

The Essential  
Guide to  
**Working  
with Habitual  
Patterns**



LION'S ROAR



# LION'S ROAR

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**INCESSANT WORRYING**, self-defeating behaviors, addictions and other unhealthy habits—why are we caught again and again in certain patterns, even when we know they’re not good for us? Buddhist practice helps us to see out habitual thoughts, emotions, and actions so that we can ultimately be free of them. While Western psychology analyses the causes and history of our negative patterns, in Buddhist meditation we look directly at them as they arise in the present moment. Using mindfulness and awareness practice, we can see the true nature of negative thoughts and emotions and liberate ourselves on the spot from their power over us.

In this guide, you’ll find insightful teachings to help you examine your own patterns and ease the hold they have over you.



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## From Getting Mad to Going Shopping: What's Your Pattern?

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**Sylvia Boorstein** on 5 styles of habitual reaction and how to free yourself from yours.

EMILY, A LONG-TIME PARTICIPANT in my regular Wednesday morning Buddhist class, told us about a distressing experience she'd had the previous day. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "I came out of my apartment building and there was my car, just where I'd left it the night before, but lower. All the tires had been stolen. I got so upset that I walked the three blocks to Macy's and bought the silk pajamas I'd been coveting." People laughed sympathetically, acknowledging Emily's discomfort and appreciating the unexpected remedy she'd chosen. "After that" Emily continued, "I went home and called the police."

"I'm surprised you went shopping," another person said. "I would have found the building manager and given her a piece of my mind. I pay high rent to have good security. I probably would have been in a bad mood all day. It always takes time for my mind to settle down."

Someone else said, “I feel like I can’t tolerate that kind of sudden stress. When something like that happens, I feel exhausted before I even start to deal with it. I would have gone into my apartment, called work, and told them I needed the rest of the day off.”

Someone said, “Well, you people know what a worrier I am. I would have thought, ‘Today the tires, tomorrow the car!’ When I get over one worry, my mind is quickly scanning for the next possible thing to worry about.”

Finally someone said, “My mind doesn’t do any of those things. It blames. Mostly, it blames me. It is as if I have a built-in peer review committee always ready to criticize. I wonder who appointed them?”

By this time we were all laughing, realizing we had accidentally put together a list of the traditional five “afflictive energies.” These are five habitual ways people react to challenging circumstances that cloud clear judgment.

In traditional Buddhist texts, these energies are called the Five Hindrances, because they block access to sound decision-making. Here is the classic list:

- *Desire* (sometimes called “lust,” which somehow sounds worse)
- *Aversion* (in all its permutations, from annoyance to rage)

- *Sloth* and *Torpor* (which sounds sinful and intentional, in contrast to fatigue, my preferred term)
- *Restlessness* (which manifests as fretting or worrying)
- *Doubt* (which is linked with insecurity, self-blame, and lack of confidence)

When I tell the story about this class, it usually elicits an enthusiastic response: “Yes, that’s me! Matter of fact, I have two of those five response patterns. Can a person have more than one?”

“In fact,” I respond, “we each have all those habitual patterns of response in varying combinations in response to different circumstances.”

On one notable occasion, though, a man who had recently joined the class said, “I don’t understand any of this. I would have phoned my work to tell them I’d be late. Then I would have phoned the police, my insurance company, and an auto repair to get the car towed and serviced. Then I would have taken the bus to work. What’s the matter with these people?”

Everyone laughed, and I probably did too. But I was very careful in my response, because no one had been wrong in identifying how they responded to stress and nothing was “the matter” with anyone.

I replied, “I think most of us here would have done that too. What people are describing is what they felt like doing, what thoughts flashed through their minds before they did the obvious



sensible thing.” The silk pajama story served as a prompt for people to notice what their minds habitually bring up in response to stress and difficulty.

My most prominent default position, the one that's been the most painful all my life, is restlessness, an agitation of mind that manifests as obsessive worrying. Long before I knew about restlessness as a recognizable, commonly shared form of confusion, I knew I had it. I worried about things that were sometimes genuine concerns (which required attention, but not obsessive fretting) and I worried about imagined concerns, things that had not yet happened but could. When I describe to people the kinds of worst-case scenarios my mind can construct out of minimal data, many heads nod in rueful recognition of this familiar experience.

Imagine this scene: I was traveling with my husband in a foreign country, before there were cellphones, and we planned to meet at a particular restaurant for lunch. I arrived on time, at noon. He wasn't there yet.

I waited a minute, maybe two, and then I thought, “What if something bad happened to him? What if he got lost? He doesn't speak the language. What if he took ill? He is old. What if he is missing and no one can find him? I suppose I could call the American embassy. If something terrible happened I'd need to call our family ...”

Only a few minutes passed before he strolled into view, happy to tell me about his morning's adventures. I felt dismayed to find myself caught, yet again, in a gratuitous mind-storm.

Each experience like this solidified my view of myself. “I am a world class worrier,” I would think, “and I guess I’ll need to deal with this forever.” Calling myself “world class” was an attempt to make light of my uncomfortable habit. I wouldn’t do that now. Every afflictive mind tendency that becomes a habit is painful.

Here’s a second scene from the pre-cellphone era: I was waiting with other parents for a ski bus to return from a day in the mountains. Aboard were sixty eleven-year-olds, one of whom was mine. The bus was fifteen minutes late. As we stood together in the winter evening darkness, it began to rain.



Every afflictive mind tendency that becomes a habit is painful.

Ten more minutes passed. I thought, “How come these other parents, like the one who just said, ‘Let’s get something to eat while we wait?’, are not thinking that if it’s raining here, it’s snowing in the mountains, and quite likely there has been an accident?”

I was aware of the frightening thoughts I was having, and the pain of having those thoughts. I was also aware that the other parents did not take every situation of ambiguity to a dreadful conclusion. I felt envious.

Over the years I have made the shift from thinking, “I am stuck with this mind and these tendencies forever” to trusting, “I can be different! I’m not sure these thoughts will stop, but I can stop being held hostage by them.”

I began by deliberately not identifying myself with my habitual pattern. To voice my confidence in the possibility of change I began to say, “I’m thinking of myself as a recovering fretter.” As a diligent practice, I became particularly vigilant about the arising of frightening thoughts. I describe this practice as “mindfulness of alarming thoughts.” Being genuinely mindful requires that I acknowledge the thoughts with a balanced mind. Whenever I am able to intercept the thoughts in the tiny space in my awareness before fear enzymes flood through my body, I can recognize that they are only thoughts and I don’t have to believe them. Then the thoughts just become thoughts. They don’t stir up a commotion. This is tremendous progress.

I had hoped in my early years of practice that my tendency toward alarm would disappear. That didn’t happen. Perhaps these habitual tendencies are coded in our genes. Perhaps they are patterns we learn in our families, or from our culture. Because I am a psychologist, I selected elements of my childhood experience to present a plausible story for why my mind makes up worries. But validating my habit with a story didn’t make it better. What helped was years of recognizing and not responding to afflictive tendencies. Now, worry thoughts happen less, and when they do, they have much less power. That, for me, is liberating enough.

In the end, it isn’t about never having afflictive habits arise. They are part of being human and having complex lives. Treating afflictive habits like mildly annoying cousins who visit from time to time reduces their power. I’m sure that is true across the

spectrum of afflictive energies, not just my habit of restless worry. I'm also sure that a relaxed mind—one that is steady enough to absorb the initial startle of an afflictive energy, alert enough to identify it clearly, and determined enough not to give in to it—is the key to working with any disturbing habit. We can follow the Buddha's example.

Imagine the Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree on the night of his enlightenment. He is absolutely resolute and determined to free his mind of all confusion. According to legend, Mara, the personification of ego, arrives to thwart his plan. Accompanying Mara are all the forces that confuse the mind. The Buddha, recognizing that his mind is about to be challenged, says, "I see your armies, Mara, and I am not afraid."

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Now, worry thoughts happen less, and when they do, they have much less power. That, for me, is liberating enough.

Visualize, if you can, this wonderful scene as it unfolds. The forces of Mara unleash spears and arrows which turn into flowers as they encounter the field of poised benevolence that surrounds the Buddha. Mara then creates a display of erotic temptations which dissolve in the field of radiant ease that surrounds the Buddha. Mara disappears and the Buddha declares his enlightenment.

The Buddha gains wisdom because he is peaceful. Equanimity is the prerequisite for liberation. The Buddha's ability to remain poised, to counter potential distress with blessings of goodwill, demonstrates the end of suffering. His behavior represents his central teaching, "Peace is possible."

