

The Hidden Power of Mood

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Lost in a Mood

We all know what it means to be in a mood. However, part of the nature of mood is that we often don't know when we're in it. It can be like a wet wool blanket over our heads, keeping us from seeing it or anything else very clearly.

Moods have an energy thought-loop to them. We can get lost in what seem like explanations of why we feel the way we do, telling stories to ourselves, adding them up. This process can keep intensifying the emotional tone of the mood. And yes, we can be in several moods at once. They can be composite, or overlaid, or revolving or whatever, depending on their causes and conditions.

One thing I want to make clear: being in a mood is not your fault. There's no blame here. It's like being covered with mud. It's often unpleasant and you want to get out of it, but it's not something to hold against yourself, especially with mood disorders, or biochemical moods. Together with proper medical help and therapy, this practice can help with biochemical moods, using the same kind of techniques I'll be discussing. Generally, though, this talk will address moods that arise from life's experiences, or, "situational" moods. As with all aspects of this practice, if what you try doesn't zap you right into a better mood, you have not failed, in any way.

It's important to understand that while we're in a mood, it colors our perceptions. Like a magnetic force, moods pull all new events into their orbit. Things that wouldn't otherwise cause an emotional reaction now get added up, and amplify the power of the mood. And this process continues without our recognizing it, twisting our response to each new event.

That certainly happens to me when I get "down" because of things that are happening, like this injury to my foot. It turns out it's worse than a broken bone. This kind of injury heals very slowly – if at all – and it's very painful until it heals. It's left me pretty immobile, made a lot of activities impossible, and limited the fun in what I can do. So over the past four months I gradually slipped into a depression. This is a mood that just drains your energy.

Another mood I've had to deal with is being irritated or frustrated. There are all sorts of moods, and when they start blending with each other, who knows what they're called?

Then there are good moods: days when we feel like we're brimming with energy; it seems there are so many fun things to do that we can't possibly do in them all in a day. Most of us love this kind of mood. And yet – it has its down sides. A big one is that we often mistake a good mood for happiness, and when it's gone – either because something happened to disturb it or it just isn't there one morning – it feels like life has gotten worse. It seems we're just not happy anymore. Also, these "up" moods can go too high. They can turn giddy, or manic, overriding our good judgment and leading us into conduct we regret.

Seeing We're In One

The first challenge with moods is to know when we're in one. Sometimes it takes someone else to tell us, "You're pretty bubbly lately," or, "Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed today?" If we can realize we're in a mood before it effects our behavior too much, we can avoid a lot of suffering – our own and that of those around us.

So how do we use our practice to deal with our moods?

A lot of what our practice is about is just coming back to being present, over and over. We do this when we're formally meditating, and in mindful moments during the day. In those moments we emerge from the fog of our day's experiences, back to being aware of ourselves as sentient beings. This has a wonderful effect on our quality of life, just to be present for however long it lasts. It provides a moment of respite and relaxation that's quite pleasant, just like the moments in meditation when we're conscious of feeling relaxed and stress-free.

But it's really just the beginning of our practice. Once we become present, our job is to study our immediate experience. Technically, it's the moment just before our return to mindfulness that we need to study. This is why over the centuries many scholars have called mindfulness by words that also mean "remembering." Most of the time, when we are suddenly mindful again, there's still a residue of mental phenomena left over from the mindless moment before: an emotional feeling that lingers in the body, a train of thought echoing in the background.

Almost every time I lead meditation, I suggest that you do something in the moment when you return to mindfulness: check out how you *feel*. Also, look at the thoughts you had just before you snapped back to Buddha-hood. Can you see the link of causation between the two? Put that higher consciousness to work. Look into your heart and mind and see: was I suffering just now? Why? This is the work Buddha assigned us in the sixth fold of the Eightfold Path, the Wise Effort of reducing mind states that cause suffering, and fostering those leading to peace, joy and love. The first step in doing that is to develop the ability to monitor our state of mind and heart. It's so important to practice this in meditation, when we're not imbedded in the chaos of daily life.

Now, when we do have mindful moments during that chaos, out in the world, our feelings and thoughts may be more powerful, and in that way somewhat easier to "see." But it's during meditation that we need to develop the habit of looking, and of trying to discern the causal connection between our thoughts and feelings. Again, it's nice if we're mindful during the day and get a little mini-break from high stress, but we get a lot more benefit if we also put that moment to work in a way that will reduce our overall suffering. As we do this time and again, we begin to see patterns, get to know ourselves, and develop wisdom. It's cumulative. The more we learn, the more we see, the better we can avoid suffering in the future, and so forth.

Learning Our Way Out

Let's take as an example the mood I got to know well over the course of this year, after I injured my foot in January. My tolerance for frustration was depleted, by not knowing why my foot wouldn't heal, not being able to do things, and so forth. It took a lot of my spiritual bandwidth to deal with this, resulting in my being what you might call "irritable."

Things I could usually tolerate would make me say things I really wished I hadn't. Surprisingly often, just seeing that I'm irritable will loosen the mood's hold on me. But in big moods, like that cranky one I was in, it takes a little more effort and intention. When I have a moment of awareness and see that I'm irritable, my job as a practitioner is to study this experience and understand it – in terms of what caused it and how I can change what's going on in my mind and thereby end this suffering. I need to get my mind out of the stories that keep circling in my head like a hamster wheel about how rotten this situation is and oh, woe is me. Sometimes we can also use antidotes to the mind states we're in, good spiritual medicine.

Here's an example. I was sitting in the supermarket parking lot on a hot day. The car was getting hot, so I began feeling sorry for myself because I couldn't open the driver's window to make a cross-breeze. While thoughts started tempting me to blame this on the now-absent driver who was in doing our shopping (with the car keys), I became aware of a woman a couple lanes in front of me. She was a very heavy woman with ankles badly swollen, wearing inexpensive sandals. It was obvious seeing her walk that it hurt her. As I gradually focused attention on her, I noticed that I was feeling compassion. There was a big difference between the feeling tone of that and of the self-pity I'd just been wallowing in. What I felt for this woman was much gentler and more comforting than what I'd been feeling for myself for the past several months. So I took the rest of my time in that now not-so-hot car meditating, turning this feeling of compassion toward my own experience.

This didn't instantly snap me out of the mood permanently, but over the past couple weeks, I've watched for that tightness in the body that comes with being irritable, and I've brought compassion for myself whenever I think of all I'm missing because of my foot. That cranky mood has gradually lifted and I've returned to normal – whatever that is.

So moods may be good or bad, as we judge them. But they're no one's fault. They're just a fact of human life. Still, they present us with a great practice opportunity, when they're situational and we can get an idea of what caused them. The first step is to develop a habit of returning to mindfulness. Then, when we have such a moment, put it to use. See what's happening with us, recognize that we're in a mood that causes suffering, and investigate how it does that. Then see what can be done about it, like turning attention away from habitual thoughts, and bringing in an antidote, like compassion. As we practice, we learn and gradually get better. We just need to keep practicing with whatever is up in each moment of mindfulness.