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*The
Antidote*

Happiness for
People Who Can't Stand
Positive Thinking

The Storm Before the Calm

A Buddhist Guide to Not Thinking Positively

You want it to be one way. But it's the other way.

– Marlo Stanfield in *The Wire*

IN THE EARLY 1960s, Robert Aitken, an American Zen Buddhist living in Hawaii, began to notice something inexplicable and alarming. Aitken was one of the pioneers in bringing Buddhism to the spiritually hungry West, and at their home in Honolulu, he and his wife Anne had opened a *zendo*, or meditation centre, catering mainly to the island's growing population of hippies. But something about a number of the new meditation students didn't seem right. They would arrive, and sit down on their cushions at the appointed time, where they would remain still as stones, apparently meditating; but then, when the bell rang to signal the end of a meditation period, they would rise to their feet – and immediately collapse onto the ground. It took Aitken several weeks of tactful enquiries to establish what was going on. Word had got around, among the hippies of Honolulu, that attempting Zen meditation while under the influence of LSD was the ultimate trip, an express train to mind-blowing ecstasy.

As the craze for Buddhist meditation spread further through America and Europe, the notion that it was a shortcut to ecstasy proved a popular one. Back in the 1950s, that had certainly been what had appealed to Jack Kerouac, who embraced it with an enthusiasm he otherwise reserved for whisky and magic mushrooms. Blood circulation problems meant that it caused him agony to sit cross-legged for more than a few minutes at a time, but he battled on anyway, determined to penetrate new realms of bliss. Sometimes, it even seemed to work. 'Fall, hands a-clasped, into instantaneous ecstasy like a shot of heroin or morphine,' he wrote to his friend Allen Ginsberg, describing his early efforts. 'The glands inside my brain discharging the good glad fluid (Holy Fluid) . . . healing all my sickness . . . erasing all . . . ' More often, though, his knees simply hurt too much, and after a short time he would be forced, as one Kerouac biographer notes, 'to scramble to his feet and rub his legs to restore circulation'.

These days, the more prevalent stereotype about meditation is that it is a path not to ecstasy but to trance-like calm. It sometimes seems impossible to open a magazine, or a newspaper features section, without being preached to about the relaxation-inducing benefits of mindfulness meditation. The stock photograph most commonly used to illustrate such articles is of a woman in a leotard, on a beach; her legs are crossed and her eyes closed, and an insipid smile is playing on her lips. (If the topic of the article is 'using meditation in everyday life', it's sometimes a man or woman in a business suit, instead – same cross-legged posture, same smile.) The Australian meditation teacher Paul Wilson, the bestselling self-styled 'guru of calm', has done much to reinforce this stereotype: his books on meditation include *The Calm Technique*, *Instant Calm*, *The Little Book of Calm*, *The Big*

Book of Calm, Calm at Work, Calm Mother, Calm Child, The Complete Book of Calm and Calm for Life.

The idea of meditation as a path to calmness is somewhat more realistic, since calmness – unlike unbroken ecstasy – can indeed be one of its side effects. Yet all these associations have contributed to a modern image of meditation as a sophisticated form of positive thinking, which is almost the opposite of the truth. In fact, meditation has little to do with achieving any specific desired state of mind, no matter whether blissful or calm. At Buddhism's core, instead, is an often misunderstood notion that is starkly opposed to most contemporary assumptions about how to be happy, and that places it squarely on the 'negative path' to happiness: non-attachment.

At the root of all suffering, says the second of the four 'noble truths' that define Buddhism, is attachment. The fact that we desire some things, and dislike or hate others, is what motivates virtually every human activity. Rather than merely enjoying pleasurable things during the moments in which they occur, and experiencing the unpleasantness of painful things, we develop the habits of clinging and aversion: we grasp at what we like, trying to hold onto it forever, and push away what we don't like, trying to avoid it at all costs. Both constitute attachment. Pain is inevitable, from this perspective, but *suffering* is an optional extra, resulting from our attachments, which represent our attempt to try to deny the unavoidable truth that everything is impermanent. Develop a strong attachment to your good looks – as opposed to merely enjoying them while they last – and you will suffer when they fade, as they inevitably will; develop a strong attachment to your luxurious lifestyle, and your life may become an unhappy, fearful struggle to keep things that way. Attach too strongly to life, and death will seem all the more frightening. (The parallels here with

Stoicism, and with Albert Ellis's distinction between what we prefer and what we feel we must have, aren't coincidental; the traditions overlap in countless ways.) Non-attachment need not mean withdrawing from life, or suppressing natural impulses, or engaging in punishing self-denial. It simply means approaching the whole of life – inner thoughts and emotions, outer events and circumstances – without clinging or aversion. To live non-attachedly is to feel impulses, think thoughts, and experience life without becoming hooked by mental narratives about how things 'should' be, or should never be, or should remain forever. The perfectly non-attached Buddhist would be simply, calmly present, and non-judgmentally aware.

