

# EMBRACING THE ENERGY OF STRONG EMOTIONS:

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A Practical Use of the Five Buddha Families

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At times, as meditators, our emotions are oftentimes intensified and can become stronger than ever. Through the practices of meditation, as we get closer to the reality of our lives, we are exposing and invoking powerful energies. We contact spaciousness where things aren't so chaotic in our minds; we become cooled down, even for just a couple of seconds. Then by contrast the wildness, chaos of our emotions is felt all the more vividly. We might feel ourselves more naked, in the sense that when we practice we're not sedating ourselves with our discursive mind as much, so when our emotions arise we could even experience it more intensely than ever. A man with an alcohol problem who sobered up told me in the first couple weeks of sobriety, "Everything is so raw to me, everything. I feel so emotional, irritable and sad." His sedating process had been undermined. It can be like this for meditators as well as we train ourselves to stay on the edge of nowness.

As our awareness and sensitivity increases, we also experience more directly the contagious quality of emotions. We become more aware of being able to sense and contact others' emotions. Part of this is that humans have a natural ability to stand in others' shoes. If we are sitting in the back of a movie theatre, and are watching a road race on the screen, we notice that the people in front of us sway their heads back and forth as they watch the cars go around the curves. So it is with others' emotions, we have a natural ability and propensity to contact and follow the emotions of others. In fact the more we practice, the more we enhance this ability. So we might ourselves not be personally experiencing much emotion however we are picking up and exchanging with others' emotions all the time.

Also, it can seem that no matter how many years we've meditated we have certain emotional patterns that seem fixed, as if we are hard-wired to respond, react and feel in predictable ways. We find ourselves talking just like one's father or one's mother no matter how many times we vowed not to. Or we could be prone to certain kinds of strong emotions like loneliness, depression, irritability, and anxiety, emotions we have a long history with, emotions that seem to come up almost automatically. We oftentimes meet these strong reoccurring emotions with a sense of dread.

Intelligently, we may have learned to not trust some of our emotional life because it has created a lot of pain for ourselves and others. One man recently told me that his wife left him; he had driven her away with his jealous and angry rages. He had been so insecure that when she left the house he'd hounded her all the time and ranted about how she didn't do this or that the right way, trying to control her. Most of us have stories about how we have hurt ourselves through emotional display and how it has made sense to be cautious about letting others see our emotional life.

We also might distrust the fickleness of emotions, one minute we feel so affectionate towards somebody and the next minute we're totally irritated with the same person. Also, we can distrust how we use emotions as a way to justify and protect ourselves and keep ourselves stuck.

In meditation practice we learn the technique of touch and go, but how does this work when we have particularly strong emotions, emotions like boiling anger, pervasive anxiety and gripping fear, waves of jealousy and resentment, sadness and particular passions that seem relentless? When does touching an emotion become indulging in it, when does letting go of an emotion feel like we haven't really allowed ourselves to touch anything? Our practice of touch and go might be more like sniff and run.

## ESSENCE IS HEALTHY

From the Buddhist point of view, the essence of our emotional energy is basically healthy, very energetic, intelligent, and full of heart. Each emotion we have, if we connect with the essence of it, is connected to one of the five Buddha family wisdoms. So the good news is we do not have to change our emotions or our fundamental personality. If we are an irritable person, we don't have to become a nice person who's very soft. Or if we're an anxious person we don't have to necessarily become smooth and unruffled. Rather than change and try to smooth out our irritability and anxiety, we can look at it further and discover the wisdom within the very energy of that emotion. Sometimes we think of the five Buddha families as esoteric and distant, available to us in only in the fleeting moments when we've practiced a great deal. However, these energies are present all the time, whenever we are truly present with our emotions. We will examine how the five Buddha family energies can affect and enhance our practice of relating with strong and unrelenting emotional energies. Also, we will explore how the Buddha family energies (without naming them as such) can help others – who may have no formal meditation practice – work with their strong and attention-grabbing emotions as well.

