

Pathways

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"I am not a teacher; only a fellow traveler of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead - ahead of myself as well as of you."

George Bernard Shaw

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Loosening the Grip

The older I get, the more I get the sense that all of us suffer from addictions of one kind or another.

Sure, we all know the standard addictions to alcohol, drugs, food, money, power, sex, work; but that's not exactly what I want to talk about here, although we can apply the same things there too.

Addiction comes from the latin, to be bound to or pledged. From one perspective addictions grip us, from another perspective we grip our addictions. I guess that's why one of the first steps towards recovery is to admit the presence of an addiction...we have to be able to see the grip for what it is.

As such, the grip traps us into repetitive actions involving the addiction. Now, let's take this outside the realm of standard addictions and ask ourselves if we are addicted to some of our responses in life. There are certain things that people can do around me that are almost guaranteed to get me annoyed. Could it be that my response is nothing more than addiction playing itself out? Could it be that I have no choice in how I behave because I deny the presence of the addictive trigger?

Every time I stop myself from acting out the old script, I am loosening the grip on my habitual, conditioned response system. Of course I am not consistently successful, and if I beat myself up every time I fail, all I do is underscore my inability to let go of the grip. So, my goal is not to stop the action, it is simply this: Do something different. When I feel myself moving into an addictive pattern of behavior, I

make a conscious effort to choose a different path. I'm not always successful. When I am successful, I am learning to moderate my actions...I am coming closer to finding a balance in my life and my actions.

Note the important thing here: I'm not trying to stop a behaviour, just attempting to derail the pattern everytime it occurs. If I try to stop something outright, all I do is increase its power by creating internal resistance.

The goal is to become mindful. Recognize yourself going through a patterned response, acknowledge it and become aware. Do something different. Little by little, the behaviour changes as you recognize the benefits of a different behavioural choice.

We learn this ability in the martial arts. We learn how to fall, throw, punch, kick, and how to move. Little by little, we see the movement habits that get in our way and we alter them. One action at a time, we improve our skill, *if* we are willing to see ourselves going through habituated responses and *if* we are willing to change them. Slowly, we become skillful martial artists.

Since we're coming to the end of the semester, let's take a couple of examples: procrastination and test anxiety. Neither of these help us a lot, most of the time. Most of the time, the inner dialog takes over, undermines our ability to produce our best work and reinforces the inner belief system. If we can see ourselves acting out an old script, we have an opportunity to delete the old message and replace it with a new one. ☺

Purrsians Aren't From Babble On

Apparently, my recent discussions concerning the nature of cats has provoked the response that I have not had the same experience of cats that many of you have had.

I tend to believe that cats are Zen masters. To me, cats are masters of non-verbal communication, being present and economy of action.

I will grant you that it is entirely possible that I'm not seeing things from the same perspective that others of you are seeing things...but it doesn't particularly matter.

In my world, our cat is an absolute master of getting her point across with a minimum of effort and a maximum level of efficiency.

Perhaps I just attract that sort of cat into my world...I don't know, but it's been that way with every cat who has ever owned me (or our family).

So what?

Almost every cat I have ever known sleeps for most of the day and seems completely content with his or her existence. My experience of cats is that they know they're the stuff and don't doubt themselves. Whatever it is that they do, they do it...100%.

When I watch our cat, I am reminded of a Zen proverb I quoted a few months ago in this newsletter: When you walk, walk, when you sit, sit. Above all don't wobble.

Given the intent of this quote, it is my contention that cats could teach us a thing or two about being. Cats can teach us a lot about doing something and not wobbling.

Cats don't seem to indulge themselves in an inner dialog of doubt and uncertainty. They simply do what they do, or they don't.

In recent months, our cat has developed some arthritic joint pain in one of her fore limbs (or, if you prefer, one of her four limbs). She will hunker down to jump up onto something and then change her mind. She doesn't complain or whine, she doesn't feel sorry for herself. She either jumps if she feels like it, or she doesn't. O.K. I'll admit it, sometimes she'll jump and not make it, but there is no indecision in her, no regret, no self-pity. If she lacks the power to jump onto the bed, she goes to sleep somewhere else.

