

# The Great Um: Working with Doubt and Indecision

By Peter B. Williams

This essay on doubt and indecision is intended for those of us whose mantra is more “um” than “om,” or whose personal motto might be something along the lines of “Never put off until tomorrow what you can put off until the day after tomorrow.”

Doubt is a mind state that most of us don't like. Of course, when it arises, we would like to move out of it as quickly as possible, but the very nature of doubt makes this difficult. Doubt tends to immobilize us, stuck between different options, unsure of what to do next. Doubt leads to indecision. Rather than making our best guess, forming a decision and acting on it, accepting that we may make a mistake, we stay frozen in fear of consequences and therefore do not learn anything. We simply spin around and around in our indecisiveness.

Because this immobilizing tendency of doubt is so strong, the Buddha listed it as one of the five most common obstacles in meditation (hindrances). When we doubt the ability of our meditation practice to deal with our minds, we stop being mindful, and this, of course, prevents us from finding out what mindfulness can do for us. Thus, doubt is a self-fulfilling prophecy, pulling the plug on our practice, and causing us to doubt it even more. But the solution is very simple. All we have to do is notice that we are in doubting mind. The minute we do that, mindfulness shows us that doubt is just a thought, and the only power it has is the power we give it through our identification with it. When we see that it is just thinking, there is really nothing more we have to do. It can die of its own accord in the equanimous space of awareness.

Doubt and indecision in our lives can be more difficult than when we notice it in our meditation practice. We don't have to act while on the cushion, but we surely do in our lives. Below are some general guidelines for moving through doubt and into action. Following this is a specific practice for making decisions mindfully.

## Some Basic Principles of Moving through Doubt

The first principle is to recognize that spinning around in indecision is a false comfort. We don't escape a decision with indecision; we are actually making the choice to be stuck. If you keep spinning in choices “A or B, A or B, A or B,” you are making a third choice, C. And choice C is being caught in “A or B, A or B, A or B.” Often C is the worse of the three, because you don't learn

anything, there is no chance for growth or change. Of course there are times you need more information, but there comes a point when it is time to act. The key is to remember that acting and making a mistake is preferable to inaction, because you will grow from the experience.

As the Zen story goes, a student asks his teacher why he seems so at peace. The teacher replies simply, "From good judgment."

"And how did you learn good judgment," the student asked?

"From experience," the teacher said.

"And how did you get experience," the student asked?

"From bad judgment," the teacher replied.

Second, it is wise to distinguish between doubt and "don't know" mind. Of course, life is massively uncertain. We have no idea what our thoughts will be in the next minute, much less the next day. So it would seem that indecision and doubt make sense in our chaotic and changeable world. However, an alternative to the crippling nature of doubt is to simply let what is uncertain be uncertain. This "don't know" mind is open and connected with the present moment, while doubt tends to be disconnected and locked into running through the same thoughts over and over. "Don't know" mind is dancing with uncertainty, while doubt is being assaulted and defeated by it. Mindfulness practice helps us stay in a kind of blessed not knowing, staying connected to the momentariness of things, gaining more and more information, until clear action presents itself more spontaneously. The mindful deciding below gets more concrete about how to do this.

Third, remember that we have gone from the Industrial Age to the Information Age to the Too Much Information Age. The information overload of 24/7 news, internet updates, twitters, emails, and texts is overwhelming to our poor, little hunter-gatherer brains! We also have so many material choices it can be mind boggling. I recently installed some French doors in our kitchen and could not believe how many door knob and hinge styles the shop salesman insisted I look at - pewter, copper, nickel, brass, brushed brass, platinum, silver-plated, and on and on. I just wanted a doorknob! No wonder we get stuck in indecision. In many ways, our culture is learning about the tyranny of choice. Too much choice leads to no choice at all.

The most recent issue of Newsweek has a cover story called "Brain Freeze" that describes the science documenting the pitfalls of this information overload. As we get deluged by data we actually get worse at deciding, decision science

is finding. For instance, scientific studies show that people tend to make more creative and more rationally defensible actions when allowing one's unconscious, informed by one's experience, to guide decision making. With so much information, we stay up in our heads, spinning in endlessly complex options, and completely out of touch with our gut instincts. The TMI Age is also the era of "I need it yesterday," and immediacy of decision has become the chief value, rather than the quality of the decision. Furthermore, deciding stops altogether when we have too much information. The story says that, "Decision science has shown that people faced with a plethora of choices are apt to make no decision at all." For instance, in a workplace study, when people looking into 401k plans are given many plan options, participation drops from 75 to 61 percent. People drop out from the overwhelm. Lastly, it is easier to regret decisions when we have accessed too much data in the decision process.

To deal with information overload, the story recommends:

1. Deal with emails and texts in batches and not real time.
2. Remove yourself from info flux and allow time for the unconscious to take over. You'll make better decisions.
3. Prioritize only a few important criteria when facing a choice.

Fourth, when making bigger decisions try to remember what really matters to you. What are your deeper priorities? If that is not clear to you, then it's really great to contemplate this or talk it over with a friend. When this is clear and you have really placed the decision in the bigger context, the decision becomes easier. Some cartoons make light of how our addiction to work as the meaning of life can make knowing what really matters challenging:

Fifth, rather than going rapidly back and forth between choices, sit with each of them for a period of time. For instance, on bigger decisions, pretend you have made choice A for a day. See all that comes up with that choice. Then the next day do the same with choice B. Then decide. Do this over a smaller time frame for smaller decisions.

The sixth principle I have found to be really important - focus on the gain in each choice rather than what you will miss out on. The mind gets much happier when you focus on the win - win, instead of the lose - lose. And when you are happier, you relax more, and are more decisive.

Lastly, when you have made a decision, resolve to stick with it. Affirm to yourself that you are decided and then just be mindful of any doubt or re-deciding that comes up. You can just be with doubt, or second-guessing or worry in the present moment, without biting on the thoughts or engaging them. I

have found this last step to be extremely helpful in short-circuiting doubt, which does not often know how to find an endpoint on its own.

## DEAL - A Mindful Decision Process

Soryu, a student of vipassana teacher Shinzen Young, has developed a mindful decision process based on Shinzen's approach to meditation. Please go to the link below to see the instructions. It will help to explain the terms feel, image, and talk used in the DEAL approach. Feel is physical sensation associated with emotion, talk is verbal thinking, and image is visual thinking, or inner imaging. A bit about the 4 steps:

D = Define = Frame the issue clearly and simply, preferably as a 2 option choice.

E = Explore - Self-explanatory.

A = Allow - After you have explored each side in feel, image, talk space, then go back into each three spaces and see what is there without interference. Sometimes a decision will be obvious, sometimes not.

L = Launch = Self-explanatory.

<http://soryuforall.budsa.org/decision/description>