## SUPPRESSION

As we know, from our study, there are two extremes of dealing with emotions in a neurotic way. One extreme is to suppress the emotion and the other is to indulge in it.

When we suppress an emotion, we are deflecting and smothering the energy of an emotion so that not even we ourselves see it clearly. There are different styles of suppressing an emotion, all based on fear: thinking an emotion is unclear and messy we may try to rise above it through intellectualism, where emotions are seen as too much vulnerability or as a kind of defeat, by staying busy, by philosophically choosing some emotions over others or by simply ignoring and whitewashing our emotions away.

By ignoring, downplaying, or suppressing an emotion the emotion does not really go away, it comes back later sometimes having gathered more momentum and sometimes coming back in more indirect ways. For example, a woman I have worked with who had a gambling problem was married to a controlling husband. She had to spend money according to what he permitted. She was very passive and docile with this man, anxious and agreeable to do his bidding. I noticed her struggle with her emotions while she was in my office and she said every time she starts to cry or get angry she shuts herself off almost immediately. She said, "Well I don't want to be angry or sad, it's a sign of failure – that I'm not in control of myself." Nonetheless, she had a secret lifestyle where she would slip out to the gambling casino every so often and blow a lot of money. Her husband would be very upset about it when he later found out. While recounting to me one day her husband's upsetness she could hardly contain her smile, her enjoyment of this. She was angry with her husband, but didn't want to see herself as an angry person so she suppressed her anger. Nonetheless, the anger arose indirectly in her spending his well-calculated money. An emotion, when suppressed, is not self-liberated, it leaks out in different ways.

Suppressing emotions means that we are suppressing the intelligence and vitality of our energy. This sets up struggle and desynchronization with ourselves and others. A couple was in my office the other day and the woman was saying to her husband "You never talk to me. You come home and just read the paper. You don't talk to me (repeating herself as if she expected that saying it once wasn't going to get through to him) I don't even know you!" And he says, (almost looking as though he is looking up from his paper!), "What do you mean; I talk to you all the time. I come home, I ask you how your day was – we talk to each other all the time!" And she says, "Yeah but we don't really talk. . . you spend all the time reading the paper, and in front of the computer." He begins to outwardly become more angry and frustrated. He starts to lecture her, "Can't you be a little more reasonable about this? You're always too sensitive." Lecturing and advice giving is a way this man kept distance from her, kept himself numb from her emotions. She shot back, "What

do you mean I'm too sensitive?" And she may be actually thinking she's a little too sensitive too, but she hates hearing that from her husband because basically he is saying that he doesn't want to have anything to do with her emotionality. It makes her even angrier. And they both continued to communicate in terms of who was right and who was wrong, as if the solution was a kind of legal briefing.

## INDULGING

The other extreme of dealing with emotions is indulging. A man who has a temper problem told me a story of how he was driving his truck in a small town in Nova Scotia; it was winter with snow on the ground. Suddenly, a fifteen-year-old boy in a snowmobile pulled out in front of him. Not only did this boy scare the man who had to swerve the truck to avoid hitting him, but the boy turned and flipped him the bird as well! So the man ended up chasing the boy all over town with his truck. And the boy realized the man in this truck was seriously angry, and proceeded to take his snowmobile at a torrid pace down the streets through a number of stop signs. The boy got away at the end, but the man told me he was really scared afterwards because he could have inadvertently caused the boy to be killed.

We examined the progression of his experience during the incident.... His first experience was that he got startled and then scared, and there was a feeling of helplessness and chaos. He didn't like this feeling of helplessness and fear and he wanted to destroy what had scared him. He had a whole history of pushing away, trying to eliminate fear by losing his temper. He could feel the excitement of his quickening rage: there was a rush and a surge of power. He thought, "I'm going to get this kid." He felt a frantic pleasure, a surge of power and a satisfying one pointedness in his rage. The ultimate goal is this power surge is release, getting the emotion out of him. It's like the experience of temporary pleasure of "telling that so and so off." So there is a short lived pleasure in the acting out, in the releasing of emotion where we actually feel and enjoy the power. At that moment we have abolished, wiped out our feelings of fear. In this story, the rush of power was temporary and, fortunately for everyone, the boy got away, and then my client was left shaking, realizing that his rage almost caused the boy to be killed. This is an extreme example but it articulates some of the ups and downs of indulging in one's emotion. We end up making a mess for ourselves as well as others. Like suppressing emotion, indulging in emotion is a way of trying to get rid of the energy of that emotion, looking to release it instead of relating to the energy of the emotion directly.

