

## BEFRIENDING EMOTION: SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND TRANSFORMATION

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Because emotion is our most common experience of being moved and taken over by forces seemingly beyond our control, it is one of the most confusing and challenging phenomena of everyday life.

A common tendency in our culture is to treat emotional energy with suspicion or contempt, as alien, "other," separate from us. The "passions," as this energy has sometimes been called, have been viewed as our "lower nature," from Plato onward. Thus we have generally failed to discover how emotion can actually serve as an extremely powerful vehicle for developing new dimensions of personal and transpersonal self-knowledge. Insofar as the vivid energy of emotion intensifies our experience, it can expose common fixations of mind and psychological blockages. Emotions may help wake us up to what is happening in our lives by indicating where we most need to work on ourselves to become more balanced and integrated. And, since they are expressions of our own life energy, experiencing them in a direct and mindful way can help us to feel ourselves more deeply.

The subject of emotion is one of the most confused chapters in modern psychology, in that few psychologists agree about what emotion signifies or even about what words to use in examining it. Anyone wishing to learn about emotion from the literature of Western psychology finds a bewildering array of theories about what it is, how it arises, and how to deal with it in one's life. James Hillman (1961), at the end of an exhaustive

*emotion  
in  
modern  
psychology*

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This is a chapter from a forthcoming book, *Full Circle Mind*.

study of emotion, concludes that "no matter how thoroughly amplified, the problem of emotion ... remains perennial and its solution ineffable" (p. 289).

Perhaps it is the dualistic way in which emotion has been thought about that has made it such a difficult problem in Western psychology. The emotions have often been associated with instinctual drives and reactions to them (as by Freud), or with purely physiological response patterns (as by James). Viewing the source of the passions as Freud did, as an "it" (translated in English as "id"; see Welwood & Wilber, 1979), "a primitive chaos, a cauldron of seething excitement," (Freud, 1933), makes it more difficult to befriend emotions and accept them as part of oneself.

Thus Western psychology has reinforced the widespread view of emotions as fundamentally alien and "other." For example, Jung (1940) states that

... an emotion is the intrusion of an unconscious personality... To the primitive mind, a man who is seized by a strong emotion is possessed by a *devil* or a *spirit*; and our language still expresses the same idea, at least metaphorically. There is much to be said in favor of this point of view (p. 19).

effects  
of  
alienation  
from  
emotions

According to Hillman (1975), a follower of Jung's, "... our psychological afflictions and emotions too are not truly ours. They come and go... by factors independent of our potency" (p. 175). This view of emotions as primitive and alien seems to be a classic Western way of separating ourselves from them. This is in sharp contrast to the meditative approach, which considers that it is precisely *this* alienation from emotions that causes them to be domineering and uncontrollable.

If we closely examine what emotions consist of, we may find that it is not emotional energy *per se* that is alien or confusing. Rather, emotional energy accentuates any inner confusion and fragmentation that already exists. In particular, our emotional energy can intensify the ways we are dominated and compelled by our thoughts and fantasies. This compulsion may at times become all-encompassing and all-consuming, so that a person is "beside himself" or engages in various neurotic or psychotic behaviors.

The dualistic attitude toward emotional energy leads people to deal with it by trying to get rid of it. On the one hand, it is common to think that the solution to the "problem" of emotion is to get it out of one's system by acting it out impulsively. On the other hand, a person might try to suppress or subdue

his emotions because they seem so threatening or dangerous. However, both strategies only lead to further confusion because they neither lead to emotion directly nor allow us to experience what it is. Thus these strategies can be quite aggressive, either toward others or toward oneself, and they prevent one from discovering how emotion may actually become a vehicle for connecting with oneself.

How then can we understand and relate to emotions in a non-dualistic way? How can we befriend them and accept them as part of ourselves? How can we utilize their potent energy to wake us up from fixed habits of mind? In this paper we will explore the nature of emotions phenomenologically, without trying to explain them in terms of any instinctual drives or purely automatic physiological reactions. We will see how the energies of emotion may be worked with in different ways in psychotherapy and meditation. And we will discover how different kinds of self-knowledge and opening can occur with these two ways of relating to emotions.

*a  
phenomenological  
exploration*

#### CLARIFYING TERMS

Loose and inconsistent definitions of terms have clouded the study of emotions in Western psychology. The word "feeling" has been commonly used to refer to a whole spectrum of different kinds of awareness, from vague intuitions ("I feel he may not like me") to intense emotions ("I feel rage"). To avoid this confusion, this spectrum as a whole will be called *here, felt energy*. And the term "feeling" will be used more precisely to refer to *specific* bodily felt responses to life situations.