The point I am trying to get to is that all too often humans engage in an inner dialog, which can easily undermine our efforts to do and to be.

In our conscious mind there is a constant chatter, an inner babble that we seem completely unable to stop.

Take a moment here.....

Stop.

Listen.

Do you hear it? ...that constant stream of thoughts telling us who we are, what we like, what we fear, what we believe...and so on.

It never ends.

It seems that the only time the inner chatter stops is when our mind is

fully present in an action...like watching the yellow, sugar maple leaf fall past my window as I pause...here, for a moment, drawn aside by nature. That memory will now be with me till I die, the colors, the movement of the leaf on the breeze, all of it is perfectly recorded as I experienced it in the moment. In the moment I was fully present, nothing else existed, no other thoughts...just the leaf, falling.

Often, when I write this newsletter, time does that. Time slows down and I write the whole newsletter without stopping. It is as though the words are already there, waiting for me to find them and write them down, all I have to do is to turn off the chatter, listen to the deeper undercurrent and record the result. The words are there, waiting. I don't hear them when I am in the way, chattering away at myself.

One of the reasons that the newsletter does not get released on the same day each month, is that I sense an idea and then I wait for the words. I don't try to write. When I 'try' to write the result is rarely what I am after. I write when I write. When I write, the inner turmoil goes away and silence surrounds me.

It is for this reason that I tell you that cats in their wisdom teach us so much.

Cats don't babble, they don't wobble, they just are...in my world, purrsians aren't from babble-on.



It's hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head

Sally Kempton

Who are you putting on?

When you wake up in the morning, who do you put on?

Have you ever thought that the self we each become when we wake up, is as much a habit and an addiction as it is anything else?

Have you ever thought that the person you put on in the morning is a choice? Each day we choose to pick up the patterns of yesterday, for good or ill, we become the only the only thing we have ever known...ourselves.

It is a very difficult thing to imagine becoming something other than the person that we think we are. After all, no matter how old we are, we have had a lifetime of experience at fulfilling our own expectations and those of others, living up to the labels that we give ourselves and those labels we pick up from the people around us. Each of us is, to a large degree, a set of conditioned responses developed from the interaction of the experiences of our lives with our genetic potential. Let's think about it for a minute. Think about all the hidden messages we tell ourselves each day: I'm stressed, I'm happy, I'm depressed, I'm smart, I'm stupid, I'm tidy, I'm always late, I'm lazy, I'm a workaholic, I'm no good at science, I love math, I can't draw, I love dance, I'm strong, I'm weak, I'm liked, I'm lonely....you know what you tell yourself, just as well as I know my own inner dialog. Those messages are what we use to define ourselves every

day. When we get up in the morning, we put on those messages, just like a suit of clothes....whether they truly fit our highest, best self, or not.

The inner dialog is what we have become used to, comfortable with, and with which we define the limits of our personality. We rarely take time to question the dialog and so eventually, the messages become a straight-jacket. We become trapped by who we think we are supposed to be, regardless of whether that is truly who we are.

Stepping outside of the dialog and seeing it for what it is, is a very difficult thing to do. You have to be able to see yourself acting out your own script.

In order to make any progress away from the 'conditioned self'; first, see yourself. Become an observer of self, not a participant in self. Secondly, observe yourself without judgment and observe with a degree of compassion. None of this is easy, the inner dialog will be pulling at you, coercing you, every step of the way.

So what can you do?

One thing that is possible is to look for road signs. Road signs are hints that we falling into a learned pattern of thinking and behaving.

Some of the road signs are words like can't and try. For instance: I can't do _____, but I'll give it a try. *Ding, ding, ding*, warning, warning, warning...you are setting yourself up to fulfill the message.

Or how about this one: I have to _____, or else my _____ will be _____ at me.

