

## River of Feelings By Michael O'Neal

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*The function of meditation practice is to heal and transform. Meditation...helps us to be whole, and to look deeply into ourselves and around us in order to realize what is really there. The energy that is used in meditation is mindfulness; to look deeply is to use mindfulness to light up the recesses of our mind, or to look into the heart of things in order to see their true nature. –Thich Nhat Hanh*

*If you haven't wept deeply, you haven't begun to meditate. –Ajahn Chah*

*You can never step into the same river twice. –Heraclitus*

In each of us there runs a river of feelings. Joyful feelings, painful feelings, calm feelings, passing one into another, moment after moment. For many of us, emotional life is an area of difficulty. It may be that painful feelings are frequently present—grief, shame, fear, anger. Or it may be that we have an uneasy awareness of the power of emotions, and so do our best to minimize their presence in our lives in general. Or we may feel that we have to follow every pull of emotion, and find ourselves exhausted from being dragged around.

The Buddha gave great importance to bringing mindfulness to feelings. In his teaching on the practice of mindfulness he identified four foundations—the body, feelings, mind-states, and mind-objects. "Feelings" here has a special meaning. It refers to the feeling tone that accompanies every sense experience, including mental events. These feeling tones are of three kinds—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. The special importance of the feeling tones is how they condition our mind-states, which include emotions and thoughts. For instance, if the feeling tone is unpleasant, it is very easy for us to be carried off into feeling annoyed, angry, or rageful—feeling some form of hatred and aversion for whatever is connected (or even unconnected) with that unpleasant feeling. If a pleasant feeling tone comes up, it is fertile ground for the greedy, grasping mind that wants the pleasant feeling to continue and to increase. If the feeling tone is neutral, our tendency is to tune out the experience, or be confused by it, or do something to change it into pleasant or unpleasant, which we can then react to in a more familiar way.

When we bring mindfulness to feelings and emotions, we bring awareness to the flow of experience, without being carried away by it, without trying to force it to be different, without trying to escape from it. Because of our long habit of running toward the pleasant and running away from the unpleasant, and fuzzing out on the neutral, this is a radical practice, and it requires both courage and stability. Strong emotions, particularly painful ones, can seem unbearable to simply be with. But the practice of mindfulness can help us see that we don't need to be frightened by powerful emotions, that they are only one aspect of who we are, that they are constantly changing, and that we have the capacity to experience emotions without being overwhelmed by them.

When our mindfulness is strong enough, it can safely hold even very powerful emotions. To experience this is enormously liberating—to stay present, aware, and non-interfering as an emotion arises, peaks, and then quiets down.