#### A STARTING POINT: BASIC ALIVENESS

Since emotions and feelings are expressions of being alive, it is important to begin by exploring the basic nature of this aliveness. Aliveness is our most fundamental experience of ourselves-being present to life at this moment with an open receptivity, which, like a mirror, generously reflects whatever appears in front of it. It is our most intimate experience." Though we may live in a condition of alienation from this basic aliveness, it is not inherently like "the it" which Freud (1933) called "... an obscure, inaccessible part of our personality."

\*In previous articles this aliveness has been described as an "open ground" (Welwood, 1977a), "open space" (1977b), or "big mind" (1976, 1979).

The biologist Rene Dubos equates this sense of aliveness with a fundamental *joie de vivre*, a sense of the wholesomeness of being awake to life, despite all the ups and downs of circumstance:

About the experience of life, most people are under the illusion that they can be happy only if something especially good happens . . . . Oddly enough, there is only one phrase I know to express that life is good *per se*, that just being alive is good. Whenever *one* wants to say that, one uses the French expression-in all languages: one speaks of *joie de vivre*. *Joie de vivre* simply means that just being alive is an extraordinary experience. It is perhaps the greatest . . . experience one can have. The quality of that experience anyone can see by watching a young child or a young animal playing in the spring. It is totally immaterial what goes on, except for the fact that one is alive. It does not mean that you are very happy with the way you live; you can even be suffering. You can have lots of trouble, but just being alive is a quality *per se* (Dubos in Needleman, 1979, p. 59),

This basic aliveness also has qualities of tenderness and gentleness. Because our fundamental nature is open and receptive to the world, we are not only highly sensitive creatures, but also quite vulnerable. Our senses and the intricate workings of the brain and nervous system are geared toward *letting the world in*. Thus we have feeling.

Like water, which is the cradle of life as well as a universal element in all living tissues, our aliveness is both the source of feelings, and contained within them. Like the earth, aliveness surrounds us on all sides, while feeling is something that grows out of this basic ground. Like air, which, when breathed into the lungs, quickens the *whole* body with a fresh source of energy, aliveness is the open space in the heart of feelings which keeps them from ever becoming fixed or solid. And it is like fire in its intensity and its warmth. Connecting with this basic sense of aliveness, in which lies our basic sanity and health, is more than what some psychologists have called "getting in touch with one's feelings." It is discovering ourselves in our most basic sensitivity, from which all emotions and feelings arise.

connecting  
with  
basic  
aliveness

#### FELT MEANING

Life situations usually mean something more to us than the specific feelings and emotions they may give rise to. This "something more" is sensed holistically in terms of "felt meanings." Felt meanings are more global than our usual feelings and emotions, and can thus lead to new ways of understanding our life situations.

For instance, underneath my feeling of irritation with someone, many felt meanings may be enfolded together in a blurry whole (Welwood, 1978). My irritation is familiar, but the particular felt meanings underlying *this particular irritation* are still quite unfamiliar. If I attend to my bodily felt sense of this irritation, I can unfold and articulate some of these felt meanings (e.g., "Let's see-my irritation has something to do with feeling ignored by you, which makes me feel helpless, powerless. And that brings up all this outrage. But that's not the main thing really-it's more that I really *do* want to connect with you, even though you will not recognize me , .. because [ do care about you" ... and so on). Before I attended to them and tried to articulate them, these meanings were simply felt as a vague background felt sense. My feeling is thus not only the familiar something I can focus on, but also expresses wider patterns in my life, connected with my ongoing sense of many other past and present situations as well, These multiple relationships, felt holistically, make up a sense of rich possibilities in any given moment. These potentials already exist embryonically underneath our more familiar patterns of feeling and emotional response. One body of research suggests that being in contact with this wider context of felt meaning is the basis of personality change in psychotherapy, and possibly a major source of creative decision-making (Gendlin, 1964; Gendlin, Beebe, Cassens, Klein & Oberlander, 1968; Welwood, 1969).

*contacting  
felt  
meaning*

#### FEELING

Feelings are more recognizable than felt meanings. Many feelings are quite familiar to us, such as sadness, gladness, friendliness, or hostility, though not every feeling is clearly definable or nameable. However, even an indescribable feeling is felt as a particular "something." We can sense *that* it is, even if we do not know *what* it is. Although in one sense feelings are "inside" us, in that they are felt in the body, they always reflect our interaction with the world, either in actuality or in fantasy. As one existential psychologist has pointed out, "There are as many feelings as there are situations" (Buytendijk, 1962, P: 160). This implies that when we feel something, it is not just some isolated event happening inside us, but may be a valuable clue or message about our life at that moment.

