

# Chapter 8

## HAPPINESS, LANGUAGE AND THE PRESENT MOMENT

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*“If not now, when?”*

Zen question

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What does it really mean to “live in the past”? To “live in the future”? To “live in the present”? *Do these have anything to do with language* and with the results we produce for ourselves? Does our orientation toward *time* have anything to do with our own happiness?

Many of us have a sense that spending too much time dwelling on and focusing on the past or the future is not productive. We have enough experience to say that it doesn't really help; in fact, that in many cases it seems to detract from our ability to create what we want to create. And on a deeper level, many traditions and cultures point to “being present” as a fundamental practice required for spiritual growth, awareness and development. What are we talking about here? And how might our understanding of language serve as a tool, as an entry point, as a lever, as we look for “ways of being” that bring us more peace and more effectiveness in our lives?

## *Language and the Pursuit of Happiness*

Most of us have, from time to time, found ourselves “living in the past” or “living in the future.” These are metaphors, of course; we’re actually always still living here, now, right where we are. But the metaphor points to *some action that we’re taking* that produces the *result*—the experience—of somehow not being fully “present,” fully conscious, fully aware of what’s going on here and now. And this in turn diminishes our awareness, our ability to listen, to shift, and to take action. This is the key.

The actions which produce this result are, no surprise, *language actions*. They are recurring internal and external conversations, stories, assessments, interpretations that remain always focused on things past or things yet to come. These conversations, of course, may be conducted in and flow out of a number of *different moods*. (Remember our 3-circle model). And in circular fashion, different conversations, different assessments, different declarations, different language actions serve to *produce* different moodspaces. This is one of the major claims related to this way of understanding language.

By participating in certain conversations, we generate and help shift or sustain certain moods. By participating in other conversations, other emotional spaces are brought forth and supported. We like to make our moods “right”—we can observe this in our conversations. And moving forward in that mood, certain other interpretations are readily available and likely, while others are not. There is an undeniable connection which exists here. The mood provides the emotional flavor—the particular, subjective experience, the openness or closedness to possibilities—connected with being in the particular conversation. The mood matters.

Some conversations about the past may be seen as positive, helpful or enjoyable while others may be seen as negative, unhelpful and unenjoyable. The determining factor as to whether we experience a conversation as being “positive” or “negative” has to do with the particular mood the conversation lives in and produces. Also important are the length of time we stay in these conversations, and the results that come about because we stay in them as long as we do. We have found that better results come about when we spend the vast majority of our time right here, right now, in the present.

Let’s take a look at some examples. We can say that we’re living in the *past*, or “stuck” in the *past* when over time, lots of our conversations with ourselves and with others tend to be in the following moods. (*Note: We have all visited these moodspaces, at one time or another. As a human*

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*being, we say it's normal and natural and healthy to experience the full range of emotions. To reinforce a point made earlier, this is NOT to say that it's wrong to be resentful or sad or anxious, or that these mood-spaces are inherently bad, or there's something we're not doing right if we ever find ourselves here. To me, the keys are awareness, timeframe and choice. Do we notice ourselves being here? Do we periodically visit these emotional spaces, or live in them ongoingly? And once we stay awhile, should we choose to move out of them, do we know what "moves" are available?)*

- A persistent mood of *resentment*. In this mood, conversations are full of assessments of unfairness, of blame, and of ascribing bad intentions to others related to something that has occurred. (Many of these assessments will not be seen as assessments, however; they'll be seen as the Truth.) They also include assessments of powerlessness, of not being able to do anything about the situation, of being victimized, as well as private promises to get even somehow. This mood supports recurring negative evaluations of other people and events, and assessments that we have been taken advantage of or greatly under-appreciated.
- A persistent mood of *guilt*. In this mood, conversations include lots of assessments about what I did or didn't do and how "bad" or "wrong" it was, how badly it violated my standards; recurring conversations in which I blame myself and "beat myself up". We may have these conversations in which we blame ourselves over and over again, over long periods of time, all connected to a single past event. We may promise not to forgive ourselves; we may even declare that nobody (not even God) can or will forgive us. These conversations include lots of negative assessments about myself, my general worthiness as a human being, and my possibilities, in a number of areas.
- A persistent mood of *sadness*. Sadness always has to do with loss and with a sense of having possibilities diminished. It is seen as a totally healthy, normal, natural emotional space, even to the degree that people who *never* visit sadness can be said to be missing out on quite a lot. Sadness reveals a lot about what we're concerned about, what we care about, in our lives. However, conversations in which we *recurrently* relive whatever events or circumstances surround the loss can, over long periods of time, make it difficult for us to see