The Buddha is said to have placed his hand on the ground as Mara appeared, in a gesture that signified, "I have a right to be here."

As human beings, we also have the right to recognize challenge, choose to override our instinctive impulses, and liberate ourselves, moment to moment, from falling into the confusion that is suffering. We too can recognize hindrance habits as unwholesome and override their lure. We can modulate aversive feelings so that our views are expressed as useful responses. We can resist the impulse to disengage when participation is appropriate. We can recognize irrelevant alarming thoughts as the creations of fantasy that they are and put them aside. We can recognize self-doubt (although it is the subtlest of energies and masquerades as truth) and ignore it.

There are a variety of special trainings or practices for developing each of these skills. But the universal remedy, which is effective in responding to confusion of any sort, is the training of the mind that the Buddha demonstrated under the bodhi tree.

This training involves the practices of wise effort, wise concentration, and wise mindfulness. Wise effort is the ongoing determination to choose responses that are wholesome. Wise

concentration is building, through lifestyle choices and meditation practice, enough stability in the mind to maintain equanimity through the ever-changing challenges of life. Wise mindfulness is the continual, non-coercive awareness of changing experiences, which is, in itself, the practice of peace.

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It is helpful to identify hindrance energies not as character flaws but as default positions of the mind under stress. This allows the mind to relax.

In classes where I ask that people disclose, by a show of hands, which hindrance energy is their most prominent one, there are always five groups that identify themselves. Sometimes the people in each group meet together to share their experiences of what works best as responses to these uncomfortable tendencies. Participants report that they find the groups helpful. More than specific remedies, the discovery that other people are willing to share stories of their experiences, especially when a lack of consciousness has created serious difficulties in their lives, is reassuring, and normalizing, and inspiring.

It is helpful to identify hindrance energies not as character flaws but as default positions of the mind under stress. This allows the mind to relax. “I have a mind that, under stress, thinks first of sensual soothing” is kinder than “I am a lustful person.” “When I am startled, angry thoughts arise in my mind” is kinder than “I am

an angry person.” “At the slightest hint of ambiguity in a situation, dire possibilities fill my mind,” is kinder, and less embarrassing, than admitting “I am a chronic fretter.”

What helps is remembering, “This confusion is a temporary attack which will pass soon. It will pass faster if I’m kind to myself (because, after all, I am in pain) and if I don’t solidify this experience into a fixed view.” Reframing unpleasant energies (and all the hindrances are unpleasant) as transient, opportunistic phenomena doesn’t preclude them from arising or immediately neutralize them. But it does make them workable. ✿



## How to Free Yourself from the Seven Obsessions

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We suffer, the Buddha said, from seven deep-rooted habitual patterns. To free ourselves from them, says **Valerie (Vimalasara) Mason-John**, we need to see how they have become part of our identity.

*Watch your thoughts; they become habits.*

*Watch your habits; they become stories.*

*Watch your stories; they become excuses.*

*Watch your excuses; they become relapses.*

*Watch your relapses; they become dis-eases.*

*Watch your dis-eases; they become vicious cycles.*

*Watch your vicious cycles; they become your wheel of life.*

We meditate to uproot what the Buddhist teachings call *samskaras*. These are the mental impressions and recollections that have been psychologically imprinted in our minds by early childhood trauma.

We also meditate to loosen what the Buddha called the seven *anusayas*, which are obsessions or underlying habitual tendencies. If we really want to break deep-rooted habits, every one of



us needs to become aware of the obsessions of sensual passion, resistance, views, uncertainty, conceit, ignorance, and the passion of becoming.

Maybe you've made a New Year's resolution again this year, performed rituals, done therapy, or tried plant medicine. But these seven habitual ways of acting out are still dominating your life and causing you misery. Why? Because the *anusayas* are rooted in ancestral trauma, intergenerational trauma, and epigenetic trauma. They have become part of your identity.

The thoughts that habitually run around in your head are part of your superego: they are giving internal voice to the adults in your past who harmed, hurt, and wounded you. Every time we habitually react, that past is present. It resurfaces.

I used to have a huge reaction if I was waiting for a friend and they were half an hour late. For some of you, someone being half an hour late wouldn't be a big deal. But once upon a time, waiting for someone put my whole body into a crisis—palpitations, sweats, grinding my teeth. That's because the memory was still in my body of the six-week-old me who was left somewhere by a mother who never returned. So when someone was late, my body memory was activated and I became deeply distressed.

This habit of reacting was only uprooted when I surrendered the identity of an abandoned six-week-old, and allowed that identity to die, in the painful gap of sadness, rather than habitually turning away from it in my distress. We transcend our habits by allowing a part of our superego to die.



## MEDITATION

### Thoughts with No Thinker

- Become aware of the body by simply noticing what the body is touching. Notice your clothing and anything else touching the body.
- The body produces sensations—it's what the body does. So become aware of such sensations: heat, tickling, aching, throbbing, itching, pain, and so on. Notice that these sensations are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.
- Sensations trigger thoughts, so become aware of thoughts touching the heart-mind. Notice them without identifying with them, without thinking them, and without creating habitual grooves in the brain.
- The heart-mind will produce thoughts, because that's what it does, too. You don't have to think them. You can be free of stinking thinking and have "thoughts without a stinker."
- We work with thoughts by inhaling deeply, expanding the breath throughout the body, and then exhaling. Do this several times, and hopefully this will begin to weaken habits.



## Gaining Perspective on Habitual Patterns

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When you're caught in habitual patterns, says **Joan Sutherland**, try not to fixate on your reactions. Instead, cultivate awareness of everything that is happening in the moment.

SOMETIMES IT CAN SEEM as though being human is a problem that spiritual practice is meant to solve. But Buddhist meditative and related practices actually have a different focus: developing our human faculties to see more clearly the true nature of things, so that we can participate in and respond to how things are in a more generous and helpful way. Our individual awakenings become part of the world's awakening. This means leaning into life, and to do that we have to recognize what gets in the way. For each of us, this is likely to include certain habitual patterns of thinking and feeling in reaction to what we encounter.

Meditation and inquiry are methods, ways to have direct experiences of the deepest insights of our tradition—of the interpermeation of all things and the way things, including our habitual reactions, rise into existence for a while and then fall away again. Everything is provisional, and everything influences everything else. The implication for our inner lives is that they are seamless with the outer world, and constantly changing with it. We're

not encapsulated consciousnesses bouncing around in a world of other consciousnesses and inert matter, but part of a vibrant, ever-changing field that encompasses everything we can experience, and more. Everything is rising and falling in this field, sometimes for a nanosecond and sometimes for a geological age, but still appearing and disappearing in an infinitely complex web of other things doing the same. To the extent that we experience, in the ordinary moments of our lives, the seamlessness of our inner states and outer circumstances, we're being more realistic, more in tune with the way things actually are.

From this perspective, how do we deal with the habitual patterns of heart and mind that inhibit us from having a more realistic understanding of life, and a more intimate engagement with it? Perhaps it becomes less important to tackle the thoughts and feelings directly, to do something about them, than it is to see them in their true proportion. A reaction, after all, is just one thing among many appearing in the field at that particular moment, no more or less important than anything else.

Simply put, how we react is not the most important element of any situation. When we fixate on our reactions, they pull us away from a primary experience of what's actually happening, into a small room where how we think and feel about the experience becomes the most important thing, the thing we're now in relationship with. If you and I are having a conversation and I become angry, I might find my emotions so compelling that suddenly I'm not in a conversation with you anymore, but with my

anger. What's wrong with this person? This must not stand! Then, particularly if I'm involved in a spiritual practice, I'm likely to have reactions to my reactions. After all this meditation, I shouldn't be getting angry like this! Or, This is righteous anger! Now I'm in the third order of experience, moving further and further away from the actual conversation with you.



A reaction is just one thing among many appearing in the field at that particular moment, no more or less important than anything else.

If we pull the camera back for a wider view, it's immediately apparent that a reaction like this is only one of many things rising in any given moment in the field. There's you and me and our surroundings, your mood, my capacity for misunderstanding, the temperature of the air, the sound of birds or traffic outside the window and the neighborhood beyond that, the most recent calamity in the news, and more other phenomena than we can possibly take into account. The moment is vast, with a lot of space between the things in it. The moment is generous. I don't have to zero in on my reaction, to act impulsively on it or repudiate it or improve it, all of which tend to reinforce the sense of its importance, but just accept it as one (small) part of what's happening. Usually that simple shift changes everything. It allows us to step out of the small room of second-order experience and back into a fuller, more realistic experience of the moment.