*recognizing  
feelings*

#### EMOTION

Emotion is an intense form of feeling. Whereas feeling can be fairly mild or vague, emotion is extremely strong and specific.

A *feeling* of fear may lurk in the background of the mind without a specific object, whereas the *emotion* of fear or terror is an unmistakable reaction to something very specific. Emotion has a "must come" quality (Gendlin, 1973). Whereas feelings may be quite peripheral to the focus of attention, emotion grabs our attention. Emotions are defined here not by the words used to categorize them (such as anger, fear, sorrow), but by the experiential criterion of how fully they overtake us.

REVIEWING THE SPECTRUM OF FELT ENERGY

Figure 1 illustrates the relation of felt meaning, feeling, and emotion:

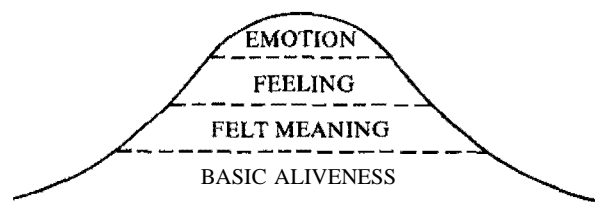


Figure 1. The Spectrum of Felt Energy

*the  
relation of  
emotion,  
feeling,  
and  
felt meaning*

At bottom, our nature is an aliveness which is open to the *world*. This aliveness is unconditional; it does not depend on feeling good or bad. It is a global sensitivity which, as the world affects us, takes on the form of feeling and emotion.

Felt meaning is an intermediary stage between this pure aliveness and specific feelings. Felt meanings are our sense of how we relate to particular situations, how we react to this or that about our lives. They are more fluid than specific feelings, but more fixed or limited than basic aliveness.

Feelings are a combination of basic aliveness and felt meanings. For example, say I move into a new house and am upset about the traffic noise I discover in the street outside. My feeling of irritation is a mix of: 1) my basic sensitivity to the world, with 2) felt meanings-e.g., my sense of the kind of environment I like to live in, how much I can tolerate living in a less than ideal environment, why quiet is important to me, my expectation that this neighborhood would not be noisy, and so on.

Emotion is the further development of feeling, from irritation,

say, to angry outrage when the city sanitation engineers start tearing up the street outside with jackhammers. At each successive level of the spectrum, felt energy becomes more channelled and narrowed down, less global and open. If we imagine that Figure 1 is a volcano, we can see that as the energy gets closer to the top, and narrowed into a more condensed form, it takes on greater urgency, pressure, and potential explosiveness. Deep in the ground the molten lava has room to circulate freely, but as it becomes channelled, the force and pressure threaten to erupt. Emotion is thus an intense bodily energy which is about to blow the lid off things, shoot forth into the world. It is this channelling of a larger energy and the pressure this creates that makes many strong emotions rather painful to feel. (Even intense ecstatic emotions can be somewhat stressful, which is why people often cry when they are overjoyed.) They seem almost too much to handle.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONS

How is it that feelings develop into the emotions that overtake us with their powerful energy? Let us look at one of the most common routes.

Insofar as I avoid relating to the vulnerability in my feelings, say, of sadness, the more they give rise to sad "story-lines," composed of thoughts and images, memories, projections into the future, dialogue with myself about my life. The more I entertain and mull over these sad thoughts and fantasies, the further they reinforce my sadness, giving new fuel to it, locking me further into it. And the sadder I become, the more sad story-lines arise—a vicious circle. This subconscious or semi-conscious mulling serves as a catalyst that intensifies the feeling. Emotions develop as this thought/feeling cycle works itself up into a peak, generating further pressure—I may start to cry or be overcome by grief and despair. Such phrases as "out of one's senses" or "swept away" express the driving, consuming quality of emotion, which takes us over more powerfully and totally than feeling.

*how  
feelings  
develop  
into  
emotion*

Emotional upsurge may build up slowly or happen in a flash, depending on the situation. In either case, it is like a fire kindled by the catalytic cycle of thought-intensifying feeling, which in turn gives rise to further thought, and so on. Emotions are thus often generated as a rebound between feeling and this mulling, intensifying with each reverberation. Insofar as they are a rebound, they are at one remove from the present moment, and thus can cloud our ability to see clearly. When we are swept up in our emotional story lines, we are less likely to

take account of the complexity of the whole situation. It is for this reason that we often regret what we may say or do when under the influence of emotional upheaval.

