

Emotions Inside and Out: Buddhist Psychology meets Emotional Intelligence  
Eve Ekman & Dave Smith  
Against the Stream: 7-30-2016

**Introduction:** The English language is rich in many ways, particularly when explaining the features of the material world, but it is remarkably clumsy when it comes to articulating the nuanced terrain of inner experience. This is one of the reasons why the current conversations about consciousness, meditation and psychology in general can at times become rather confusing. As we are now beginning to understand the inner workings of the mind-body process thru cognitive and neuroscience it is quite humbling to see that a detailed and highly developed map of the mind and body as a system of “lived” experience had been delineated by the Buddha and his immediate followers some 2500 years ago.

- Andrew Olendzki

When we begin to study or attempt to understand the psychology of present-moment consciousness from a Buddhist perspective, we need to have a foundation for what it is that we are actually hoping to accomplish. To begin, we will outline some simple criteria as to the purpose of this exploration.

(1) The end result of this exploration is to know suffering, its cause, its end, and the process that leads to its end. The Buddha himself claims to teach just one thing- suffering and its end.

(2) The “knowing” of this process is to be developed within the framework and practice of mindfulness meditation, and then applied to all areas of our lives. The development of mindfulness plays a key role in the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion...that which puts an end to suffering.

Mindfulness is a responsive awareness. It is not a passive function of the mind. Mindfulness is the ability to respond to life in a way that decreases harm. It's a living and breathing way to view experience. It is a method of looking and perceiving. Mindfulness can be likened to the function of a mirror. It simply reflects what is present. It is able to do so internally and externally. Whether it is a sound, sight, taste, or a thought, mindfulness simply knows the object as it is. The ethical component is the relationship we have with, or to the object. Once we develop the ability to differentiate awareness of the object, and from the object, we are able to see the relationship between it and ourselves. We are able to create a triangle of experience, awareness-object-relationship. We are able to sustain our mental capacities in a wholesome feedback loop and change our relationship to how we experience and respond to our lives.

In short, mindfulness is the ability to objectively monitor the arising and passing of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, within the framework of present-time awareness.

In truth, mindfulness requires a host of ideas and practices that need to be considered and cultivated, including and especially understanding emotions. By doing so it provides us the ability to view our lives from a new and much richer perspective.

We find that mindfulness practice rests in two basic questions: What is arising in my experience? How am I relating to it? The first question is about awareness and attention, the second is

about the ethical nature of how experience is being *held*, or in other words, how we are relating to it. The ethical role of mindfulness practice is to develop a non-harming intention toward whatever object arises. The ability to do this allows us to move through our lives under the best possible conditions. While maintaining the view that pain, stress, loss, and difficulty are inevitable aspects of life, we can learn to respond with empathy and care rather than anger and fear. We learn to balance focused attention with the attitude or quality of the mind.

