



BEFRIENDING DIFFICULT EMOTION

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The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. — Marcel Proust

WE often maintain a polarised attitude towards our emotions, constructing an inner duality that divides them into positive ones and negative ones, in other words those that are pleasing and those that are uncomfortable. In the latter category, stress, anxiety and despair have especially garnered bad reputations for themselves in modern times. Beyond these, anger in particular is often seen as a toxic, “skull and crossbones” emotion, owing to its volatile and potentially destructive nature. Yet anger is a powerfully constructive emotion that can be employed to bring about immense personal and social change. It currently seems in vogue to quickly consult one’s general practitioner when these emotions arise, as if they constitute an illness, a sickness or a disease that requires treatment or even a cure.

Western society seems to promote the ideal of the stolid modern personality, impervious to bouts of emotional “weakness”. Indeed, people in the throes of difficult emotion are often referred to unkindly as being “emotional”, “moody” or “overly sensitive”. The enhanced standard of living available in industrialised societies leads us to craft carefully constructed comfort zones, veritable fortresses designed to protect us from life’s vagaries. When feelings such as stress, anxiety and despair visit us, we often view them as hostile enemies who have invaded our world of inner security. Our immediate reaction is to recoil from these emotions, fearing the discomfort and even overwhelming pain that accompany them.

In ancient Eastern spiritual traditions, these same difficult emotions are instead seen as invitations to healing. They often point to specific places inside us that have been wounded or neglected and now call out for careful attention. Far from being symptomatic of mental illness or instances of hysteria, the entire spectrum of feelings and emotions we experience is simply a response to life as we open ourselves to it and let it touch us. In one sense, nothing that touches us is unwelcome; everything we can feel and experience is worthy of our wholehearted attention.¹ The Persian poet Rumi described it this way:²

*This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.*

*A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.*

*Welcome and entertain them all
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture.*

*Still treat each guest honourably,
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.*

*The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing
and invite them in.*

*Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.*

As emotional beings, at different times we experience all the subtle tones on the emotional scale. We can deliberately cultivate a state of emotional wakefulness whereby we acknowledge the emotions as friendly messengers of healing, personal depth, and connection to ourselves, others and the wider experience of life itself. With this knowledge we can learn to embrace everything we encounter in the light of calm acceptance.

Understandably, the raw, unpredictable power of difficult emotion can lead to the fear of being overwhelmed and rendered helpless. Yet this response is tantamount to being caught in a trap that simply intensifies the hold such emotions have on us. When the raw intensity of painful emotion descends, stillness is rarely our first reaction. We tend to panic and feel shame as historical storylines of self-recrimination are initiated, themes such as “I’m inadequate”, “I’m a failure” and “I’m unlovable”. Then the *thoughts* about what we are feeling actually become worse than the emotions themselves, kicking up unresolved patterns of self-loathing. Such self-defeating thinking serves to shore up repressive notions of personal fallibility. This spiral of destructive reaction can lead to attempting to mute the entire experience through medication or avoid it through intoxication or some form of diversion. As an alternative to such counter-productive strategies, we can hold steady and endeavour to entertain difficult emotion in its raw immediacy as innate living forces that connect us to our innermost being, which is the very seat of organic, joyful being.

Episodes of difficult emotion generally augur a time for personal growth, an impetus to evolve into something more than what we are today. They represent a golden opportunity to explore our emotional landscape with a spirit of kindness and curiosity to find inner awakening. When we courageously face the nakedness of raw emotion

with a non-judgemental and compassionate awareness, it is as if we extend forgiveness all around, within and without. We thereby relieve ourselves of the burden of self-recrimination or blame of others for having wronged us. Such a gentle approach to befriending our inner experiencing establishes a sense of emotional balance amidst the turmoil and the turbulence, bathing our emotional wounds in the salve of acknowledgement and acceptance.³ Thus, remaining patient and taking a step back from panicked reactivity can pay enormous dividends, as inner tyranny is replaced with inner freedom.

We tend to view emotions in simple dualistic terms, such as good and bad, positive and negative, right and wrong, pleasant and unpleasant, friend and enemy, and acceptable and unacceptable. However, emotions are richly textured and multidimensional, defying simple characterisation as “sad”, “angry” or “happy”. After narrowing them into digestible definitions we tend to grasp the pleasant ones and avoid the unpleasant ones, an approach that leads to entanglement and suffering. Instead, we can avoid labelling our experience of emotion and allow the fluid unfolding process of emotion to pass through us the like the changing weather. Inner freedom does not mean being free of difficult emotion, but free to fully feel emotion as it arises and moves on, unafraid of the movement of life itself.

The human ego has a way behaving selfishly, childishly demanding that life, people, the universe, and circumstances conform to its petty cravings. Losses often give rise to instances of powerfully felt emotion that appear as transformative agents to break open our protective shell of ego. Our instinctive reaction is to maintain our inner status quo at all costs, to not allow the shell to crack and thus enter a frightful arena of uncertainty. Misconceiving the experience as poisonous

to the soul, we tighten and contract around the sharp pain of difficult emotion and hence prolong the discomfort. Rather than opting for a quick fix to “cure” the discomfort, we can allow our less-helpful inner structures to dissolve in the pain and open our hearts to new ways of being. This allows for a stronger experiential awareness of the many subtle nuances of emotional intensity in relation to loved ones, to nature, and to the broader experience of life itself. The befriending of our entire emotional spectrum bestows a freer flow of emotion and effectively creates a compassionate space for them to transform us.⁴

As creatures of habit we are prone to getting caught in long-established grooves in relating to ourselves and to our life experience. Such patterns prevent us from seeing anew, closing down openness and the possibility of new insight. A heightened awareness of our inner experiencing, comprised of a gentle vigilance, reveals how difficult emotion carries an inherent wisdom, an essential dignity.⁵ Enlightened emotion helps us connect more deeply to ourselves, to others, to the beauty of nature, and most importantly to an inner tenderness that unveils the magic of being human, the privilege of being alive.



References

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5. *Ibid.*