*relation  
between  
thought  
and  
emotion*

Since the core of emotions is pure aliveness, however, they are not necessarily problematic, as we shall see further on. The problematic aspect of emotional upheaval—its powerful grip and blinding entanglement—is caused by highly-charged dramatic fantasies combining with felt energy. This upheaval is an "emotional churning," a further intensification of the subconscious mulling which may have led up to it. Although thinking and emotion are usually considered to be separate mental functions, a close examination of experience reveals that thinking plays a key role in generating and maintaining emotional upheaval. Without the kindling of thoughts and fantasies to feed on, emotion would be like a fire that would quickly burn out.

Emotional distress may smolder away inside us, causing a wide variety of neurotic symptoms, from ulcers to phobia. Or it may continually "blow off" and spew forth into the world. Thus emotional churning is usually either self-destructive or a way of polluting the world. Emotional thinking also tends to generalize and exaggerate the importance and justification of our feelings. When we are overcome with depression, which may stem from one specific incident, we may see the whole world, our whole life history and future prospects in this light. Our depressed thoughts radiate out in all directions and further intensify the depression. Thought and fantasy extend and lock us into the emotion, often keeping it relatively stuck and solidified.

Thus emotional upheavals can be a way of freezing our aliveness, which is quite fluid and open in its basic nature. However, emotions need not become frozen. If we do not try to solidify emotions by churning out elaborate story-lines from them, we may find that they contain the intelligence of our basic aliveness in them,

#### WORKING WITH EMOTION

What kind of understanding is necessary for the power of emotion to be directly faced in a positive way? How can we relate to emotion without getting stuck in patterns of suppressing it, churning it over, or blindly spewing it out? How may emotion actually become a vehicle for deeper self-knowledge and insight into our life?



An important key to working with emotions constructively is facing and examining them without denying them or using them as a weapon for self-justification. Once we decide to work with emotions directly in this way, as a vehicle of self-inquiry and self-understanding, there are at least two different possible approaches: 1) The psychotherapeutic approach, which may use a kind of *dynamic reflection* to unfold the underlying felt meanings contained in emotions. This approach may develop greater personal self-knowledge, growth, and effectiveness in communication; and 2) The meditative approach, which penetrates through emotions and felt meaning to the ground of basic aliveness from which they arise. Meditation can be a more radical practice leading to a deeper self-transformation through the *transmutation* of emotional confusion into great clarity of mind.

*two  
ways  
to work  
with  
emotion*

#### THE PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC APPROACH

Freeing oneself from emotional churning through dynamic reflection requires going beneath the specific emotion to the broader felt meaning of the situation, as Gendlin (1973) indicates:

Now, in the situation that is beginning to make me angry, how do I find that move which, if it succeeds, will let me not need to be angry, and which, to succeed, must meet a large number of considerations that make up the situation? I do it from the felt meaning.

From the felt meaning or felt sense of a given situation as a whole you can get a course of action or a sequence of words which arise from that whole, from the feel of all the facets of it. In contrast, if you focus on the anger, you will get stomping, hitting, kicking, and fighting. The felt meaning implies a vast number of behaviors and verbalizations, and ... it may imply one suited to all this. The emotion of anger implies fighting.... If you focus on it, you will get madder and madder (p. 394).

This may sound as though Gendlin is suggesting denying the anger. But actually he is talking about going *through* the anger, letting the anger act as a lead-in to the wider context of felt meaning of which anger is only one piece. Going through the emotion to the felt meaning underneath may ease emotional churning and generate new self-insight.

One client describes it in terms of a hurricane: "If you only go so far into something, it's like going into a hurricane and getting terribly blown about. You have to go into it and then keep going further and further *in* till you can see where you are." This beautifully expresses the fact that the direction of focusing is definitely

into the emotions, not away from them, yet also that focusing involves something of the centrality, depth, and quiet one finds-the quality which others have called "being in touch with myself." The felt referent for the moment is *me*. It *unfolds* and is a thousand things. In comparison, the emotional tone which attaches to it and precedes it is not itself a thousand things. To remain with it merely feeds it. There is always a "breath-held," tense, tight quality about most of these emotional tones. Yet to turn away from the emotion is to turn away also from the direction in which one "finds oneself." Thus one must "move into" and "through" or "on by" these emotional tones to ... *the felt meaning* of it all (Gendlin, 1964,p. 124n).