### **The Four Foundations of Mindfulness:**

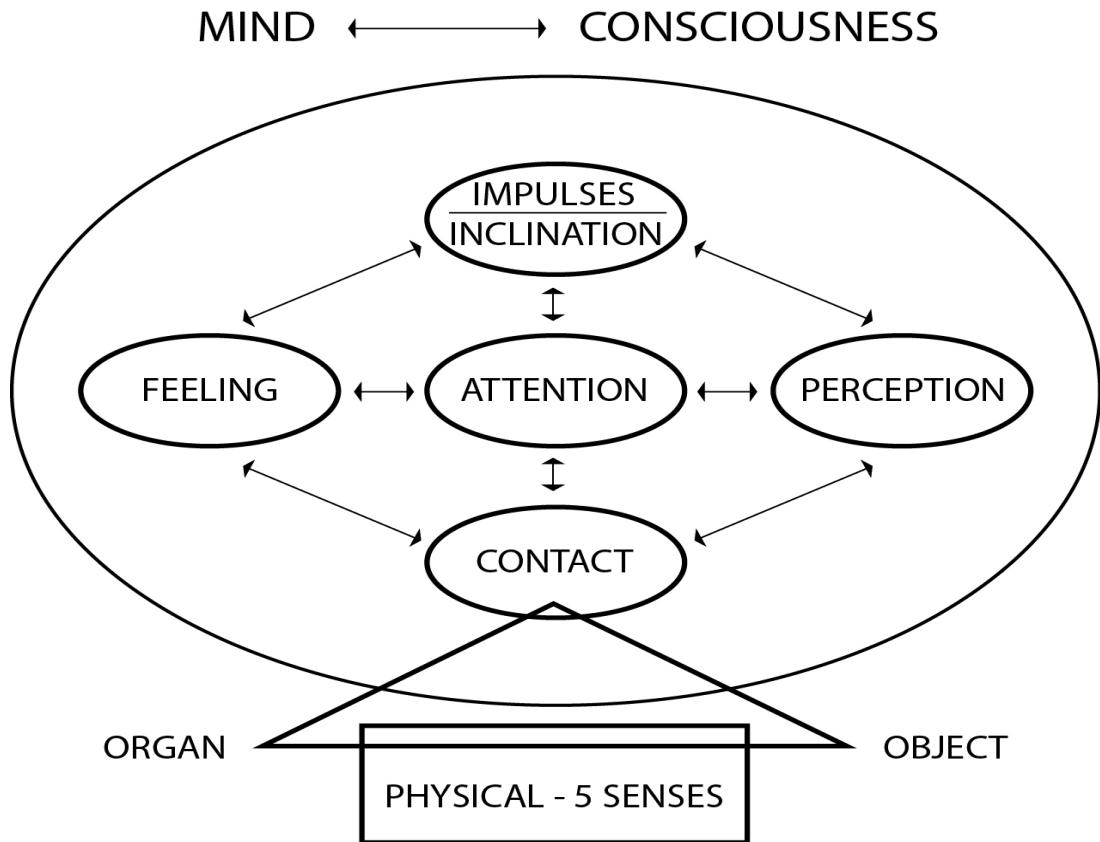
1. Mindfulness of body/breath: sensations
2. Mindfulness of feeling tone: impressions
3. Mindfulness of mind states: attitudes & emotions
4. Mindfulness of mind objects: activities/categories of experience

**Approaching the Mind:** Dr. Daniel Siegel from UCLA has done a lot to further our understanding and begin to offer some concrete definitions for the word “mind”. Several years ago Dr. Siegel conducted a research project where he interviewed a wide range of people from the mental health field and asked them if they had ever heard a lecture, received any training or took a course that offered a concrete definition of the word “mind”. This is what he discovered. *“What I discovered was that the fields of mental health, psychiatry, psychology, social work, nursing, occupational therapy, and educational therapy, didn't have a definition of the mind. We didn't even have a definition of mental health. Over the course of the last nine years, I have asked almost 90,000 officials from every discipline of mental health around the globe if they ever had even one lecture about what the mind is or if they ever had a lecture defining what mental health is. Well over 95% of professionals in the field of mental health don't have a definition of the mind or mental health. I personally felt this was a crisis because after all, if we are mental health practitioners, what is it we are practicing?”*-Daniel Siegel

Dr. Siegel's definition of the word mind:

**Mind:** An embodied and relational emergent process; that regulates the flow of energy and information. The mind is a regulatory process that can be monitored, measured and modified. There are also a number of terms, concepts and ideas that can be used as synonyms for the word mind: consciousness, awareness, experience, cognition, etc. Below is a diagram of how the mind is described within the context of early Buddhism, which is typically described and articulated as the “five aggregates”--“ nama rupa vinyana”, or sometimes called “mental factors”. This definition is built upon the idea that consciousness begins the moment that an organ comes into contact with an object. The Buddha uses the 5 physical senses but adds the “mind” as a sense gate, meaning that a “thought” is no different than a taste or a smell or a sound. The mind is made up of 5 components that arise and pass away in each moment of consciousness.

1. Contact (phasso)
2. Feeling (vedana)
3. Perception (sanna)
4. Formations/inclinations (sankara)
5. Attention (manisakaro)



**1. Contact-with-Materiality (physical forms):** We make contact with the physical world thru the 5 senses. This creates the conditions for c-ness to arise the moment that an organ comes into contact with an object. Tuning into sensory experience and developing sustained attention is the preliminary tool when developing mindfulness. Mindfulness practice typically begins by intentionally placing the attention on the sensation of the in-and-out breath.

