

How to Tame a Monkey

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When I was an undergraduate, I took a class on early Chinese philosophy. I was a junior or a sophomore at the time. One day I rolled into class, and noticed that people were pulling out pieces of paper and putting them on the tables in front of them. I had this nagging sense that I had forgotten something. Surely I would have remembered if there was a paper due today! I checked my calendar book, which was surprisingly vacant and untouched, and saw nothing. I checked the course syllabus. Sure enough, that morning's date was the due date for the midterm paper. It had come and went and I had not even given it a second thought. As class began, people handed their papers to the front of the room. I felt this awful feeling of impending doom wash over me, as if my life as I knew it was over. I liked this class, and I thought I was doing well in it. I spent the rest of the lecture feeling like I was going to the gallows, a root canal and a tax audit all at once. I spoke to the professor after the class was over and he let me turn the paper in late for a reduced letter grade. I don't remember what I got when I finally turned it in.

One thing I do remember though is that feeling of dread. The feeling of having forgotten something important that I should have brought with me. Those of you who have been to meetings with me have no doubt seen my trusty palm pilot—I have never trusted my memory for my schedule after that fateful morning. That is one thing I carried away. The other thing I took away was that feeling. I have literally had recurring dreams of that moment of extreme anxiety and distress.

There is plenty of that to go around these days; anxiety and distress. Every day the election seems to loom larger and larger on the national horizon. In a way I find it sneaking up on me. It's hard to believe that it is only a few weeks away, it seems like they have been campaigning for years. Regardless of which side you take, there is a lot riding emotionally for people on this election. Then to make matters worse the stock market has been on a roller coaster ride this past week. I know that has not done anyone's disposition any good. I heard from one member of my family that he was down twenty grand from last weekend to now. Sort of puts turning in a term paper a week late in perspective doesn't it. Although they are apples and oranges from a rational perspective, from an emotional perspective it might not be so dissimilar. That feeling of intense anxiety and uncertainty can overpower us, and leave us feeling adrift in life. Something we were counting on is not as

stable as we thought it was. Our faith is shattered, and that fear makes things worse.

What to do with all of this? Well I am probably not the one to come to for investment advice. But it reminds me of something the Dalai Lama once wrote. When the Dalai Lama was fifteen years old he was named the head of state; the ruler of the country of Tibet. A year later the Chinese invaded Tibet and he had to flee in disguise and found refuge in India. There he has lived in exile ever since, and the Tibetan people have been in diaspora. When the Dalai Lama was faced with the possibility of invasion he was filled with worry and dread. But he decided there are two parts of this situation that I am worried about: the things I can control and the things I can't control. I should work as hard as possible to improve those aspects of my situation in which my effort can conceivably make a difference. As for those things that I can do nothing about, then worrying about them will not improve them or make them worse. Therefore in either case there is no need to worry. Those things I can control I have given my fullest effort. The things out of my control will not be helped; they will be as they are.

I don't know if the Dalai Lama's advice is useful to you or not. But one thing it does point out is that the only thing we really have control over in our life is our own mind. We cannot control what other people do or fail to do. All we have is this mind and body in this very moment. Yet so often we don't really. We are pulled this way and that

way by distractions. Thich Nhat Hanh writes about his friend Jim who was a Catholic peace worker who worked on peace demonstrations during the Vietnam War.

“I remember a couple of years ago, when Jim and I were first traveling together in the United States, we sat under a tree and shared a tangerine. He began to talk about what we would be doing in the future. Whenever we thought about a project that seemed attractive or inspiring, Jim became so immersed in it that he literally forgot about what he was doing in the present. He popped a section of tangerine in his mouth and, before he had begun chewing it, had another slice ready to pop into his mouth again. He was hardly aware he was eating a tangerine. All I had to say was, ‘You ought to eat the tangerine section you’ve already taken.’ Jim was startled into realizing what he was doing.

It was as if he hadn’t been eating the tangerine at all. If he had been eating anything, he was ‘eating’ his future plans. A tangerine has sections. If you can eat just one section, you can probably eat the entire tangerine. But if you can’t eat a single section, you cannot eat the tangerine. Jim understood. He slowly put his hand down and focused on the presence of the slice already in his mouth. He chewed it thoughtfully before reaching down and taking another section.

