

Unbundling Obstacles to Mindfulness Practice

By Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT

At the gym one morning, a magazine the facility subscribes to was sitting in a dressing room I was in and I started to read the tag lines on the cover. There was a striking photo on the cover of a man who looked like someone not to tangle with; fierce expression, scowling and steely eyes, and arms bared with rippling and sculpted cutting into the muscle that suggested much hard work had been done to create a sort of fortress such that an armor was attached around the bone and soft tissue that was still probably underneath. The title heading of the issue of this exercise magazine was "the Fighter issue," and was probably meant to inspire those to follow the path of the star on the cover. The tag line to the story about the man was (Someone or other's) "Brutal Workout." This struck me as very much in line with the way we treat ourselves sometimes, without mercy. I asked someone about this in a conversation later in the day what they thought it meant. Why would such a tagline sell magazines?

The reply I got was that whoever would see this guy and read that line would probably think, it may be brutal but look at the results. (No one would even consider messing with this guy in a fight, but also that he had set out to build a body-fortress and he had accomplished that.) It occurred to me that this is part of the similar way we believe we need to go with some important areas of our lives-no pain, no gain. It goes further. Only if we are willing to go to the extreme- even to the point of brutalizing ourselves will we pass muster, or have a chance to accomplish those capacities that allow us to go beyond weakness and failure to attain dominance over obstacles. If there is an underlying assumption that some obstacles are impenetrable, then nothing short of the ultimate acquisition of that material stuff that could be employed to lessen the odds against us will do. And it may go further, in ways that are not always obvious in the extremis. Yet if we are inclined to apply the same problem resolution and effort to learning who we are, the method may be revealed as attempting the achievement of the meaningful through attachment to that which cannot accomplish it –a separate solo self habituated to believing in the unfathomable solidness of the obstacles I am up against. The response to this naturally follows-collect as many pleasant experiences, gear, and other weaponry to use to assail the opposing force by which I define myself.

A sort of relentless inner self critic may seem to be needed for us to succeed, improve, and progress, perhaps one day in the future even being able to say that we've earned the right to be likeable, okay or even lovable to others and to ourselves. When we go after our well-being and set out to acquire psychological and spiritual prowess like another possession, we compare ourselves to the attainments of others in these areas and lose the opportunity to see the merits of what others do as well as our own merit.

In our meditation practice we may in repeated fashion come across this pre-absorbed and digested set of beliefs about what works and about how we probably need to proceed if we want "to get somewhere." Yet, we cannot get somewhere, for we are already somewhere.

HERE. Yet here can be daunting when we come into obstacles. (Or at least they seem like they are). Sometimes the obstacles are ones that seem dilemmas of practice, like becoming attached to relaxing while practicing because it feels pleasant to do so.

Although mindfulness meditation is one of the vehicles that at times assist practitioners to be relaxed, there is at times an obstacle created by making goals like "I am going to meditate and get relaxed," or even "I should be able to relax because I do meditation." (When faced with difficulties).

By setting such goals, we are subtly, perhaps repeating patterns, habits and conditioning for attachment to the pleasant (being relaxed, or happy), and perhaps avoiding the unpleasant or difficult. Then, if we have set up the goals for our meditation practice which are disrupted each time we are faced with difficulty, whether during formal practice or in our lives, we have unskillfully repeated an attachment to the desired pleasant relaxation or happiness and will be disappointed, and perhaps frustrated and begin or continue to attempt to analyze our way "out" of what has happened. This is an unwitting action which often raises the question about practice, "Why should I do this?" Without intending to, it is easy to return to patterns and habits of "doing mode." Then, there is a typical conditioned response wherein the perception and interpretation become linked and fused in automaticity, suggesting fight or flight. Automatic bundling of thoughts, feelings, and sensations bring a sense of "big black Blob" (impenetrable emotional obstacle, common to the landscape of depression as found in "The Mindful Way through Depression" by Williams, Teasdale, Zindel and Kabat-Zinn) to the perception(ego will then often tell us that there is no use in trying to overcome the force that depression contains). * The MBCT writers are referring to our habits of analytic thinking being used as a leading tool, and our ample evidence that this can often lead us astray. What often occurs is that in response to this seemingly impenetrable obstacle, we are caught in the content of thought and begin criticizing and analyzing as an attempt to respond. Often, there is an ensuing pattern of tension, anxiety and shallow breath. The "bundle" is pulled tighter as our rumination, anger and tension gain force. Thich Nhat Hanh says that in this way the formation of anger is like a knot. If transformed soon after it is tied, it is easier to unravel. The more tightly it is pulled, the more difficult it is to undo. +

Let us use such images to aid us with a new kind of language; the pictures in the images are the words of that language which can reveal the capacity to skillfully transcend into discoverable and profound understandings useful to our learning in everyday situations. A pebble tossed into a pond represents a moving image of the kind of waves generated on our minds by thoughts; the calming of the water's surface equates with a moment of stillness during which the pond's surface reflects what is above it. #

So, please take heart! You have awareness to help you practice. You already know that you will neither always be relaxed, nor always be happy in every moment; although you could have

these benefits as often as possible if the goal of meditation is simply being and being aware, rather than other agendas. Then, by being with whatever IS in your life, your awareness assists you in being okay through “the ten thousand joys and sorrows.” This is a *more soft* and devoted intention, rather a labor of love than the kinds of targets we are usually shooting for in our lives. Of course, ease and happiness are wonderful when they happen and are not likely to come from a “brutal workout.”

A spiritual path at times has the quality of reaching amidst the intangible for knowledge of the fleeting moment. You will build more confidence in the ability to be in such moments when you experience the unrelaxed and at times unhappy moments with awareness. This is a courageous practice and your curiosity and natural intelligence will be a far better guide than can be found in classes and books. Yet there is something to be said for group practice. After all, great and challenging questions are asked. Such questions provoke an open exploration and let us all know that we are not alone in the hope to develop the Being aspect of ourselves.

The psychology involved in these endeavors is chiefly based upon simplicity. This seems tough to find in what seems an increasingly complex world. But consider it a nutrient you will use to support what is meaningful to you and take your time.

*The Mindful Way through Depression; Freeing yourself from Chronic Unhappiness, By Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn, Guilford Press, 2007, New York

+Peace Is Every Step; The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life, Thich Nhat Hanh, Bantam Books, 1991, New York

#Imagery for Getting Well; Clinical Applications of Behavioral Medicine, Deirdre Davis Brigham with Adelaide Davis and Derry Cameron-Sampey, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994, New York