

Moods Are Not-self

April 4, 2022

Sometimes you wish the Buddha had included moods as the sixth aggregate because they're something we hold on to really tightly. Of course they're there in the aggregates. They come under fabrications. These are states of mind and body that get put together. But we're so used to our moods that we don't see them as fabricated. We have our own what you might call signature moods that make us very unaware of how we're putting them together. They're just there, it seems. We hold to them very tightly, because they seem to be us even more than our thoughts. We know that we get a lot of our thoughts from other people, but our moods seem to be totally coming from within. They're totally ours. Yet as long as you identify with them, they're going to color everything. You've got to see that they're dangerous, especially when you put yourself in a bad mood.

Often we tend to roll around in our bad moods the same way a dog would roll around in a dead squirrel—and the dog is perfectly happy to do that. Even though you know it's a bad mood, you still roll around in it.

Part of the reason is that you feel surrounded by it. It's in your body. It permeates your mind. It seems to be coloring the air all around you. But it is something you can get out of, and it's good to remember that you can.

So think about why you might want to get out of those moods, even though it feels alien to not be in that mood.

One thing you could ask yourself is, "Do you want to be in a bad mood when you die?" You think, "Of course, that would be a perfectly natural time for a bad mood, because what could be worse than the fact that you're dying?" But for the sake of your future happiness, that's precisely when you *don't* want to be in a bad mood. You want to be confident that you can handle whatever's going to come up in the course of dying.

So practice a little mindfulness of death. This is something that's really misunderstood. Some people think that this practice is there simply to remind you that someday you're going to die, so you've got to prepare. That's it. The important point is knowing *how* to prepare. A lot of times, death is all around us, and yet we'd rather not think about it. The Buddha's saying, "Look, think about it. This is how you think about it, how you prepare." You're going to need to get your mind in good shape, and that includes your moods. If any unskillful moods are hanging around, you've got to learn how to get rid of them.

We think about death in this way because the Buddha goes on to show us how to prepare.

The common way of thinking about it is that death is going to come anyhow, there's nothing much you can do about it, you're just going to die and be annihilated, so what's the skill? But the Buddha's saying there is a skill involved, and you want to be in the right mood to do that. This is where it's useful to remember what the Buddha said.

Moods would come under fabrication. What are the kinds of fabrication that go into it? The three big ones: bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal—the way you talk to yourself; and then mental—the perceptions you hold in mind and the feelings you focus on. Those are the things that went in to create the mood you're in, so you can change them. There are lots of ways you can change them. Think about those lists of topics the Buddha tells Rahula to think about before he does breath meditation, because one of the times you're really going to need the mind in the right mood is when you sit down to meditate.

Some people have trouble. They come from their daily life where there's frustration and they're impatient. They sit down and focus on the breath, and they get frustrated and impatient with the breath. So the first order of business is get the mind in the right mood to be with the breath on good terms. To begin with, the Buddha recommended that you try to make your mind like earth. Think of the part of the mind that can just be with anything, no matter what, and not feel upset or elated by it—because that part of the mind *is* there. When you're in a good mood, it knows. When you're in a bad mood, it knows. That's the part you can make like earth.

And look at the way you talk to yourself around goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity; the way you talk to yourself about your body; the way you talk to yourself about things around you outside. Try to get yourself in the right frame of mind to settle down.

Those are some of the ways you can talk to yourself.

Then you can ask yourself: Which part of the mind resists changing the fabrications, saying, "I'm not true to myself if I'm not true to my moods." Ask in return: How have your moods been true to you? Are they always helpful? Always there when you needed them? Not at all. They come and go. They're not responsible in any way. And they're certainly not going to feel neglected if you don't indulge in them. So talk to yourself, first in a way that makes you more and more inclined to say, "Okay, I can get rid of these moods, or I can let go of them, and not be a traitor to myself, actually showing that I have some concern for myself."

Then look at the images you hold in mind. These will be individual words, phrases, sometimes pictures. They're lurking around in there someplace. If you're not sure what they are, try a few images that are more of a sunny disposition, a confident disposition—you as capable of doing the meditation, you as not being worn down by your daily routine—and see which part of the mind will say, “You're lying.” That's where you're going to find where those perceptions are, because there is that part of the mind that tends to believe when you're in a bad mood that that's the real you, that that's where you see reality for what it is, how miserable it is. It believes that happy moods are false.

You have to call out that part of the mind. It's based on what? You've had disappointments in the past, and you feel that your way of shielding yourself from disappointments is just being in a bad mood all the time, not to expect anything. But then you don't accomplish anything.

After all, as long as your experience is going to be fabricated, fabricate it well. Do it in a way that allows you to attain things that you wouldn't have attained otherwise.

So when you can see that your moods are fabrications, and they seem to be you simply because they've been around for a long time—they're habits, old habits—then you realize that you can change the way you fabricate things. Develop some new habits. And it doesn't matter how old you are. As long as you have a breath that comes in and goes out, you can change the way you fabricate your breath. You can listen to what the Buddha has to say about how we are capable of changing our habits, abandoning unskillful habits and developing skillful ones in their place.

Think about it. The Buddha was not some dreamy Pollyanna type who simply said nice things. He had tortured himself to the verge of death. He came back, found the middle way. Okay, you can find the middle way too. He's shown that it's possible. And the confidence that there is a way out: That's what kept him going, even when things looked pretty bleak. It can keep you going, too. That can be the mood you hang on to: the confident mood. And you can make it you.

This is one of those areas where you don't apply not-self across the board. You're trying to create the good mood, identify with it, for the time being at least. You're confident, capable, competent, too. The more you can take these moods apart and reassemble them in a way that's helpful for the path, the more you're going to believe that, because you can *make* it true.

Remember those two kinds of truth: the truths that are true whether you want them to be or not, and then the truths that will be true only if you want them and act on that desire. They're just as true. It's just that your relationship is different. It

takes more out of you. The Buddha teaches the truth of a path that can take you to the end of suffering. Even if it takes a lot out of you, it's really worth it because it pays back many times over.