Later, when Jim went to prison for activities against the war, I was worried about whether he could endure the four walls of prison and sent him a very short letter. ‘Do you remember the tangerine we shared when we were together? Your being there is like the tangerine. Eat it and be one with it. Tomorrow it will be no more.’”

The advice of a Zen master. Notice that Thich Nhat Hanh does not offer us magic or anything supernatural. He doesn’t tell his friend that

his imprisonment is all part of some larger divine plan. No, his message is much simpler; more down to earth. Right here, right now, pay attention to where you are and what you are doing. Really pay attention to it, even if it is unpleasant or scary. Set aside your distractions, the stories and narratives you get caught up with in your mind, and just be present with your full attention to everything that is placed before your senses.

The best way to begin is with the Buddha's advice in The Four Foundations of Mindfulness. When you breathe in a long breath, know that you are breathing in a long breath. When you are breathing in a short breath, know that you are breathing in a short breath. Notice that the Buddha doesn't tell you that your breathing should be long or short. There is no "should" here, there is simply what is. Sometimes your breathing is long, notice that. Sometimes your breathing is short, notice that. Stay present to your breathing. Recently I saw a list of funny sayings pretending to be from the Buddha. One was, "Breathe in, breathe out. Breathe in, breathe out. If you cannot do this, then enlightenment is the least of your worries!" But it is true. Breath is fundamental to life, and it is something you carry around with you all the time.

In our modern reading today, Thich Nhat Hanh mentions what he calls "Monkey Mind." Monkey mind is that tendency for the mind to run off in a million different directions following any shiny thing that captures its attention for the moment before the next thought or feeling

hooks us. I have sat in meditation before and when I was done thought, “You know I don’t even need TV. My own distractions are so much more entertaining.” Daydreaming can be tempting, but it takes us out of this moment. We are like Jim who is eating his future rather than the tangerine slice in his mouth. Meditation is the process of taming this monkey. It is interesting that Thich Nhat Hanh uses the word “bind the monkey.” The word “religion” comes from the Latin root *religare*; to bind back or to bind together. A happy coincidence that religion is what binds or tames the monkey mind.

But we should not be too down on distractions. The Buddha tells us that everything in this world is constantly changing. Our minds go from this thing to that like a monkey in a tree. However we should not be upset by this, or blame ourselves for not meditating correctly. There is no state of being called “distraction” and another state of being called “oneness” or “enlightenment.” Distraction and enlightenment are a continuous process; one flows into the other and back again. Our distractions are a part of us, and we cannot be angry or blame them away. We should show compassion to our distractions, they may actually be helpful.

Let me show you what I mean. In seminary in Chicago another student and I were very much into meditation. We ran a small meditation group of students and their friends who would get together once a week and just sit. Neither of us were “Zen Masters” and so we

didn't feel qualified to teach—but we could rearrange one of the larger classrooms and place cushions around the edge and turn it into a makeshift meditation room. We would turn out the lights on cold Chicago evenings and meditate and drink hot tea in the dark. It was wonderful!

One time one of our professors, now my colleague Rev. Carol Hepokoski in Rochester Minnesota, had forgotten part of her lesson notes in the classroom. She went to retrieve these notes only to find half a dozen or so of us sitting on cushions with the lights out, gazing at the floor before us. She gingerly opened the door, and walked to the table right in front of us. Light streamed in. She tried to gather what papers she could see in the dark, but there was a good deal of rustling and noise. If I am remembering correctly, she may even have apologized to us while we were meditating. Carol gathered her things and left as quietly as she could, closing the door behind her.