**2. Feeling:** Once contact is made a feeling “tone” will arise.

1.Pleasant+ 2. Unpleasant- 3. Neutral 0

We see that we almost always reach for what is pleasant and push away what is unpleasant. This is known as the pleasure/pain dichotomy. When things are neutral we often become bored or uninterested and try to distract ourselves in various ways. We find that we are being bombarded with thoughts, emotions and sensations all of which can be registered as + - 0. Remember, feeling tone can and should be applied to all aspects of the experience: thoughts, sensations and emotions.

**3. Perception:** The role of perception is to differentiate one object from another. It is thru the aggregate of perception that the world makes sense to us; it is where we form “intelligence” through memory and analysis. We struggle to a large degree with our perception about past and future, which is the basis for anxiety and depression. Perception will often give rise to difficult

emotions and mind/mental states. Based on our moment-to-moment perception we may begin to experience anger, fear, jealousy, doubt and an over all sense of “lack”. Most cognitive behavior programs encourage people to question perception; to challenge views, opinions, core beliefs, theories and so forth.

**4. Mental formations-inclinations-intentions:** based on the information we receive from feeling and perception we are “inclined” to do something about what we gather to be happening. This is what can be called the “to do” mind- as it motivates us to think, speak or act. The Pali term (sankhara), as is often the case with early Buddhism, has no one English word that can accurately sum up what the term sankhara embodies. Buddhist scholar and academic Andrew Olendzki defines the term sankhara as: intention, volition, choice, decision, activities of body, speech, and mind, traits and dispositions. *Olendzki also adds that the term can also been seen to encompass the majority of what we know as “emotions”*-which would make sense that many of us struggle, to a high degree in the realm of emotional experience; as our entire organism is bombarded with a wide and bewildering array of content that influences mind states, attitudes, emotions and so forth.

**5. Attention:** Early Buddhism defines attention as: “making in the mind”. Modern Neuroscience is constantly studying the role and affect of attention. This may be seen as the current crossroads where “east meets west” in the practice and theory of how the mind and emotions works. What we do know is that attention regulates emotion. Attention reaches forward and connects us to the world, defining and shaping our experience. Attention provides the mechanisms that underlie our awareness of the world and the voluntary regulation of feelings and thoughts. Attention defines and creates our reality. It is the most valuable and affective aspect of the mental apparatus, the mind. Often times mindfulness practice instructions will use the words attention and awareness interchangeably, which colloquially speaking does work, but is not entirely true. For example, imagine that you are overlooking a field from a hilltop; all of what you are taking in can be experienced within the container of awareness. Awareness is panoramic. Now, if you pick up a pair of binoculars and focus in on a tree, a flower or a deer that can be understood as attention. Awareness is wide, attention is narrow. Awareness is open, attention is focus.

**Consciousness:** Simply put, consciousness is the container that holds all of these factors together. From the view of Buddhist psychology, c-ness is an event, it’s an episode, and it arises and passes away one moment at a time. It is not a noun; it’s not a thing. It’s a verb; it’s what is happening. Again the same idea can be applied to mind. It arises based on conditions that allow it to do so, when and organ meets and object. It’s really that simple. The term awareness can more accurately be associated with c-ness. A good way to remember it is thinking of c-ness as a fist, which is comprised of 5 fingers: contact, feeling, perception, formations and attention. As the old story goes, consciousness is like the king who never arrives alone but is always accompanied by his entourage.

Let’s walk thru this process.

**1. Contact-** As we begin our practice we come into contact with the felt sense of our entire experience as it arises and passes away. **2. Feeling-** We begin to notice that the world/life feels a

certain way to us- (+ - 0). **3. Perception-** Our experience also makes perceptual sense to us- (it appears intelligent)-we can differentiate one object from another thru memory. **4. Formations-** We are inclined to take a stance or disposition towards all that we experience- (a sense that something can be done “to do”). **5. Attention-** Attention manifests as a “confrontation” with any particular object- it literally means “making in the mind”-its characteristic is the conducting of the mental aggregates towards an object. All of these 5 factors arise together and pass away together in every single moment of consciousness. This is the core structure of what constitutes the experience of “mind”. Mindfulness is the ability to navigate the system.

