

Working with Difficult Emotions

(Meditation developed by Thich Nhat Hanh)

This meditation is one that might help if you are experiencing “difficult” emotions. It’s presented here in five steps.

1. **NAMING.** Recognize the Emotion. Name it. Breathe in and out. Get in touch with your body and breath. Breathe with the emotion – “breathing in, I feel sadness; breathing out, I feel sadness.”
2. **CLAIMING.** Be with the emotion. Claim it as my own. See that this emotion comes and goes with causes and conditions and I am responsible for my emotion – “breathing in, I see this is my anger; breathing out, I see this is my anger.”
3. **CALMING.** Be at ease with the emotion. Hold the emotion as I would hold a baby – “breathing in, I hold my heartbreak tenderly; breathing out, I hold my heartbreak tenderly.”
4. **RELEASING.** Release the Emotion. Let it go – “breathing in, at ease with betrayal; breathing out, I release betrayal.”
5. **LOOKING DEEPLY.** Seeing deeply the causes and conditions that led to the emotion. This step arises naturally during and/or after the work of the first four steps. Step Five is not the same as analyzing or coming up with an intellectual framework that explains away the emotion. It is looking deeply from a place of true recognition of the emotion, with calmness and non-attachment. It is seeing of the true root of the emotion.

It’s important to completely experience each step before moving to the next step. Actually, if you really do this practice, you don’t so much “move” to the next step as have the next step open for you. If you stay at step one for a long time, it doesn’t mean that you have failed, rather it means that you are the Buddha of “Naming the Emotion.” This process is not something that can be completed overnight. Like all really important work, it cannot be rushed. It’s especially important not to skip ahead to step five before the first four are completely experienced, otherwise, you risk just spinning in thought and not allow the emotion to be truly present.

Another caution: there is a time and place for this work. If you are in the midst of depression or some other difficult mental state, it may be better to do loving-kindness meditation towards yourself, or outdoor walking meditation, gardening meditation, etc. until you have enough ease and stability to do this work.

Examples of Loving-kindness phrases:

May I be happy and free from suffering.
May I be safe from physical harm.
May I be healthy in body and mind.
May I know ease of well-being.