Do you know what happened? Nothing. None of us moved or spoke or looked up when she came in. All of us continued to meditate. Dave and I went to see Carol the next day: to thank her. She gave us a wonderful distraction. Anyone can be present to this moment when it is quiet. Can you do it when you want to get up and shout or stretch your legs? What about when they give you a great excuse to look up or even start one of those stories that always runs through our monkey minds, “Why is she here? Can't she see we are meditating? Come back later

and get your lesson!” No no. Present moment only. Breathing in I hear the rustling of paper, breathing out I see my embarrassed teacher leave. I have heard stories of Zen retreats in California where they sit on raised benches around the wall. Occasionally they get earthquakes in California and you can see these benches shake and sway while people are sitting on them. No one jumps up and runs. They stay with their breath. Carol gave us a chance, an opportunity, with her distraction to do some very good mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is just that process of binding up the monkey mind, of continuously returning to this very moment.

Meditation is a spiritual practice. I use the word practice very intentionally. You sit in meditation practicing following your breath, paying attention to the present moment. It is like the piano—practice for an hour, so that you can perform at the recital. The recital in this case is real life. When walking, be aware of walking. When crying, be aware of crying. When eating a tangerine, eat a tangerine. Mindfulness does not mean that you make no plans for the future. But when you call your stock broker this week, be mindful of calling your stock broker. Do so with your full self present. Do not be distracted by thoughts and feelings. Tame your monkey mind by pausing a few moments to breathe and maybe even smile.

I invite you to try this, if only for five minutes in your day. Soon five will grow to ten. Meditation is great because there really is no

theology involved. Buddha doesn't say that you have to believe X, Y, and Z before you follow your breath. Just do it. Over time, you will see that each present moment is interconnected to every other moment. Things slow down, and you feel a sort of kinship with life. Thich Nhat Hanh's book Miracle of Mindfulness gets its name because he notes that by practicing mindfulness and moving beyond the distractions of our monkey mind we start to see things clearer. We notice the birds and their songs where before we simply walked to the car with our ears closed. We take a moment to taste that crisp fall air in Delaware. Even in Hockessin where I live you that fall air contains the smell of mushroom farms. Enough mindfulness and you can even feel an appreciation for that.

One moment leads the next and to the next. To truly be mindful of one moment means you are mindful to the moments preceding it and following it. Thich Nhat Hanh mentions the poet Nguyen Cong Tru who was walking along a road one day, and suddenly understood that others had walked along the same road countless ages before. He wrote a poem: "On the same spot I sit today /Others came, in ages past, to sit. /One thousand years, still others will come. /Who is the singer, and who the listener?"

A month ago, I visited the Gettysburg Battlefield for the first time. If you have never been, I urge you to go. It was an awesome thing for me to stand on that battlefield, and I mean awesome in the true sense of

inspiring awe. The narrative of one's history books fails to capture the raw feeling one gets by standing among the rocks and boulders of Little Round Top. I was moved by sharing the same space as those men who died there long ago; to realize that only time separated them from me. And somehow the one hundred forty-five years that separates the events of the Civil War's decisive battle, and my life, seemed like a very small gap. "On the same spot I sit today others came, in ages past, to sit. One thousand years, still others will come. Who is the singer, and who the listener?" Each moment contains moments of the past. To be mindful of one is to be mindful of its ancestors. Paying attention to one's breath, our guide to this present moment, may seem like a small thing. And it is. But in the depth of that small moment lies the whole world.

I find that a comfort in those mornings when I wake up from my recurring dream of the paper I once forgot to turn in. Times of anxiety, worry, fear, and depression are a part of life. How many times I have sat with people in their darkest hours and wished for the magic wand to make suffering disappear. I suppose the best one can do in times such as these is to think of our worries sort of like my professor Rev. Carol when she barged into our meditation room. They are moments that test our resolve to be present. To be fully mindful even in the midst of scary or difficult emotions is a challenge. But so often the thing causing our suffering is usually the monkey mind, the story we tell ourselves of how awful things are, or how great things used to be, that are really not the

here and now. They have nothing to do with the changing leaves, the cool fresh air, the unseasonably warm sun, the kind smile of a co-worker, the affectionate touch of a loved one, the taste of a sour green apple. Whatever else may come up for you this week, be sure to make time for those moments too. Be present to them, fully aware of the gifts they are. Be sure to breathe. If you can't do that, then enlightenment is the least of your worries! Amen Blessed Be.