About Emotion-Focused Mindfulness Therapy

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Touching the earth within and around us

When the Buddha sat down in the meditation that led to his awakening, he was plagued by self-doubt. The Buddhist scriptures portray this mythologically as Mara, the evil one, sending his daughters and an army of demons to disrupt the Buddha's meditation with lust, hesitation and fear. Who do you think you are to try to awaken?

The Buddha bent forward and touched the earth. According to the scriptures, the earth witnessed him, recognizing his many lifetimes as a bodhisattva. In traditional Buddhism, bodhisattvas are those who put aside full liberation from death and rebirth in order to reincarnate again and again, sacrificing themselves until all beings become liberated. I like to think of this in more pragmatic terms, that we can each touch the earth within and around us by shifting into mindful experiencing, that is, by settling into our bodily experience and coming alive to the implicit feel of the current moment in a non-judgemental, decentered way. "Decentered" means understanding that thoughts and feelings are not direct, unmediated truths about ourselves, others and the world. This shift brings us alive to the world and that which supports us; things feel more workable.

This is reflected in the first of the four Buddhist Brahma Viharas. These are central values we can orient to and cultivate in mindfulness meditation and life. Brahma is the supreme divinity in the ancient Indian pantheon and "vihara" refers to a dwelling place. The Brahma Viharas are also known as the Four Immeasurables because their cultivation can lead to states that feel as spacious and deep as if you were living with Brahma in Brahma's home. The first Brahma Vihara is usually referred to as "loving-kindness;" I prefer to call it "*friendliness*."

This is the sense of grounded, spacious wellbeing, openness and kindness toward ourselves, others and the world that tends to emerge from shifting into mindful experiencing.

Buddhism has many lists, often referred to in the Buddhist practice circles I have known — with affection, respect, and gentle irony — as "laundry lists." Unlike laundry lists, typically, if you understand and experience the first item on these lists, you understand the rest, they telescope out of the first. This is true of the Brahma Viharas: the shift into friendly mindful experiencing creates optimal conditions for cultivating the next three and implies them.

Sheri Geller and Les Greenberg in their (2011) *Therapeutic Presence: A Mindful Approach to Effective Therapy* have described how mindfulness is the ground of empathy. Empathy is our capacity to follow our own and others' feelings and thoughts in a friendly, kind way. From an emotion-focused mindfulness therapy perspective (EFMT; Gayner, 2019), the Brahma Viharas come alive through empathy.

The second Brahma Vihara involves experiencing *compassion* when suffering arises in ourselves and others. Compassion involves feeling moved by suffering, wishing for it to be alleviated, and wanting to help. As Ann Weiser Cornell in her (2013[1]) book *Focusing in Clinical Practice: The Essence of Change* pointed out, if we turn toward that within us that is suffering in a non-judgemental, decentered way, without identifying with it, and say, "Hello" to it, curious and alive to how it is feeling, kindness and compassion arise naturally. This transforms our experience of suffering. (You can read more about experiential focusing **here**

The third Brahma Vihara is usually referred to as "sympathetic" or "empathic joy," and described as appreciating and feeling joy when others are in wholesome states. From an EFMT perspective, it may make more sense to think of this as *appreciating and empathizing with primary adaptive emotions* in ourselves and others, including compassion, joy and happiness (but any emotion can be adaptive), and carrying forward their implications into the rest of our life. In emotion-focused therapy (EFT), adaptive emotions have a lot of implicit

[1] Ann Weiser Cornell (2013, Kindle edition; Chapter 5 Fostering the client's strong self: The central environment for felt senses; (Section) Self-in-presence: A way of being, not something to find; paragraphs 3-5.

information about what is happening, they orient us, tell us what matters to us, and, if we reflect on them, can motivate us to act in wholesome ways. Deepening experiencing through experiential focusing and other forms of emotional processing that include focusing sub-processes tend toward primary adaptive emotions.