*an  
emotional  
situation  
as an  
opportunity*

A situation which stirs up intense emotions often has important elements that would be overlooked if one were to simply vent the emotions. Take the following example. A woman suddenly tells a man who has been interested in her for a long time that she intends to marry someone else, while also letting him know that he did not pursue her hard enough. The man, who has felt very strongly for her, feels crushed. He could react by getting carried away with anger, self-pity, or resentment. But the situation is actually larger and more meaningful to him than any of these emotional responses would express. Crying or flailing out do not help here, for as it turns out, this situation symbolizes or crystallizes a whole pattern of his life. He does feel angry and hurt, but if he can keep going past these emotional tones to get *in* touch with all of the (intensely felt) meaning that this situation has for him, it can be a powerful opportunity to see deeply into a whole aspect of himself. The loss of this woman he cared about may lead to a realization of how he always plays things safe and does not dare to risk himself fully. He could just cry and try to forget about it, or instead he could look into the complexity of his feelings that have been aroused by this situation. Perhaps it takes h.m days to really begin to unravel this complex of felt meaning. But when he finally sees all that is involved in it, he may feel a powerful sense of release, not only from his pain, but also from the blindness of a certain pattern of behavior that he has been trapped in for many years. By going into his pain and anger and seeing what was involved in them, he wakes up to an aspect of his life that he has never seen so clearly before. This realization leaves him feeling more in touch with his own life.

At the level of felt meaning, we are in touch with much more than anyone emotion. As we move through the emotion, it may open up and reveal the felt meanings underneath. This is *like* peeling an onion, layer by layer. As one unfolds these felt meanings, at some point one may feel a release from an emotion's grip. By untangling the knots in one's emotions and

feelings, one may arrive momentarily back at the basic ground of one's aliveness, which is a moment of both release and freshness. Gendlin (1978) has called this moment a "felt shift." From here a person can explore new aspects of himself which were previously blocked or screened by his habitual emotional thought patterns. Then he may see his way clear to move in a direction that is more viable for him, more suited to his life situation as a whole. **In** this perspective, moving through emotional turbulence to untangle its undergrowth of felt meaning and make contact with one's basic aliveness is the core of the psychotherapeutic process, regardless of what techniques are used.

Psychotherapy has traditionally been oriented toward helping a person improve his life situation and making him feel better. It values emotion as a way of pointing to unresolved situations, and aspects of oneself previously overlooked. However, the limitation of this approach is its tendency to continue exploring further feelings and emotions *rather than to fully appreciate and rest in the basic aliveness that is discovered in moments of shift and opening*. This may result in a continual preoccupation with examining feelings, which can become an endless project, distracting one from the more basic aliveness, tenderness, and openness one discovers through them.

*limitations  
a/a  
psychotherapy  
approach*

#### THE MEDITATIVE APPROACH TO EMOTION

In meditation (particularly of the mindfulness type), there is no attempt to "figure out" emotions. Instead, the meditator acknowledges emotions as they are, which eventually allows him to connect directly with a more transpersonal dimension of emotional energy.

Feelings and emotions which arise during meditation practice are not viewed as having any special importance, as they are in psychotherapy. They are respected as the forms of energy they are, without being a "big deal." While practicing, the meditator does not try to unfold the meanings of his feelings. Rather, he acknowledges the feelings and returns to the discipline of his practice. Feelings and emotions are not an important focus in meditation because the practice is oriented more toward a person's ongoing sense of aliveness than toward the colorations of his passing concerns. Thus, meditation cools the heat of emotional fire. Deemphasizing emotional story-lines and dramas may lead to both the spontaneous emergence of felt meaning patterns (which in turn are not emphasized), as well as flashes of open awareness (Welwood, 1977a). If you look

at Figure I as a wave, then emotional churning *is* the whitecap where the winds of the world have whipped the ocean into a frenzy. Felt meaning is more like a series of swells which keep rolling on without any particular climax. And at the same time, in the depths of the ocean, at the level of basic aliveness, all is quite calm.

In everyday life situations, outside the formal meditation practice, an experienced meditator might also spend less time following out the story-lines of his emotions. Whereas one often tends to feel most alive when involved in emotional dramas, meditation practice allows one to realize a more ongoing sense of one's aliveness as always present, even in undramatic moments. A meditation practitioner might understand that his aliveness is an immediate connection with the world that is much more basic than his particular dramas of the moment. By seeing how he locks himself into particular emotional reactions, he loosens his attachment to them. His emotions are less likely to freeze and more quickly thaw out to dissolve back into the basic fluidity of his aliveness. He is thus less likely to lose his sense of connection with the world or to disrupt his life through preoccupation with the self-importance of his feelings. **In** this way he would remain grounded.