If reaction is a move into the partial, a privileging of how we think and feel above everything else, response emerges from the whole of oneself, grounded in the whole situation, with each element assuming its true size and shape. In responding we're not doing something about a situation, but participating in it.

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Habits can be deeply ingrained, but over time it's possible that even a troublesome reaction can assume its proper size and shape as one thing among many, rising and falling with everything else.

It's interesting that our evaluation of a habitual reaction as negative doesn't arise until the third order of experience, fully two circles away from what's actually happening: it's our reaction to our reaction to what's happening. The ancients called this putting a head on top of your head. Not only are we distancing ourselves from the original situation, but even from our reaction to the situation. That kind of distancing can be a defense against a reaction that's causing unease out of proportion to its proportion, as it were, and that's when inquiry can be useful.

The basic inquiry is What is this? And it's a way back to what we're trying to avoid. We drop the self-centered focus of the third order of experience and re-enter the second, encountering our reaction directly, without preconceptions and even with interest. We've picked up one thing from the field and are taking a closer

look for a while. We inquire into whatever What is this? evokes— thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, memories. The unexpected and surprising are particularly valuable, because they come from somewhere other than what we can usually imagine. Habits can be deeply ingrained, but over time it's possible that even a quite troublesome reaction can assume its proper size and shape as one thing among many, rising and falling with everything else, no longer especially inhibiting or especially fascinating. And we move closer to a life lived in response instead of reaction, closer to participation in the way things actually are. ❁



## Notice Craving and Aversion

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To give yourself a fighting chance against negative patterns, says **Josh Korda**, you've got to get at the driving forces behind them.

“BAD HABITS” and compulsive tendencies, such as procrastination, perfectionism, and addictive distractions, are formidable roadblocks to our long-term well-being, happiness, our self-esteem. To address our “bad habits” we need to understand how they operate.

First, they're not a sign of “laziness” or “negligence,” as they're initiated with little if any conscious choice. Compulsions are essentially defense mechanisms, behaviors that distract our attention from unnecessary unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or memories. Imagine arriving home to an empty apartment after a stressful day of work, confronted with loneliness or melancholy, then finding yourself binge eating or mesmerized by countless hours of Netflix. Such fixations briefly raise our dopamine levels, providing a false sense of uplift and reward, and pull our attention away from painful emotional states lurking in the background. If we put aside these distractions, our dopamine levels quickly plunge and the painful feelings (*dukkha*) return, with greater force.



Delving deeper, roughly twenty-five years ago a famous neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, explained that choices and behaviors are rooted in feelings, not rational thought; in other words, *we act according to how we feel, not how we think*. My conscious, rational mind will say “Salad is healthier than cheese,” but when I’m anxious, frustrated, or sad, grilled cheese wins every time. It’s the human condition to act in accordance with what positive feelings dictate and avoid what activates negative states, even at the expense of long-term, healthy goals and growth opportunities.

Some 2,500 years ago, in a teaching called the *Paticca-samuppada*, the Buddha explained human behavior in much the same manner as Damasio: positive feelings, or *sukkhā vedāna*, elicit craving, the urge to grasp and cling to what evokes pleasure. Conversely, negative feelings, *dukkhā vedāna*, create aversion, the urge to avoid or push what creates pain.

The dharma, however, notes there is a way to free ourselves from these drives: If we want to interrupt habitually ingrained behaviors, we must bring awareness of these feelings into our attention and observe them until the feelings, positive or negative, dissipate and fade. At that point reason has a fighting chance at influencing our behaviors.

When I find myself putting off a healthy, though uninspiring task, I’ll visualize a pleasant, long-term result that would accrue, and generate positive feelings while I hold the task in mind. Eventually, associating a worthwhile endeavor with positive feelings makes it easier to focus on the routine I’ve previously sidestepped.



## MEDITATION

### Overriding the Habit of Procrastination

In my own practice I've developed a method specifically to override the habits of procrastination and distraction.

Close your eyes and sit comfortably, bringing attention to the sensations of your breath as experienced in your abdomen. Try to subtly extend the length of exhalations, which helps down regulate the nervous system.

When you're ready, bring to mind a task you've been avoiding, though it would be beneficial. It could be going to a yoga class, paying bills, you name it. As you visualize yourself engaging in the activity, become aware of the subtle physical feelings it evokes—perhaps a tightness in the chest, clenched teeth, contracted abdomen, or hesitant breathing. Use your long, slow exhalations to soothe the negative feelings associated with the task.

Now bring to mind a long-term positive outcome that would result from this task. Really allow yourself to fantasize about a wonderful outcome. Once this is achieved, bring your attention to the positive feelings that have been evoked. Savor the sensations and use the breath to spread them.

Lastly, with positive feelings invoked, bring your attention back to the task you've avoided, and spend a minute linking the pleasant feelings with the avoided routine. That's it!

Finally, it's important to note that behavioral change doesn't occur after a single meditation—avoidance coping is notoriously resistant to change. Give these practices time and patience. They'll work if you work at them.



## Silencing the Inner Critic

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The nagging, negative voice of self-judgement, says **Christina Feldman**, is a powerful affliction best met with courage, kindness, and understanding.

*Unruly beings are like space.  
There's not enough time to overcome them.  
Overcoming these angry thoughts.  
Is like defeating all of our enemies.  
—Shantideva*

THE BUDDHA SAT beneath the Bodhi tree on the eve of his enlightenment and was assailed by Mara, representing all of the afflictions we meet in the landscape of our minds: worry and restlessness, dullness and resistance, craving, aversion, and doubt. The one affliction that did not make an appearance in this story is the powerful voice of the inner critic—the inner judge that can torment us on a daily basis, undermining our well-being and distorting our relationship with life. The inner critic is the voice of shame, blame, belittlement, aversion, and contempt. To many of us, it is so familiar that it seems almost hardwired into our hearts.

Before exploring the nature of the judgmental mind, it is essential to mark the distinction between the voice of the inner critic and our capacity for discernment and discriminating

wisdom. Discriminating wisdom is what brings us to our cushion to meditate and inspires us to act in ways that bring suffering and harm to an end. Discriminating wisdom is the source of every wise act and word. Discernment draws upon ethics, compassion, and wisdom and teaches us moment by moment to discover the Buddha in ourselves and in others.



The judging mind is optional; it can be understood and released.

The inner critic is a creature of a different nature. With the inner critic, we may still come to our cushion but we come accompanied by a story that tells us we are unworthy or inadequate. With the inner critic, we still act, speak, and make choices, yet moment by moment we feel endlessly criticized, compared, and belittled. The judgmental mind draws not upon all that is wise but upon Mara, the patterns of aversion, doubt, ill will, and fear. Rarely is the judgmental heart the source of wise action or speech, nor does it lead to the end of suffering. The judgmental mind is suffering and compounds suffering. It suffocates ethics, the guidelines of kindness and care, and it wounds our hearts and lives.

Discriminating wisdom is essential and must be cultivated. The judging mind is optional; it can be understood and released. Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic described the essence of the spiritual path as a search for truth that springs from love.

Beneath the Bodhi tree, Mara's power over Siddhartha ended the moment he was able to look Mara in the eye and simply say, "I know you." These few words were a reflection of a profound shift in Siddhartha's heart: the shift from being intimidated and overpowered by Mara to having the courage to open a dialogue of understanding with Mara, and bringing intimidation to an end.

The judgmental mind that causes so much pain in our lives cannot be exempted from our practice. The judgmental mind needs to be met with the same courage and investigation we bring to any other afflictive emotion. The judgmental mind does not respond well to suppression, avoidance, or aversion. It needs kindness and understanding. The late Jiyu-Kennett Roshi, a Zen teacher, said the training of liberation begins with compassion for the self, and that cultivating a non-judgmental mind toward ourselves is the key to a genuine compassion for all beings.

We begin this process by asking what a non-judgmental mind looks like, and what it means to be free of the burden of the inner critic. To understand these questions experientially, we need to turn our attention to the judgmental mind and embrace its pain with the same mindfulness we would bring to a pain in our body or to another's sorrow.