### WHAT IS AN EMOTION?

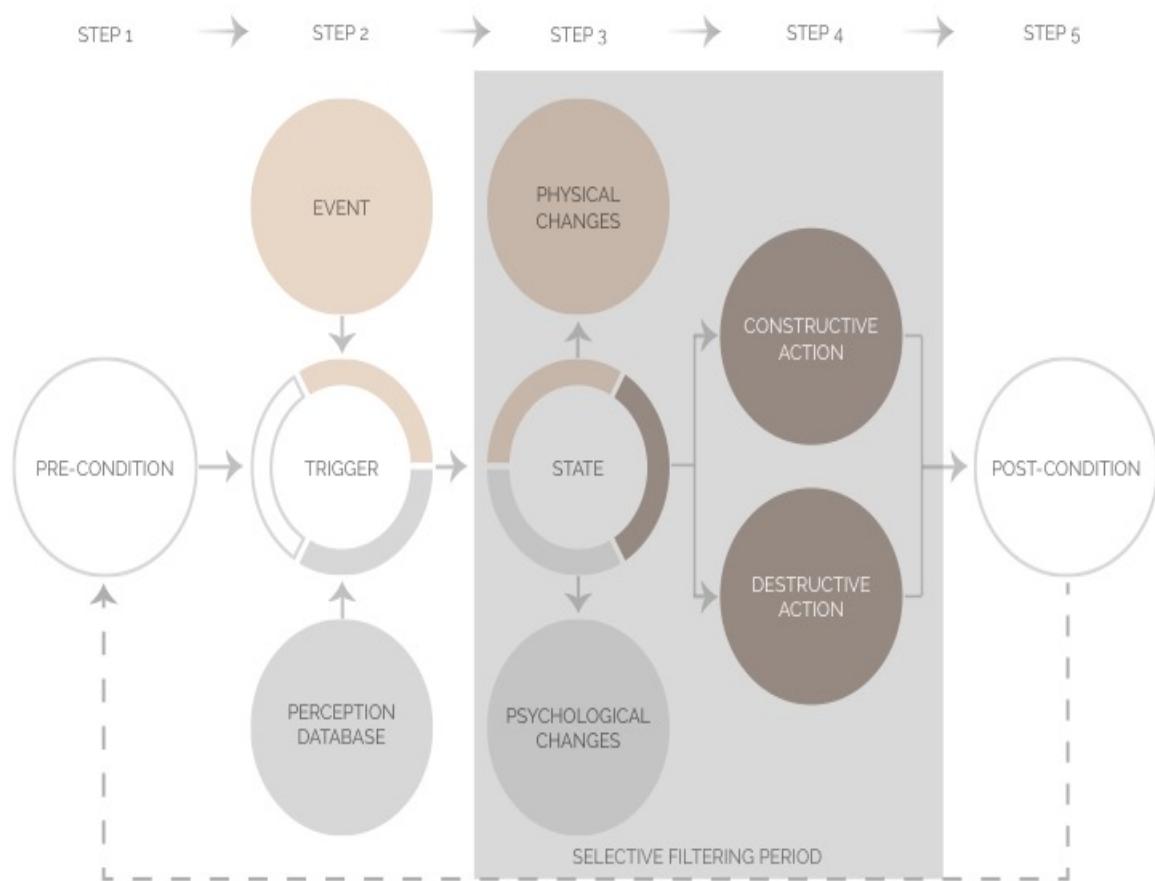
An episode of emotion is a brief, succinct experience, one which does not always fit our expectations. Most emotions arise in under a twenty-fifth of a second and last no longer than a few minutes. We often feel as though our emotions last much longer; however, what we are remembering is likely a series of emotion episodes. The definition of emotion is as follows:

Emotion is a process, a particular kind of very fast, automatic appraisal influenced by our evolutionary and personal pasts, in which we sense that something important to our welfare is occurring and a set of physiological changes and behaviors begin to deal with the situation. In particular, emotions efficiently coordinate diverse response systems, thereby helping us respond to important challenges or opportunities.

Our emotions can lead us to our greatest joys and most painful sorrows. In their most creative capacity, they are guides pointing us towards who we truly are and what is most meaningful in our lives. At their most destructive, we are caught by them: lost in the grip of anger, sadness, fear, or overwhelm. This suffering is something we have all felt, but we can create more space, choice, and ease in the face of it.