Which, let's be frank, isn't going to happen for most of us any time soon. The idea of living without wanting things to be one way rather than another way strikes most people as a strange sort of goal. How could you not be attached to having good friends, to enjoying fulfilling relationships, or to doing well for yourself materially? And how could you be happy if you weren't thus attached? Meditation might indeed be the path to non-attachment, as the Buddhists claim – but it is by no means clear, to anyone accustomed to the standard approaches to happiness, why that's a destination that one might ever wish to reach.

What first led me to question this commonsense position was the title of a slim book by another American Zen Buddhist and trained psychiatrist. It was called *Ending the Pursuit of Happiness*, and its author, a man named Barry Magid, argued that the idea of using meditation to make your life 'better' or 'happier', in any conventional sense, was a misunderstanding. The point, instead, was to learn how to stop trying to fix things, to stop being so preoccupied with trying to control one's experience of the world, to *give up* trying to replace unpleasant thoughts and emotions

with more pleasant ones, and to see that, through dropping the 'pursuit of happiness', a more profound peace might result. Or, rather, that wasn't the 'point', exactly, because Magid objected to the notion that meditation had a point. If it did, he seemed to imply, that would make it just another happiness technique, a way of satisfying our desire to cling to certain states and eliminate others. This was all deeply confusing. What would be the point, I wondered, of doing something pointless? Why would anyone try to end the pursuit of happiness, if not to become happy – in which case, wouldn't they still be pursuing happiness, only by more cunning means?

Barry Magid practised psychiatry in a large, sparsely furnished room on the ground floor of an apartment block near Central Park, on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It was unlit save for a desk lamp, and its two leather chairs were placed unusually far from each other, against opposite walls, so that Magid's head seemed to loom out at me from the dark. He was a tall, owlish man in his early sixties, with wire-rimmed glasses, and when I asked him a rambling question about Buddhism and non-attachment, he looked at me with mild amusement. Then he started talking about something else entirely.

What I really needed to understand, he told me, was the myth of Oedipus. In Magid's view, the famous tale of the ancient Greek king – who kills his father and marries his mother, bringing disaster to his family and his city, and prompting him to gouge out his eyes – was the perfect metaphor for what was wrong with pursuing happiness. This had little to do with the 'Oedipus complex', Freud's theory about boys secretly wanting to have sex with their mothers. The real message of the myth, Magid explained, was that struggling to escape your demons was what gave them their power. It was the 'backwards law' in mythological

form: clinging to a particular version of a happy life, while fighting to eliminate all possibility of an unhappy one, was the cause of the problem, not its solution.

You may be familiar with the story. When Oedipus is born to the King and Queen of Thebes, his horrible fate – that he will kill one parent, and marry the other – has already been foretold by an oracle. His mother and father, desperate to ensure that this never comes to pass, persuade a local shepherd to take the newborn, with instructions to abandon him to the elements. But the shepherd can't bring himself to let Oedipus die; the child lives, and subsequently becomes the adoptive son of the King and Queen of Corinth. But when Oedipus confronts them, some time later, with the rumour that he is adopted, they deny it – so when he hears about the oracle's terrible prophecy, he assumes that they are the parents to whom it refers. Resolving to escape the curse by putting as much distance as possible between himself and the couple he takes to be his parents, Oedipus travels far away. Unfortunately, the faraway place at which he arrives is Thebes. Thereafter, fate drags him to his inevitable end: first, he becomes involved in an unlikely dispute over a chariot, and kills its occupant, who turns out to have been his father. Then he falls in love with his mother.

One obvious reading of this myth is that you can never escape your fate, no matter how hard you try. But Magid preferred another. 'The quintessential point,' he told me, 'is that if you flee it, it'll come back to bite you. The very thing from which you're in flight – well, it's the fleeing that brings on the problem. For Freud, our whole psychology is organised around this avoidance. The unconscious is the repository of everything that we're avoiding.'