The first three Brahma Viharas lead naturally to and imply the fourth: *equanimity*. In English, "equanimity" refers to calm and composure in difficult circumstances. In classical forms of Buddhism,[2] one cultivates equanimity by recognizing and liberating oneself from unwholesome emotions driven by craving (involving either grasping, aversion or confusion) and orienting instead to wholesome states free from craving. Similarly, from an EFMT perspective, equanimity emerges from responding differentially to emotions, liberating ourselves from repetitive emotions that interfere with developing a more authentic relationship with suffering and our existential situation, and orienting instead to primary adaptive emotions.

In EFMT, we learn to differentiate and arrive at primary, core emotions that underlie secondary, defensive emotions, allowing us to let go of secondary emotions and to sort out whether primary emotions we are experiencing are

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[2] John Dunne (2015) describes a key distinction between classical and nondual forms of Buddhist practice. This is useful way of distinguishing "general trends that apply across a broad range of practices and traditions" in Buddhism (ibid, page 254). Classical Buddhism is rooted most directly in the Abhidharma scriptures and commentaries, the earliest of which emerged several hundred years after the Buddha and can be found in Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism. Like earlier Buddhist scriptures, classical Buddhism has a dualistic emphasis on responding differentially to wholesome and unwholesome states and assumes an inevitable phenomenological distinction between subject and object in how consciousness arises. Nondual forms of Buddhism can be found in Mahayana Buddhism, such as Chan Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, and involve practitioners seeking something classical forms assume is impossible — cultivating states free of the distinction between subject and object. Nondual practices are associated with popularizing movements in Buddhist history that attempted to make mindfulness meditation more accessible for lay people (Sharf,2015). Zen Buddhism, with its nondual mindfulness, is the primary Buddhist source informing another popularizing movement, mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 2011; Dunne, 2015; Sharf, 2015.)

Sharf argues these differences represent a tension present throughout Buddhist history that is a key aspect of its richness. There are also hybrid forms that combine classical and nondual Buddhism, such as the teachings of the Theravada monk, Ajahn Chah, Jack Kornfield's most formative teacher. Kornfield is a major founding teacher of the American vipassana movement, the primary source of Buddhist teachers and retreat centres to which both mindfulness-based clinicians and their clients turn to maintain and deepen their practices.

adaptive or maladaptive. Maladaptive emotions are too intense, paralyzing and often have an edge of helplessness to them. They are not about current situations and they don't help us navigate them. They are loaded with information about the past and they need to be transformed by remembering the toxic developmental situations that conditioned them and the unmet needs we suffered then, such as needing but not receiving love, affection, comfort, safety, and respect. When we do this, implicit adaptive emotions tend to emerge, such as anger at those who abused or neglected us and sadness and compassion for what we suffered then. These adaptive emotions along with empathy for what we suffered can transform primary maladaptive emotions, helping orient us to fresh healing narratives and responding to current situations in adaptive ways. For example,

> an HIV+ gay man expressed in therapy anxiety and unwillingness to date, certain of rejection if he disclosed his HIV status. Exploring this, he realized the anxiety was being driven by maladaptive shame and humiliation associated with memories of his father's emotional abuse. Working on this in an enactment task, imagining his father in an empty chair in front of him, intensified and clarified how his feelings were due to his father's maltreatment and helped him recognize unmet needs for love and respect. His therapist helped him express implicit adaptive anger to his father, as well as compassion and validation for his younger self's feelings of shame and humiliation. These adaptive emotions transformed the shame and humiliation, leading to feelings of integration and wholeness, the development of a new healing narrative, and a new willingness to date and disclose his HIV status. (Gayner, 2019, page 10)

Equanimity emerges as we learn to deepen experiencing, liberating ourselves from repetitive emotions and appreciating and making sense of adaptive emotions that orient us and empower us to cultivate our own and others' growth and flourishing. Touching the earth through friendly mindful experiencing naturally tends toward empathy, compassion for suffering, orienting to adaptive primary emotions, and equanimity.