Our indulging in emotion can also turn inward toward ourselves. In this quieter and more common approach we obsess about a person or situation, becoming immersed in our thinking mind. This kind of obsessive thinking, even though it is rousing many different emotional upheavals, is another way we deflect and ward off direct experience of the basic energy of the emotion.

There are different aspects to the process of indulging one's emotions, these aspects can happen in a momentary flash or build up over a long time: first, one becomes attached to an emotion, simultaneously being both excited by it and wanting to get rid of it. There is a gathering of justification for that emotion through obsessive logic, and a gathering of an identity or storyline that goes along with the logic. We then zero in on the emotion and stubbornly stick to it despite evidence of other emotions and energies taking place. The emotion builds up to a crescendo of self-justified energy and is finally released. After the release there is a hiatus until the pressure of the need for release returns, again and again.

## FIVE WISDOMS

What does it mean then to practice embracing emotions, without falling into the extremes of suppressing or indulging? This is when the intelligence of the five Buddha families can be invoked. Let us look again at the man mentioned earlier whose wife had left him. He acknowledged to me that he has a problem with fear. In his stomach are literal knots of fear. This fear knot in his stomach follows and haunts him all the time, and he does all kinds of things to try to get rid of it: think about other things, keep busy, he even stays at home so he doesn't have to go out at all. When his wife was still around he would try to lose himself in her, minding her business, criticizing her and so on, instead of feeling his own pain. Nonetheless his fear was all-pervasive and his stomach ached and burned, he oftentimes required stomach medication to get through his day.

We had formed a trusting relationship and tried the embracing practice using the five Buddha family energies. This client and I had enough trust between us to work in a fresh way with his emotions that did not involve a story line. We went through a five-step practice. These five steps are tied in with the five Buddha families.

**Buddha** The first step is to invoke the energy, the power of the Buddha Family, which is associated with the element of space. This is the wisdom of non-action. We don't try to do anything; we are already healthy to begin with. Even if we don't fully trust that we are healthy, we allow ourselves to just be, stop and rest from struggling with the pain of our experience.

**Vajra** The second step that he did was to become awake in nowness, which is one of the wisdoms of the Vajra Family. Vajra is connected with the dawn — waking up. So we wake up, not just to the mental aspect of the present moment but also to one's whole sensory experience. We especially wake up to the energy in our body, in my client's case becoming aware of the knot of fear in his stomach.

**Ratna** The third step is that what we wake up to is a whole landscape of various energetic and emotional experiences contained in our body, in our sense perceptions. We are invoking and connecting to the Ratna energy, connected with the earth element. Earth accommodates and in that way is hospitable towards all of our energy no matter how tense, edgy or uncomfortable it may be. We allow the energy of the emotion to exist in our direct experience and we explore the richness of this emotional landscape. Where do we experience the knot, the tenseness in our body, does it move, what are its qualities, its texture and temperature? Within nowness, we have a hospitable and nonjudgmental feeling towards our experience.

**Padma** The fourth step, Padma is that we embrace our experience and bring it closer to us. Padma is connected with the element of fire. We are not passively watching our experience from afar, instead we draw the tension towards us, we embrace the tension with affection and warmth, as if we were holding a small animal that we love very much. We melt into the energy and the energy melts into us.

**Karma** And then the fifth step, the Karma family, connected to the wind element, we breathe in air and oxygen and movement to the part of the body where we feel the emotion or the energetic activity. We give the emotional energy in the body literal oxygen, space, air. We don't have to let go of an emotion, it lets go of itself. When we go through all of these steps, letting go naturally happens. It's good to do the fifth step deliberately however, because it's easy to hold our breath, especially when an emotion is strong.

