

Pathways

THE CHRIS DEWEY PROFESSIONAL SERVICES LLC. NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 17 ISSUE 4

JUNE 2013



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*"Be kind,
every [one] you meet
is fighting a hard battle"*

Ian Maclaren

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Are You Happy?

Are you happy? A curious question that appears wonderfully innocent on the surface, but which can make us think more deeply, if we choose to allow it to do so.

Pain in life is inevitable, we all know pain of one kind or another. How we respond to that pain is another matter entirely. Some people may naturally respond by shaking off a specific life trauma and being buoyant of spirit, others might struggle under similar circumstances and may endure deep suffering. I suspect that each of us, at some time and at some level knows or has known suffering; it is a part of the human condition...for now. Our seemingly innate ability to suffer, however, can create the fertile soil in which compassion, empathy and wisdom can grow.

So what triggers a move towards suffering versus happiness? For sure, genetic and environmental factors influence our brain's inherent response pathways, but I do believe that we have the ability to control and train those pathways...if we are aware, and if we can learn to be a witness to our responses without judging them. Moreover, allowing a response to an event to occur, without labeling it happy = good, and suffering = bad, opens a doorway to learning opportunity. In either case we can ask what is the benefit that I derive from choosing to be happy or choosing to suffer in

response to a life crisis, because at some level the choices we make (either consciously or unconsciously) can be related to some perceived benefit for our spirit.

Something else to consider is the energetic frequency to the pathway of choosing either suffering or happiness. The resonating frequency of the choice will bring associated entrainment for subsequent events that flow from the initial life crisis event. Lastly, there is the notion that everyone is doing the best that they can with what they've got in the moment, based upon their experiences and their understanding of their own universe. If they could make a better choice, they would.

By raising our personal awareness, and by becoming a non-judging witness to the events in our lives, we can raise the resonating energy of our responses in an organic way because we create the possibility of choice moment to moment. I therefore believe that our job as coaches is to allow our clients the opportunity of making new choices by asking the questions that a) touch our clients at their core, b) meet our clients where they are and c) give clients the opportunity to raise their own level of perceived choice availability.

It is all about our ability to see the world in ways that transcend our norms. Choice can be liberating. ☺

It's not what you think

I want to pick up on a theme from last month, and take it on a bit of a tangent. Last month, I was talking about mindfulness and the practice of observing without judging.

This month I want to focus our discussion a little more on the 'what' of what we think about most of the time. Just for a moment, I'd like you to sit back, close your eyes and allow your mind to go wherever it wants. What themes bubbled up for you?

If you look at your internal dialogue for any length of time do you notice how conditioned it is? Do you notice how much what you think is governed by what you have previously thought. If I didn't like avocados last week, I don't think I'll like them this week either.

The curious thing to me is that our thoughts are such stunningly short-lived, ephemeral things, and yet we ascribe to them a power to command our reality at so many levels. Think about it for a moment, Each thought is with us for maybe parts of a second, and yet we carry the thought forward with a new one, built on the one that just faded, and so on. As the thoughts gain momentum over the years, they carve neural pathways of association in our brains that tell us our story. And don't we just like to cling to our stories? They define us, they rule us.

So let's take a step back and look at the bulk of our conditioned thinking for a moment. How much of our thinking is catabolic versus anabolic? How much of it is comparison-based? When you stop and really look at what you think, a significant proportion of it is comparison-based. I compare who am I, what I do, where I live, what I say, how much I earn, how I dress, the kinds of foods I like, music I listen to, books I read, hobbies that inspire me...the list is enormous. Then there are the three C's we've spoken of before... How many of my thoughts, even quietly in the recesses of

my consciousness (and unannounced to the world) are critical, complaining or condemning? These thoughts are not just about others either, they work just as well when applied to self...don't they?

Our lives are full of them, we pronounce judgments about everything within the confines of our minds, and those judgments can quickly turn to catabolic thoughts that can undermine us so very quickly.

So what to do?

Obviously the reverse of catabolic processes that break us down are anabolic processes that build us up. And that brings us to the great 'C.' The great 'C' is compassion. Compassion for self and compassion for other (as though there is really a difference).

The art of working with your mind is to **recognize** your thoughts for what they are, and **release** them with compassion, and **replace** them with grace.

That's a tall order. As a point of critical comparison ☺, I fail miserably most of the time...but it is not the perception of failure that is important, it is the continued practice.