The essence of mindfulness is to see, to understand, and to find freedom within everything that feels intractable and clouded by confusion. Mindfulness is a present-moment experience, concerned with embracing and understanding the entirety of each moment with tenderness, warmth, and interest. In the light of

this engaged attention, we discover it is impossible to hate or fear anything we truly understand, including the judgmental mind. We begin to see that the greatest barrier to compassion and freedom is not the pain or adversity we meet in our lives but the ongoing tendency to criticize and fear the simple truths of the moment. Instead of just wanting the judgmental mind to go away, we could begin to ask what it is teaching us. Abhirupa Nanda, a nun from the time of the Buddha, suggested meditating on the unconditioned. Liberate the tendency to judge yourself as being above, below, or the same as others. By penetrating deeply into judgment, you will live at peace.

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Looking closely at the judgmental mind, we see that it is rarely truthful or able to see the whole of anything.

Although it may seem so, we were not born with a judgmental, aversive mind. It is a learned way of seeing and relating, and it can be unlearned. Looking closely at the judgmental mind, we see that it is rarely truthful or able to see the whole of anything. Instead, the judgmental mind is governed by seizing upon the particulars of ourselves and others and mistaking those particulars for the truth. A friend neglects to return a phone call, and this triggers a cascade of anxious thinking that convinces us they are an indifferent person or we are unworthy of their attention. We arrive late for an appointment and in moments the inner critic determines

we are a mindless failure. The practice of meditation, of discovering what is true, suggests there is another path that can be followed.

In the Sufi tradition it is suggested that our thoughts should pass through three gates. At the first gate, we ask of our thought, “Is it true?” If so, we let the thought pass through to the second gate, where we ask, “Is it necessary or useful?” If this also is so, we let the thought continue on its way to the third gate, where we ask, “Is this thought rooted in love and kindness?” Judgmental thoughts, which are neither true, helpful, nor kind, falter at the gates.

Students often wonder why the judgmental mind does not appear in the traditional list of afflictions that Siddhartha met under the Bodhi tree. Perhaps it is because the judgmental mind is not one affliction or hindrance but a compounded hindrance. If you explore just one moment during which the inner critic is operating, you sense how the winds of all of the hindrances flow through it. There is craving, which takes form in the expectations and ideals we hold for ourselves and others. There is restlessness and worry — the shoulds and expectations generating endless thought and emotion as we struggle to avoid imperfection. And there is aversion and ill will, directed toward ourselves and others when our shoulds and expectations are disappointed. Doubt makes a powerful appearance too—doubt in our worthiness,

goodness, and capacity. Then there is the affliction of dullness, which makes a disguised appearance in the form of despair, resignation, and numbness.

Holding all of these afflictions together are the beliefs we have regarding who we are and who we are not, which continually fuel the afflictive emotions. But the path of awakening invites us to understand this compound of the inner critic, to learn how to loosen its hold and power, and to rediscover all that is true within ourselves and others. The path invites us to extend kindness, rather than harshness, to ourselves and all beings and to learn to see a thought as a thought, rather than as a description of reality. On the path, we can begin to see that self-judgment or judgment of another is no more than a thought that is laden with ill will and aversion. There is a profound liberation in knowing this so deeply that we can let go of ill will.

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Nurturing our capacity to be mindful and present is the first step to understanding and disempowering the identity and power of the inner critic.

The Buddha taught that what we dwell upon becomes the shape of our mind. If we dwell on ill will, directed outwardly or inwardly in the form of blame, disparagement, or aversion, it will become the shape of our mind until all that we see is that which is broken, flawed, imperfect, and impossible. In India there is a saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint in the marketplace, all he



sees are the saint's pockets. Habit and awareness do not co-exist. Nurturing our capacity to be mindful and present is the first step to understanding and disempowering the identity and power of the inner critic.

We can learn to pause and to listen deeply to the voice of the inner judge, with its endless symphony of blame and shame, and we can surround it with the kindness of mindfulness. We can investigate the truth of its story. We can begin to sense that the inner critic truly warrants compassion, as does any suffering and affliction. Instead of fleeing the painfulness of the judgmental mind we can turn toward it, sensing that everything we are invited to understand in the journey of awakening can be understood within the judgmental mind. Letting go, compassion, the emptiness of self, equanimity, and wisdom are the lessons we are invited to explore with this most powerful of afflictions. The alchemy of mindfulness is to nurture a sense of possibility. We are encouraged to imagine a life free from ill will, blame, and shame. To imagine a life and a heart of compassion, wisdom, and peace. ✿



## How We Get Hooked and How We Get Unhooked

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**Pema Chödrön** on *shenpa*, or the urge, the hook, that triggers our habitual tendency to close down. We get hooked in that moment of tightening when we reach for relief. To get unhooked, we begin by recognizing that moment of unease and learn to relax in that moment.

YOU'RE TRYING TO MAKE A POINT with a coworker or your partner. At one moment, her face is open and she's listening, and at the next, her eyes cloud over or her jaw tenses. What is it that you're seeing?

Someone criticizes you. They criticize your work or your appearance or your child. At moments like that, what is it you feel? It has a familiar taste in your mouth, it has a familiar smell. Once you begin to notice it, you feel like this experience has been happening forever.

The Tibetan word for this is *shenpa*. It is usually translated "attachment," but a more descriptive translation might be "hooked." When *shenpa* hooks us, we're likely to get stuck. We could call *shenpa* "that sticky feeling." It's an everyday experience. Even a spot on your new sweater can take you there. At the subtlest level, we feel a tightening, a tensing, a sense of closing down. Then we feel a sense of withdrawing, not wanting to be where we

are. That's the hooked quality. That tight feeling has the power to hook us into self-denigration, blame, anger, jealousy and other emotions which lead to words and actions that end up poisoning us.

Remember the fairy tale in which toads hop out of the princess's mouth whenever she starts to say mean words? That's how being hooked can feel. Yet we don't stop—we can't stop—because we're in the habit of associating whatever we're doing with relief from our own discomfort. This is the *shenpa* syndrome. The word “attachment” doesn't quite translate what's happening. It's a quality of experience that's not easy to describe but which everyone knows well. *Shenpa* is usually involuntary and it gets right to the root of why we suffer.

Someone looks at us in a certain way, or we hear a certain song, we smell a certain smell, we walk into a certain room and *boom*. The feeling has nothing to do with the present, and nevertheless, there it is. When we were practicing recognizing *shenpa* at Gampo Abbey, we discovered that some of us could feel it even when a particular person simply sat down next to us at the dining table.

*Shenpa* thrives on the underlying insecurity of living in a world that is always changing. We experience this insecurity as a background of slight unease or restlessness. We all want some kind of relief from that unease, so we turn to what we enjoy—food, alcohol, drugs, sex, work or shopping. In moderation what we enjoy might be very delightful. We can appreciate its taste and its

presence in our life. But when we empower it with the idea that it will bring us comfort, that it will remove our unease, we get hooked.

So we could also call *shenpa* “the urge”—the urge to smoke that cigarette, to overeat, to have another drink, to indulge our addiction, whatever it is. Sometimes *shenpa* is so strong that we’re willing to die getting this short-term symptomatic relief. The momentum behind the urge is so strong that we never pull out of the habitual pattern of turning to poison for comfort. It doesn’t necessarily have to involve a substance; it can be saying mean things, or approaching everything with a critical mind. That’s a major hook. Something triggers an old pattern we’d rather not feel, and we tighten up and hook into criticizing or complaining. It gives us a puffed-up satisfaction and a feeling of control that provides short-term relief from uneasiness.



Shenpa is usually involuntary and it gets right to the root of why we suffer.

Those of us with strong addictions know that working with habitual patterns begins with the willingness to fully acknowledge our urge, and then the willingness not to act on it. This business of not acting out is called *refraining*. Traditionally it’s called *renunciation*. What we renounce or refrain from isn’t food, sex, work or relationships per se. We renounce and refrain from the *shenpa*. When we talk about refraining from the *shenpa*, we’re not

talking about trying to cast it out; we're talking about trying to see the *shenpa* clearly and experiencing it. If we can see *shenpa* just as we're starting to close down, when we feel the tightening, there's the possibility of catching the urge to do the habitual thing, and not doing it.

Without meditation practice, this is almost impossible to do. Generally speaking, we don't catch the tightening until we've indulged the urge to scratch our itch in some habitual way. And unless we equate refraining with loving-kindness and friendliness towards ourselves, refraining feels like putting on a strait-jacket. We struggle against it. The Tibetan word for renunciation is *shenlok*, which means turning *shenpa* upside-down, shaking it up. When we feel the tightening, somehow we have to know how to open up the space without getting hooked into our habitual pattern.

