

Downers

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

There was a time when depression was not so psychologised and medicalised. People talked of being ‘under the weather’. It was seen as part of life. Sometimes you were ‘a bit down’. You were told to ‘pull your socks up’ and ‘get on with it’. These downers are to be distinguished from mental illness. So long as we are feeling ‘a bit depressed’, the big problem is we get depressed about it. Or angry about it. Even anxious about it. That’s what can drive ‘a bit depressed’ into a serious depression. My first teacher was my mother. She would now be considered to suffer from some degree of clinical anxiety driven depression. She ended up with a concoction of pills so beloved of doctors. But she that age group and complained of lacking energy, an anxious stomach and headaches. She told me later in life that what kept her going was her mothering of four children. That was the first lesson. Just keep doing what you have to do - and do it with love. She was a sanguine type and enjoyed a slapstick type humour. She’d stick a needle in your bum while watching TV. And she transformed when she was with friends. No matter how she felt, she engaged and found happiness and fun in their company. That was the second precious lesson. You’ve got to laugh! These two strategies I believe kept me from going under, but they did not tackle the problem at root which was my relationship to my ‘downers’. It was not until I began to meditate that I was able to really grapple with them. The Buddha asks us to really confront these feelings. Not in an aggressive way, but in a welcoming, kind, open-hearted way. He has a way of expressing this intimate embrace. He instructs us to ‘feel feelings in feelings’, to experience ‘mental states in mental states’. In other words no barriers caused by aversion or fear. For when we do not want to feel them, we seek distraction. Anything will do. Watch TV. Eat chocolates. And worse! And if these poor strategies fail, then we truly begin to go under. It takes a lot of trust to open up to these dark whirlpools. At times we may feel overwhelmed. That’s when we need the teacher or the therapist. But as we persist we see we are creating a different relationship towards aching states of mind and harrowing emotions. This is one of radical acceptance: this is the way it is; equanimity: open-hearted, open-minded, no resistance; and patient forbearance: a willingness to bear with mental pain. When we discover this new relationship of non-aggression and non-fear, something magical begins to happen. It is as though all that dark, oppressive turbulence is allowed to express itself fully and in so doing exhausts itself. Slowly these moods no longer hijack our lives. They become less dense and don’t hang around so long. Then we begin to realise we have found the way not simply to bring depression to an end, but all suffering. This is the gift of Dhamma the Buddha gave to humanity - the understanding of how we create suffering for ourselves and how we can bring it all to an end.

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