The founding myth of Buddhism is practically a mirror-image of all this. The Buddha becomes psychologically free – enlightened

– by confronting negativity, suffering and impermanence, rather than struggling to avoid it. According to legend, the historical Buddha was born Siddharta Gautama, the son of a king, in a palace in the foothills of the Himalayas. Like Oedipus, his destiny had been foretold: it was prophesied that he would become either a powerful king or a holy man. In common with parents throughout history, Siddharta's preferred the job description that came with good pay and security, and so they dedicated themselves to making sure their son would grow to love privilege. They made his life a luxurious prison, pampering him with fine foods and armies of servants; he even managed to marry and have a son without once leaving his bubble of entitlement. It was only at the age of twenty-nine that he managed to venture outside the compound. There, he saw what have become enshrined in Buddhist lore as the 'Four Sights': an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic monk. The first three symbolised the inevitability of impermanence, and the three fates awaiting us all. Siddharta was shocked into abandoning his comfortable life, and his family, to become an itinerant monk. It was in India, some years later, that he is supposed to have achieved enlightenment after spending the night sitting beneath a fig tree, thereby becoming the Buddha, 'the one who woke up'. But it was those initial sights, according to the myth, that first awoke his understanding of impermanence. Buddhism's path to serenity began with a confrontation with the negative.

From Barry Magid's Buddhist-Freudian point of view, then, most people who thought they were 'seeking happiness' were really running away from things of which they were barely aware. Meditation, the way he described it, was a way to stop running. You sat still, and watched your thoughts and emotions and desires and aversions come and go, and you resisted the urge to try to

flee from them, to fix them, or to cling to them. You practised non-attachment, in other words. Whatever came up, negative or positive, you stayed present and observed it. It wasn't about escaping into ecstasy – or even into calmness, as the word is normally understood; and it certainly wasn't about positive thinking. It was about the significantly greater challenge of declining to do any of that.

It was shortly after meeting Magid that I took the rash decision to spend a week with forty strangers, meditating for about nine hours a day, in the middle of a forest, in the depths of winter, many miles from the nearest town, in almost unbroken silence.

Which proved interesting.

'The basic meditation instruction is really incredibly simple,' said Howard, one of the two teachers charged with running the retreat at the Insight Meditation Society, a converted turn-of-the-century mansion in the remote pine forests of central Massachusetts. It was early evening, and all forty of us were seated on cushions filled with buckwheat hulls in the building's austere main hall, listening to a man with a voice so calming it was impossible to imagine an instruction he might give that you wouldn't be lulled into following. 'Sit comfortably, gently close your eyes, and notice the breath as it flows in and out. You can focus on this sensation at the nostrils, or at the abdomen. Just follow one breath in, and one breath out. And then do it again.' There were nervous chuckles; surely it wasn't going to be that simple, or that boring? 'Other things will come up,' Howard continued. 'Physical sensations, feelings and thoughts will carry us away into distraction. In meditation, when we notice that happening, we don't judge. We just return to the breath.' It really was that simple, apparently. What

he failed to point out – though we were to discover it soon enough – was that ‘simple’ didn’t mean ‘easy’.

I had arrived at the Insight Meditation Society earlier that afternoon, sharing a taxi from the nearest major railway station, about twenty-five miles away, with an Israeli student I’ll call Adina. As we bounced along uneven backwoods roads, she explained that she was attending the retreat because she felt lost. ‘It’s like I have no roots anywhere . . . nothing to hold on to, no structure in my life,’ she said. I couldn’t help wincing inwardly at her candour: we’d only just met, and as far as I was concerned this was oversharing. But what she said next made sense. She was hoping that meditation might be a way not to stop feeling lost, but to come to see the lostness differently – to embrace it, even. The American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön calls this ‘relaxing into the groundlessness of our situation’, and it harmonises well with the idea of non-attachment. Chödrön suggests that ‘groundlessness’ is actually everyone’s situation, all the time, whether they like it or not. It’s just that most of us can’t relax in the presence of that truth; instead, we frantically scramble to deny it.

