

Chapter 1

A New Language of Emotion

*"This place where you are right now,
God circled on a map for you."*

-Hafiz

There is an important paradigm shift currently unfolding in human evolution, one that pertains to new ways of experiencing and reframing our relationship to ourselves and our emotions. Therefore, the concepts and practices discussed in this book constitute, in a sense, an utterly new language, one that could not have entered into the collective discourse before now because it has, in part, been born of relatively recent advancements in behavioral sciences and wellness fields such as neuroscience, psychology, and biomechanics, to name a few.

Because the way we form relationship to our emotions, and even the concept of doing so, is still in its infancy, learning this new language, just like the process for learning any new language, takes time, patience, and self-forgiveness. And, as with any new language, in order to create a platform for fluency, we would do well to begin with the basics.

One of the most important fundamentals of enhancing our relationship to emotions, and figuring out this eloquent yet unfamiliar tongue, is the ability to stop running from what feels uncomfortable. In his poem, *The Place Where You Are Right Now*, Hafiz writes, "This place where you are right now / God circled on a map for you." Regardless of one's religious beliefs, or lack thereof, the transcendent truth of this line is that no matter what we are experiencing in a given moment, no matter how chaotic or upsetting things may feel, there is always something important about what arises within us; there is always something we can learn that will help us navigate our own growth. When we allow ourselves to move through every aspect of these processes with full presence to what we feel—resisting the reactive urge to avoid, push away, or run from the darker places on the map, and embracing equally the beautiful, the uncomfortable, and even, at times, the seemingly unbearable—the learnings offered by these experiences make themselves known, and, given space to exist, eventually become lanterns that transform the darkness, lighting the way ahead.

How do we make space for all of our emotions to exist so that we can reap the benefits of what they have to teach us, when for so long we have entrained ourselves—psychologically, intellectually, and even physically—to ignore, suppress, and deeply bury that which does not feel "good"? To make space, we must retrain ourselves to relax the fears we carry when it comes to feeling our emotions.

One way to facilitate this, and another fundamental building block of this new language, is to learn to distinguish between two different parts of ourselves, often referred to in contemporary writings and dialogue as *the ego* and *the witness*. I will discuss the intricacies of these two roles of self, and their relationship, later in this chapter. It is extremely important to identify exactly what role each of these aspects of ourselves fulfills, and when each one is either helpful or detrimental to us for accomplishing a particular task.

In order to make space for uncomfortable emotions to be fully and safely experienced, and therefore, also to dissipate more easily, we must first become acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of these two parts. We need to get familiar with which part of ourselves to summons for support when we want to feel safe travelling into the depths of feeling; we have to know the right tool to use when we want to dismantle the walls that our autonomic defense mechanisms have constructed to manufacture versions of safety that may now be outdated and irrelevant. Both the ego and the witness are valuable, but it is vital that we learn when to harness each one, as they possess wildly different characteristics and abilities.

Finally, if we wish to change our relationship to emotions, we must first understand some facts about them. Looking at emotions from an objective perspective can help diminish the lofty power they may sometimes appear to wield over us, and can re-empower us to navigate them with greater ease and dynamism.

This is perhaps the best place to begin retraining our perceptions of, and responses to, feeling; learning a new set of facts about this part of our experience offers a set of clear, demonstrable concepts that we can use to broaden and shift our emotional lexicon.

Feeling and thinking are mutually exclusive.

It is not possible to think your feelings. Although thinking of course shares a certain kind of relationship with emotion, it is an entirely separate function that occupies and arises from a distinct part of the brain. If we are thinking about something, using our reasoning brains to try to understand a particular aspect—or multiple aspects—of a situation, trying to figure out a solution to a perceived problem, or thinking *about* an emotion itself, we are not in a state of feeling, but rather, a state of thinking. This is a very important distinction. If we mistake thinking for feeling, we will likely be unable to recognize when we are suppressing our emotions. We may therefore erroneously assume that because we are thinking about a certain situation that we face, for example, that we are fully experiencing our feelings about that situation, when in fact we are probably doing just the opposite. That is, by engaging the thinking mind, we unintentionally suppress our feelings. In order to fully experience our emotions—thus helping them more readily dissipate and returning us to a balanced state—we need to recognize the difference between thinking and feeling. When we see this difference, it becomes easier to recognize when we need to make more space just to feel, just to experience our emotions without thought. This, of course, can be challenging for everyone, since the human brain is constantly thinking, solving, assessing, and reasoning—this is where meditation and mindfulness practice can serve as a great tool for forming deeper relationships with our emotions, and this will be explored further in later chapters.