

A Good Mood to Meditate

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Ajaan Suwat often said at the beginning of his meditation instructions to put yourself in a good mood. It might sound backwards. We think that we meditate in order to get in a good mood. How do you start out in a good mood? Well, you remind yourself that meditating is a good thing. Here you've got this opportunity sit here quietly watching your mind. It's an opportunity that rarely comes. Most people in the world are either too rich or too poor, too busy with their work, too enthralled with their pleasures, to have the time, to take the time, to really get to know their own mind. You've got the opportunity right now.

Remind yourself also that you're following a good path, the path of the Buddha's teachings—virtue, concentration, discernment—which harms no one. It helps foster good qualities in the mind. It's a path that was found by people without defilements and taught by people without defilements who, when they taught it, had no ulterior motives are all. They had found what worked and were happy to share it with others.

So if you find that you're bringing a bad mood into the meditation, stop and think for a while. This is one of the reasons why we have the chants, to think about things that are conducive to meditation, to remind us of why it's a good thing to be meditating. Think thoughts of goodwill. Remind yourself that ultimate happiness can't be found in the body or the things of the body. If you're going to find true happiness, you have to find it in the mind. So focus on whatever theme you find helpful to get the mind in a good mood to meditate, and then it'll be a lot easier to settle down.

When the Buddha describes suffering, he talks about clinging to the five aggregates. And we hear that one of the aggregates is feeling. People often assume that means our emotions, but that's not where the emotions are in the aggregates. The emotions are under fabrications. They're put together. What are they made out of? They're made of, one, the way you breathe. Emotions have their physical aspect. They're not totally mental. An emotion is basically a thought that's gotten lodged in the body and has affected the hormones in the body one way or another, which is why it seems so much more insistent, so much more important and real than mere thoughts.

This is why we tend to identify with our moods much more than we identify with thoughts, because the moods have moved into the body that we claim to be us, claim to be ours. Part of this is caused by the way you breathe. Part of it is

caused by the way the mind thinks about things. You could sit here thinking about all the wrong that has been done to you: This person said that, that person did this. You focus on the topic, you can elaborate in all kinds of directions why it was wrong for them to do that, and you can build a really bad mood that way.

Deeper than that are what fabrications in the mind. Directed thought and evaluation are called verbal fabrication. They're things the mind says to itself. Then there are mental fabrications, which are feelings and perceptions: the labels you put on things, and the actual feeling-tones themselves—pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. All these things get mixed together and fabricated into emotions.

So it's important to realize that an emotion is a fabricated thing. It's not primal. It may deal a lot in the lizard part of our brain, but it's still fabricated. It's something put together. So when you realize that it's put together, you try to put together a good emotion if you find yourself in a bad one. One of the problems of being in a bad mood, though, is that it usually churns out hormones that get in the blood and stay in the blood for a while. So you may begin expressing the anger to yourself—or it might be actual a verbal expression of anger outside—and if you let the mind dwell on the anger for a while, certain hormones get in your bloodstream and then you're stuck with them for a while. It takes a while to wash them out.

So here you are, trying to sit and meditate and put yourself in a good mood, and yet you've got all these other hormones in the blood that are designed to make you feel on edge. If you're having trouble putting yourself in a good mood, it's because you're allowing the basic sense of the body to have a big impact on the mind. That's something you've got to learn how to cut through. Otherwise, it becomes a vicious circle. The mind feels lousy in the body and so it churns out more lousy hormones, and it feels even worse. So it's important to know how to cut the cycle. One way of doing that is realizing that it's just this stuff in the body. It's going to take a while for it to get out.

So don't focus on the whole body at a time like that. Focus on one little spot. There must be some spot in the body where you can gain some measure of comfort, so focus right there. As for the rest of the body, give it over to the hormones for the time being, but you're not going to feed on the bad feelings or the uncomfortable feelings in the body. You just confine your attention to that one little spot and hide out there. It's like going through a storm. If you have a little tiny shack, and there's a big storm outside, you just stay inside your little shack. You don't go venturing outside. Try to find a place that's safe from the

wind and the rain, and just stay right there. Content yourself, saying, “Well, at least here is safe.”

As for the storm outside, let it blow its way. If you find that you can’t stop it, you can’t stop it. If you went out and tried to stop the wind and the rain, you’d just expose yourself to the wind and the rain, which wouldn’t be helpful. You’ve got to get inside where it’s more dry, warm, protected from the storm, and content yourself with staying there. You may want to go outside but that’s not the time to go outside.

And it’s the same with the body, especially in the summer like this. It’s usually in really hot summers that riots happen in cities because people let the weather get to them.

So try not to let the heat get to you. That can just compound the problems. Find a little spot in the body that’s relatively cool and say, “Okay, I can’t make the whole body feel good, and I can’t make things outside be the way I want them to be, but at least here is one little spot where I can hunker down for the time being.” Then do your best to put yourself in a good mood in that little spot.

This is a basic principle that’s useful in all aspects of the practice. There will be times when you can’t get things to go the way you want them to, not only in terms of your moods but also in terms of social situations. All kinds of things outside are totally beyond our control, and yet we allow our happiness to depend on things that are totally out of our control. This puts us in a bad position. You’ve got to realize, “The wide range of the world that I would like to see this way or that way is not always going to be the way I want it to be. But at least I can control a few things inside my mind, inside the body.” Find those things and focus there. Ride out the storm that way.

This way, you help to cut that vicious cycle of being in a lousy mood that makes the body feels lousy, and then because it’s so lousy, your mood gets even worse. It’s a simple application of the teaching on not-self: Why identify with a lousy mood? It’s not going to help you at all. You say, “It’s mine,” well, simply because it’s in the mind would you want to say, “It’s mine”? If it’s lousy, who wants it? Learn to step outside it. Or learn how to step deeper inside. Don’t go streaming out after mood and then from the mood out to things outside. For the time being, identify only with what you can control. It may seem like a small space, but at least it’s better than getting involved in identifying with things that are actually going to make the situation worse.

So content yourself to be right here, right now. There’s another teaching that Ajaan Suwat would often stress, which was to content yourself with the practice. If it is going to be a little spot inside, content yourself with that little spot.

Meditate, he would say, with a sense of contentment. That way, you build a foundation for other better things, as the meditation begins to take root.

This is a basic principle you try to follow, not only while you're sitting here meditating but also as you go through the day. You're going to run into lots of situations you can't control, so don't go out and try to feed on them. Don't go out trying to claim them as you or yours. Learn to have at least a little spot inside that you can feed on, that provides you with some nourishment, so that you're not out there eating scraps and garbage that other people have thrown away. Learn to be selective in your feeding.

As you do this, you get a better and better sense of exactly how much you can control your moods, how you can condition them in the direction you want them to go. That it makes it a lot easier to live in the midst of the moods and the feelings in the body. Think of the various feelings you have as raw materials, out of which you can create a mood. Learn to be picky in which materials you're going to use. Use only materials that create good moods and just leave the rest. This doesn't mean turning a blind eye to mistakes you've made in the past, but you do have to put yourself in a good mood first before you're going to be able to look at your past mistakes in a way where you're willing to admit, "Ah, yes, I did make a mistake there, and I want to learn from that."

So the basic principle is always to do what you can to put yourself on a good solid footing first. Then, when you're ready, you can deal with whatever else gets thrown at you.