

## THE SELF IN PANIC

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It is easy to say the self is fickle and we can laugh about that. It is more difficult to dwell on the darker side of the self, like when it is frightened and in panic, although this happens too often for many of us.

In fact it is rather amazing. One minute I can be calm and all is right with my world and the future looks bright. I am happy. And the next minute the phone rings or I open a letter with some bad news and my world is instantly topsy-turvy again. If the news is really bad I go into full-panic mode, which means lying on my back at 3 AM staring at the ceiling. At that point I am completely out of control and in the throes of panic.

How does that work? If nothing else it shows clearly that the external world as I know it outside of me is very much controlled by my attitude, how I see things from inside that world. The tiniest piece of news, like my bank account is overdrawn or I have lost an opportunity I counted on, can change a bright sunny day into one filled with fear and worry. I am not even in any physical danger. Nothing has really changed except my mind, and if ever I needed to be calm and have all my wits about me, it is when bad news arrives. And that is just the point that I tend to abandon all calm, lose control of my mind, and plunge into a full-fledged route of panic.

And although I do know better, I soon find myself struggling to be calm, to control my mind, and somehow to return to normal again. And it is usually very hard to do, and whatever my misfortune is hangs over me like a black cloud making life-as-usual practically impossible. Feeling good about myself suddenly seems like a distant dream, like a hopeful bubble popped by whatever bad news just intervened. I was foolish enough (once again) to think it could last.

I know the self can be fickle, but what could be more arbitrary than to have my good fortune and happiness turn on a dime, at even the hint of bad news. I can't (most of the time) do anything about the advent of bad news, but I should be able to do at least something about how I react to that bad news. What is the solution?

Being engulfed by cyclic existence, the ups and downs of fate, is what the Buddhists call "Samsara," literally the dependable undependability of it all and the fact that I never will get all of my ducks in a row no matter how smart I think I am, and even if I do, it will be only for a moment. What goes up must come down.

When I was young I used to picture this in my mind: many people in the middle of a bottomless lake trying to climb on top of one another to get out. In other words: hopeless.

Terrible things can happen to us, but being subject to outrageous fortune and then responding with panic adds insult to injury IMO. I have a lifetime of experience with hope, fear, and panic and the only thing that has helped this state of things for me is some kind of mind practice, which means first learning to get to know your mind. Here is some information that might help:

The mind is not the 'self'. 'Self' is relatively easy to know and recognize, but recognizing the true nature of the mind in which the self is embedded takes practice, mind practice. Learning to use the mind for other than academic purposes is something most Westerners know nothing about,

like: using the mind to look at itself. Can you do that? Most folks have no idea what mind practice involves and think it is like lighting a candle, maybe some incense, and sitting in a corner on a cushion. Not at all.

Real meditation, real mind practice takes time and effort, but it does actually work. In my experience, nothing else has, not the so-called “guided” meditation, relaxation therapy, prescription drugs, other drugs, and so on. What I from experience know works is the kind of mind practice that is taught in Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, which are literally methods of learning to be aware all the time.