In practicing with *shenpa*, first we try to recognize it. The best place to do this is on the meditation cushion. Sitting practice teaches us how to open to and relax with whatever arises, without picking and choosing. It teaches us to experience the uneasiness and the urge fully, and to interrupt the momentum that usually follows. We do this by not following after the thoughts and learning to come back to the present moment. We learn to stay with the uneasiness, the tightening, the itch of *shenpa*. We train in sitting still with our desire to scratch. This is how we learn to stop the chain reaction of habitual patterns that otherwise will rule our lives. This is how we weaken the patterns that keep us hooked

into discomfort that we mistake as comfort. We label the spinoff “thinking” and return to the present moment. Yet even in meditation, we experience *shenpa*.

Let’s say, for example, that in meditation you felt settled and open. Thoughts came and went, but they didn’t hook you. They were like clouds in the sky that dissolved when you acknowledged them. You were able to return to the moment without a sense of struggle. Afterwards, you’re hooked on that very pleasant experience: “I did it right, I got it right. That’s how it should always be, that’s the model.” Getting caught like that builds arrogance, and conversely it builds poverty, because your next session is nothing like that. In fact, your “bad” session is even worse now because you’re hooked on the “good” one. You sat there and you were discursive: you were obsessing about something at home, at work. You worried and you fretted; you got caught up in fear or anger. At the end of the session, you feel discouraged—it was “bad,” and there’s only you to blame.

Is there something inherently wrong or right with either meditation experience? Only the *shenpa*. The *shenpa* we feel toward “good” meditation hooks us into how it’s “supposed” to be, and that sets us up for *shenpa* towards how it’s not “supposed” to be. Yet the meditation is just what it is. We get caught in our idea of it: that’s the *shenpa*. That stickiness is the root *shenpa*. We call it ego-clinging or self-absorption. When we’re hooked on the idea of good experience, self-absorption gets stronger; when we’re

hooked on the idea of bad experience, self-absorption gets stronger. This is why we, as practitioners, are taught not to judge ourselves, not to get caught in good or bad.

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The work we have to do is about coming to know that we're tensing or hooked or "all worked up." That's the essence of realization.

What we really need to do is address things just as they are. Learning to recognize *shenpa* teaches us the meaning of not being attached to this world. Not being attached has nothing to do with this world. It has to do with *shenpa*—being hooked by what we associate with comfort. All we're trying to do is not to feel our uneasiness. But when we do this we never get to the root of practice. The root is experiencing the itch as well as the urge to scratch, and then not acting it out.

If we're willing to practice this way over time, *prajna* begins to kick in. *Prajna* is clear seeing. It's our innate intelligence, our wisdom. With *prajna*, we begin to see the whole chain reaction clearly. As we practice, this wisdom becomes a stronger force than *shenpa*. That in itself has the power to stop the chain reaction.

*Prajna* isn't ego-involved. It's wisdom found in basic goodness, openness, equanimity—which cuts through self-absorption. With *prajna* we can see what will open up space. Habituation, which is

ego-based, is just the opposite—a compulsion to fill up space in our own particular style. Some of us close space by hammering our point through; others do it by trying to smooth the waters.

We're taught that whatever arises is fresh, the essence of realization. That's the basic view. But how do we see whatever arises as the essence of realization when the fact of the matter is, we have work to do? The key is to look into *shenpa*. The work we have to do is about coming to know that we're tensing or hooked or "all worked up." That's the essence of realization. The earlier we catch it, the easier *shenpa* is to work with, but even catching it when we're already all worked up is good. Sometimes we have to go through the whole cycle even though we see what we're doing. The urge is so strong, the hook so sharp, the habitual pattern so sticky, that there are times when we can't do anything about it.

There is something we can do after the fact, however. We can go sit on the meditation cushion and re-run the story. Maybe we start with remembering the all-worked-up feeling and get in touch with that. We look clearly at the *shenpa* in retrospect; this is very helpful. It's also helpful to see *shenpa* arising in little ways, where the hook is not so sharp.

Buddhists are talking about *shenpa* when they say, "Don't get caught in the content: observe the underlying quality—the clinging, the desire, the attachment." Sitting meditation teaches us how to see that tangent before we go off on it. It basically comes down



to the instruction, “label it thinking.” To train in this on the cushion, where it’s relatively easy and pleasant to do, is how we can prepare ourselves to stay when we get all worked up.

Then we can train in seeing *shenpa* wherever we are. Say something to another person and maybe you’ll feel that tensing. Rather than get caught in a story line about how right you are or how wrong you are, take it as an opportunity to be present with the hooked quality. Use it as an opportunity to stay with the tightness without acting upon it. Let that training be your base.

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Once we’re aware of *shenpa*, we begin to notice it in other people. We see them shutting down.

You can also practice recognizing *shenpa* out in nature. Practice sitting still and catching the moment when you close down. Or practice in a crowd, watching one person at a time. When you’re silent, what hooks you is mental dialogue. You talk to yourself about badness or goodness: me-bad or they-bad, this-right or that-wrong. Just to see this is a practice. You’ll be intrigued by how you’ll involuntarily shut down and get hooked, one way or another. Just keep labeling those thoughts and come back to the immediacy of the feeling. That’s how not to follow the chain reaction.

Once we’re aware of *shenpa*, we begin to notice it in other people. We see them shutting down. We see that they’ve been hooked and that nothing is going to get through to them now.

At that moment we have prajna. That basic intelligence comes through when we're not caught up in escaping from our own unease. With prajna we can see what's happening with others; we can see when they've been hooked. Then we can give the situation some space. One way to do that is by opening up the space on the spot, through meditation. Be quiet and place your mind on your breath. Hold your mind in place with great openness and curiosity toward the other person. Asking a question is another way of creating space around that sticky feeling. So is postponing your discussion to another time.

At the abbey, we're very fortunate that everybody is excited about working with *shenpa*. So many words I've tried using become ammunition that people use against themselves. But we feel some kind of gladness about working with *shenpa*, perhaps because the word is unfamiliar. We can acknowledge what's happening with clear seeing, without aiming it at ourselves. Since no one particularly likes to have his *shenpa* pointed out, people at the Abbey make deals like, "When you see me getting hooked, just pull your earlobe, and if I see you getting hooked, I'll do the same. Or if you see it in yourself, and I'm not picking up on it, at least give some little sign that maybe this isn't the time to continue this discussion." This is how we help each other cultivate prajna, clear seeing.

We could think of this whole process in terms of four R's: *recognizing* the *shenpa*, *refraining* from scratching, *relaxing* into the underlying urge to scratch and then *resolving* to continue to

interrupt our habitual patterns like this for the rest of our lives. What do you do when you don't do the habitual thing? You're left with your urge. That's how you become more in touch with the craving and the wanting to move away. You learn to relax with it. Then you resolve to keep practicing this way.

Working with *shenpa* softens us up. Once we see how we get hooked and how we get swept along by the momentum, there's no way to be arrogant. The trick is to keep seeing. Don't let the softening and humility turn into self-denigration. That's just another hook. Because we've been strengthening the whole habituated situation for a long, long time, we can't expect to undo it overnight. It's not a one-shot deal. It takes loving-kindness to recognize; it takes practice to refrain; it takes willingness to relax; it takes determination to keep training this way. It helps to remember that we may experience two billion kinds of itches and seven quadrillion types of scratching, but there is really only one root *shenpa*—ego-clinging. We experience it as tightening and self-absorption. It has degrees of intensity. The branch *shenpas* are all our different styles of scratching that itch.

I recently saw a cartoon of three fish swimming around a hook. One fish is saying to the other, "The secret is non-attachment." That's a *shenpa* cartoon: the secret is—don't bite that hook. If we can catch ourselves at that place where the urge to bite is strong, we can at least get a bigger perspective on what's happening. As we practice this way, we gain confidence in our own wisdom. It begins to guide us toward the fundamental aspect of our being—spaciousness, warmth, and spontaneity. ❁



## Get to the Root of Your Patterns

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Our basic problem, says **Trudy Goodman**, is ignoring the reality of impermanence. Being mindful in the moment, appreciating this flowing, interconnected life, we miraculously free ourselves from habitual patterns.

THE HABITUAL PATTERNS that arise in us seem to have a life of their own, shaping our behavior into contours of isolation, anxiety, self-criticism, addiction, or other self-destructive habits. These patterns make us unhappy. They are obstacles to what we long for in our lives and might even cause us to give up our goals and dreams in despair.