## **MAITRI: A UNIVERSALLY ACCESSIBLE PRACTICE**

A key aspect of this five-step practice is the aspect of maitri, a Sanskrit word meaning loving kindness. Within the sharp and vivid quality of nowness we relate to our sense perceptions; experiencing our tension, our anger, our headache, or our fear with kindness, accommodation and respect, even if our experience is intense and jagged. With this practice we emphasize the touch a little more than we might normally do; in fact touch in this case means embracing and melting into the sensory experience. When we touch our anger for instance, in this way, we are neither suppressing anger nor indulging in it. And actually, as was said earlier, when we really touch something fully, as in formal meditation practice, it naturally dissolves and opens out. It's really important to go into this practice without trying to change anything, without any hope. Because if one goes into it thinking that we have a new technique of getting rid of the knot or the rage we're still approaching it from the point of view of trying to get rid of it or looking for release. There's still a fear of the energy. Of course, we can even have maitri with our fear of embracing our emotion! We might be afraid that if we get too close to the energy of an emotion the emotion would swallow or overwhelm us. In this case one could do the 5-step practice relating to the fear of touching our emotion.

We may say to ourselves, "I don't really experience any particular emotion. Maybe a little tiredness, irritation, vague wisps of this emotion or that one." In Buddhism, ignoring and stubbornness is also considered an emotion, because it is active and energetically pushing away. We may think that snow is just snow, white is just white however the Innu have something like 59 different words for snow; each refers to a different quality of snow. Within the context of working with energy even our ignoring and numbing ourselves has different qualities and texture that can be embraced within nowness. Stubbornness and ignoring have a lot of intelligence and power contained in its essence. When we experience this energy directly it opens us to experiencing other aspects of our experience.

We can do the five-step practice in a slow contemplative manner or quickly like a flash. We may find it easier to connect to some aspects of the five-step process and other aspects we may find more difficult as we tend to be more tuned in to certain energies than others. For instance, we might connect with the accommodation, the Ratna part of the exercise, but have more difficulty connecting with the Padma, the embracing part. In a Maitri Program distinguishing one energy from another becomes very clear and in longer programs there is an opportunity to focus more intensively on an energy that one finds more unfamiliar.

The Buddha family energies are not just esoteric energies that one can relate to only on exceptional occasions when we are in totally in-synch or when we are in some kind of practice groove. We can relate to these energies in our common everyday lives. I have found it useful to teach these basic five steps to people who don't know anything about five Buddha families but who connect immediately with the principles of just being, awakensess, hospitality, embracing and moving. In fact, non meditating health practitioners using some of the more effective treatment methods of working with chronic pain or anxiety have previously adopted aspects of this five-step process because it is natural and it works. For instance, those suffering from chronic pain learn not to struggle or fight with their pain. The teachings of the five Buddha families have a lot to add to this growing sophisticated knowledge about working with pain and energy because of its precision, thoroughness and faith in enlightened energies being within all experience. I have found that those who don't formally meditate quickly realize the importance of being able to be mindful in order to be able to take oneself through the 5 steps.

If we contain and work with our emotions in this five-step process we avoid the extremes of suppression and indulging. All of us, meditators and nonmeditators alike can contain our emotions in this maitri container no matter how intense or dogged they are. In German there is a beautiful word for this kind of container, a Gefass, which literally means sacred vessel. We contain our emotions in a sacred vessel, and use the Buddha family wisdoms that are continually available to us in order to relate with our emotions directly. As Trungpa Rinpoche said at Naropa Institute

“our resentment is not the problem, our resentment about our resentment is the problem.” We don’t need to discard our emotions or see them as an enemy. When we relate to our emotions directly they are naturally self-liberated, their nature of emptiness, vividness, intelligence and heart come through.

*Maitri Space Awareness* practice (also known as the five Buddha family or five Wisdoms practice) is now part of the core curriculum of The Shambhala School of Buddhist Studies.

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