

Saturday, January 19th, 2013

Practices of the Week – Urge Surfing and More

The series on letting go of unskillful habits continues with a focus on desire. This mind state is the driving force under any compulsive behavior. To change such behavior we have to be willing to turn towards desire and be aware of what it is like.

Changing our behavior using mindfulness avoids the restrictive, control-oriented change strategies that are so often unsuccessful. This approach also avoids any judging of the mind states under the behavior. Such self-judgment leads to the unworthiness that underlies so many of our unskillful habits.

In a mindfulness approach, we break the compulsion at the link between the action and the desire propelling it. We make a boundary around our behavior, turning our backs on the desired object and turning our attention towards the desire itself. While compulsive habits tend to be avoidance strategies for unwelcome emotions such as loneliness, fear, unworthiness, or hurt, desire tends to be the force that propels us into the distracting action and it is very important to be aware of.

A mindful approach to change is built on the recognition that the only control we ever have is how we respond to the moment to which we just awoke. This insight has two aspects: 1. Change only happens through mindfulness and 2. The only time for change is now. Regarding the first point, when we are on “automatic pilot,” we are mindlessly acting out our habitual patterns and reinforcing them in the process. It is only by becoming more mindful that we have a chance to cut our unskillful behavior. As the holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Victor Frankl wrote, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth

and our freedom.”

On the second point, psychological research shows that a will power-based approach to long-term future change is doomed to fail. In one recent study, only 22% of 700 study subjects kept their New Year’s resolutions. Have you ever thought, hung-over after a night of partying, “I’ll never drink again.” Fat chance, huh? Change is most likely to happen through setting a realistic, near-term goal, breaking the goal into small steps, and then celebrating small changes made in that direction. A small step is a momentary change, where, in the now, we refrain from a habitual pattern. Every time we do so we are weakening our destructive habits and strengthening our helpful ones and in the process rewiring our brains. Celebrating the small victories helps us be motivated to continue in the same direction.

To be effective, a change plan also needs to recognize that change comes in fits and starts, and that acting out the habitual pattern is not a failure but just a normal and forgivable misstep along the road to transformation. This avoids the common occurrence, to use one example, to give up altogether when one has “fallen of the wagon” of a restrictive diet and goes on an eating binge. The best approach to realizing you have gone against your intended direction of change is to simply start over. Treating yourself with a sense of humor makes the reset that much easier.

PRACTICES

GETTING REAL – The first practice this week is to be mindful of acting out the unskillful behavior we wish to change. We do

this to get really real about how this behavior is working for us.

The single biggest predictor of change is the motivation behind it. Change is very unlikely until we really want it. We can boost our motivation for change by feeling the impact of our unskillful habits. A big part of addictive patterns is self-deception: We lie to ourselves about, distract from, or rationalize away the harm our actions cause to ourselves or others. In a mindfulness approach to change, we have to be willing to feel the pain of our actions. For instance, in the habit of overeating if one distracts from feeling the misery of being bloated, then one is not likely to want to change it. While this approach is difficult in the short term, it fosters the motivation that is the only thing that leads to long-lasting change.

In addition, being mindful of our unskillful behavior helps us realize the difference between ideas about our actions and the reality of our actions. Does the behavior really live up to the hype? While that jelly-filled donut might glisten with the promise of ever-lasting fulfillment, when we are mindful of eating it we see that it gives us a few moments of pleasure and then – poof! – our fulfillment is gone. If we stay with our experience, we might realize that while it was pleasant to eat the donut, the sweetness actually leaves a burning in the back of our throats and our energy crashes in the inevitable come-down from the sugar high.

So whatever the habit is that you would like to change, resolve to wake up in it at least once this week and be mindful of the whole experience, beginning, middle and end. Rather than distract yourself from the task at hand with criticism, let the behavior happen with mindfulness immersed in the body, knowing that you will learn something in the process.

URGE SURFING – We can avoid a control-oriented approach to change by being very

free with the desires that underlie our habits. The essence of this approach can be summarized with the phrase “urge surfing,” coined by Alan Marlatt, one of the pioneers in mindfulness-based addiction treatment. In an interview in the vipassana journal *Inquiring Mind* (2010) he says, “An urge is like an ocean wave that grows bigger and bigger as it approaches the shore. As it grows, there’s the desire to just give in, but if you do, you’ll reinforce the power of the addiction. Instead, you can ride the ‘wave.’” Note that there is no condemnation of or struggling against the desire. Rather, the idea is to fully allow it and surf the energy of desire in our mind and bodies.

Resolve to wake up at least once this week to the desire under the habit you would like to change. Refrain from the behavior by turning your attention away from the object of desire (either real or imagined) and towards desire itself. Ask yourself, “What do I have to sit with in order to not act?” The answer will invariably include desire. Let yourself be a big, open field of acceptance, curiosity, and awareness, grounding your attention in the body sensations of the experience of wanting.

Being mindful of desire reveals the imperative built into it. What compels us to act out wanting mind is some version of the thought, “I have to have that.” Be on the lookout for such thoughts as they are the linchpins of our compulsive behavior. Just notice the thoughts and realize that the imperative is a façade, maybe a big and believable one like the mighty display of the puny Wizard of Oz, but a façade nonetheless. The “I have to” is generally an overreaction that seems to be unrelated to the size of the payoff, just as imperative in reaching for a Hershey’s chocolate kiss as in reaching to sign a new contract on a house.

As we are mindful of desire, we may see that while the object of desire in our imagination is often quite pleasant, the

experience of desire in the body is one of tension. To desire is to want and, in one definition of the word, to want is to lack. We are here in the present moment wanting some other experience, and this sense of lack often shows up as a tension in the body. Being with the unpleasantness in the body can be a way of breaking the enchantment with our habitual behavior.

A key insight in being mindful is that we think we have to have the object of our desire for the desire to go away. Mindfulness shows us an alternative, one with no hangovers or addictive reinforcement. Because all mind states are impermanent, desire cannot last forever. In fact, when being mindful of wanting mind, it is common to watch it arise and fade away again and again. As we keep watching the waves of desire swell and recede, it loses its charge. In a mindful approach to change, we don't have to change our experience; we only have to outlast it.

CHANGE ALLY - Successful change strategies tend to have in common a social component. Some would argue that underneath all desires and all compulsive patterns is the desire for relationship, for real and meaningful human contact. Twelve-step programs seem built on this insight; the sponsor relationship is an ingenious way to replace our need for an addictive substance with a relationship.

I strongly encourage you to find a friend or a fellow sangha member to be an ally in helping you change one of your unwelcome habits. Ideally, you both work on changing something about your behavior. Let it be just one thing for each of you. They do not have to be the same. The point is that you assist each other in specific and realistic goals, that you are real with each other about the danger zones (times and place you are mostly likely to enact the behavior), and that you can support each other in times of need (call your ally instead of acting out the behavior).

Best of luck with creating a change in your life!