Our taxi driver seemed lost in a more literal sense, plunging down rutted tracks through the forest, then reversing back up them again, cursing his satellite navigation system. The meditation centre proved seriously hard to find, which wasn’t surprising; isolation was the point. When we finally arrived, I was shown to my room – a narrow, monkish cell, looking out over miles of uninterrupted forest. It contained a single bed, a sink, a small wardrobe, a shelf, and nothing else. I stowed my suitcase under my bed and hurried to the main hall, where a staff member outlined the week’s ground rules. We would be expected to spend one hour a day helping to clean the building, or prepare food, or do the dishes, she explained. In a few moments’ time, she would

ring the small brass gong on the building's central staircase, and we would be expected to fall silent – with only a handful of exceptions, including emergencies and question-and-answer sessions with the teachers – for the rest of the retreat. Since we wouldn't be speaking, she added, it would be best if we kept our eyes downcast, too, so as to avoid the temptation to spend the week communicating via smiling, scowling, and winking. There would be no alcohol, no sex, no use of telephones or the internet, no listening to music, and also no reading or writing – since these, she said, could rupture one's interior quiet as surely as audible conversation. Then again, as the daily schedule we found pinned to the noticeboard made clear, there would be no time for any of that, anyway:

5.30 a.m. – Waking bell

6.00 a.m. – Sitting meditation

6.30 a.m. – Breakfast

7.15 a.m. – Work period (kitchen cleaning, food preparation, etc.)

8.15 a.m. – Sitting meditation

9.15 a.m. – Walking meditation

10.00 a.m. – Sitting meditation

10.45 a.m. – Walking meditation

11.30 a.m. – Sitting meditation

12.00 noon – Lunch, followed by rest

1.45 p.m. – Walking meditation

2.15 p.m. – Sitting meditation

3.00 p.m. – Walking meditation

3.45 p.m. – Sitting meditation

4.30 p.m. – Walking meditation

5.00 p.m. – Light meal

6.15 p.m. – Sitting meditation

- 7.00 p.m. – *Walking meditation*
- 7.30 p.m. – *Dharma talk*
- 8.30 p.m. – *Walking meditation*
- 9.00 p.m. – *Sitting meditation*
- 9.30 p.m. – *Sleep or further meditation*

'Well, that'll be the structure you were looking for,' I said to Adina, who was standing nearby. The moment I'd said this, it struck me as an annoying, smart-aleck kind of remark. What made it worse, somehow, was that it was the last thing I said. A few seconds later, we heard the deep ring of the gong, and silence descended.

It didn't take very long on the meditation cushion, however, to discover that outer silence did not automatically confer inner silence. For the first several hours after receiving the basic instructions – the rest of the first evening, and most of the following morning – my mind was occupied almost exclusively by song lyrics, looping loudly on repeat. Inexplicably, and appallingly, they were mostly the lyrics to the 1997 song 'Barbie Girl', by the Danish-Norwegian kitsch-pop group Aqua, a track I had always despised. The music was interrupted only by occasional anxious thoughts about how I was going to make it through the week, plus stray entries from my to-do list that I'd forgotten to deal with prior to my departure.

In my defence, this – the mental chatter in general, not 'Barbie Girl' – is almost everybody's first experience of silent meditation. When you eliminate the distractions of external noise, and turn your attention inwards, what strikes you first is this: it's almost constantly noisy in there. It's not that the inner chatter is somehow generated by the attempt to meditate. It's simply that outer noise, the rest of the time, drowns out the inner noise; in the silence of the forest and the meditation hall, it all became suddenly

audible. 'One realises', as the spiritual teacher Jiddu Krishnamurti once put it, 'that one's brain is constantly chattering, constantly planning, designing: what it will do, what it has done, the past impinging itself on the present. It is everlasting chattering, chattering, chattering.'

An understandable response to such chatter, when you're attempting to meditate, is to try to quieten it – to dampen it down, or perhaps even to try to stop thinking altogether. But one central principle of *vipassana* meditation, the variety taught at the Insight Meditation Centre, is the opposite: to let the clamour be. As the Buddhist teacher Steve Hagen says in his pithy guide-book *Meditation: Now or Never*, 'we do not try to forcefully detach ourselves from the feelings, thoughts and expectations that arise in our mind. We don't try to force anything into or out of the mind. Rather, we let things rise and fall, come and go, and simply be . . . there will be times in meditation when we're relaxed, and times when our minds are agitated. We do not seek to attain a relaxed state, or to drive out our agitated and distracted mind. That is just more agitation.' This is the first big step towards non-attachment: learning to view passing thoughts and feelings as if one were a spectator, not a participant. Consider it too closely, and this idea becomes dizzying, given that watching your own thought processes is itself a thought process; it can be easy to feel caught in some kind of infinite loop.

