

Surfing the Ride Part One:  
The RAIN Approach for Working with Emotions

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This essay covers how to work wisely with emotions in mindfulness practice.

Probably more than anything else, emotions are the place of deepest attachment. We define our personalities largely through them - "I am a happy person, a sad person, an eager person" - and we tend to lose meditative awareness anytime an emotional state occurs. I will focus particularly on difficult emotions, as they tend to be where we get most easily hooked into suffering. The techniques below apply also to easier emotions, such as joy or love, and it is skillful to be aware of them, as this lessens our attachment to them.

Because troublesome states are such big obstacles in our lives, leaning to work with them skillfully offers profound relief from suffering. The essence of this skill is learning to welcome emotions without getting overwhelmed by them, walking a middle path between repression and indulgence. Mindfulness allows one to experience difficult states fully, learn from them, and then watch them disappear all by themselves. In the process, one learns self-compassion, patience, and connection with all humanity, since we are all plagued by emotional turmoil. Over time, one's relationship with difficulty changes; mindfulness takes what one considers to be emotional "crap" and turns it into manure, fertilizing one's heart to grow into more openness, tenderness, and joy. This all leads to the confidence that one's mind is workable and a newfound sense of freedom that the Tibetan Buddhist tradition likes to call the "lion's roar." May it be so for you!

## The RAIN Approach

What are emotions? Mindfulness practice shows us that they have four components: thoughts, images, body sensations, and mood or energy. Thoughts and images are usually involved, body sensations are present frequently, and mood is sometimes part of the experience. How do we work with such energies in our meditation? Dharma teacher Michelle McDonald developed a simple and effective approach encapsulated in the acronym RAIN. It stands for: recognize, accept, investigate, and non-identify.

### Recognize

This is a big deal. If everyone recognized what they felt, thereby providing the choice to act on an emotion or not, the world would be a completely different place. Imagine if you saw you were angry every time it happened, and could use the pause to decide whether it was skillful to lash out at someone? "Being mindful is easy," says my teacher Joseph Goldstein, "Remembering to be mindful is the hard part." This is especially true with emotions, whose intensity usually blinds our awareness.

When you are meditating and you recognize an emotion, label it with a simple word such as "fear" or "envy." Brain research shows that "naming is taming," that labeling an emotion gives one a healthy distance from it, making it easier to observe. Don't worry too much about getting the label exactly right. The function of the label is just to connect the mind to the present and make the emotion more workable. If you think too much about which exact emotion you are experiencing, just note "emotion."

## Accept or Allow

You can't judge and understand at the same time. If you are judging you are caught in reaction, and you cannot be aware of something you are in reaction to. In meditation, we stay with our experience, being willing to feel an emotion exactly as it is, without adding interpretation or judgment. This is acceptance. Can we accept so deeply that we can actually be friends with everything that arises? Can we say to anger, or fear, or happiness, "I am your friend, no one can know how you feel but me." Can we accept so deeply that if we do react, we can notice even that without judgment, and come back to the body sensation of the emotion?

We best accept our emotions by being aware of the body sensations associated with them. The body tends to be the place of least charge in the midst of an emotional upheaval. In the midst of fear, it is much easier to stay attentive to the tingling in the belly than it is to stay aware of the fear thoughts. The belly does not say, "Oh my gosh, it's six weeks before the holidays and I have not even begun shopping and where is all the money going to come from for my 27 cousins and nieces and nephews, not to mention all my siblings." It just says, "tingle, tingle, tingle."

We never know our thoughts to be true. Of course, they are sometimes quite relevant and need to be acted upon, but much of the time our thoughts are just so much confused, unclear, anxious and hypothetical background noise. In the acceptance step, we need to accept the story line of our emotion without judging it, while adopting an agnostic stance to its truthfulness. "We'll see" is my favorite response to any storyline. It encapsulates kindness and wisdom. There is no condemnation of the story, but no reaction to it either. This acceptance of thoughts without believing them is the key to a wise relationship with emotions.

Adopting an attitude of kindness is an especially important part of this acceptance

step. As we start to become more mindful, we may begin to notice emotions that conflict with our self-image or that seem inconvenient in certain situations. Because mindfulness gives us such a mirror-like and unflinching take on how we are doing, it forces us to be kind to ourselves. We must learn to accept our shortcomings and can be secure in the knowledge that any compassion we give ourselves will be planted in our hearts as a gift that we can then give someone else. As the Dalai Lama says, "My religion is kindness," and being kind to our rowdy emotional lives is a huge step towards having a full and healthy heart. The phrase "of course" best encapsulates the attitude of kindness one can take towards their emotions. When an emotion arises, no matter what it is, see if you can give it your best grandmotherly (or fatherly) smile, pat on the head, and say, "Of course."

