



Making Better Choices, Mindfully

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If insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results, then clearly, I'm insane!

Sad to say, I know I have plenty of company with me. It seems to me most of us are asleep at the wheel of our life a lot of the time, if not most of it. And, while we may be unaware of our self-induced insanity, we are very familiar with the actual experience of it. We feel a variety of emotions from fearlessness, glee, happiness, or hope as we begin a new relationship or project which transitions into depression, disappointment, sadness, frustration, anger or fear as it comes to an unfulfilling end. Rinse and repeat, right? It happens over and over again. None of us set out on this path intentionally; nonetheless we wake up and find ourselves there anyway. Believe it or not, the fact that we even are aware of this is good news: it means we have awakened at some point. The question is how do we begin making better choices? More importantly, how can we find ourselves awake more often than not? Maybe even more important is the question, what is the benefit of being awake more often?

Ultimately, my belief is - the benefit of living from an awakened state is less suffering. I experience less suffering directly and those in relationship with me experience less suffering as a result of interaction with me. How does this happen? My explanation is that when I respond to what is happening in the present moment from an "awakened state" (versus reacting automatically based on past experience or future expectations, for example), I am responding from my whole being, my integrated self of mind, body, and spirit. I am open and curious with my thinking, grounded and at peace in my body and am aware of and aligned with my intuitive nature. I find this creates an opportunity for those I interact with to respond in a similar manner. But, even when others are asleep and reacting from the past or future, I find I still have choice in my response, which feels good to me.

Now, back to my second question, how can we find ourselves awake more often than not? This is a matter of changing our habitual way of being. From birth, we grow and develop as human beings based on our genetics, interacting with and learning from everything and everyone in our environment. We develop certain habitual ways of being based on reinforced patterns of behavior, accepted belief systems, cultural norms of our family, faith, community and country, and so on. To change a habit, we must begin practicing the new behavior we desire. This is where courage and compassion are needed to support taking baby steps, stumbling, getting back up and continuing to practice, one step at a time.

I have practiced some form of meditation on and off for the past four years. I have practiced sitting meditation (guided by CD, such as a loving-kindness meditation, and unguided seated meditation based on following my breath, and a walking insight meditation following a labyrinth path). I have recently begun practicing sitting meditation, again. Specifically, I sit and meditate with a guided mindfulness meditation CD. I'm getting something new from this latest meditation. I'm being guided in the practice of shifting my habitual way of reacting to my body sensations, distractions in my environment, my thoughts, my emotional reaction to my thoughts or body sensations, and so on.

So, how does it work? During the meditation, you are asked to sit with the intention of being still. You are asked to follow the steps below when you experience something you feel is triggering a reaction from you (i.e., an itch, a ringing phone, thoughts about who's phone is ringing, frustration with the person who forgot to turn

off their phone, and so on). For example, I will use the experience of having an itch while meditating to take you through the steps.

Step 1: Awareness

You feel an itch on your knee.

Step 2: Observation

Observe the itch sensation for a while. Does it vary in its sensation, stronger or weaker? Does it dissipate and go away?

Step 3: Ponder Options

Consider whether or not you need to react? If yes, consider what reactions are possible to resolve your itch? Let's say the itch does vary in its sensation, but doesn't go away entirely. You believe you want to do something to end the distraction at this point, so you are inclined to scratch it. You ponder your options: you could ask someone to scratch it for you, you could move your leg, which might cause your pants to scratch the itch or you could simply move your arm and use your fingers to scratch the itch.

Step 4: Make Decision

Assuming it is still itching, let's say you decide to move your arm to scratch.

Step 5: Take Action with Intention

Assuming it is still itching, you move your arm with the intention of simply scratching the itch with your fingers. Return to your meditation without further movement.

Over time, as we practice these simple steps with regard to our body sensations during meditation, we begin to develop a new habit: the possibility for responding from awareness and choice. We can apply these steps to the distractions other than of the body that occur during meditation, as mentioned previously: environmental, mental, emotional, etc. By doing so, we strengthen the new habit and have access to more choice in our meditation experience. Over time, the new habit will be available to us in response to our experiences in our everyday lives. To answer my first question, we practice a new way of being, making better choices, mindfully.

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