

Tame your mind

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Taming our minds

We all have moments when we need to tame our mind. Perhaps you feel yourself starting to become angry, or anxious, or just overwhelmed by everything you have to do. Your body tenses, your mind starts creating pictures of how awful this thing is, and if you allow your emotions to take over, you will soon be past the point of no return. This is a great time to pull out one of Epictetus's master mind tricks: the noble impression. Let's see how Epictetus describes it:

If you muster these thoughts against it, you'll overpower your impression and not be swept away by it. But first of all, don't allow yourself to be dazed by the rapidity of the impact, but say, 'Wait a while for me, my impression, let me see what you are and what you're an impression of; let me test you out.' And then don't allow it to lead you on by making you a picture of all that may follow, or else it will take possession of you and conduct you wherever it wants. But rather, introduce some fine and noble impression in place of it, and cast out this impure one. – Epictetus Discourses, 2.18, 23-25)

Creating positive mental images

One of the best ways to stop creating negative mental pictures for yourself is to substitute a beautiful image instead. I love Epictetus's use of the phrase fine and noble. These are not words we often use today – they are out of fashion – but they connote something not only beautiful, but worthy of respect and honor. A fine and noble impression would be one that elevates your mind toward a worthy goal, like wisdom or justice.

Choose a fine and noble image

In order to successfully execute this strategy, you'll need to be prepared. First, choose your fine and noble image. When you have some free time (in other words, not when you're in the middle of an emotional reaction), think about your most noble goals in life. You might even want to write them down. These are not things you want to accomplish, but rather character

traits you would like to develop. If you tend to be angry, maybe your goal is to become a more serene person. If you tend to be fearful, perhaps you'd like to develop courage. Select your top one or two goals to work toward.

Connect the image of the goal

Next, connect a strong mental image to this goal. Make sure it's very personal. If you have a role model who exemplifies this trait, think about that person acting gracefully under pressure, in the way you would like to. Or think about your ideal self responding wisely or courageously in a difficult situation.

Meditate on the image

Spend some time meditating on your image so that it becomes ingrained in your mind. You could even draw a picture or write a few lines in your journal about your fine and noble impression. Think about the details and make sure you see it clearly. You can even imagine yourself using the impression during a stressful time. Do a dress rehearsal in your mind and feel how your mind immediately clears when you apply the impression.

Use the image on a daily basis

Now you're ready to start using your noble impression on a daily basis. Whenever you confront your selected challenge, you know what to do: introduce your fine and noble impression and cast out the impure one. Go back to that uplifted mental zone you created for yourself. You are just getting back to where you belong – you are bringing out natural nobility of spirit. Because as Epictetus reminds us (*Discourses*, 4.7, 8), when we take the time to develop our true nature we become “noble-minded, great-hearted, and free”.

