

Buttons

By Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron

From *Taming the Mind*, published by Snow Lion Publications

We often say, “That made me angry!” or “That person really irks me!” thinking that our anger and irritation were caused by the other person and we had no choice in our emotional response to them. However, when we examine our experience, it becomes evident that choice always exists, but we seldom take it and instead follow our habitual tendencies. These mental, verbal, and physical habits are conditioned; they are not an innate or inseparable part of us. But we seldom realize this and thus rarely examine if these habitual responses are realistic and beneficial. However, when we recognize that some of these are detrimental to ourselves and others, we’ll be motivated to apply the counter-forces to them. Recognizing them as previous conditioning, we’ll understand that we can re-condition our mind, speech, and body and thus let go of harmful habits and perspectives and cultivate beneficial ones.

When we examine our anger to see if it’s realistic, we find that beneath it are many presuppositions and expectations about the way things should be, how people should treat us, and who we are. These expectations and preconceptions are our “buttons”—the things we’re sensitive to that set us off.¹ Because they are unconscious and unrecognized, they color the way we see situations and how we interact with others without our even knowing it.

For example, we may feel that our dear ones are “part of us,” so much so that we cease treating them with the respect and common courtesy we give to friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. Assuming that our dear ones will always love us, we neglect to nurture and care for these relationships and instead complain that our needs are not being met. We expect them to always be there for us and to understand us. Sometimes we assume that they know us so well that they should know what we feel and what we want.

To help people identify their expectations, I suggest some homework: For the next week, every time you are irritated or angry with someone you’re close to, look at what your external and internal buttons are. An external button is a situation in which you typically get upset. For example, a family member leaves their dirty socks on the floor, does the grocery shopping a day later than you asked, or talks about how much better you’d feel if you lost weight. An internal button is your expectation. An external situation only becomes a button for us if we have internal expectations, attachments, and sensitivities. As part of this homework, write down the situation as well as your expectations in it. Then, check to see if your expectation fits the situation or not.

Ordella did the homework assignment. She reported the following:

I have discovered some very interesting things about myself while doing the Button Homework Assignment. I’d asked you if there was a common denominator among the underlying expectations that make us mad. Well, I realized that, at the very least, all my expectations are unrealistic.

In addition, after you talked about how we tend to think of our spouse and dear ones as a part of us and therefore take them for granted and don’t treat them very well, I wondered, “How do I think my husband, Alan, is part of me? Obviously he is his own person. I just don’t get it.” In an attempt to understand, I wrote out some situations that

are my buttons and then asked myself, “What was my expectation of him in this situation?” As I did, I wound up laughing out loud at myself!

Button: He doesn't know something and asks too many questions.

Expectation: He should know everything that I know.

Button: He is doing something wrong, inefficiently, too slowly, etc.

Expectation: He should do everything exactly how I would do it.

Button: He is not supporting me. He is doing his own thing while I am struggling to get things done (This is a big one, especially when I am busy).

Expectation: My agenda should be his number one priority.

So here I am, expecting my husband to have the same knowledge as me, to do everything like I do, and to have the same agenda and priorities as I have. If that doesn't sound like thinking that he is an extension of me, I don't know what is! I can't believe how absurd it is to think like this, yet for years that's been what I've assumed was right and true. Let's hope that now, since I have exposed my underlying delusional thought, these three buttons will disappear.

When I did the same exercise regarding my buttons with my kids, I discovered more unrealistic expectations. For example, I hold my children to a higher standard than I do myself. They should have, do, and be everything I don't have, can't do, and am not. That's what will make them happy. (Actually, that's what will make me happy. It may not make them happy.) Nevertheless, it's trickier for me not to get mad at them. I use my anger as a discipline tool—a poor one, granted—like my mother did. I use anger to force them into shape, so it is harder to let it go. I think that if I let go, I will be a bad parent! Isn't that a funny preconception?

Another person, Lloyd, reported:

Button: Someone in a position of authority asks me questions about what I'm doing.

Assumption: I am accountable to no one; I always understand instructions correctly. She is micro-managing me and doesn't respect me.

Expectation: Others should see my superior qualities and not challenge my need for control.

Button: I'm in a bad mood and get upset, and others notice it.

Expectation: I should be able to control my afflictive emotions and maintain an air of calm composure and self-control without much effort on my part.

Button: Someone does not follow agreed upon rules.

Expectation: People should follow all agreed upon rules so that I am not inconvenienced or irritated by their lack of discipline. However, if I choose not to follow a rule, others should cut me slack and not get angry.

Identifying our buttons and our false expectations requires a degree of honesty with ourselves that may initially be uncomfortable. However, their one redeeming quality is that they can be eliminated using the antidotes of mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion. With mindfulness, we acknowledge that our buttons are our responsibility. As long as we have buttons, they will get pushed, even if others have no intention to do so. The only way to remedy this difficulty is to stop holding onto our buttons.

With wisdom we see that those preconceptions are neither realistic nor beneficial and we let them go. Wisdom also enables us to have more “realistic” expectations. But no matter how realistic our expectations are, they are never hard and fast rules that govern others’ behavior. We’ll be miserable if we try to enforce them as if they were.

For this reason, compassion and cherishing others are important. Holding them in mind, we are able to be patient when others don’t meet even our modified and more realistic expectations. Other people are sometimes overwhelmed by disturbing attitudes and emotions, just as we are. They, like us, make mistakes. Some acceptance on our part is needed.

A sense of humor is also important in working with our expectations. It’s helpful to be able to laugh at the foolishness of our expectations, assumptions, and preconceptions. Some of the thoughts and beliefs our minds dream up are truly hilarious. When we can laugh at ourselves, our foibles lose their charge and we avoid falling into the trap of self-hatred when we recognize them. In addition, it’s fun to laugh and Dharma practice should be fun!

¹ See Chapter 9 of *Working with Anger* by Thubten Chodron.