

*Chapter 24 of Meditation Now or Never by Steve Hagen*

Meditation isn't about cutting off our feelings, or ignoring them, or transcending them. It's just the opposite. In meditation, we freely experience and realize our emotions fully — without increasing them with thought, without trying to end them or continue them, without trying to do anything about them at all.

In meditation, we don't analyze our feelings or thoughts. We let them come up, observe them fully without commenting, and let them fade away. That's all.

Usually, when we have a feeling, particularly a negative feeling, we are tempted to vent it in some way to get it off our chests. We believe that expressing it will enable us to be done with it, so that it can dissipate.

Maybe. But maybe not. In fact, it's not the expression of the feeling — that is, talking about or demonstrating the feeling — that allows it to dissipate. It's in realizing it directly — that is, in feeling it fully without adding thought to it or interfering with it — that we can truly let it go.

It's possible that unloading our feelings may help us to feel them by making them more real or intense. But this is not helpful if we then can't let them go and return to *here* and *now*.

We need to be careful. For in talking about our feelings to others, rather than just noting them completely and quietly and then letting them go, we can sometimes get caught up in them, not to mention stir up emotions in others as well. Instead of simply watching them as they dissolve, we grab hold of them and pump them up, or obsess over them. Often, as part of this process, we imagine events from our past or fantasize about our future. These reveries are never real, but we tend not to notice that. Whether they're based on memory, hope, fear, or dread, we're imagining them. They're delusional. They're not *here* and *now*.

Yet look at the power such thoughts have to carry us away.

Imagine that you drop in on a friend who's been feeling down lately, to see how he's doing. He tells you, "I feel great today. Yesterday I wasn't doing too well, but today I'm just fine"

"You weren't feeling well yesterday?" you ask. "Tell me more about that."

He does, and soon he's back in his depression.

This is exactly what we do with ourselves when we allow our thoughts to work on our emotions. Even though we might feel fine in this moment, our minds drift into the past or future, where our thoughts stir up negative feelings, say, in response to our mental images. Then, instead of letting those feelings and images drift away, we take hold of them, turn them over, and review them closely, telling ourselves more about how bad we feel.

We tend to think that by analyzing our feelings — particularly our painful ones — or the images we conjure up in our minds that engender them, we can find some core to our mental problems, get a good look at what's wrong, and then fix everything. We imagine there's something warped

or bent out of shape in our minds that needs to be repaired, and, if left unattended, the disturbing or painful feelings will continue indefinitely.

But simply feeling bad is not the problem. It's this process of needing to fix what isn't broken that's the problem.

Simply feeling bad at times is normal. So is simply feeling good.

When we feel good for no particular reason, however, we rarely say to ourselves, "Why am I feeling good? I need to figure this out, look deep within, and try to find a reason for these good feelings." We're more likely to just let ourselves feel good and not give it another thought.

We can (and ought to) do the same with emotions we don't like: experience them completely — that is, notice them, but without trying to control or resist them. Just let them wash through and fade away.

Our problem is not that we're warped or broken at the core. Our problem is that we get caught up in our thinking. Instead of simply feeling, we mentally obsess about those feelings, and then confuse these thoughts with Reality. We grasp the fleeting feeling and hang on, continuing to relive our painful thoughts over and over. While we're mentally fixated on an event that took place yesterday, or last week, or twenty years ago, the actual, fresh, clean, vibrant reality of *this moment* flashes by without our even noticing.

In *this moment*, there's no dragging out our past. There's no projecting the future, with all its attendant worries, excitement, dread, regrets, and expectations.

This isn't to say that we ought to ignore the past or the future. But we need to understand that the past and future are never *here* but only as thought. It's always *now*; it's never then or when. *Now* is where everything takes place.

We all have a great deal of learning and experience in our memories and thoughts. Use them, but use them wisely. As my teacher used to say, "Put them in your backpack and carry them lightly." Let your past inform your life, not hold sway over it. Draw upon your past only as you need to, as experience and learning that can be helpful in *this moment*.

Sometimes we imagine our past as a massive weight on our shoulders, under which we must somehow lumber down the road of life. But the past simply isn't here. It can't be. Our *thoughts* about the past may appear in this moment, but thoughts don't have any intrinsic weight of their own. To whatever degree we imagine the weight of the past on our shoulders, it's weight that we're needlessly loading on ourselves. There's no such weight. It's only that we *think* there is.

The same goes for the future. If you dread it, you're forgetting that it's only thought. On the other hand, if you're filled with great expectations, you've just set yourself up for a big letdown. In the meantime, how much of your precious time are you going to let slip by without noticing?

Sometimes, too, the more we talk about our feelings, the more solid and permanent they appear. We fuel those feelings with thought, giving birth to them anew in each new moment. In

this way we make ourselves quite miserable. We then grow attached to these feelings, believing that the stronger we feel them, the more powerful or important or profound they are. We overlook that it was in our carelessness that we artificially made them so intense. But if we carry on in this way, is it because we're capable of feeling deeply, or because we're, to some degree, insane? We're not noticing our part in all of this confusion.

We may imagine that if we talk about how we feel and why, we can get down to something genuine and true. But we can't. We can't ever really explain how we feel — we can only *feel* how we feel. This is as far as we can go without our thoughts otherwise making a mess of it.

Had we simply let our initial feeling alone, it would soon fade away like the morning dew. And our sense of urgency — our need to somehow deal with the feeling — would evaporate as well.

So in meditation we put our effort into coming back. In each moment, learn to spot yourself forming and running off into the past or the future. Then come back. Just come back. Don't say anything, not even to yourself.

We commonly imagine that thoughts and feelings are separate things. But they're not exactly, as we've seen. They constantly feed each other.

Sometimes you'll hear someone describe themselves as a thinking person or a feeling person, but the fact is, we all think and we all feel. None of us just thinks or just feels. This is directly experienced by all of us. Thinking and feeling occur together at once. Heart and mind are not separate. (Indeed, there's a classic Zen text that identifies them as one in its title: "Trusting the Heartmind")

In meditation, we give full attention to direct experience — that is, what we feel, see, think, hear, smell, or taste right *now*. That's all. In other words, we don't comment on it. We don't ignore it or squelch it or analyze it or dwell on it or control it. Thus it all washes through.

In learning to come into *this moment*, we realize feelings directly, and we see the thoughts that often come attached to them.

But we don't judge them or talk about them. We don't make anything of them at all. They come-and go, and we taste them fully and directly, with no aftertaste. We don't consume them, and they don't consume us.

We only need to watch. Negative emotions under wordless observation cannot last for long. As long as we don't say anything to ourselves about them, they will naturally weaken and die away. But if we feed and amplify those feelings, they will just as naturally remain and grow.

Our emotions and thoughts are like the weather. They are sometimes pleasant, sometimes unpleasant, always changing. We can do little to control them directly, and are wise not to try. Yet they needn't control us, either. What we can do is be alert. Just observe and let them be what they are. And after the occasional, inevitable storm has passed, we only need to quietly watch as the clouds dissipate on their own without any help from us.

