

# Developmental aspects of emotional competence and Buddhism

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Emotion involves a feeling state that has immediate meaning and significance for the individual, a bodily expression in terms of vocalization, facial activity and patterning, together with bodily posture and movement and physiological changes in both the central and the autonomic nervous system (Rutter, 1980). Even in newborn babies it is possible to discern the precursors of emotional responding. There appear to be three basic patterns: a state of contentment, a state of distress and a state of cataleptic immobility. Cataleptic immobility occurs in infants of all species and consists of sudden motionlessness with sleep-like respiration and staring non-convergent eyes. Such a response is usually triggered by a dangerous situation. In human infants these cataleptic immobility responses usually disappear after two months. However, many of the features may reappear in the form of catatonic and hypnotic phenomena in later life.

The process of emotional maturation has several aspects, such as, Differentiation, Self-regulation, Desomatization and Utilization (Dwivedi 2004 in press). A whole range of factors can have an influence on emotional development, for example, the extent of cognitive and motor development, genetic and biological potential, cultural context and training and parenting. Just like the development of urinary and faecal continence and walking and talking, development of emotional competence is also dependent upon the quality of training made available.

One of the important aspects of emotional maturation is its differentiation. Thus, out of the two basic emotional states of contentment and distress a huge variety of specific emotions emerge, such as, joy, pride, delight, love, anger, jealousy, guilt, anxiety, shame, humiliation, disgust and so on. A study in Oxford, Amsterdam and a remote village in Eastern Nepal revealed a similar developmental pattern of emotional understanding in children.

However, we sometimes meet children who have poor emotional differentiation as if emotionally illiterate. They don't recognise more than a few feelings, e.g. boredom, anger etc. This may be due to poor training. Problems of emotional differentiation may also arise in Attachment disorder, Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Alexithymia.

Alexithymia is a construct with cognitive and affective characteristics that has been found in many patients with psychosomatic illness, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders. The features include difficulty identifying and describing subjective feelings, difficulty distinguishing between feelings and bodily sensations of emotional arousal, constricted imaginal capacity (paucity of fantasies) and externally oriented cognitive style.

In a study by Denham et al. (2002) children's deficits in emotional knowledge assessed at age 3 and 4 predicted subsequent years' aggression.

- Preschool disruptive behaviour can be associated with a number of later psychopathology including delinquency, school failure and substance abuse.
- Aggressive children are more likely to have impulsive and hostile attributions of others in social interactions with peers.

The second aspect of emotional maturation involves the development of an increasing capacity to tolerate emotions. In order to facilitate the development of tolerance, parents allow their infants to experience emotions but intervene to protect the child from being overwhelmed by excessively intense or prolonged emotions. Such interventions have a dual function. On the one hand, the child is protected from being

traumatised by the overwhelmingly unbearable and shattering emotional experiences and on the other hand, this enables the child to learn how to utilise some soothing, comforting or distracting strategies. This helps the development of an increasing capacity to tolerate emotions through self-regulation of affect. As babies grow, they can identify with their caregivers and can initiate self-soothing or comforting interventions themselves, as soon as their emotions begin to exceed their capacity to tolerate.

The third aspect is desomatization. In the beginning, all of emotional expression or its communication is through somatic or massive bodily responses. However, with maturation, motor control, cognitive development and learning the infant begins to use various symbolic gestures (such as for initiating comforting, expressing affection, separation, loss, anger and so on) and words. Such a development is heavily influenced by the caregivers helping the child acquire various verbal and non-verbal communication skills and to identify and articulate their feelings and needs. An integral part of good parenting is the great pleasure that the caregivers take in the slightest difference in baby's vocalisations and keep encouraging the growing child to recognise and put their feelings into words rather than just act these out.

The fourth aspect is utilisation. The growing self-awareness enables the child to begin to treat their emotions as signals to themselves so that the emotional energy can be utilised for problem solving, planning and implementing of constructive strategies. As the children mature they also learn how to get in touch with their almost hidden feelings and how to explore an apparent complexity of feelings. They appreciate the role of these feelings in a whole range of mental and physical activities and begin to learn to utilise this important channel of influence.

The psyche is a complex hierarchical structure of systems or programmes involving feeling, thinking and behaviour. Emotions endow these programmes with a specific qualitative value, such as motivation, connect cognitive elements and contribute to their storage and mobilisation according to context. Thus, emotions play a central role not only in organising and integrating cognition but also in a variety of mental functions such as motivation, information processing, memory, behaviour and so on. However, most of the time, the emotional aspects of these mental operations may remain preconscious.

The Freudian view of emotion was influenced by hydraulics, for example, temper builds up and then it is discharged, or lust keeps growing until consumed and starts again. However, in the East, for example, in India as early as the 6th Century BC. there was already a coherent theory of emotions (Dwivedi and Gardner 1997). One of the features of this theory was that of the lack of emotionlessness (just as lack of weatherlessness). By expanding or intensifying one's consciousness through meditation, it is possible to become aware of emotions that would have been otherwise preconscious. In Sanskrit, there are two words: Sukha and Dukha. Sukha means Happiness and Dukha means misery or Suffering. If look at their epistemology, Kha means space, Su means good and Du means bad. Therefore, Sukha is good space and Dukha is bad space. Here space is in the sense of clearance between the hub and the axle of a wheel i.e. space of awareness and reflection around experiences, processes, interactions and so on.