The good news is that we can become aware of how we get caught in these patterns and learn to move through experience with more love and wisdom. The process of getting stuck in patterned thoughts and feelings happens quite mechanically. The

gateway to freedom is to understand this compassionately. In this, meditation is our best friend, allowing us space to relax and receive other dimensions of our being.

The most fundamental pattern that we all have is ignoring impermanence—denying the fact that everything is always changing and can't bring us lasting happiness. We humans imagine that the self is continuous and permanent, even though it isn't and we aren't!

Intellectually we know this, but it just doesn't feel true. To quote the *Anguttara Nikaya*, "It seems that although we thought ourselves permanent, we are not. Although we thought ourselves settled, we are not. Although we thought we would last forever, we will not."

This is where our mindfulness practice helps. Practicing meditation with loving awareness, we begin to see change as a constant. We see that we can't breathe in forever—we have to breathe out. This inevitable rhythm is independent of what I want or who I am or what pattern has me in its grip. With mindful awareness, the ebb and flow of breath, the birth and death of experience, become clear. This is wisdom—seeing the way life unfolds so lovingly in us, as us.



## MEDITATION

### Loving Connection

- Mindfulness meditation is the backward step into simply being here together, appreciating this life, and sharing it with each other. Miraculously, this is the way to free our hearts from habitual patterns. We simply create moments of loving connection with ourselves, each other, and our world. How wonderful!
- Sense the space all around you and the thoughts and feelings flowing through the mind and heart. Relax into the fullness of being.
- Be 100 percent present with what is seen, heard, and felt. Then step back into the simple fact of this existence, this reality. Just be with this particular moment in all of eternity. And be with this next one, too.
- When you notice attention has wandered into the past or future, shift your body back just an inch, relaxing into a posture of receptivity, poise, and balance. 🌿



## The Natural Liberation of Habits

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When you recognize the true nature of mind, says **Tsokyni Rinpoche**, all habitual patterns are naturally liberated in the space of wisdom. That includes the ultimate habit known as samsara.

THE ULTIMATE HABITUAL pattern is samsara itself—the wheel of habitual cyclic existence that causes all your suffering. The karma that drives the wheel—the three poisons of attachment, aggression, and ignorance—are actually deep-seated habits of mind.

When you finally get tired of unconsciously participating in the daily show of habitual samsaric programming, what can you do to change it? Buddhism teaches three ways to cut your ties to samsara, once you have decided this is something you really need and want to do.

One approach is to shut off the world of phenomena and your attachment to it. This is the path of renunciation. It is illustrated by the paintings of skeletons on the walls of temples in Burma or Thailand. They are reminders to Theravada monks and nuns to stay free of desire and attachment arising in their mind. The problem is that this method of cutting individual episodes of attachment one after another could be endless.

Another possibility is to transform how you perceive samsara altogether. Instead of renouncing it, you train to develop strong compassion and insight into the empty nature of samsara. By changing your habitually deluded way of perceiving phenomena, you will change how your mind is affected by and responds to negative emotions and confusion. This is the basic approach of Mahayana Buddhism. It is a subtle practice that required a good deal of patient self-examination and clear awareness of your motivation.



Buddhism teaches three ways to cut your ties to samsara, once you have decided this is something you really need and want to do.

The third method is to allow samsara to manifest and immediately recognize that it is the expression or display of primordial wisdom. This is the approach in the Dzogchen and Mahamudra meditation traditions of Vajrayana Buddhism.

In Dzogchen practice, the most important thing is the recognition of inner space, or emptiness. If you can practice this, then whatever phenomena of samsara arise are dissolved into wisdom mind.



For this to happen, your recognition of mind nature has to be unwavering. If you can achieve this, then anything that arises in your mindstream—any emotions, thoughts, likes, dislikes, perceptions of good and bad, and so on—is naturally released without effort.

The problem is that when phenomena arise from confusion and ignorance, they dominate your perception and the result is suffering. However, habitual negative emotions like fear can be naturally liberated by allowing them to dissolve into the inner space of mind. You can do this because the essence of these habitual emotions is actually wisdom.

The key point is to let go of the grasping within the emotion and see its true nature. When habitual emotions arise, you neither suppress nor get caught up in them. You do not get carried away by clinging to self and other. If you just allow the emotion to dissolve, the energy trapped within it is released and blossoms as wisdom.

With continued practice in the true nature of mind, you can develop strong self-knowing awareness so that it naturally alchemizes negative emotions into their essence. When phenomena arise, they are self-liberated because your ego identity and conceptual mind have finally retired. Then the true nature of mind, which is wisdom, lets them resolve into inner space naturally.

In Dzogchen, this is called the “great ease,” in which even the concept of death is a joke, just another phenomenon that is ultimately empty. You have gone through a secret door of sorts: everything that was hidden from you by conceptual mind and ego fixation is revealed. You realize it has been completely accessible and present all the time as your basic nature.

True mind nature does not act, do anything, modify, or function as some subtle antidote to phenomena. It is simply open space and luminosity in union. If you throw colored chalk powder into the air, it has nothing to hold onto or cling to. It naturally falls to the ground. It is not like space does anything. It is simply how space is. The true nature of mind is like that.

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Once we see how we get hooked and how we get swept along by the momentum, there’s no way to be arrogant. The trick is to keep seeing.

There are progressive unfoldings in Dzogchen, as you deepen your experience of wisdom mind and learn to liberate habits without effort. The stage of self-liberation is compared to throwing chalk into space. Liberation upon arising is like making a drawing on water, and liberation beyond benefit and harm is like a thief entering an empty house.

When you reach this last level, everything that arises is seen as friendly and you are completely carefree. You do not need to accept, reject, or change anything. All appearances are realized as pure wisdom phenomena, arising spontaneously as compassionate energy from the unity of absolute and relative truth.

This natural liberation of thoughts and emotions is based on a non-conceptual recognition of inner space. You know that the essence of any afflictive emotion is pure wisdom and that thoughts in themselves are empty. This gives you a deep sense of spacious ease, a carefree feeling. You have confidence that all phenomena can be naturally released by themselves without the necessity of an antidote or remedy. You experience the infinite purity that pervades everything. You do not need to eliminate or abandon anything, since it is already pure in essence. ✨



## Befriend Your Feelings

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How you relate to your feelings, says **Lama Willa Miller**, may be the most important habit of all. When you meet your feelings with grace and mindfulness, you find they're your best friends on the spiritual path.

WHEN WE THINK ABOUT making and breaking habits, how often do we consider our feelings? The fact is that perhaps the most important habits we can make (or break) are those relating to how we are with our emotions.

You might have thought that the way to work with your feelings is to meditate around or away from them, and it seems as if many people seek out meditation hoping it will pacify their feelings. But as meditators, we must develop conscious habits of relating to our feeling life with grace and mindfulness, or our meditation will ultimately not be effective. Our feelings—if we know how to practice with them—are our best friends on the spiritual path. They have wisdom to offer.

One effective way to work with feelings is to welcome them into the meditative space. In this practice, we sit with our feelings, even unpleasant ones, and make friends with them. We often meet feelings with strategies of escape, avoidance, suppression, indulgence, or self-judgment. The practice of befriending feelings provides us with another option. We gradually learn not only to tolerate what arises, but to welcome it and take it into our personal and spiritual path.



## MEDITATION

### Make Friends with Your Feelings

- First, pause and take a few deep breaths. This helps us find the mental and emotional space to sit with whatever is arising.
- Turn your attention away from the story behind the feeling towards the feeling itself.
- Now turn your attention to your body. Where does this feeling live in your body—in your belly, heart, shoulders, back, neck, face, head? Explore the quality of the feeling there. Is it heavy, light, tight, constricted?
- Next, breathe some space into the feeling. Your awareness, your self-compassion, flows into and around this space created by the breath. This gentle, kind attention comes alongside the feeling like a good friend might come alongside you

when you need someone to listen. This attention is not there to fix anything or dismiss anything. It does not judge or label. It has no plans.

