

A Slave to Your Moods

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In the old days all you had to say was “Close your eyes.” Now we also have to say, “Turn off your device,” so that you can focus your full attention on the breath right now. You’ve got the breath coming in, going out. It’s here all the time, but all too often our attention is someplace else.

Now especially that we have all these devices where we’re connected up, as soon as you turn on your cellphone it’s as if you’ve been placed on a leash. Anyone who wants to call you at any time, they have the right to call you. And you become a slave to other people’s moods. If they feel like talking to you, they’ll go ding! There’s the sound.

The problem is that when we’re a slave to other people’s moods so much in the course of the day, then when we have time alone we want to be a slave to our own moods. We think we’re free if we’re following our moods as opposed to theirs. But still they’re just moods which have very little reason to them. It’s like having a committee in your mind and there are some bullies in the back saying, “Okay, now it’s my turn!” And they don’t really care whether your long-term happiness is going to benefit or not. They want something short, something quick. Which is why you have to learn you can’t listen to them either.

If you’re going to listen to anybody listen to the Buddha, because he found true happiness, and he said, “This is how it’s done.” Generation after generation of people ever since then have found that it’s true. You train your mind, you gain control of your mind. You gain an understanding of your mind, particularly the ways in which the mind is causing itself unnecessary suffering in the way we feed on things—not only physical food but also mental food. The mind feeds on its moods, it feeds on its feelings, it feeds on its ideas. Sometimes those things are good food and sometimes they’re junk food. But above all, you have to learn don’t be a slave to your moods.

As the Buddha once pointed out, there are four kinds of actions in the world. There are things you like to do that when you do them give good long-term results, and then there are actions you don’t like to do that give long-term bad results. Both of those are no-brainers. If you like to do it, it gives good results, it’s very easy to do. If you don’t like to do it and it gives bad results, it’s very easy to say No. The problems are the things that you like to do but give bad long-term results, and the things you don’t like to do that give good long-term results.

It’s right here that the Buddha said that your discernment can be measured. Discernment doesn’t mean that you have to think about abstract things. It’s just a matter of: Can you talk yourself into doing the things you know really are in your long-term benefit even though you don’t like doing them? And can you talk yourself out of doing the things that you like to do but you know are going to lead to long-term harm? That’s where your real discernment is.

And that's where you find your freedom. If you're a slave to your moods then who knows what's going to happen in the long term. But if you're not a slave, then you can decide, "I'm doing this because it gives long-term benefits; I'm saying No to that because it gives long-term harm." That's when you're free. You don't have to be anybody's slave at that point.

So try to find time when you can be by yourself, and realize that you don't want your moods to take over when you're by yourself, when you turn off the device, when you're cut off from the rest of the world. You want something better than your moods. You want wisdom. And the Buddha's offering a chance, "This is how you develop wisdom." Look at the good examples that other people have left from the past, good examples you see in the present moment. If you see someone do something particularly skillful, take note of that and say, "I can do that, too." If you see somebody doing something really unskillful, instead of getting worked up about how bad they are, ask yourself, "Do I have that habit myself? If I do, this is how it looks from the outside. Maybe I'd better change." In this way, wisdom takes over and develops.

Of course, you need to have a sense of well-being to make sure that the bullies don't say, "Well, I just want my pleasure right now." This is why we have meditation on the breath, to give yourself a sense of ease right here, right now, that you can tap into whenever you want. In that way, the impulse to just go for the quick fix is a lot weaker, because you've got something better right here.