So let's look at those three R's: First you will want to simply recognize what you are thinking and how it leads to the next thought. Recognize the quantity and quality of your dominant thoughts, recognize the emotions they evoke within you, recognize how they affect your heart rate, breathing, and sense of stress.

Next, regardless of what the thought is, release it...let it go...it's not yours anyway...it's just a trained response to your storyline. Of course, the moment you attempt to let it go, you will cling to it like a limpet, then you'll obsess over it, and then you'll express something like displeasure about the futility of the exercise...or... you are already well on your way to being enlightened and should be writing the newsletter instead of me.

Let's assume for a moment that you can

release the thought and create a space...guess what? Another thought appears...where did it come from? What is its quality and power?

Let it go.

Be compassionate with yourself, smile, laugh, don't take yourself too seriously in this, just witness and let go.

Now let's say you notice a thought that was a comparison, that led to a thought that was critical and then that thought led to a complaint about your own lot in life...this is the place for replacement with grace.

In this moment is a wonderful opportunity to take the original comparison point and embrace it as a part of self. Recognize that you are learning and growing, that you are a work in progress and that in this moment you are doing the best you can with what you have and what you know. Replace the thought stream with an anabolic thought stream.

Keep doing it.

Each of us has spent a lifetime using conditioned thinking based upon the cultures in which we grew up. Baby boys get blue balloons, baby girls get pink balloons. Did that ever cross your mind as silly? I grew up driving on the correct side of the road, everyone else is wrong...you get the point.

My mind is full of comparisons, and of course I need them to work through my day. I know what my car and my house look like by comparison to all other cars and houses within my field of experience right now. If I didn't, I'd never find my home! 'Home' in this sense is a very specific location based on comparative experience.

But what happens when I cut loose of the negative comparisons that come along? What happens when I train my mind to entertain compassionate, anabolic thoughts?

I've a mind to do exactly that.

What about you? ☺

“ The hardest victory is the victory over self ”

— Aristotle

Overwhelming fear

Ever been here? Have you ever been to a place that you are so overwhelmed you don't know what to do? I'm sure you have, most of us have if we are honest with ourselves.

So what's at work here?

What is overwhelming? Clearly, it is a comparison point in life: I can handle this much, but not this extra stuff, and therefore it is too much. I was O.K. then, but I'm too stressed now, and want less of this and more of what I had.

Living in the space of being overwhelmed is about a comparison of a perception of our past, with a perception of our ability and what we think is about to happen.

The net result is an immediately heightened stress response and a fear spike. When we feel overwhelmed we feel incapable of coping, and we begin to second-guess ourselves. Overwhelming events can leave us feeling tired, frustrated, incapable and self-effacing. The downward spiral can be extraordinarily fast from this point...if we allow it to be so.

Feelings of being overwhelmed are also self-reinforcing.

The way out is to break the cycle, to take action.

Overwhelm comes when feel like we are being asked to do more than we can handle. In reality, when this sort of thing occurs, we are living at the effect of our lives, not the cause. When you live at the effect of your life, you react to circumstances. When you live at the cause of your life, you proactively create your choices.

When we live at the cause of our lives, we do not experience overwhelming events because we are creating our world, moment-by-moment.

Now that I am in oriental medical school full-time and using my coaching business to support me, life can take on a surreal quality at times.

In and of itself school is demanding, intense and challenging...it is supposed to be. At times, it can become a tad overwhelming. Why? It becomes overwhelming when I lose sight of the individual trees and stare at the entire forest, and get frightened. The fear is the fear of not being capable or good enough, and that is a massively catabolic gremlin. Once the fear grabs a corner to hold on to, it begins to undermine my ability to work efficiently and effectively. My stress level goes up and the cycle begins to escalate to the point of overwhelm.

Here is your moment of truth, here's where the rubber of mindfulness hits the road of life.

Be the witness, see yourself going through the process and stand back from it. Observe, don't judge yourself for being a wuss.

Feeling overwhelmed is an opportunity to step into your greatness.

Well, actually, it is an invitation to step back, regroup, thank the gremlin for the gift of insight and *then* to step into your greatness.

When you live at the cause of your life, you live with intent. You create opportunities in your life. I chose to put myself back into school when I retired. I chose to become a life coach.

I chose to be here, now, in this place, doing these things.