## Investigate

Something really shifts in our psyche when we take an interest in what an emotion is like instead of getting lost in it. Mindfulness uses this interest to investigate an emotion experientially, where we feel it instead of analyzing it. To do so, we ground our attention in the body. In the body we are in the present moment experience of an emotion. Time exists only in the thoughts and images. The body is also the least charged part of the emotion. Where is any catastrophic story except in thoughts and images? We do not ignore the thoughts, but since they can pull us out of the present so easily, we stay with sensations, noticing thoughts in the periphery. We could crib the old real estate joke, "What are the three secrets of emotional wisdom? Sensation, sensation, sensation."

*Turn Towards* - When we investigate in the body, the first move is to turn towards the sensation(s) of an emotion. Where is it located? What is the texture of the sensation(s)? Tingling? Pulsing? Hot or cold? Tight or loose? Something else? What happens

to it as you observe it? Answer these questions by feeling them not by thinking about them.

In “turning towards” we drop our resistance to any emotion. The resistance is born of doubt that we can be with an emotion and be okay. But, actually, we can feel our emotions much more than we believe we can. When we stay attentive to the body without feeding the story of a difficult state, we can actually be just fine in its midst. It is powerful to learn this.

*Turn Away* - The second move of investigation is to turn away from an emotion and feel where it is not manifesting in the body. Typically, we feel emotions in only a part of the body, such as the front of the torso or throat or head. Occasionally emotions can manifest elsewhere. Often, we find much of the body is out of activation, with sensations such as smooth, grounded, tingle or pulse.

We can continue the process of noticing an emotion by turning back to where it is in the body and then turning away again to where it is not.

## **Non-identify**

While we can “do,” the first three steps of RAIN, the fourth is not something we do, but is an insight that we have. The process of turning towards and away reveals that any emotion will typically manifest in only a part of us. This is the insight of non-identification, the insight that you are more than any emotion you are experiencing. This insight also arises when we notice that if we are aware of an emotion we are not it. We are bigger than it.

Normally, we collapse around an afflictive emotion and are blind to anything else. Our language reflects this in statements such as “I am scared” or “I am angry,” as if we are identical to our emotions, as if scared or angry is all we are. But with mindfulness we

see that an emotion is just one thing happening in our experience and we can notice other things as well.

To reflect the insight of non-identification, it is helpful to change our languaging of emotions, for example, shifting a statement such as “I am scared” to “A part of me is scared,” or “Fear is happening.”

When we stop identifying with our emotions we start seeing them more clearly. From this comes two more insights: we see that mental states are impermanent and impersonal. Firstly, meditation shows us that as long as we are not feeding the thoughts that underlie them, emotions change all the time. They tend to dissipate soon after their thoughts dissipate. Impermanence is the great liberator, your true friend. You don’t have to do anything to get rid of an unpleasant emotion but be aware of it. Impermanence takes care of the rest.

Of course, this does not work if you have the agenda to get rid of the emotion by being mindful of it. This is based on aversion, and aversion will be the underground spring that keeps feeding the emotion. However, if we are truly interested in finding out what an emotion feels like, its impermanent nature will reveal itself.

Important advice: rather than “letting go” of an emotion, welcome it. Fully allow it and be mindful of it. If you do this, a state will express its energy and eventually go away all by itself. You don’t have to “let go” of an emotion, you only have to “let it go” on its merry way.

Secondly, mindfulness reveals that we don’t intend most of our emotions, but that they instead arise from conditions in the mind; one mind moment conditions another. For example, once on retreat there was this twang-like click from a thermostat in the meditation hall, almost like a bass, and instantaneously I heard the bass in a John Coltrane tune called “Africa.” And I went into

bliss and thought, “Ah, infant bliss.” And then came the thought, “Infant, oh no!” because I was remembered the time I was babysitting my infant godson. He loved sitting in his car seat and I was carrying him around in his house when I got a craving for a chocolate chip cookie. I put him a little bit hastily on a laundry basket full of clothes on the floor and the thing toppled. He fell on the carpet and hit his head and started bawling. Eventually he calmed down and felt better. But I felt so bad inside because I had the thought, “That happened because of my greed for wanting a cookie.” Then I started remembering all the other times I was thoughtless of others: the times I’ve rushed through a door and didn’t hold it for somebody, or cut people off in traffic, or offended people with an offhand joke. I sat there in that unworthiness for quite a while.

Where did that unworthiness come from? From a click on a wall, the click of the thermostat. I never saw the “I.” Instead, there was just the witnessing of a cascade of mental events spilling out of itself until it all got really stuck in the difficult emotion of unworthiness. The unworthiness had arisen so

impersonally!

A huge healing happens when we begin to see our emotions as impersonal and ephemeral. We learn that we do not really have to do anything to work with our emotions other than pay them kind attention. Not only are they really changeable, they are not happening to us and “we” don’t make them happen. It’s as if airplanes are constantly passing an airport and never landing. We don’t have to fuss with planes that never land; they just pass on by. When we see how workable our emotions are we can really start to allow them. And this gives us energy, vitality, and a sense of humor and adventure.

I end with two statements that summarize the essence of meditating with emotions. The first is that for any emotion, we do not need to change it, we only need to outlast it with kind attention. The second comes from dharma teacher Anna Douglass: “What we are practicing is non-interference. When we get out of the way, everything self-liberates.”