

The Power of the Third Moment

The look you gave the driver who cut you off. The email you shouldn't have sent. There's an effective way to avoid acting on your worst emotions.

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Photograph by Seth Miranda



Another driver cuts you off, and you feel a surge of rage. A coworker gets the promotion you think you deserve, and waves of jealousy wash over you. The pastry display in the grocery store beckons, and you sense your willpower dissolving. Anger. Impatience. Shock. Desire. Frustration. You spend your days bombarded by emotions.

These emotions are often negative—and if you act on them, they can derail you. You know: That email you shouldn't have sent. The snappy retort you shouldn't have verbalized. The black funk that permeates every experience and keeps you from feeling joy. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. You can learn to recognize harmful emotions in the moment—and let them go.

Choosing the karma you create

Past karma shapes your experience of the world. It exists; there is not much you can do about it. Yet you are also constantly creating new karma, and that gives you a golden opportunity. With your reaction to each experience, you create the karma that will color your future. It is up to you whether this new karma is positive or negative. You simply have to pay attention at the right moment. Think of how karma operates as if it were a key ring. It seems solid; you can move your key seamlessly around the circle. Yet there is actually a start and an end to the key ring—and a gap. If you know the gap is there, and you have the skill, you can extricate your key from the ring. Similarly, earlier karma creates your experience of events. Your reaction, based on your experience, triggers new karma and a new cycle of creation and experience. You can allow that cycle to continue in an endless sequence. Or you can find the gap, gain the skill, and extricate yourself from the cycle, simultaneously building your compassion and enhancing your sense of inner ease.

The Buddhist tradition is rife with teachings: on compassion, on why we should avoid hatred and jealousy, and on the power of a positive outlook. These teachings are extraordinarily valuable. They clarify and deepen our understanding—and they inspire us. But teachings and their explanations require logic to parse. In the heat of an emotional exchange, you may not have the luxury of logic, because logic requires time and an unbiased mind. Pressure creates a crisis. You don't have time to think, only to react. So you need a well-honed, quickly deployed skill,

something that is short, easy to use, and effective. This is the Third Moment Method, a practical tool that in many ways embodies the core of Buddhist practice.

Understanding the three moments

Life is composed of a series of experiences, and each of these experiences can be broken into three moments.

The First Moment

SENSING

In the first moment, your sensory organs—your eyes, ears, nose—perceive some sort of input. This moment between, for instance, a sound reaching your ear and your ear perceiving it, is instantaneous. It is also effortless, because it is hardwired into your system. In this moment, if someone says “lemon,” you have heard the sound, but you haven't yet recognized what that sound means.

The Second Moment

ARISING

In the second moment, you recognize the sound—or other sensation—and you have an instant, subconscious reaction, classifying it as good, bad, or neutral. This, too, is automatic, based on prior experience: memories and understanding stemming from your ingrained cultural beliefs, religious beliefs, and linguistic perceptions. It happens so quickly that you may even think it is part of the first moment. You have a physical manifestation of your thought as your body responds to positive, negative, or neutral input—although a “neutral” reaction usually leans slightly toward positive or negative.

Maybe someone is describing a juicy lemon they’ve just sliced. You connect the sound “lemon” to an idea stored in your memory. It evokes a shape, a color, a scent, a taste. Your memory invites an emotional reaction. You love lemons and your mouth salivates; you find lemons sour and you cringe.

The Third Moment

REACTING

In the third moment, you have the choice of accepting your memory’s emotion-tinged invitation or not.

Your reaction may be mental, verbal, or physical. If you have classified something as good, you are drawn to it, even though it may not be beneficial. If you have classified something as bad, you

push it away, sometimes with more force than is appropriate or necessary. In either case, you may do a lot of damage that you will later need to try to undo.

Let’s think of “lemon” in a different context. What if your mechanic says that your brand-new car is a lemon? How would you feel? Furious? Foolish? Frustrated? What might you say to the person who advised you to buy it? The third moment provides you with the space to determine your response.

You have a choice about the kind of life you lead. You can let your environment dictate your experience, in which case, unless you solve all the problems of every person with whom you interact, you will always face some unhappiness. Or you can take control over your own experience of life. To me, this seems like a better path.

Practicing the Third Moment Method

The Third Moment Method helps you take this path. In it, you use the Third Moment not to react but to watch—in a very specific way.

At the very instant an emotion arises, pause. Notice the emotion you are experiencing. The timing is very important. You need to be focused and aware before your emotion connects with a thought and becomes solidified. You want to simply see the emotion for what it is.

By widening the gap between action and reaction, you can gain some distance from your automatic responses and also gain an opportunity to know your emotions.

You may be tempted to trace the source of your emotion; that is logical, but in this instance it is not helpful. Instead of focusing on who did what to whom, simply look into your emotion. Don't do this as an observer, with duality between yourself and the emotion, as though it were external to you. Instead, watch your actual experience; try to feel it directly. Feel your emotion as if it were an inflated balloon, filling your insides. Don't pay attention to the balloon itself; pay attention to what's inside it. What does it feel like? No rationalizing. No reasoning. What is at the very core of the balloon? Just space. This is not relabeling your emotion as space. It is simply awareness that the emotion itself does not exist in the way we believe it does, as something fixed and solid. Over time, as that awareness grows, you will begin to feel ease, and maybe even joy.

By widening the gap between action and reaction, you can gain some distance from your automatic responses and also gain an opportunity to know your emotions. You can stop being ruled by these emotions and instead begin to rule your experience of life.

To really enjoy this freedom, though, you need to practice. If you can practice the Third Moment Method frequently and deeply enough, you can experience the unconditional joy that breeds lovingkindness and compassion.

Of course, in the heat of the moment, it can be difficult to remember a practice that is not yet ingrained. You can try practice drills—mentally creating scenarios that evoke strong emotions, then using the Third Moment Method to diffuse them. This will begin to create a mental muscle memory. However, in your mind you still know the experience isn't real, so in many ways the effect is not real either. The best practice is real life.

Benefiting from the results

Remember: The Third Moment passes very quickly, and it is easy to miss. You find it in the instant between seeing a nasty email and ring off a reply, hearing a criticism and retorting, seeing a gooey dessert and reaching for it. This is the time to stop and practice the Third Moment Method.

If you truly experience this once—if you really catch the moment—you will find that the Third

if you truly experience this once – if you really catch the moment – you will find that the Third Moment Method is not only easy but also something you will want to do often. So try to be conscious of your emotions, and seize every opportunity to practice.

If you do this, you will find that your mind is cooler, clearer, and less biased. You are more connected to the present moment. You are aware that your emotions are not reality. That, in turn, affects how you interpret your experiences. You may also find not only that you interact with the world more easily but also that your relationships are better—starting with your relationship with yourself.

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