When I lose sight of that, the gremlin sneaks up and reminds me that I'm not good enough, and if I allow it to do so, the cycle goes into hyperdrive.

If I choose to be a witness, I can interrupt the cycle, learn from the event and put myself back on the path of my highest intent.

Note that I didn't say that this was easy, it most assuredly isn't, but it is possible...after all, feelings of overwhelm can only emerge from thoughts of inadequacy, and I am responsible for generating my own thoughts.

It may take me some time to bring myself back to my center, but with training and focus, the mind can be taught to generate the anabolic thoughts that sustain me.

There's one last idea here, that I'd like to share. Feeling overwhelmed often comes with a sense of suffering, and the 'woe is me' syndrome. I once heard it said that suffering can be seen as a form of willful resistance to reality. In short, we choose to suffer.

I can either choose to feel overwhelmed and helpless, or I can choose to take control of my thoughts, take action on something that I can do, and start to move myself forward in the face of the fears I sense within.

It is not feeling overwhelmed that does us in, it is allowing the gremlin to tell us that we are helpless...and believing it.

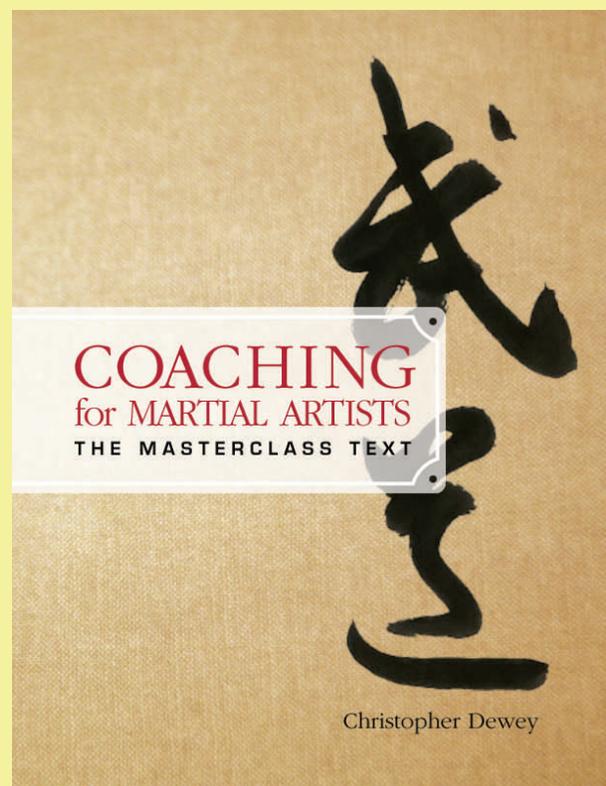
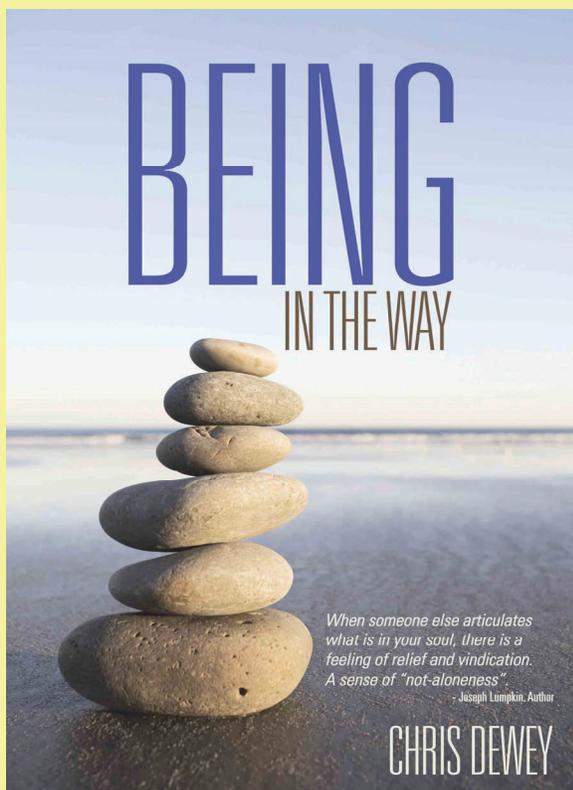
There will be moments when each of us will feel overwhelmed...what do you want to do about it? ☺

“Faith that the thing can be done is essential to any great achievement”

— Thomas Carruthers

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