

ORDINARY AND REPETITIVE PATHS TO MEANING

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There are patterns and cycles that seem to return to us at various stages of our lives. Sometimes it is difficult to identify when this is happening until the moment when we first recognize that we are dealing with an obstacle. Such obstacles may confound us in that we have believed to have already solved them earlier on. Subtly, a number of such obstacles return as a representations; symbols of core beliefs that have the force of repetition and habit to lend a sense of false negative certainty. These are unhappy recognitions that are often stored in linguistic quagmires like, "the truth hurts." In single faceted core-belief composites, we may arrive during staged patterns and cycles of our lives at unhappy impasses, and operate under the influence of these core false assumptions about who we are and can become, and even what is the nature of meaning, from moment to moment.

Perhaps the complexity of our lives suggests that the tangle of problems humanity is in the midst of can only be resolved with complex solutions and in the search for the panacea we miss the opportunities that abound in our daily lives, just as they are. The more we can be present, with each moment; the open-ended capacity to learn can be found, and in the context of the obstacles not having any more particular power than they are interpreted to have. We may only be able at first effort to hold to this intention to be in the moment only for short periods of time, so strong is the pull of our conditioning to drift away from our actual life. The results we try to have by living ahead of our lives may provide some temporary relief from the avoidance enacted by "keeping up," comparing our attainments to those of others around us, and constant self-improvement, but the question "is this all there is?," lingers.

Awareness Practice offers us the daily life opportunity to practice being in the moment in our actual life. Yet, to do so consistently, with concentration and equanimity requires dealing with the repetition involved in numerous moment to moment returns to a beginning, a first breath, allowing judgments to come and go, thoughts to be observed not as facts but rather as mind-stuff/energy/waves of flow, softening of the tangle of anger, loss, shame, and clusters of rut-like tracks and associations; a gentle accepting embrace of being the healing presence in the enhanced and expanded field of consciousness. Gradually, the practice builds the internal networks related to compassion and meaning. Yet many teachings highlight the instruction that being with oneself requires letting go of demands for achievement. The practitioner is building skills in the ironic expectation that to seek results may stall progress. It is here where the teachings of mindfulness offer the insight that we may have drifted unwittingly into thoughts about practice rather than the simpler experiencing of practice. Again, the simplicity of mindfulness is something that we are not accustomed to experiencing and it is common that we find ourselves, through thoughts, criticisms, speculation, analysis, rumination, evaluation, and habit a myriad of ways to resist.

In response to incremental awakening to the resistance, a moment of softly intent emphasis returns the meditator to begin at the beginning, to recommence non-clinging attention to the breath, to sounds, to thoughts without identification with the self, to the expanded container

of consciousness, to the observation of cognitive-somatic-emotional energies, to the opening path of freedom from core limiting beliefs, and to the opening to the everyday necessities of our lives not as “stuff to get through to get to the good parts,” but rather as the extraordinary opportunities to learn and find meaning they can be.

The daily mindfulness practice offering the most expanded scope is the informal practice occurring outside of formal meditation sittings, but whether formal or informal, the similarity to our lives at large, matches in the need to both be with and to work with repetition and ordinariness.

Mark Williams, Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Oxford, and co-author of the “Mindful Way Through Depression,” states, “ ...If some of these practices seem a little repetitive, it’s because they are. Meditation is a simple practice that gains its power from repetition. It’s only through this that we can become aware of the repeating patterns in our own minds. Ironically, meditative repetition frees us from endlessly repeating our past mistakes and the automatic pilot that drives self-defeating and self-attacking thoughts and actions. Through repetition, we gradually tune into the subtle differences that each moment brings.”¹

Until we are aware, everyday events may seem mundane and common-place. Once we are aware these same events become infused with radiance. This is not a goal, but rather a way of being we can practice. This is not a capacity set aside for the few, but rather a gift awaiting the opening for those who are prepared to softly dissolve life’s clouds and shadows with the application of light, healing, acceptance and compassion. Life’s challenges require the courage of a skilled heart to recognize them for what they are, everyday possibilities with potential to impart extraordinary confidence and empowerment. In this way, every moment is our teacher. In this way mistakes are not failures, but rather possibilities for learning. ²

Wisdom springs from these events if we are present to be with them. Unexpected meaning can come from the ordinary. Boredom itself can be understood as a resistance to the present, during which a meaning is just out of reach of awareness. In continuing to practice, the meaning is revealed. We can be taught this, and then avoid it, forget it, yet through repetition we will learn it again.

In meditation practice, boredom is useful as a signal to return to the moment, to renew the intent to attend, to self-support for noticing breaks from concentration, to allow respect for the impenetrable, and the application of simplicity so common to restoration, composure and self-compassion. In the experiential learning occurring during mindfulness meditation, the practitioner utilizes the states of boredom, fear, anger, shame, anxiety, hurt, and tension as “adaptive system messengers”³, signals that developmental, psychological, and spiritual work is in progress, often leading to new meanings, learnings and creative choice.

The classic “tell” of our boredom, the yawn, is in recent neuroscience revealed, on a deeper level as a neuro-biological wake up call. Citing studies from the Institute of Neurology in London, Andrew Newberg, M.D., concludes that yawning is an overall neural tonic with noted effects on the precuneus, and fits, along with meditation, as part of the seven top ways to exercise your brain. Among the many benefits yawning (and so the boredom often associated with it), stimulates alertness and concentration, improves cognitive function, increases memory recall, enhances consciousness and alertness, lowers stress, relaxes every part of your body, increases empathy and social awareness, and associates with the mirror neuron system.