**Let's unpack this definition.** Emotion is a process, meaning there are a series of small stages that make up an emotion episode. This begins with our automatic appraisal or perspective of the world as influenced by our personal past (our learned responses arising from life experiences) and our evolutionary past (our hardwired responses that have been passed down genetically). This appraisal helps us filter what is “important to our welfare.” Typically, appraisal is so fast that we are totally unaware of it. Because our appraisal is influenced by our personal pasts, we can have quite distinct responses to the world. Consider this example: You are walking down the street with a close friend and an approaching car with its windows down is loudly playing a song. For you this song elicits a feeling of great sadness; it is the favorite song of a friend who died from cancer and was played at her or his eulogy. However, for your friend, who did not know this person and has no association with the song, there is no emotional response, or perhaps there is annoyance about the loud noise. You and your friend are on the same street hearing the same song, but your response is learned and personal. But if that same car had to avoid a cat running across the road and suddenly veered onto the sidewalk, both you and your friend, irrespective of personal pasts, would jump backwards in fear. This is a universal response to an imminent threat. Emotions help us respond before we even have time to think, “What is that car doing?” This is the brilliance and burden of emotions: They can rally our physiological responses to cause immediate behaviors to save our lives, but they arise without our choosing them and can feel quite out of our control.

## EMOTIONAL EPISODE TIMELINE



PRE-CONDITION	This describes the context or situations which may influence the way we enter the emotion. For example our pre-condition could be physiological: being hungry, tired or emotional: having had a very enjoyable or stressful day or coming out of a prior emotional episode.	PSYCHOLOGICAL CHANGES	This describes the qualitative experience of the emotion, how sadness feels sad, or anger feels angry.
EVENT	This describes a person, place, situation, image, thought, memory, smell, sound, taste or idea that we encounter from the outside world or from our own mind. We are constantly, automatically appraising, or assessing our inner and outer world. For example, when we hear a new song, we are instantly overlaying our knowledge of instruments and categories of music as we listen without even thinking, this is automatic appraisal.	ACTION	This describes our emotional responses. This could be an external behavior such as yelling in anger, or could be internal, such as suppressing anger. Each emotion in the atlas shows a range of immediate actions, as well as intrinsic or intention actions. The action can be either constructive or destructive. Leading to further collaboration with others or to difficulty in collaborating.
TRIGGER	This describes the combination of the automatic appraisal matching to some universal/hardwired or acquired script in our database.	POST-CONDITION	This describes the result or impact of our emotional actions. This could be external: if we have yelled at someone they may then yell back; or internal: if we have suppressed we could be feeling some ongoing irritation. The post condition could lead to our next episode of emotion, if someone is yelling back at us we are triggered once again to either anger, fear or sadness/regret for our actions. Our post condition is an opportunity for us to build emotional awareness through reflection on our emotion, to understand the trigger, identify the felt experience and consider its impact it has had.
PERCEPTION DATABASE	This describes our universal/hardwired responses and our individually acquired emotional memories. For example, if the event is a smell and in the database is the stored memory of the shampoo our mother used in our childhood, and we are triggered to experience an emotion of warm nostalgia of a happy childhood. When the appraised event resembles something in our database, it may be a highly accurate or could create a distorted perception of the trigger. For example if we had an intimidating experience with a police officer when we were young and we are pulled over as an adult we could misperceive the situation with a distorted sense of fear.	SELECTIVE FILTERING PERIOD	The Selective Filtering Period is initiated with the onset of actions and signals — perception is narrowed and distorted, filtering and interpreting information relevant to and consistent with the prevailing emotion. For example, when fear is aroused, there is a heightened sensitivity to real and imagined threats.
PHYSICAL CHANGES	This describes the autonomic changes in our body which occur as our emotion arises. We can experience these changes as sensations in our body, feeling heat in our face, tightness in our jaw or shoulders, etc.	Learned display rules (to regulate signals) and learned feeling rules (to modify, amplify or suppress subjective feelings) arise. We don't know how quickly these occur. Do they occur before signals and actions, or immediately during the onset of signals and actions? Impulses are translated into actions and signals. The gap between Step 2 (impulses) and Step 4 (actions/signals) is variable, depending on the individual characteristics of each person and the person's emotional profile, the intensity of the appraised trigger, and the momentary psychological state of the individual when the trigger is appraised (how much sleep the person had last night; what, if any, emotion the person last experienced or is currently experiencing, etc.).	
STATE	This describes the emotion itself, inclusive of physical and psychological changes.		