- Now, welcome your feeling. You might even silently speak to it in our practice, saying something like, “I am not going to dismiss you or suppress you. I am just here to be with you. You are welcome here. I will be your friend.” We spend so much time fighting the presence of feelings, especially unpleasant ones. Notice how this kind of welcoming attention affects your feeling.
- Trust your capacity to hold a space of welcoming and safety for your feeling. If you need to take a break at this point, you can. Sit with whatever happens. Stay open. Stay curious.
- If you make a habit of this practice, you will gradually notice a shift. The feeling will begin to feel safe with you, and eventually it will begin to relax and open up. At that point, you can notice what it is like when the feeling liberates itself. Let go of the project of befriending and dwell in openness without effort. It is enough to stay here in the present moment, just as you are. This moment of awareness is luminous. This moment of awareness is spacious. This moment is free as it is. 🌿



## Reconnecting with Ourselves

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In order to heal our painful habits, says **Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche**, we need to turn our attention inward and reconnect with our experience through stillness, silence, and spaciousness.

THROUGH THE NEGATIVE, habitual patterns of distraction and restlessness, we frequently disconnect from ourselves. As a result, we are often depleted, for we do not fully receive what life offers, what nature offers, or what other people offer, and we don't recognize opportunities to benefit others.

You may be sitting on a bench in a beautiful park, yet not be seeing the trees, hearing the birds, or smelling the blossoms. Perhaps you are distracted with your cellphone or worrying about something, and though you are breathing you may have no actual relationship to your body, your speech, your mind, or to the park. I refer to this as sitting on a rotten karmic cushion.

This can happen anywhere—in a business meeting or at the family dinner table. You may even be at a lovely party, but your mind is not part of the celebration. Caught up in thoughts about some problem, we strategize solutions, but this never brings

satisfaction because it never reconnects us to ourselves. In truth, our thoughts and strategies are the imaginations of our pain body, pain speech, and pain mind—the ego or identity we mistake as “me” simply because it is so familiar. Trying to improve ego does not bring liberation from suffering; it only reinforces the disconnection.

It is very important to acknowledge that suffering exists and to have the proper relationship with it. The root cause of suffering is ignorance, the failure to recognize the true nature of mind, which is always open and clear and the source of all positive qualities. By failing to recognize our true nature, we search for happiness outside ourselves. This fundamental disconnection from the actual source of positive qualities within, and the restless search for satisfaction outside ourselves is something we do habitually, yet we often don't even experience this as suffering because it doesn't seem all that dramatic.

Until we recognize this pain identity and truly acknowledge our own disconnection, there is no path of healing available and we will not realize our full potential in this life. So acknowledging suffering is the first step, and a beautiful one, because it is the first step on the journey to awakening the sacred body, authentic speech, and luminous mind—which is who we truly are when we are fully present in each moment.



## Discovering Inner Refuge

We begin by acknowledging the habitual patterns that arise from our disconnection from ourselves, which I refer to as pain body, pain speech, and pain mind. We may experience this disconnection in a variety of ways, such as irritation, boredom, restlessness, sadness, or an underlying feeling that something is missing. If we are to heal or awaken from these patterns, we need to generate a caring relationship with the evidence of our disconnection. Recall how you feel supported when you are with a friend who is simply present, open, and nonjudgmental, and bring those very qualities to your own experience. The silence containing this fullness of the presence of another is always there within you and always beautiful. So that is exactly how you need to experience your pain. Connect with stillness, silence, and spaciousness, which enables you to observe, allow, and feel whatever you experience without judgment.

So often we identify with our pain—I am so sad. I can't believe you said that to me. You hurt me. Who is this me that is sad, angry, and hurt? It is one thing to experience pain; it is another thing to be pain. This self is ego and the fundamental suffering of ego is that it has no connection to what is.

In the middle of a confused or disconnected experience, or even at a seemingly ordinary moment, draw your attention inward. Do you experience the stillness that becomes available? It sounds easy and therefore may not seem very convincing as a remedy for suffering, yet it can take years or even a lifetime to

make that simple shift and discover what becomes available when you do. Some people may not make the shift and may always perceive the world as potentially dangerous and threatening. But if you're able to make that shift again and again, it can transform your identity and experience. Being aware of a moment of agitation or restlessness and knowing there is another way to experience it—to turn one's attention inward and connect with the fundamental stillness of being—is the discovery of inner refuge through stillness.



Being aware of a moment of agitation or restlessness and knowing there is another way to experience it is the discovery of inner refuge through stillness.

When you turn your attention inward, you may notice competing internal voices. Turn toward the silence. Simply hear the silence that is available. Most of the time we do not listen to the silence but listen to our thoughts—we negotiate, we strategize, and we are pleased when we come up with a good solution, confusing this with clarity. Sometimes we try not to think about something and push it out of our mind and distract ourselves with other things. This is all noise, and considered pain speech. When we listen to the silence that is available in any given moment, whether we are in the middle of a busy airport or sitting at a holiday dinner table, our inner noise dissolves. In this way we discover inner refuge through silence.

When you have lots of thoughts, turn toward the spacious aspect of the mind. Spaciousness is always available because that is the nature of mind—it is open and clear. Don't try to reject, control, or stop your thoughts. Simply allow them. Host them. Look at thinking as it is. It is like trying to catch a rainbow. As you go toward it, you simply find space. In this way you discover inner refuge through spaciousness.

It is important to neither reject nor invite thoughts. If you look at thought directly and nakedly, thought cannot sustain itself. If you reject thought, that is another thought. And that thought is only a smarter ego: "I am outsmarting that thought by observing it. Oh, there it is." And there you are, talking to yourself, holding on to the credential of being the observer of thoughts. The mind that strategizes is itself the creator of our suffering, and no matter how elegant or refined our strategy, it is still a version of the pain mind. So instead of coming up with a winning strategy, we must shift our relationship with pain mind altogether by hosting our thoughts, observing our thoughts, and then allow the observer to dissolve as well.

What is left you may wonder? You have to find out by directly and nakedly observing. The mind that wonders what is left if we don't rely on thinking or observing our experience can't discover the richness of the openness of being. We need to look directly into our thinking, busy mind to discover the inner refuge of

spaciousness, and thereby discover the luminous mind. Fortunately, others who have gone before us have done so and provide pointing-out instructions and encouragement for us.

## Transforming Painful Habits Through Open Awareness

When ego is the result of disconnection, awareness itself is true connection. Awareness that is direct and naked is described as the sun, and the warmth of awareness dissolves the solidified pain identity the way the sun melts ice. So whenever you feel the pain of being disconnected from yourself, be open to it and be with it. Host your pain well with presence that is completely open, and most important, nonjudgmental.

Can you be open with your pain—still, silent, spacious? There is nothing better than open awareness for transforming pain, and that tool is within you at this very moment. The method of transforming pain into the path of liberation has no conceptual aspect, it is simply being open. In open awareness, everything is processed. There is no unfinished business.

Another beautiful thing about open awareness is that it is like light. And light does not recognize the history of darkness—how long, how intense, or how complex the darkness is. Light simply illuminates darkness. Like the sun, it is not selective, and the moment it shines, darkness is dispelled. The moment you are aware, your negative patterns are dispelled.

## Finding the Closest Door

Stillness, silence, and spaciousness bring us to the same place—open awareness. But you go for refuge through a particular door: one through the body, one through speech, one through mind. Once you arrive, which door you entered through is no longer important. The door is only important when you are lost. If you are lost on the eastern side of the mountain, it is better to find the eastern path because it is the path closest to you. When we fly we are always reminded by the flight attendant that “the nearest exit could be right behind you.” The closest entrance is right here with you. The tension in your neck and shoulders could be your closest entrance. Your Inner Critic could be your closest entrance. Your doubting, hesitating mind could be your closest entrance. But we often overlook the opportunities right in front of us and take the farthest possible route. It is interesting how often we don’t value that which is closest.

If open awareness is so simple, and any given moment of distraction, irritation, or anger is our doorway, why do we not turn toward our discomfort and discover a deeper truth? We are simply not very familiar with openness and we don’t trust that it is sufficient. Turning our attention inward seems like the easiest thing to do, yet we don’t do it.

## A Prescription for Inner Refuge

How is it possible to become more familiar with inner refuge? If we are ill and are given a prescription for medicine that we've been told is absolutely necessary for our recovery and well-being, we are motivated to take our medicine. So perhaps we need to think of turning toward inner refuge as taking the medicine that will release us from our habit of disconnecting from the source of being. You have three pills to take: the pill of stillness, the pill of silence, the pill of spaciousness. Start by taking at least three pills a day. You can choose when to take stillness, when to take silence, or when to take spaciousness as your medicine. Actually, if you pay attention, opportunities will choose you. When you are rushing, you become agitated. Your agitation has chosen you. At that very moment say, "Thank you, agitation. You have reminded me to take the pill of stillness." Breathe in slowly and go toward your agitation with openness. Your stillness is right in the midst of your agitation. Don't distract yourself and reject this moment, thinking you will try to find stillness later or somewhere else. Discover the stillness right here within your agitation.