Fortunately, it isn't necessary to resolve this conundrum in order to practise meditation. The technique, as Howard had explained, is simply to return – every time you realise you've been carried away by a narrative, or by an emotion – to the breath. The following evening, during the teachers' daily talk, he quoted the Catholic mystic St Francis de Sales, a practitioner of Christian meditation: 'Bring yourself back to the point quite gently. And

even if you do nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back a thousand times, though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well employed.' There is more to non-attachment than this – and much more, it's worth emphasising, to Buddhism than non-attachment. But it is where it all begins.

It becomes easier to make sense of this when you realise that Buddhism, though we think of it today as a religion, was originally just as much an approach to the study of psychology. The central Buddhist psychological text, the *Abhidhamma*, is a ferociously complex tome of lists and sub-clauses and technical argument. But one of its more straightforward insights is the notion that the mind can be viewed, in many respects, as one of the senses – like seeing, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. Just as we receive smells through the 'sense-door' of the nose, and tastes through the sense-door of the tongue, it's possible to see the mind as a kind of sense-door, too, or as a screen on which thoughts are projected, like images in a cinema. This isn't how we usually think about thinking. Sounds and smells and tastes, after all, are just sounds and smells and tastes, but thoughts, we tend to assume, are something much more important. Because they come from within us, they feel more essential, and expressive of our deepest selves. But is that true, really? When you start meditating, it soon becomes apparent that thoughts – and emotions – bubble up in much the same uncontrollable, unbidden fashion in which noises reach the ears, smells reach the nose, and so on. I could no more choose for thoughts not to occur than I could choose not to feel chilly when I was woken by the ringing of the morning bell at five-thirty each day – or, for that matter, than I could choose not to hear the bell.

Seeing thoughts as similar to the other five senses makes

non-attachment seem much more approachable as a goal. In the analogy most commonly used by contemporary Buddhists, mental activity begins to seem more like weather – like clouds and sunny spells, rainstorms and blizzards, arising and passing away. The mind, in this analogy, is the sky, and the sky doesn't cling to specific weather conditions, nor try to get rid of the 'bad' ones. The sky just is. In this the Buddhists go further than the Stoics, who can sometimes seem rather attached to certain mind-states, especially that of tranquility. The perfect Stoic adapts his or her thinking so as to remain undisturbed by undesirable circumstances; the perfect Buddhist sees thinking itself as just another set of circumstances, to be non-judgmentally observed.

Even more challenging than practising non-attachment to passing thoughts and feelings is practising it in the presence of physical pain; to be non-judgmental about being in agony seems preposterous. But it is here that some of the most powerful scientific evidence for cultivating non-attachment has been accumulating in recent years. Some Buddhists, such as Barry Magid, might object to the implication that the benefits of meditation need to be scientifically 'proven'. But the science is intriguing nonetheless – especially in the case of a series of experiments conducted in 2009, at the University of North Carolina, by a young psychologist named Fadel Zeidan.

Zeidan wanted to test the effects of meditation on people's ability to endure physical pain, and so, with refreshing straightforwardness, he decided to hurt them. His research employed mild electric shocks – jolts that weren't sufficient to be harmful, but that were powerful enough to make limbs twitch – and participants were asked to rank their subjective experience of the pain. Some then received three twenty-minute lessons in mindfulness meditation over the course of the next few days, showing them

how to develop non-judgmental awareness of their thoughts, emotions, and sensations. When further electric shocks were administered, those who used the meditation techniques reported significantly reduced pain. (In a related experiment by Zeidan's team, using brain scans and pain created by a hot-plate, meditation appeared to lead to less pain for every participant, with the reductions ranging from 11 to 93 per cent.) A critic might counter that the meditation was merely providing a distraction, giving the participants something else to focus on – so Zeidan had another group perform a mathematics task while being shocked. Distraction did have some effect, but it was nowhere near as large as that of meditation. And the meditation lessons, unlike distraction, lowered pain levels even when participants didn't actively meditate during the shocks.

