

Do bad mindfully

[Revised edition of fb180506 on Facebook]

In affluent Singapore, the mass media often report on criminal offence by executives, doctors, lawyers, academics, Christian pastors and Buddhist monks for which they had to serve prison time. These are professionals—can we then say that a professional is one who does something better for more money? But “better” here can refer to both good actions as well as bad ones.

Evolution has taught us to survive the harshest natural and human challenges, but we have yet to learn to overcome some of our criminal habits. Such habits do not sprout up overnight, but have been learned and conditioned from our past. Basically, we have never really been taught about right and wrong, good and bad. Or worse, we are actually drilled that in our rat-race society money is might, and might is right.

Learning right

Healthy moral habits have to be taught from young in a loving way. The key teaching on this early training is found in the Amba,laṭṭhika Rāhul’ovāda Sutta (M 61), where the Buddha basically teaches his own son Rāhula to examine himself on a deep personal level—his thoughts, speech and deeds—if any of it will harm himself, others or both. “Both” here is a term for society in general and today we would include the environment.¹

Notice how the Buddha teaches young Rāhula. The Buddha does not command him: Don’t do this, or don’t do that! Instead he is taught to be curious about his mind, speech and body. Let us apply this principle in some modern circumstances.

Smoke and drink

When I was a teenager I smoked because my peers did; when I was older I drank with western Buddhist friends. As I learned to enjoy the smoke, I noticed that it hurt my eyes, it smelt like an unwashed over-used sweaty towel, it made me cough, it tasted like chemical. I easily gave it up. I enjoyed the drink while I was at it, but it actually tasted so bad, we seem to seep just a bit each time as a dare; I wondered why anyone drank at all!

Looking back, I realized I had used some sort of mindfulness approach. I was being curious about the bad habits I had. I did not really fight them, but wondered why I even thought of doing them. The question now is how did these bad habits start? Perhaps we had an urge, or we wanted to get back at someone, or we were simply bored.

¹ Amba,laṭṭhika Rāhul’ovāda Sutta (M 61), [SD 3.10](#).

Learning by imitating

We notice something or someone doing something, and thought it was worth copying. For example, we notice that when we show anger people were more likely to agree with us. So we learned a trigger, behaviour, reward, repeat. This is just how our karmic unconscious works. Once we get angry, we will get angry again. Once we give in to desire, we will fall for it again. Once we show fear, we will show it again. And so on—this is how our latent tendency (*anusaya*) builds up and grips us ever tighter. Again and again--that's samsara.

We know that being angry, falling into lust or showing fear are not helpful, even bad. This is called self-restraint or cognitive control. Hence, we need to know our habits on a deeper level. Notice the urge, get curious; feel the joy of letting go; and repeat. This way we don't have to force ourselves, but to be disenchanted, even disgusted, on a gut level so that we are not inclined to do it again. This is naturally letting go.

When we are mindful of something bad we are doing—say like when we are angry—we will notice a lot of things that we do not like and actually feel bad about. Then, we more naturally let go of old bad habits and form new good ones. We begin to see the benefits of it all.

Up close and personal

Being mindful then is simply about being really up close and personal with what is happening in our body and mind. We should get curious with what is going on inside us rather than wanting to force our bad habits to go away or to feel guilty about them. As we begin to see ourselves as a better person, capable of great things and boundless love, it becomes very much easier to step out of our bad habit loops.

If we are brave enough, we may even smile at a silly habit--call it by its name. Don't call it by your name; then, you will own it forever. The inner smiling--the Buddha smile--is disarming. It means we do not fear the enemy; we befriend it. These are little miracles that bring us closer to the Buddha.

This--if sustained--makes buddhas. Then, we keep on making and befriend our mistakes for countless lives until we have done them all--even breaking our hearts, losing our limbs, losing our heads life after life after life. Then, we're done, ready to awaken from the dreamy sleep of endless failing, falling and fleeing, into the bright light of beauty and truth.

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