#### TRANSMUTATION

*emotion  
as a  
vehicle  
for  
self-  
illumination*

This does not mean, however, that our hypothetical seasoned meditator would ignore or suppress his emotions. On the contrary, to the extent that he is not caught up in figuring out all the meanings of his feelings, he could let himself experience the energy and aliveness in his feelings more nakedly, quite apart from the story lines they suggest. This more radical approach to emotions allows them to become a vehicle for self-illumination, for seeing through oneself and one's mental fixations. This process is termed *transmutation* in Vajrayana Buddhism as well as in certain other traditions. The notion of transmutation, going back to the ancient alchemical traditions, implies converting something seemingly worthless into something extremely valuable, like lead into gold. This exploration of transmutation is simply meant to be suggestive, without presuming to capture or conceptualize its subtleties, which are much more experientially vivid than could be described here. First, however, several other aspects of feeling and emotion need to be looked at before we can appreciate what transmutation might be.

## *Feelings Judgment*

It is important to recognize the judgmental aspect of feeling. Many psychologists have noted how feeling often reflects a judgment of a situation in terms of pro or con, pleasant or unpleasant, affirming or negating. For example, Jung states (1923) that "feeling is also a kind of judging ... solely concerned with the setting up of a subjective criterion of acceptance or rejection." Generally speaking, we are continually engaged in a project of trying to validate our existence and worth as unique individuals, of achieving a worthwhile image of who we are and what we are doing. We feel good when this self-image is furthered, and badly when it is negated or thwarted. Hubert Benoit (1959) describes this judgmental activity:

Although I do not often realize it, the question 'Am I?' is behind all my endeavors; I seek a definite confirmation of my 'being' in everything that I aspire to, As long as this ... question is identified in me with the problem of my temporal success, .. distress dwells in me on account of my temporal limitation; for the question so posed is always menaced with 'a negative reply (p. 230).

Inasmuch as feelings contain implicit judgments about whether situations affirm or negate us, they take on a positive or negative charge. This preoccupation with affirmation and negation tends to blind us to what is actually going on in the situation, beyond how it specifically furthers or defeats our project of becoming somebody important.

*positive  
and negative  
charge  
of feeling*

We also make more deliberate judgments about feelings and emotions when they arise. For instance, we judge depression negatively, as a "strike against us," while seeing joy or pleasure as affirming us. Being depressed about being depressed puts us at two removes from reality. The struggle against feeling and emotion keeps us locked into emotional churning and may even intensify it.

## *Befriending Emotions*

The first step toward transmutation is to cut through this struggle of self-judgment by accepting the emotion as it is. Instead of seeing emotions as a threat, it is possible to befriend them, allow them to be just as they are—expressions of our own energy. By not indulging in further judgments, it becomes possible to feel the texture and actual quality of the emotion.

For someone accustomed to struggling against emotions, this might seem an impossible task-"If I let myself really experience the emotion, maybe I will go berserk!" In most situations this fear simply expresses our alienation from ourselves. By alienating our own energy, making it "other," and then judging it negatively, we may come to believe that emotions are demonic, that we have "monsters" inside us. But fear of fear or anger is much worse than these primary emotions themselves, for it freezes them into a negative form. Running away from a fierce animal, or attempting to suppress it, only *provokes* attack. The first step in taming the lions of emotions, in transmuting their seemingly fierce energy into illumination and insight, is to befriend them, by allowing them to be, without judging them as good or bad.

### *Emotion as Energy*

Feelings and emotions are not nearly as substantial and solid as our reactions to them. This lack of solidity and stability is due to the fluid aliveness at their core. Since feelings are continually changing, in-process, they cannot be contemplated or grasped in the same way as the story-lines that arise from them. As Benoit (1959) points out:

But if! try to perceive my sadness with an effort of investigation, in order to examine it and know *it*, I realize *that* what *is* presented *for* my examination is always a film of images, sad or saddening, but not my sadness itself in its indivisibility .... It is completely impossible for me to seize my sentiment in a mental capture and *know* it as I can my images (p. 232).

*the  
difficulty  
of grasping  
feeling*

But suppose I give up trying to grasp my feeling, judge it, or chum up new thoughts and fantasies from it. If I really open to my sadness, feeling its full intensity. *I* become enveloped in *it*. I become it. I cannot externally observe it as I can my sad thoughts. Instead of fighting the feeling or indulging in the thoughts arising from it, I can go directly into it. The interesting fact is that I cannot stay there for very long. If I fully become this sadness, it may intensify for a while, and I may experience the full painfulness of it. But even this pain becomes a window through which I may feel and appreciate my existence more fully. If I really let myself feel the pain, I simultaneously feel my tenderness, my vulnerability to life, which reminds me that I am alive. I am a living being who is exposed to the world. I realize that I can move beyond my thoughts, fears, and images and directly feel this naked quality of my life, And that is a breakthrough which actually feels

good. Opening completely to emotion, no matter how painful it is, eventually leads to a felt shift, and the emotional intensity eases. In turning to face my own demons, they dissolve into my own living energy. This puts me in touch with myself in a whole and fresh way.