When emotions become intense they not only break into conscious awareness but their excessive intensity can even trigger a chain of disastrous consequences such as violent or destructive acting out, alcohol and drug abuse, psychosomatic illness and even psychogenic death. A person may feel that such an emotional state is going to be everlasting and may not appreciate the fact that all emotions are only transient. With the help of meditation, if one does not fight, indulge or actively avoid, the emotions will just

run their course. The meditative practices can harness their energy for creative and constructive purposes, analogous to taming a tiger.

We all know that our minds are very skilled in mixing the real with the unreal so that it is difficult to take them apart. It is just like milk mixed with water. For example, if someone becomes insulting, hurtful or nasty, it would be natural to feel hurt or angry. Within a split second the breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, skin conductance etc. can change dramatically. These changes may take place even without our knowledge and certainly without our permission as if someone has pushed a button. Nowadays the technology has advanced so much that we have touch screens, remote controls and all sorts of timing devices. Human machinery is equally sophisticated - there are a variety of ways in which it can get turned on and off. And once it is turned on, it can stay on for some time.

So, we remain in such a state of mind even after the person has stopped being hurtful. The mind keeps going over and over the said phrases, the demeanour, the tone, the look, the accent and so on. It gets glued to these mental objects (which in this instance are just memories). This keeps stirring up the feelings of hurt, anger etc. Even if someone else may be nice to us, we might not notice this because the mind is too busy with the other (hurtful) mental object. Eventually, maybe after an hour or so, we might feel not so churned up; those feelings might go out of our consciousness and become latent or dormant. However, later in the day, even if we are in a pleasant situation, we might suddenly remember the incidence and once again the heart rate, breathing etc. would change dramatically. No one is insulting us then; it is purely a memory but the mind treats it as if it is real. Even the next day, the day after and so on, the same thing may happen again and again. People who have had very traumatic experiences know how distressing these flashbacks can be.

Going back to the idea of mental objects stirring up feelings, they don't have to be only memories involving ourselves. Even imagination or fantasy about third parties can have a similar effect. For example, if we watch a horror film at night, most of us would feel scared, although there is no real creature or blood, but only glass screen, light, shade and electronics. The windows and curtains that felt so warm during the day may appear infested with ghostly beings. An erotic film can in a similar way produce arousal in the viewer, although no one is doing anything in reality to him or her. Thus, our minds are very skilled in mixing the real with the unreal.

It is also possible that when we feel angry, we may feel so angry that we may even lash out and attack. So, it seems there are as if, three layers. When the particular feeling is dormant or latent, it is as if in the first layer. When it has been stirred up by the mental object, it is in the second layer and when it spills over into physical or verbal action, it is in the third layer. Between the second and their layer, there is, as it were, a gearbox. Thus the relationship between the amount of feelings and the amount of action depends upon the gear we are in. Sometimes we can put our cars in the neutral gear and rev the engine but the car doesn't move. This is similar to what happens in dreams - a lot of feelings but no bodily movements. On a slope, a car can keep running down in the neutral gear without pressing the accelerator, like the group situation, in which one can get easily carried away with certain actions without much feeling. It is not uncommon to see less feelings leading to more actions or more feelings leading to less action depending upon which gear we are in. I am sure we have also come across the reverse gear, where we feel one thing but behave according to its opposite.

One of the Burmese Buddhist teachers, Ledi Sayadaw, who lived from 1846 to 1923, likened this to three levels of fire in a box of matches. Fire usually manifests whenever a match is struck. This is the second level of fire and is analogous to a mental object striking on the consciousness and stirring up feelings. The third level of fire is

when the burning match comes into contact with flammable objects, analogous to the emotionally charged person coming in contact with an external object and the intense feelings spilling over into vocal and/or physical action. However, the first level of fire is inherent, latent or dormant in the box of matches analogous to latent or preconscious predisposition for feelings such as, anger and so on. This latent predisposition (*Anusaya*, in Pali) is a product of illusory processes, creating a deep sense of self. In the presence of *Anusaya*, when a mental object strikes the consciousness, the feelings are stirred up because of poor mindfulness. It is because of poor mindfulness that a mental object is not appreciated as only a mental object (ideation, memory, image etc.) and is responded to as if it is a real object. The second level i.e. the stirring up of the feelings and the mind getting glued to it is called *Pariyuthana* (in Pali), as if obsessed with the mental object. The third level or physical and/or vocal actions (*Vitikkama*, in Pali literally meaning transgression) arises if the relevant physical object comes into contact in the presence of *Pariyuthana* and poor volitional control.

Accordingly, the Buddhist approach has been threefold: a) cultivating volitional control (*Sila* or the practice of observing precepts), b) mindfulness (*Sati* and *Samadhi* to recognise mental objects as such and to be able to keep them at bay) and c) wisdom (*Panna* to cut gradually through the illusory processes that create this deep sense of self) (Dwivedi 2000). According to Buddhism, our minds operate in terms of *Khanas* ('mind moments'), there being 17x1021 *khanas* in the blink of an eye. The sense of I, mine, me, my and that of constancy, agency, continuity, solidity in objects and relationships is the result. This is the fundamental reason behind all our suffering. Cutting through these illusory processes is not easy and can take many lifetimes.

Thus, from the Buddhist point of view, meditation can help with emotional regulation in several ways, for example:

- By developing wisdom and cutting through the deep-rooted sense of 'self' as a product of illusory processes, and not taking things personally.
- By expanding our consciousness, becoming aware of subtle emotions and thus better managing various mental operations
- By early detection of emotional processes to initiate interventions or coping strategies.
- By harnessing the energy inherent in emotions to use for constructive and creative purposes i.e. 'Taming the Tiger'.

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