

In the Fire of Passions: Working with Hot Emotions

by
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Working with hot passions is a difficult thing. To be engulfed by flames of rage, jealousy, fear, lust or grief is to be at the mercy of our raging emotions and to lose any sense of equanimity. The strength of our emotion can trigger actions that we later regret. The words we speak in anger or jealousy can damage or even break the delicate strands of trust and love that bind us to those we love. To find true equanimity and steady kindness, it is important to find ways to work skilfully with our passions. This doesn't mean trying to put a lid on our strong emotions. After all, emotions are what make us human. And, as we learn how to work with our passions, we find that our capacity for loving-kindness and compassion increases. This is rather like using the compost bin in the garden: you fill it with all sorts of garden refuse and unappetizing food scraps. And then it heats up so that you can hardly put your hand into it. When the work is done, you find that all of this mess has turned into beautiful compost that helps the plants grow and flourish. So this is what we need to do with our passions—to turn them into aspects of our life that help us heal and nourish self and others.

Let's now take a closer look at strong emotions. One of the ways we become aware of our passions is because there is always a compelling body experience. Who has not experienced the roiling fire in the belly that spells anger or the heavy heart that accompanies grief, or the tight band of fear around the chest that inhibits breathing? This body feeling comes with a gripping story line that usually has the shape of a thought loop. You go over and over the same story without finding any resolve or respite. Of course it is exactly this process that keeps your emotions at the boil! In this situation you can feel trapped. But there is a way to escape that honours your emotions and, at the same time, can give you back your freedom and equanimity. In the following four steps I outline an approach to working with 'hot' emotions.

The turmoil and confusion that 'hot' emotions create is quite debilitating. So the first step when you are embroiled in turmoil is to ***get your bearings***. Investigate your emotional field with tender care: is it jealousy? or rage? or grief? or despair? Find what your emotional field is and then name it. Make sure that the naming is free of judgement and full of compassion. When the naming and acknowledging of emotions is charged with utmost compassion and love, that is when the wounded heart begins to heal.

The second step of healing is to ***listen to the body***. Each emotional field has a voice in the body, if only we listen carefully. Notice which sensations in your body correspond to your emotional field; notice which parts of your body are clenched, or where there is a trembling or empty feeling and so on.

The third step of healing is to ***let go of story***. You will find that the feelings in your body are accompanied by a compelling story. This is the realm of grinding rumination. Our mind seems to circle endlessly around a painful issue like the tongue ceaselessly returning to the hole in a tooth. We re-run past battles endlessly and invent future conversations. If you have ever gone white-water rafting or kayaking you will know about the terrifying vortex that can appear just after you have crested a hidden boulder. If you fall out of the raft there is a danger of being caught in such a hole and being sucked down again and again, just as you seem about to surface for a moment. This is how it is with thought loops. We seem to be sucked down into unrelenting loops of thoughts that submerge and suffocate us. When you are in this situation you will find that there are short moments of awareness, when you realise that you are trapped in a thought loop. In such moments, when you 'come up for air', say to yourself with kindness, 'Let go of story'. When you become aware of your story, you may find that there are different layers. A surface layer may be directly connected with the experience that set off your strong emotion: you re-run the event over and over and invent different responses or imagine a future event that vindicates you. A deeper layer is touched when one of your core stories gets triggered. These core stories are insidious and difficult to discover because they pose as truths, not as judgements. Pay attention to stories, such as 'Nobody

ever...’, ‘I always...’ Or sweeping statements such as, ‘She is more important to him!’, ‘Nobody loves me!’, ‘I am useless!’, ‘They always leave me!’ and so on. Whatever the story is – let it go! Sometimes our deep stories are inchoate and it seems hard to put words to them but they express themselves clearly in posture. Notice any habitual posture your body takes up at such a time.

The fourth step of healing is: *meet suffering with love*. When you notice that you are in the midst of turmoil, caught in endless raging thought loops, rest your awareness gently on the area of your body where the emotional turmoil lives, gather all your compassion and love and say silently, ‘Oh – suffering anger!’ or whatever the emotional field is that you are embroiled in. The word *suffering* in its ancient sense means ‘to allow’. When you say ‘Suffering jealousy’ (or whatever your emotional field is), it allows this exiled part of your soul to find a home in your heart. When you start to truly include and allow your suffering to be present, healing begins to take place. You can continue this practice throughout the day, even in the midst of your everyday work. When you notice you are caught in your emotional turmoil, simply place your hand on the part of your body where it lives and silently say, ‘Oh – suffering rage’ (or whatever your emotional field is).

Embracing our own suffering and failings with compassion allows us to embrace the suffering and failings of others with a spacious heart. As we allow our heart to open in this way, we find that nothing is outside of it at all. We learn to bear witness kindly to grief, rage, fear, envy, jealousy and the many other shades of passion. This is the heart of Kuanyin, the one who hears the cries of the world. When we become intimate with our passions, we find our True Nature right there as anger, as jealousy, as grief, as fear. Master Chao-chou makes this point clearly:

A monk asked Master Chao-chou, “In whom does Buddha cause passion?”

“Buddha causes passion in us all.”

“How do we get rid of it?”

Chao-chou said, “Why should we get rid of it?”¹

1. Chang Chung-Yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch’an Buddhism*. Random House (Vintage Books), New York 1971, p.166.