

## **OK! Let Go of the Banana!**

Using mindfulness to free ourselves from painful beliefs

By Micki Fine

Here's how to catch a monkey. You need a basket, a lid with a hole just large enough for the monkey to stick her hand into, and a banana. You firmly attach the basket to something immovable. You stash a banana inside the basket, attach the lid and wait. The monkey will come put her hand through the lid to grasp the banana. But, guess what – the hole is not big enough for the monkey's hand to fit through when she's got a banana in her fist. All she has to do is let go of the banana in order to be free of the trap. Amazing as it seems, the monkey won't let go of the banana even in the face of being captured.

Not many of us need or want to catch monkeys. So, what's the point? Just like the monkey holds on to the banana, sometimes we cling to beliefs, feelings, or behaviors that prevent us from being free and getting what we want. It's easy to see that the monkey should just let go of the banana, but it's not so easy to see what we need to release.

*"If you cling to something as absolute truth and are caught in it, when truth comes in person and knocks on your door, you will refuse to let it in." – Buddha*

Think about the concerns and fears that many gays and lesbians have about being out. Many people struggle with what others will think of them. "My parents will disown me if I tell them." "She'll hate me if she finds out." "I'll get fired." "He'd never understand."

It's natural to have these thoughts. But they cause suffering. What we really want is acceptance and freedom to live our lives. Because of these thoughts and fears, we don't live freely and we may feel alienated. So, holding on to these beliefs and fears gets us the opposite of what we really want. Just like with the monkey, letting go may be just what is needed.

Simply letting go of our beliefs and fears is not simple. Maybe you've tried just not caring what others think, but that brings resentment and hardening of one's heart. Withdrawing or numbing yourself with drugs or alcohol is an escape. Perhaps you've tried denying that a problem exists at all. These tactics don't work in the long-term. We need to try something that goes beyond diverting ourselves from the issue.

Mindfulness is a powerful way of being that can help us not only become less reactive to our thoughts and beliefs, but also change them over time. Mindfulness, the skill of bringing spacious, nonjudgmental awareness to our everyday present-moment experience, fosters the skill of engaging with life more fully and becoming more in tune with oneself.

You might ask how mindfulness can produce such results. Good question. Meditation is practiced to foster mindfulness. Meditation includes focusing on the breath, noticing the content of the mind

when it wanders, and refocusing whenever needed. You become an observer of your experience, including your thoughts and feelings.

*“The stronger the observer is, the less mysterious emotions are, and the less we tend to get caught by them.” – Charlotte Joko Beck*

Just beneath the surface of regular awareness is an amazing world of thoughts. Many of us are unaware of these thoughts because we live life on a kind of auto-pilot. We remain distracted from ourselves. But those thoughts are what drive our behaviors.

See for yourself. Sit and notice your breath for a few minutes. Notice what thoughts come up when your mind wanders away from the breath. What comes up for you? Chores you feel anxious about getting done? Worries about an argument with your lover? Refocus and notice again. What is it this time? A daydream? Another worry? Just keep refocusing for awhile and observe what happens.

Let’s say a thought you had during this little experiment was, “What am I doing sitting here? I have too much to do.” This may make you feel anxious, so you jump up and hurry around, get impatient with traffic while running errands, and end up out of sorts for the rest of the day.

In meditation, we learn to observe our thoughts (“What am I doing sitting here? I have too much to do.”) and feelings (anxiety), and recognize that they are simply thoughts and feelings. Then we do nothing about them and refocus on the breath. This teaches us that our thoughts and feelings do not have to overwhelm us. By the very fact that we can observe them means that we do not have to identify with them by reacting automatically.

*“When we want something out of an effort to fill an aching desire within, ...we are lost in attachment. We are trying to fill an emptiness that no object can ever fill.” – Sharon Salzberg*

With a meditation practice, some of the thoughts about what others think of you may be less worrisome. Another benefit of observing your experience through meditation is that you begin to know and connect with yourself. With this connection you can experience life with greater acceptance and peace. You don’t have to be like the monkey who keeps holding on to the banana even though it is to her disadvantage. With mindfulness, you can consciously choose to be free.

Go ahead, let go of the banana.