Holding on to one's feelings is not actually possible, for feelings and emotions by their very nature are ever changing. What one holds on to are images, attitudes, or story-lines connected with the feelings, which are not present-oriented, but fixated on past or future events. Emotions may seem to have us in *their* grip, but as soon as we turn to face them directly, we find nothing as solid as our avoidance or judgments of them.

Thus, in turning to face my emotions, I get a glimpse of the intensity of my existence-as-felt. Emotion, as something I fear or separate myself from, may become somewhat solid. But as something I embody, it is simply a pure process of organismic felt energy, an expression of the dynamic quality of life and its suprapersonal nature. As Tarthang Tulku (1974) points out:

The more you go into the disturbance-when you really get in there-the emotional characteristics no longer exist. Then this becomes proper meditation (p, 18).

Benoit describes this process of "seeing through" the turbulence of emotion as a "liberating inner gesture," "a looking into one's own nature" (p, 130). This approach to emotion leads directly into it and actually feels its dynamic intensity without getting caught in the emotionally-charged images that arise from it. This penetration of emotion is a purely experiential gesture of opening directly *to* the energy of the emotion without backing off. It is a simple and direct process which is not dependent on any technique. As Tarthang Tulku (1978) describes it:

*"seeing  
through"  
the  
turbulence  
of emotion*

What we can do is concentrate on the anger, not allowing any other thoughts to enter. That means we sit with our angry thoughts, focusing our concentration on the anger-not on its object-so that we make no discriminations, have no reactions. Likewise, when anxiety or any other disturbing feeling arises ... concentrate on the feeling, not on thoughts about it. Concentrate on the center of the feeling; penetrate into that space. There is a density of energy in that center that is clear and distinct. This energy has great power, and can transmit great clarity.... To transform our negativities, we need only learn to touch them skillfully and gently (p. 54, 52).

This may be a delicate maneuver at first. We may have a brief glimpse of this larger organismic energy, but then soon drift back into mulling and churning or being seduced by fantasies. However; the sustained attention that is necessary can be facilitated by meditation practice, through which one can learn to stop being "hijacked" by one's thoughts. Benoit provides an example of the transmutation that may occur:

Let us suppose that a failure puts me into a spasm of humiliation; if I take *no correct* action, my humiliation will pass more or less rapidly, and sooner or later I will come out of this state; I shall be no longer humiliated, but then I shall *have* come back to my habitual pretention, and, in consequence, open to an eventual new humiliation. If, on the contrary, in my state of humiliation, I consciously adhere to my spasm, my humiliation disappears without my pretention reappearing ... my humiliation is transformed into humility (p. 143).

Various metaphors have been used to describe this transformation of emotional energy. As Benoit states:

When a success exalts me, I feel myself to be aggrandized, increased, tenfold in volume; physically even, I feel my chest fill out, my nostrils open, I use large gestures. When on the contrary, a repulse humiliates me, I feel myself small, shrivelled, reduced, I have a weight on my chest, my gestures are curtailed. The inner action of which we are speaking consists in shutting ourselves up willingly in this reduced volume. There is then produced a sort of condensation of the ego; the ego is at *once* denied in its volume and affirmed in its density. This process is comparable with that which transforms coal into diamonds; the aim of this process is not the destruction of the ego but its transformation .... The conscious acceptance results in the coal which has become denser, and so blacker and more opaque, being instantaneously transformed into a diamond that is perfectly transparent (p, 143).

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and  
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of  
emotion*

Thus emotion may become a window onto the vitality of the life process itself, transparent to the life force from which it springs. This image of transparency and lucency, like the diamonds metamorphosed from coal, is particularly prominent in Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. *Vajra* signifies the diamond-like, indestructible clarity of the awake state of mind. *Vajras* itself seen as a quality of life, whose fullest realization is "mirror-like wisdom." Because it signifies absolute clarity, the Vajrayana (literally, "diamond path") sees the world in terms of luminosity, lit up with brilliance. Preoccupation with the struggle for affirmation against negation acts as a screen of confusion that dulls this natural brilliance. Transmutation of emotion is one way of turning the dark, murky world of the confused mind into the radiance of clear vision.



This metaphor may make transmutation seem like a sudden change, but it is actually part of a gradual path of increasing friendliness toward oneself. Other metaphors emphasize the organic nature of this process:

Unskilled farmers throwaway their rubbish and buy manure from other farmers, but those who are skilled go on collecting their own rubbish, in spite of the bad smell and the unclean work, and when it is ready to be used they spread it on their land, and out of this they grow their crops. That is the skilled way.... And though it is very difficult and unhygienic, as it were, to work on, that is the only way to start. So out of these unclean things comes the birth of the seed which is Realization (Trungpa, 1969,p. 23).