'It was kind of freaky for me,' Zeidan said. 'I was ramping at four to five hundred milliamps, and their arms would be jolting back and forth, because the current was stimulating a motor nerve.' Yet still their pain assessments remained low. Meditation, Zeidan believes, 'had taught them that distractions, feelings and emotions are momentary, [and] don't require a label or judgment, because the moment is already over. With the meditation training, they would acknowledge the pain, they realise what it is, but they let it go. They learn to bring their attention back to the present.' If you've ever gripped the arms of a dentist's chair, in expectation of imminent agony that never actually arrives, you'll know that a big part of the problem is attachment to thoughts about pain, the fear of its arrival, and the internal struggle to avoid it. In Zeidan's laboratory, focusing non-attachedly on the experience of pain itself rendered the experience much less distressing.

As the hours turned into days at the Insight Meditation Society,

however, my attachments seemed only to grow more intractable. By the second day, the song lyrics had faded, but in their place came darker irritations. Gradually, I started to become aware of a young man sitting just behind me and to the left. I had noticed him when he first entered the meditation hall, and had felt a flash of annoyance at the time: something about him, especially his beard, had struck me as too calculatedly dishevelled, as if he were trying to make a statement. Now his audible breathing was starting to irritate me, too. It seemed studied, unnatural, somehow theatrical. My irritation slowly intensified – a reaction that struck me as entirely reasonable and proportionate at the time. It was all beginning to feel like a personal attack. How much contempt must the bearded meditator have for me, I seethed silently, deliberately to decide to ruin the serenity of my meditation by behaving so obnoxiously?

Experienced retreat-goers, it turns out, have a term for this phenomenon. They call it a '*vipassana* vendetta'. In the stillness, tiny irritations become magnified into full-blown hate campaigns; the mind is so conditioned to attaching to storylines that it seizes upon whatever's available. Being on retreat had temporarily separated me from all the real causes of distress in my life, and so, apparently, I was inventing new ones. As I shuffled to my narrow bed that evening, I was still smarting about the loud-breathing man. I did let go of the vendetta eventually – but only because I'd fallen into an exhausted and dreamless sleep.

One of the most obvious objections to non-attachment as a way of life is that it seems so passive. Granted, it might be a way of becoming more chilled out, but wouldn't it mean never getting anything done? The Buddhist monk spending decades in

meditation might be at one with the universe, but it's not clear that the rest of us should want to emulate him. Attachment, this argument runs, is the only thing that motivates anyone to accomplish anything worthwhile in the first place. If you weren't attached to things being a certain way, rather than another way – and to feeling certain emotions, rather than others – why would you ever attempt to thrive professionally, to better your material circumstances, to raise children, or to change the world? There's a persuasive retort to this, though. Just as the Stoic notion of acceptance need not entail resignation, Buddhist non-attachment can be a rigorously practical way of accomplishing worthwhile activities. To understand why, consider the most ubiquitous and frustrating barrier to getting things done: the near-universal curse of procrastination.

You are probably already much too familiar with the truth that most anti-procrastination advice just doesn't work, or at least not for very long. Motivational books, tapes and seminars might leave you feeling briefly excited, but that feeling soon fades. Ambitious lists of goals and systems of rewards seem like a great idea when you construct them, but feel stale the next morning; inspiring mottos on posters and coffee-mugs swiftly lose their ability to inspire. Procrastination sets in again, sometimes deeper than before. Which is, a cynic might suggest, how motivational speakers and self-help authors guarantee themselves a reliable income: if their products delivered lasting change, they would have much less repeat custom.

The problem with all these motivational tips and tricks is that they aren't really about 'how to get things done' at all. They're about how to feel in the mood for getting things done. 'If we get the right emotion, we can get ourselves to do *anything!*' says Tony Robbins, author of *Awaken the Giant Within*, whose books and speeches

fixate on this theme. (At Robbins's motivational seminars, participants are invited to pump themselves up by walking barefoot across hot coals.) As we've seen, though, the ideas that self-help gurus express so hyperbolically are often only extreme versions of how the rest of us think. The most common response to procrastination is indeed to try to 'get the right emotion': to try to motivate yourself to feel like getting on with the job.

The problem is that *feeling like* acting and *actually* acting are two different things. A person mired deep in procrastination might claim he is unable to work, but what he really means is that he is unable to make himself feel like working. The author Julie Fast, who writes about the psychology of depression, points out that even when a person is so depressed that she is unable to get out of bed in the morning – something Fast has experienced for herself – it's more accurate to say that she's unable to *feel like* getting out of bed. This isn't meant to imply that procrastinators, or the severely depressed, should simply pull their socks up and get over it. Rather, it highlights the way that we tend to confuse acting with feeling like acting, and how most motivational techniques are really designed to change how you *feel*. They're built, in other words, on a form of attachment – on strengthening your investment in a specific kind of emotion.