The moment you hear complaint in your voice you can recognize this as the time to take the pill of silence. What do you do? Go toward your complaints. Be open. Hear the silence within your voice. Silence is within your voice because silence is the nature of sound. Don't search for silence, rejecting sound. That is not possible. Likewise, don't look for stillness, rejecting movement.

It is the same with the door of the mind. When your mind is going crazy with thoughts, take the pill of spaciousness. Remember, don't look for space by rejecting your thoughts—space is already here. It is important to make that discovery, and to make it again and again. The only reason you don't find it is because it is closer than you realize.

So that is my prescription. May the medicine of stillness, silence, and spaciousness liberate the suffering experienced through the three doors of body, speech, and mind—and in so doing, may you benefit many others through the infinite positive qualities that become available. 🌸



## Watering the Seeds of Happiness

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Not all habits are bad. Happiness is a habit too, says Zen master **Thich Nhat Hanh**. Here's how you can make it grow.

ALL OF US have the capacity to be happy. We have seeds of compassion, understanding, and love in us. We all have many good seeds of happiness and joy. Yet we also have the habit of running in us. This restless energy of dissatisfaction and struggle separates us from the present moment and from ourselves.

In part, we're running toward something. We think happiness isn't possible in the here and now, so we try to run ahead into the future. We think if we can just get enough power, fame, wealth, or admiration from others, then we'll finally be happy. We hope that if we run toward these things faster and harder, we will get to happiness.

At the same time that we're running toward one thing, we're running away from something else. Every one of us has suffering, despair, anger, and loneliness inside of us. If we don't know how to be with these strong emotions, we want to get as far away from them as fast as possible.

Because we're always running, we're not there for ourselves. We're too busy trying to get somewhere else to be with the self we have right now. And if we're not able to take care of ourselves,



we can't be there for our loved ones. So not only are we running away from ourselves, we're also running away from our family and friends.

All this running is a lot of work. It is exhausting, and creates tension in our body and mind. We do it because it has become a habit, but with mindful attention and deep looking, we can transform the painful habit of running into a habit of happiness.

## The Roots of Our Habit Energy

Where does the energy pushing us to run come from? We need to stop and look deeply into the roots of our habit energy in order to transform it.

Each of us carries the habit energies of our ancestors. Our consciousness has a strong capacity to receive and absorb energies from those who have come before us and those around us. We carry these energies in our consciousness as fifty-one different mental formations preserved in the form of seeds, or *bija* in Sanskrit. These seeds of love, happiness, compassion, fear, hatred, anxiety, etc. are in every one of us.

Buddhist psychology divides consciousness into two parts. One part is mind consciousness and the other is store consciousness. Mind consciousness, which Western psychology calls “the conscious mind,” is our active awareness. Underlying it is the store consciousness, which contains the seeds of the fifty-one mental formations.

The first five are called the universal mental formations, because they are present in every other mental formation.

*Contact*, the first universal mental formation, happens when a sense organ and an object come together.

Next the mental formation *attention* has the function of drawing you to a particular object. When you hear a sound, your attention is drawn to that sound. There is appropriate and inappropriate attention, and with mindfulness, you can choose to focus your attention on something that is wholesome and beneficial.

The third universal mental formation, *feeling*, may be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. With mindfulness, our unpleasant feelings can be transformed into pleasant feelings, such as feelings of gratitude. When the feeling is pleasant, you can stop all thinking and just become aware of the feeling. If you can let go of thinking of this or that, you can be very happy just walking barefoot on the beach, feeling the sand between your toes.

The fourth universal mental formation is *perception*. When you see, taste, hear, or feel something, it appears in your mind as a sign that suggests a name. When we see something with petals and a stem, our mind gives it the name “flower.” If we don’t bring our mindfulness to our perception, we might not notice when it is wrong. Then we might mistake a piece of rope for a snake. We might believe a person is ignoring us when they are actually deaf,

or we might see something and think it causes us pain when actually it could bring us joy. Wrong perception is always possible and can bring about fear, anger, and irritation.

The fifth universal mental formation is *intention*, also known as volition. You have contact with the object, your feeling, and perception about it, and then you have your relationship to that object. You decide whether to possess it or to push it away. The fifth mental formation is your decision whether to accept or reject an object.

## Transforming Habit Energy

Our habit energy comes from these mental formations. Their seeds form neural pathways that lead to either suffering or happiness.

Any seed that manifests in your mind consciousness returns to your store consciousness stronger than ever. For example, when you come in contact with something that triggers the feeling of anger in you, your frequent traveling on that neural pathway turns anger into a habit. But with the intervention of mindfulness, you can erase the negative neural pathway and open up another pathway that leads to understanding and happiness.

Your depression, fear, jealousy, despair, and the conflicts within you are all negative mental formations that contribute to your habit of running away. Don't be afraid of them. If they want to come up, allow them to come up, recognize them, and embrace them.

We can't transform habit energy just with our intelligence and our desire to do so. We need some insight, and insight comes from deep looking. The only way to transform habit energy is to recognize it, embrace it with mindfulness, and practice inviting positive seeds to create positive habit energies.

Mindfulness helps us to recognize the habit energy of running. When we notice its presence, we smile to it and we are free from it. When we recognize the habit energy of running, it loses its power and can't push us to run anymore. Then we can easily release the tension in our body.



With mindful attention and deep looking, we can transform the painful habit of running into a habit of happiness.

Some habit energies are very difficult to transform. If you crumple a sheet of paper, it's difficult to make it flat again. It has the habit energy of being crumpled. We are the same. But happiness can also be a habit energy. The practice of mindfulness allows us to create new, more functional habit energies.

Suppose that you grimace when you hear a certain phrase. It's not because you want to make a face; it just happens automatically. To replace this old habit energy with a new one, every time you hear that phrase you can breathe with awareness. At first,

conscious breathing may require effort, because it doesn't yet come naturally. If you continue to practice, however, conscious breathing will become a new and positive habit energy.

## Non-Thinking and New Neural Pathways

The practice of non-thinking is the secret to creating new habits. When thinking settles in, you lose the immediate experience of contact and move on to the other mental formations. You do not have much chance to be in the here and the now, to be in touch with what is in your body and around you. So just become aware of contact and feelings. In this way you can be in touch with the elements of nourishment and healing available in your body and in the environment, both physical and mental.

With the intervention of mindfulness, you can erase a negative neural pathway and open another pathway that leads to understanding and happiness.

Suppose that every time you are worried or anxious or irritated, you reach for a big piece of cake to cover up that feeling in you. This is a habit, because a neural pathway in your brain has been created for it. But if you allow yourself to stop before you reach for the cake, you can recognize both the pattern and the other sensations happening in your mind and body. You may notice that you're not really hungry, that instead you're sad or tired. The habit of breathing and noticing your sadness will ease that suffering more effectively than cake, and you will not have the suffering of being overfull and cranky.

With mindfulness and concentration intervening in the process of perception, a new neural pathway can be created that does not lead to suffering. Instead it leads to understanding, compassion, happiness, and healing. Our brains have the power of neuroplasticity; they can change.

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When you develop the habit of being happy, then everything you do, like serving yourself a cup of tea, you do in such a way that it creates joy and happiness.

Suppose someone says something that angers you. Your old pathway wants to say something to punish him. But that makes you a victim of your habit energy. Instead, you can stop, accept the anger and irritation in you, and smile at it. With mindfulness, you look at the other person and become aware of the suffering in him. He may have spoken like that to try to get relief. He may think that speaking like that will help him suffer less, although in fact it will make him suffer more.

With just one or two seconds of looking and seeing the suffering in the other person, compassion is born. When compassion is born, you don't suffer anymore, and you may find something to say that will help him. With practice, we can always open new neural pathways like this. When they become a habit, we call it the habit of happiness.

When you develop the habit of being happy, then everything you do, like serving yourself a cup of tea, you do in such a way that it creates joy and happiness.

We practice mindfulness in order to get in touch with appropriate attention, stop our thinking, and enjoy the feeling that is possible in the here and now. We recognize the many conditions of happiness that are here, more than we could possibly imagine. This is possible. While we are doing so, healing takes place. We don't have to make any effort, because we have the habit of happiness. ❁