Suzuki Roshi (1970) speaks of how the weeds of the mind may be used to enrich one's awakening awareness:

We pull the weeds and bury them near the plant to give it nourishment. ... So you should not be bothered by your mind. You should rather be grateful for the weeds, because eventually they will enrich your practice. If you have some experience of how the weeds in your mind change into mental nourishment, your practice will make remarkable progress (p. 36).

*the  
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Thus the intensity of emotion, if allowed to burn itself through, to consume itself without generating further pollution, may actually hasten the disintegration of habitual story-line fixations and fertilize the seed of a larger awareness.

Transmutation in the Buddhist tradition becomes possible only through meditation practice, in which one learns to face and accept everything that arises in the mind, without one's clarity being carried away by it. Chogyam Trungpa (1976) outlines several aspects of this process:

There are several stages in relating with the emotions: the stages of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and transmuting. In the case of seeing the emotions, we have a general awareness that the emotions have their own space, their own development. We accept them as part of the pattern of mind, without question .... And then hearing involves experiencing the pulsation of such energy, the energy upsurge as it comes toward you. Smelling is appreciating that the energy is somewhat workable .... Touching is feeling the nitty-gritty of the whole thing, that you can touch and relate with it, that your emotions are not particularly destructive or crazy, but just an upsurge of energy, whatever form they take.... Transmutation is [to] experience emotional upheaval as it is but still work with it, become one with it (p. 69).

By considering emotions as an autonomous power, we grant

them dominion over us. "That which has become an object to me is ... something which has captured me" (Hisamatsu, 1960, p. 78). By alienating ourselves from our own energy, we may actually believe that this energy possesses solid negativity, that there is a real demon inside us. The meditative way is to befriend this energy by identifying and becoming one with it. When emotions are untangled from habitual thought/fantasy patterns, they are no longer enslaving, and we may begin to feel their energy as manifestations of our own fundamental life force.

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summary  
of the  
transformative  
approach*

To summarize, this transformative approach to emotions does not involve: 1) rejecting or trying to separate oneself from emotion; 2) getting caught up in emotionally-charged thoughts and fantasies; or 3) unfolding the underlying textures of felt meaning, as in the therapeutic approach. Rather one lets oneself feel emotion fully, while identifying with this energy in its power and painfulness. In so doing, one discovers the intense tenderness of one's aliveness.

In this approach it is not enough to see through emotions. What is essential is to identify fully with basic aliveness, the open space around and inside emotions. As an emotion opens up, one begins to feel the space in it, beyond its original claustrophobic, constricting pressure. By realizing this spaciousness, the emotional turmoil begins to appear as a little drama in the middle of a much larger awareness. At this point one can more fully identify with this clearer awareness, this free energy, with the depths of the ocean, rather than with the peaking of the waves.

The energy of emotion provides an excellent tool for cutting through the rigidity of one's habitual self-images. Emotion becomes a vehicle for experiencing a larger sense of one's life, apart from one's struggle to "be somebody." Thus emotion can be appreciated as an opportunity rather than as a problem.

Overcoming fear of one's own energy may also lead to a fearlessness toward the whole of life, insofar as there is no longer anything "other" to threaten one. In Buddhism this is known as the "lion's roar":

The Lion's Roar is the fearless proclamation that any state of mind, including the emotions, is a workable situation .... Then the most powerful energies become absolutely workable rather than taking you over, because there is nothing to take over if you are not putting up any resistance .... Indian Ashokan art depicts the lion's roar with four lions looking in four directions, which symbolizes the idea of having no back. Every direction is a front, symbolizing

all-pervading awareness. The fearlessness covers all directions (Trungpa, 1976, pp. 69-72).

## CONCLUSION

Transmutation involves completely opening to emotions as they are, without having to figure them out or trying to use them in any purposive way. It goes beyond personal self-knowledge to reveal deeper qualities of our existence. Without the proper understanding and guidance, however, this could be a somewhat dangerous process, in that one could become overrun or inflated by the intensity of one's emotional energy. Thus it is considered essential in Vajrayana Buddhism to have a firm foundation in meditation practice, which helps one to see through one's domination by thought and fantasy, and to develop the strength to no longer be carried away by them. It is also considered essential to work with a living teacher who has an intimate personal understanding of the energies of life, and who can guide the student through the many twists and turns involved in the development of this deeper awareness. Then, through discipline and practice, the confusion of the emotions may become transformed into the wisdom of seeing things as they are.

*seeing  
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