

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOVERING THE FEELING NATURE

By Pete Walker, M.A.

(Excerpted from *The Tao Of Fully Feeling*, and published in
The California Therapist, Volume 3, Issue 6, Nov/Dec 1991)

The individual who is seeking a healthy relationship with his emotional being, will strive to accept the existential fact that the human feeling nature is often contradictory and frequently vacillates between opposite polarities of feeling experiences. It is, in fact, quite normal for feelings to change unpredictably along continuums that stretch between a variety of emotional polarities. As such, it is especially human and healthy to have shifts of mood between such extremes as happy and sad, enthused and depressed, loving and angry, trusting and suspicious, brave and afraid, and forgiving and blaming.

Unfortunately, in this culture only the “positive” polarity of any emotional experience is approved or allowed. This can cause such an avoidance of the “negative” polarity, that at least two different painful conditions result. In the first, the individual injures and exhausts himself in compulsive attempts to avoid some disavowed feeling, and actually winds up more stuck in it, like the archetypal clown whose frantic efforts to free himself from a piece of fly paper, leave him more immobilized and entangled. In the second, repression of one end of the emotional continuum often leads to a repression of the whole continuum, and the individual becomes emotionally deadened. The baby of emotional vitality is thrown out with the bathwater of some unacceptable feeling. This reluctance to participate in such a fundamental realm of the human experience results in much unnecessary loss. For just as without work there would be no play; without hunger, no satiation; without fear, no courage; without tears, no joy; and without anger, no real love.

Most individuals, who choose or are coerced into only identifying with “positive” feelings, usually wind up in an emotionally lifeless middle ground – bland, deadened, and dissociated in an unemotional “no-man’s-land.” Moreover, when an individual tries to hold onto a preferred feeling for longer than its actual tenure, s/he often appears as unnatural and phony as ersatz grass or plastic flowers. If instead, s/he learns to surrender willingly to the normal human experience that: good feelings always ebb and flow, s/he will eventually be graced with a growing ability to renew the self in the vital waters of emotional flexibility.

The repression of the so-called negative polarities of emotion causes much unnecessary pain, as well as the loss of many essential aspects of the feeling nature. In fact, much of the plethora of loneliness, alienation, and addictive distraction that plagues modern America is a result of being taught and forced to reject, pathologize or punish so many of our own and others; normal feeling states. Nowhere, not in the deepest recesses of the self, or in the presence of one's closest friends, is the average person allowed to have and explore any number of normal emotional states. Anger, depression, envy, sadness, fear, distrust, etc., are all as normal a part of life as bread and flowers and streets; yet they have become ubiquitously avoided and shameful human experiences. How tragic this is, for all of these emotions have enormously important and healthy functions in a wholly integrated psyche. One dimension where this is most true is in the arena of healthy self protection. For without access to our dysphoric feelings, we are deprived of the most fundamental part of our ability to notice when something is unfair, abusive, or neglectful in our environments. Those who cannot feel their sadness often do not know when they are being unfairly excluded, and those who cannot feel their normal angry or fearful responses to abuse, are often in danger of putting up with it without protest.

Perhaps never before has humankind been so alienated from so many of its normal feeling states, as it is in the twentieth century. Never before have so many human beings been so emotionally deadened and impoverished. The disease of emotional emaciation is epidemic. Its effects on health are often euphemistically labeled as stress, and like the emotions, stress is often treated like some unwanted waste that must be removed. Until all of the emotions are accepted indiscriminately (and acceptance does not imply license to dump emotions irresponsibly or abusively), there can be no wholeness, no real sense of well being, and no solid sense of self esteem. Thus, while it may be fairly easy to like oneself when feelings of love or happiness or serenity are present, deeper psychological health is seen only in the individual who can maintain a posture of self love and self respect in the times of emotional hurt that accompany life's inevitable contingencies of loss, loneliness, uncontrollable unfairness, and accidental mistake.

The human feeling experience, much like the weather, is often unpredictably changeable. No "positive" feeling can be induced to persist as a permanent experience, no matter what Rational-Emotive Therapy tells us. As disappointing as this may be, as much as we might like to deny it, as much of a cause of ongoing life frustration for each of us as it is, and as much as

we were raised and continue to be reinforced for trying to control and pick our feelings, they are still by definition of the human condition, largely outside the province of our wills.

In this vein, the degree of an individual's wholeness and integration is often seen in the degree to which s/he can love and respect the self and others, in a myriad of different feeling states. Equanimity with the self and real intimacy with others depends on the ability to lovingly be there for oneself and others, whether the feeling experience is dysphoric or harmonious. Those who can only be there for themselves or another during the "good" times show no constancy, inspire little trust, and are only "fair weather friends" to themselves and others.