A Handle on Your Emotions

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You’ve probably seen the video of the experiment where they take a kid, put him in a room alone with a donut, and tell him they’re going to come back in five or ten minutes. And if he hasn’t eaten the donut, they’ll give him another donut. Then they have a camera on the kid to see what he actually does. And a lot of the kids can’t resist. As soon as the door is closed, they eat the donut, or they play with the donut a little bit, and then they eat it bit by bit. Apparently they kept tabs on those children, and over the years they found that the kids who were able to withstand the temptation to eat the donut actually did better in life than the ones who couldn’t withstand. The implication of the experiment, at least the way I interpreted it, was that the little kids were hardwired from the beginning to be able to say no to their emotions. Or not. But from the Buddhist point of view, we’re all trainable. We can be taught to have better skills in delayed gratification. And it’s not just delaying the gratification. It’s being skilled in how you delay it. These are skills that can be learned. It reminds me of an experiment that I was in one time. I was told to put my right hand in a bucket of ice water, and then to think of the cold in the right hand going into the left hand, and the warmth of the left hand going into the right hand, to see how long I could keep the hand in the bucket. I’d already been doing the Ajahn Lee Method, so thinking of energy flowing through the body was nothing new. So after several minutes I was told that I could stop because I was breaking the curve. I found out later that the experiment was designed to divide people into three groups. The first group was told to put their hand in the bucket of ice water and then take it out as soon as it got painful. The second group was told to put their hand in and keep it there as long as they could. And then the third group was given a technique for dealing with the cold. And of course, it was the third group who did much better than the other two. So when you’re learning to step back from emotions, learning some delayed gratification, it helps to have some techniques to give you some support. This is one of the functions of meditation. As we focus on the breath, work with the breath, we’re taking apart one part of the emotion right there, which is the way you breathe, and we’re reclaiming it. Of course, you have to learn how to see the emotion as something separate. That’s an event in the mind that, if it takes over, is going to cause you trouble down the line. So we have to start with some right views about the emotions, remembering that the emotions are fabricated. Not the real you speaking when you have a strong emotion. It’s simply a very insistent bullying emotion that’s come in, it’s taken over the playground, seized your breath, turned your breath against you. So now you’re breathing in a way that feels uncomfortable, and they’re holding your breath hostage, basically saying, “If you don’t give in to me, you’re going to be miserable.” So reclaim the breath. Take it back. And you can do that. If you’re used to breathing through patterns of tension in the body, having a sense of well-being in the breath as your default mode, it’s going to be a lot easier to take it back. And you’ve weakened a lot of the emotion right there. That’s the difference between a mere thought and an emotion. An emotion is a thought that’s taken over your breath, and that as a result is taken over by different hormones in your body. So remind yourself that when an emotion comes and the hormones are raging, the fact that they’re raging doesn’t necessarily mean that the emotion is still there. The emotion can pass away and yet leave the hormones there in your system. So you breathe and put up with the fact that there may be some discomfort in the body. Realize the simple fact of stepping back and looking at the emotion rather than jumping into it. It gives you a handle on things. Then you can work with the breath. Calm things down and think more clearly about what’s going on. This is where you look into the way you talk to yourself around the emotion and ask yourself, “Do I have to talk to myself that way or is there another way?” This is the skill we learn working with the breath as well. You learn how to talk to yourself about the breath in a way that’s actually helpful. You look at your perceptions, the images you have in mind about the breath, and you realize you can change your perceptions. You can perceive the breath simply as the air coming in and out through the nose, or you can perceive it as the energy flowing through the nerves of the body. You can perceive the energy as coming in from the outside. You can perceive it as originating from the inside. There are lots of different ways you can perceive this. They all have different effects on how you actually experience the breath. But then you can take that same set of skills and apply it to the emotion. Are you talking to yourself around the issue? Can you talk to yourself in a different way? Here, too, changing your values around it is really helpful. Seeing, say, anger or lust as troublesome rather than as your friends. You decide you want to take them apart. So as we learn the skills of concentration, we learn some discernment. These are good handles on the emotions. But other parts of the path are good handles as well. Learning generosity, being happy to give a gift, requires that you step back from some of your desires. You’ve got something. You may like to keep it for your own use, but then you realize if you give it to somebody else, there will be advantages. They’ll be happier. They’ll be friendlier toward you. So sometimes it’s worth giving that thing up. The same with the precepts. Delayed gratification. You feel immediately that you would like to do something that would satisfy your desire, say, to get back at somebody, but then you realize it doesn’t accomplish it. It just gets you in a back and forth that you have no idea when it’s going to end. So you decide to stick with your precepts. Stick with the principles of right speech and learn to find gratification in that. I tend to be pretty grim about the meditation. He ascribed it to the fact that a lot of us come to the meditation without having gone through the Buddhist teachings on generosity and virtue. Now, we probably have practiced some generosity and some virtue in our lives. But his teachings on the topic put them in the right light. So these do become skillful alternatives to just giving in to your emotions. You’re not bottling them up. You’re not suppressing them. You’re learning to channel them in a good direction. Think in good ways that make you happy to be generous, make you happy to be virtuous. And with that experience of being happy to delay the gratification of your desires, it gives you a position where you can be happy to step back from your emotions. So the basic steps of the practice—virtue concentration, discernment, or generosity, virtue, and meditation—are all good lessons in how to be skillful in delaying gratification. And practice in delaying gratification helps you step back from your emotions in a skillful way. They’ve learned that people who have manual skills, if they’re really good at the skill, tend to be a little bit more emotionally stable than people who don’t have any skills at all. So meditation, generosity, virtue, all these things are skills that give you some more maturity. So you can be in charge of your emotions and they’re not in charge of you. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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