(Aware, awake, intent, alert). Surely more socially meaningful relationships are more possible with these ingredients which are, once again, built-in to our systems. 4

Further exploration into this topic reveals that recovery from drug and alcohol addiction and from the despair of mental illness has been more recently and positively supported through the use of mindfulness meditation. The recent trends in recovery address everyday needs and the supports of not just clinicians, but friends and family in the healing process. This often follows the axiom given from the heart of Buddhist teaching, "Obstacles are not in your way, they are your way." Embracing this approach, the mindfulness practitioner recognizes and accepts that there are daily challenges and on a daily basis trains to be in the very moments when they occur. It is in the simplicity of these moments that we recognize that our experience of overwhelm when "solving problems," is simply a stage along the path to learning. 5 What approach might develop over the course of our lives if we recognized the development of meaning closely connected to the mistakes that we have made?

Those who are recovering from addictions and mental illness often struggle with the criticisms of those around them whose change blindness is overcome only eventually through many repetitions of the demonstration of ordinary responsibility have been proven to the point of a "breakthrough." This is why self-compassion is an internal resource needed for recovery prior to its social counterpart being actuated. It is self-compassion which is then the vehicle within which the intent for self-care is carried. Perhaps the "higher power" often spoken of is the vision to see into the moment despite all perception of obstacles. There is a metaphoric and therapeutic story that was passed along to me regarding the value of obstacles, concerning a butterfly:

Curious about the sighting of a cocoon in a tree outside his home, a man watched daily with great curiosity, interested in the butterfly's progress from the cocoon into the world. Although very anxious to see the process unfold as it naturally would do, the man fought the sense that he might do something to help the delicate creature. As the time drew near and the butterfly was getting closer to emerging, the man could no longer contain his urge to help, and took a razor blade to the cocoon, gently cutting an opening the rest of the way for the butterfly. As a breeze came, the butterfly attempted to leave its former home, but fell to the earth and died. Sometimes a struggle makes a being stronger. (Obstacles are not in your way, they are your way). The biological answer is that at the time the butterfly is struggling against the cocoon to free itself, liquids inside the butterfly are moved into tiny capillaries in the wings, which harden and strengthen the wings. This analogy is similar to our meditation practice and quest for deeper understanding. For even in this uplifting practice there are moments of resistance, moments of forgetfulness, moments of pain, moments of clinging, moments of cloudiness, and each calls us toward the beginning once more, also renewing purpose and confidence in working with uncertainty, impermanence, and difficulty to find meaning not only in happiness, but with whatever life brings. Our teachers and therapists are therefore wise not to reach so far into cutting our cocoons.

In the twelve steps the often repeated definition of insanity is given as "doing the same things over and over again hoping for a different result." Considering that this could be true, if we repeated mistakes over and over again, yet part of that intended definition may help us not rid our lives of all repetition. The part of the 12 step definition that changes with awareness practice is we are instead repeating things (errors), instead (being close to our experience

rather than our thoughts about it), and not necessarily trying for a result. So, it is not just repeating but repeating the intention to be “results flexible,” coupled with awareness, and not repeating mistakes, and in so doing finding creative choices. In the case of mindfulness meditation, it is in the process of repeating a fresh beginning, of being fully with the moment of that beginning and being aware that constitute what takes the place of “trying for a result.”

Borrowing then, from the 12 step tradition mentioned above, sanity is repeating an approach to each moment, allowing awareness to guide the process, and finding ways to care for ourselves and other important people in our lives. Learning from our mistakes then, will most likely create possibilities for times of healing action and times of healing rest.

Whatever we are recognizing and working on, being mindful of our imbalance can open up insight into the patterns of our lives; those which both signal change and those that signal what matters. Great teachers tell us, we don't need to be other than we are; that we are already as we are-wonderful beings.

“We meditate not to attain enlightenment, because enlightenment is already in us. We don't have to search anywhere. We don't need a purpose or a goal. We don't practice in order to obtain some high position. In aimlessness, we see that we do not lack anything that we already are what we want to become, and our striving just comes to a halt...” 6

“In the beginning people sometimes find this meditation exciting. It's like a new project, and you think that if you do it, perhaps all the unwanted stuff will go away and you'll become open, nonjudgmental, and unconditionally friendly. But after a while the sense of project wears out. You just find time each day, and sit down with yourself. You come back to your breath over and over, through boredom, edginess, fear, and well-being. This perseverance and repetition-when done with honesty, a light touch, humor and kindness-is its own reward.” 7

So let us connect with this day as the unique opportunity it is-listening to the music, opening our eyes letting the clouds over our vision and hearts gently drop their rains, and allow our tears to clear the path before us, free to live the miracle of being here. Let us find each other, laugh and in moments of joy be close to peace and in moments of sorrow be close to compassion. Take refuge in the compassion we make together, it is already waiting for you.

1 Mindfulness; An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World, Mark Williams and Danny Penman, Foreword by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Rodale Books, New York, 2011

2 When Things Fall Apart; Heart Advice for Difficult Times, Pema Chodron, Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, 1997

3 Adaptive System Messengers, Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT, Gig Harbor, WA. 2011, (Web-Published Archives of RelaxingOne.com) Est. 2008

4 How God Changes Your Brain; Breakthrough Findings from a Leading Neuroscientist, Andrew Newberg, M.D., and Mark Robert Waldman, Ballantine Books, Random House Publishing, New York, 2009

5 Confusion Resources, Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT, Gig Harbor, WA. , 2010, (Web-Published Archives of RelaxingOne.com) Est. 2008

6 The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation
Thich Nhat Hanh, Broadway Books, New York, 1998

7 When Things Fall Apart; Heart Advice for Difficult Times, Pema Chodron, Shambhala Publications, Inc., Boston, 1997