

Negative Emotions

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We try to train the mind because it's the source of all our real problems. We tend to think that our problems come from outside, but it's the way the mind deals with those outside issues—that's the real problem.

It's always looking for trouble. Lust comes, and it goes looking for something to feel lustful about. Anger comes, and it goes looking for things to be angry about. And it's not that the world doesn't provide these things. They're there—but it's what we do with them that turns them into issues.

So we have to turn our attention inward to look at where the source of these issues comes from. Our immediate reaction, of course, is always to focus on the things outside. So the very first step is to turn our attention around and just looking at the state of the mind that goes flowing out to those objects.

For example, when lust comes, you have to learn how to let go of the object you're focused on and turn around to look at the lust. When anger comes, let go of the object of your anger, turn around to look at the fact of anger in the mind—what it's like to be angry.

The same goes for other emotions: fear, shame, anxiety. You have to turn around and just look at the event in the mind *in and of itself*. And for most of us, that's quite an accomplishment right there.

One good technique is to focus on the aspects of the object that don't go in line with the emotion you're feeling. For example, with lust: Contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body. Our attachment to the body goes really, really deep. Even for people who feel they don't sense much lust in any way, there's still a very strong attachment to the body. It goes right into the bone, and it's amazing how deep it is.

So we constantly have to keep hammering away at this issue. Look at the aspects of the body that aren't worth holding on to, that aren't worth getting attached to, over, and over, and over again. Because it's not our normal habit.

The purpose of this is to focus your attention away from the object, to turn around and look at the mind: Why does it feel lust? Why does it feel attachment for this?—a thing that really doesn't deserve lust, or really doesn't deserve attachment.

The same goes for anger. Try to feel compassion for yourself, compassion for the other person, compassion for the situation, so that you can let go of the object and turn around and look at the state in the mind—*in and of itself*. What is it like to be angry?

The same holds for fear. There's a great story they tell about Ajaan Khao, in the Northeast of Thailand. He was staying in a cave for several days and he had no idea that there was a tiger that lived deeper into the cave—until one night. It was a full moon night, he was out doing

walking meditation in front of the cave, and the tiger came along to go into the cave. Ajaan Khao immediately felt a fear that filled his whole body, but he was quick enough to turn his attention away from the tiger and onto the fear: realizing that the tiger wasn't the real danger, the real danger was the fear itself—what he might do under the power of that fear. His concentration was strong enough so that he could focus on the feeling of the fear until the feeling of fear dropped away, and he dropped into a very deep, deep state of concentration, standing there in front of the tiger.

When he came out of that concentration, the moon had moved quite a ways. He realized he'd been in that concentration for several hours. The tiger was gone.

He learned several important lessons: one, the ability to drop the object and look at the fact of the emotion in the mind. And then two, he realized that the emotion and his awareness were two separate things.

All too often, the emotion colors our awareness. It's like dye that goes into a glass of water and seeps throughout the water, coloring all the water in the glass. But if we're really attentive, we can see that the fact of the awareness and the emotion are two separate things. There's a very natural dividing line between the two.

When you catch sight of that, that moves you on to the second stage in the practice—having that sense of separateness where you really can observe the emotion, and not identify with it. When you observe it, then you can start looking into, “Where does it come from? What is it flowing out of?”

It flows out of ignorance, so turn your attention onto that ignorance. Exactly what are you consciously ignoring? We tend to think of ignorance as a blank that just happens to be there in the mind, but actually there's an active process of ignoring, an active process of denying, of shutting things off within the mind. What are we covering up?

For most of us, that's how our minds function—there's a lot that we cover up from ourselves. And in the course of doing that, we just create more problems. The mind may feel that it can live with itself more easily that way, but that's not really the case, because deep down inside you know that there's a dishonesty—there's a split.

Our desire to maintain those delusions: That's what keeps us divided from ourselves, and that's what keeps all the important things in the mind under wraps, behind the curtains. The purpose of the meditation, the purpose of training the mind, is to open those curtains to look inside.

You may or may not like what you find when you look inside, but at least it's better to see it than to keep it hidden. It's better to bring it out into the open for yourself, because that way there are fewer and fewer things that can take over the mind apparently out of nowhere.

For many people when anger comes, it really *seems* to come out of nowhere. When fear comes, when any of these emotions come, they seem to suddenly appear—full-blown. But when you can start getting the mind more and more still, so that it can see more

clearly through these curtains, through these screens that it puts up within itself, then you realize that there are certain stages in how these emotions arise. There's a whole series of agreements: The mind agrees with itself, "Okay, this is going to be this, and that's going to be that, and I'm going to hold on to this, and I'm going to think that, and turn this little stirring in the mind into this or that idea, this or that emotion"—a whole string of agreements that goes on behind the curtains.

It's like politics: Most of the decisions are made behind closed doors. Most of the agreements are made behind closed doors. What happens outside is just for show. Often what the mind does is just for show. Who is it showing? It's showing to itself. It doesn't have to show anybody else.

A lot of the ways it justifies its emotions are based on what you'd say if somebody asked you about it. Someone asks, "Why did you feel anger?" "Well..." You have to give a reason that's socially acceptable, but as for the other reasons, you hide those behind the curtains. And you're not just hiding them from other people—you hide them from yourself. But the bigger the range of ignorance in your own mind, the more these things are likely to come out of nowhere and cause lots of problems.

So there are many stages in dealing with emotions like this. One is just to get your focus away from the object and on to the actual emotion in and of itself. Second is to realize that the emotion is one thing, your awareness of the emotion is something else. And you have to make the mind really as still as possible, so that you can catch these emotions as they begin, before the curtains come down to hide all the dressing up and the fabrication that goes on—before the emotions come on in full dress, full-blown.

This is why the practice of concentration is so important—and why it's an important stage in the concentration just not to play along with anything that comes along. Learn how to disband things quickly. The more quickly you can disband them, the closer and closer you get to their actual beginnings, to the point where there's a little stirring in the mind and then a label comes along and says *this is this, and that's that*, and creates whatever issues you want to out of that little stirring.

When you see this, then when the time comes to actually watch these things as they develop, you're less and less likely to get taken in. You're less and less likely to participate in what's going on. You really can have that sense of *separate* awareness that can watch things as they actually happen.

So this practice of concentration is not just a nice comfortable place to stay for periodic times in the day. It's the basic skill you need if you're going to see anything in the mind, if you're going to gain any real training in the mind, to make a real difference in how the mind functions, make a real difference in how things are organized, how things are administered in the mind.

So even though it sometimes may seem dumb just to keep coming back to the breath, coming back to the breath, it's a basic, necessary skill. Without this, you can't really see anything. All you have are ideas you've picked up from books, you've picked up from other people. Then you try to sketch in the blank spaces, but it's all guesswork. And where does guesswork come from? From the same ignorance you're trying to overcome.

You've got to turn around and do things in a new way: Realize that important changes have to be made here. But if you do the practice, you'll have the tools that you need to make them.