Sometimes, that can help. But sometimes you simply can't make yourself feel like acting. And in those situations, motivational advice risks making things worse, by surreptitiously strengthening your belief that you need to feel motivated before you can act. By encouraging an attachment to a particular emotional state, it actually inserts an additional hurdle between you and your goal. The subtext is that if you can't make yourself feel excited and pleased about getting down to work, then you can't get down to work.

Taking a non-attached stance towards procrastination, by contrast, starts from a different question: who says you need to wait until you 'feel like' doing something in order to start doing it? The problem, from this perspective, isn't that you don't feel motivated; it's that you imagine you need to feel motivated. If you can regard your thoughts and emotions about whatever you're procrastinating on as passing weather, you'll realise that your reluctance about working isn't something that needs to be eradicated, or transformed into positivity. You can coexist with it. You can note the procrastinatory feelings, and act anyway.

It is illuminating to note, here, how the daily rituals and working routines of prolific authors and artists – people who really do get a lot done – very rarely include techniques for 'getting motivated' or 'feeling inspired'. Quite the opposite: they tend to emphasise the mechanics of the working process, focusing not on generating the right mood, but on accomplishing certain physical actions, regardless of mood. Anthony Trollope wrote for three hours each morning, before leaving to go to his job as an executive at the post office; if he finished a novel within a three-hour period, he simply moved on to the next. (He wrote forty-seven novels over the course of his life.) The routines of almost all famous writers, from Charles Darwin to John Grisham, similarly emphasise specific starting times, or number of hours worked, or words written. Such rituals provide a structure to work in, whether or not the feeling of motivation or inspiration happens to be present. They let people work alongside negative or positive emotions, instead of getting distracted by the effort of cultivating only positive ones. 'Inspiration is for amateurs,' the artist Chuck Close once memorably observed. 'The rest of us just show up and get to work.'

No approach to psychology better expresses the pragmatic

benefits of non-attachment than Morita Therapy, the school founded by the early twentieth-century Japanese psychologist Shoma Morita. The head of psychiatry at Jikei University School of Medicine in Tokyo, Morita was heavily influenced by Buddhism, and especially its perspective on thoughts and emotions as mental weather – as things that happen to us, and with which we can coexist in peace. ‘People . . . think that they should always like what they do, and that their lives should be trouble-free,’ Maria wrote. ‘Consequently, their mental energy is wasted by their impossible attempts to avoid feelings of displeasure or boredom.’

One contemporary practitioner of Morita Therapy, James Hill, expresses this distinctive approach as follows: ‘Many western therapeutic methods focus on trying to successfully manage or modify our feeling-states. The underlying assumption is that if our feelings can be altered [or] reduced, we will be more able to live meaningful and effective lives; that it is our feelings that hold us back . . . [But] is it accurate to assume that we must “overcome” fear to jump off the high dive at the pool, or increase our confidence before we ask someone out on a date? If it was, most of us would still be waiting to do these things. Our life experience teaches that it is not necessary to change our feelings in order to take action . . . Once we learn to accept our feelings, we find that we can take action without changing our feeling-states.’ We can feel the fear, and do it anyway.

By the end of the fourth day at the Insight Meditation Society, things were much improved. The bearded man’s breathing had ceased to annoy. All of us seemed to have settled into the timetable that governed our waking, sleeping, meditating and eating; where before it had felt rigid and militaristic, now it cradled us through

the day. I was actually starting to enjoy meditating – even the walking meditation, which involved moving at a glacial pace across the meditation hall, trying to divide the sensations of each foot-step into the component parts of ‘lifting’, ‘moving’ and ‘placing’, and which I had initially concluded was a waste of time. When, during occasional breaks, I managed to sneak out onto the forest paths behind the meditation centre, I found I had become hyper-attuned to my environment; every crackle of every twig underfoot registered like a splintering diamond. Meanwhile, the vegetarian food we were served in the dining room – nondescript lentil stews, peanut butter on rye crackers, that sort of thing – had started to taste extraordinary. I discovered subtle sub-flavours in peanut butter I’d never have imagined might be hiding there. The Massachusetts winter sunset, viewed from the building’s main porch, was often so beautiful as to be almost painful. At night, I was sleeping more deeply than I could remember.

