain that we carry with loving awareness. We want to learn how to be present with these feelings and emotions, and learn how to open to them, how to feel them from the inside.

You're sitting on the cushion, and suddenly you have a story, maybe a difficult relationship and anger starts to arise very strong. This is common. Understand that when emotions arise in meditation, it's not that you're doing anything wrong. This is the natural state. This happens to all of us. We all experience these emotions.

It's important that we learn to let go of the story and begin to feel in the body where these emotions emanate from. Maybe you feel the anger in your throat, and you tighten. Maybe you feel the heaviness in your heart, the sorrow, and you feel the weight of that. Maybe you feel in your belly the anxiety that is running all the time, throbbing and hurting.

As we sit in meditation, we want to bring our awareness to those parts of the body. We want to name very clearly and recognize what is happening. What is this emotion? Oh, it's fear. Oh, it's sadness. Oh, it's jealousy. We want to name it in order to accept what's happening. Part of our challenge in working with difficult emotions is that we don't readily accept them. We don't want to look at them. But the practice of meditation and mindfulness is about looking at everything very clearly, being willing to be with what is difficult. That is what our training offers us.

If we learn how to be with our own difficult emotions, it also trains us to be with others with they experience difficulties. It trains us in how to be present to our life in a whole different way. It's not always easy, but through practice we learn step-by-step how to be with, how to open, and how to feel.

The good thing about difficult emotions is that they rise and they pass away. Whatever happens in meditation, it has a beginning, middle, and ending. If we learn to trust the impermanence of



our emotions, we learn that they're not here to stay, that they're passing through. Clouds as they move across the sky are a good example. We learn how to weather these inner storms when they come by naming them, opening to them, being willing to feel them, not identifying with them or attaching a long story to them. Sadness arises, and we just open to the sadness. We don't always have to make a big story out of it. We learn just to feel it from the inside.

Last week's class in mindfulness of the body greatly helps us in learning how to work with our emotions. We want to feel them, go into them, and allow them to move. Emotions are energies. They arise due to causes and conditions, and they pass away. Practicing this loving presence with which we hold our emotions—the nonreactive state of simply being with ourselves, always opening and accepting—is the heart of the mindfulness practice. Can I meet this moment fully, even if it's heartbreak? We learn. We learn step by step how to do that.

Let's practice right now. Find a comfortable position for yourself.

During this meditation, I would like you to focus on what's happening in your emotional field. Is there emotion present? Is there a background mood present? Try to see with mindfulness what is actually there.

It could be that you feel calm, that you feel happy. That's okay, too. There's no need to dig up anything, but we want to learn how to pay attention to the emotion without getting rid of it, without acting it out, through just being with it.

As you close your eyes, always start with a big breath in and a big breath out. Let your breath and your body be your refuge.

Begin feeling what's here. Allow your breath to be the doorway into presence. Out of the mind we go, into what is present in your body. Our bodies carry a storehouse of emotions. Tune in with awareness to what is here now.

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Whatever's happening, know that you can name it and open to it. Feel it as best you can.

If you don't notice anything predominant, just allow the breath to be your refuge and your anchor for your attention. Allow the tension anywhere in the body to relax, just for a moment here, as we ring the bell.

Thank you. Again, just know that working with emotions is always a process. We're always learning, so be gentle. The heart of this practice is the cultivation of wisdom, mindfulness, and very deep compassion. Everything that arises is natural. There's no need to push anything every away, or judge it. We're just learning how to open to whatever is.

Thank you for joining me for this course this week, and for the whole course. I appreciate it. I hope this was beneficial for you. If you would ever like to visit me, you can feel free to check my website, www.springwasham.com. Thank you.