And then it all went wrong. Without my noticing the precise moment of transition, the silence of the meditation hall became a combination of courtroom and torture chamber. For hours, I was attacked by barrages of negative thoughts and their associated emotions – anxious ones, guilty ones, worried ones, hostile, bored, impatient and even terrified ones – as if they had all been gathering, just out of sight, for years, waiting for this moment to pounce. Above all, they were self-critical. I was suddenly aware – and somehow all at once – of countless occasions in my life on which I had behaved badly towards other people: my parents, my sister, friends, girlfriends, or colleagues. Many of these infractions were relatively small in the scheme of things – harsh words spoken, relationships insufficiently nurtured – but they filled me with sorrow. Months afterwards, I would encounter Buddhist writings suggesting that this was a well-recognised early step on the

'progress of insight', the stages through which a meditator is traditionally held to pass: it was called 'knowledge of cause and effect', and had to do with perceiving afresh how one's actions always had consequences. The sorrow that accompanied these realisations, from a Buddhist point of view, is a good thing; it is the fertile soil in which compassion can take root.

After about a day of this, though, I began to notice something. The situation in my mind was far from quiet or relaxed. And yet my constant efforts to return to focusing on my breath – to avoid becoming attached to thoughts or emotions – seemed to be having an effect. My vantage point on my mental activity had altered subtly, as if I'd climbed two rungs up a stepladder in order to observe it from above. I was less enmeshed in it all. As Shoma Morita might have put it, I was beginning to see it all as mere mental events, to be non-judgmentally noticed. Much of my thinking concerned the past or the future, but I was no longer being yanked off into daydreams or unpleasant memories; I was absolutely present, there on the cushion, watching the performance with something less like panic and more like interest. In some monasteries in the Zen tradition, a monk is charged with creeping up behind his fellow monks, and hitting them with a thin wooden stick, or *keisaku*, in order to snap them into exactly this kind of utter presence. They didn't hit people with sticks at the Insight Meditation Society, but I felt like someone had. I was watching my own mind with total alertness.

The strangest part, though, and the part that is hardest to put into words, was the question of where I was watching all this *from*. If I'd stepped away from being enmeshed in my thoughts, where was this point of observation? Nowhere? Everywhere? I felt as if I had stepped into a void. I recalled my conversation with Adina in the taxi, and Pema Chödrön's advice about 'relaxing into

the groundlessness of our situation'. It was suddenly apparent to me that I spent my regular life in a state of desperate clinging to thinking, to trying to avoid falling into the void that lay behind thoughts. Except now I was in the void, and it wasn't terrifying at all. By the time the retreat drew to a close, I found to my surprise that I didn't want it to end; I could easily have stayed another week. Moreover, I felt as if I were among friends. Even though I had never exchanged words with most of the other retreatants – and wouldn't have recognised them in the street, given that we'd been keeping our eyes downcast – a tangible sense of community had arisen in the meditation hall. When the gong rang to indicate that we could speak again, small talk felt scratchy and awkward; it seemed to interfere with the companionship.

'Well, that was . . . ' said Adina, trailing into silence, when I encountered her on the porch as we made our preparations to leave. Encapsulating the week in a few words seemed futile.

'I know what you mean,' I replied.

By the time I made it onto the train back to New York, I had a throbbing headache: the normal noises of the non-meditating world were too much for my silence-adapted mind. Discovering the number of emails waiting in my inbox didn't help. But the stressed-out thoughts did slide away more swiftly than before. It seemed I could live with a little bad weather.

All this is only one small part of Buddhism's radical perspective on psychology. But the point is central to any 'negative' approach to happiness: it is rarely wise to struggle to change the weather. 'Clear mind is like the full moon in the sky,' Seung Sahn, a Korean Zen master of the old school, who carried a hitting-stick, told one audience in America in the 1970s. 'Sometimes clouds come and cover it, but the moon is always behind them. Clouds go away, then the moon shines brightly. So don't worry about clear

mind; it is always there. When thinking comes, behind it is clear mind. When thinking goes, there is only clear mind. Thinking comes and goes, comes and goes. You must not be attached to the coming and going.' And if that wasn't sufficient to jolt his listeners into the realisation that they did not need to be attached to their mental storylines, that they could choose to observe their thoughts and feelings non-judgmentally, and thus find peace behind the pandemonium? 'Then,' Seung Sahn was fond of saying, 'I hit you thirty times with my stick!'