Look at how you speak to yourself. Do you use 'can't', 'try', 'should', 'could', 'have to', 'got to', 'ought to', 'always', and/or 'never', a lot? Do you find yourself repeating the same lines over and over? For instance: I ought to get fit, but I just can't find the time. I'd like to spend more time _____, but I'm just too busy. I never seem to get a break, I'm just unlucky I guess. I should be doing better than this, I just don't get it. Any of those sound familiar?

Our inner dialog becomes an addiction. We don't even recognize it most of the time. Sometimes the inner dialog is so subtle, we don't even hear it, or see ourselves acting on its prompting. We become blind to our innermost thoughts.

Sometimes our inner dialog is like a tune that you keep humming for days on end, over and over...you just *can't* get it out of your mind! Sometimes we *are* the hamster on the wheel, but it is a wheel of our own construction and an activity in which we willingly (albeit subconsciously) indulge.

So, what would happen if you woke up tomorrow morning and put on a different set of thoughts? Might you be able to reach further? Achieve something new? Let go of some past issue? Find some peace? Let go of some stress? ☺

*A man can stumble on the truth, but often he will get up
and carry on*

Churchill

The Inner Chatter

It seems as though I have spent much of this newsletter talking about something that in meditation that we call the 'Monkey Mind.'

The Monkey Mind is the inner chatter of our mind, the constant babble and the incessant stream of thoughts that combine to give us a sense of who we are, moment by moment.

But do they really?

To my mind the idea behind meditation of any sort is to quieten the mind and look past the Monkey Mind. One of the places where I quieten my mind is in nature, by sitting and watching. Perhaps it is why I am drawn to poetry and photography. In times that I am in nature with my camera and my pen, I am at my most silent and can therefore 'touch' the universe with greater intensity, than when I am partially distracted by the Monkey Mind.

For me, the goal is to bring that sense of presence into my everyday actions...a much more difficult task entirely.

As I have said before, whether it is prayerful discourse with the Divine, sitting in silence concentrating upon a candle flame, silently watching nature, or simply counting your breaths, the result on the Monkey Mind is the same.

It gets quiet.

Any time that you fully focus upon some activity, or become mindful and truly present in each moment, the inner dialog loosens its grip on our conscious mind. When the Monkey Mind is quiet we are better able to access our highest levels of personal integration. Our thoughts gain clarity, our feelings become less confused and our instincts become sure. We are more able to move towards moments of flow.

The thing of it is though, that once

you have started down this road, there is no going back.

Once you begin to quieten the Monkey Mind, you have begun to seek the integration of mind, body and spirit.

I guess that this is one of the reasons I still do martial arts. When I do martial arts, it is like being in nature, the Monkey Mind goes quiet and I am present in the moment. For some of us the same thing happens when we play a musical instrument, or run a marathon, go swimming...the exact nature of the activity is irrelevant. The only requirement is that you show up to participate. And I do mean that **YOU** show up to participate...not that you *mostly* show up and give it a try. Moments of flow occur when there is total integration of mind, body and spirit, thought, feeling and instinct, intent and action.

To return to my original thought in this article...I said that the Monkey Mind gives us a sense of who we think that we are. I would argue, however, that any of you who has experienced a moment of flow, knows that in that moment, you were your highest, best self. By inference then, at all other times we are living in a lesser state of ourselves. It is no wonder to me then, that people who have had flow experiences, seek them again.

It is for this reason then, that once we start down the road to personal integration, there is no going back.

Whether we want to admit it or not, no matter how many times we turn aside, get derailed, deny it, or otherwise sabotage our own efforts, we have made a commitment. There is simply no going back.

To my mind, there is no doubt about the final outcome. The only questions revolve around the nature

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

- ◆ **AKAYAMA WINTER CAMP, ORANGE BEACH, AL, JANUARY 16-18TH, 2009**

of the journey, the path it will take and the length of the journey.

We each have different lessons to learn along the way, but I think that there are a couple of lessons that we all need to learn as we go along. One of the first lessons is to be compassionate with ourselves and accept that we are not there yet, that we will fail in our 'best' efforts time and time again, and that it does us no good to beat ourselves up with every mistep.

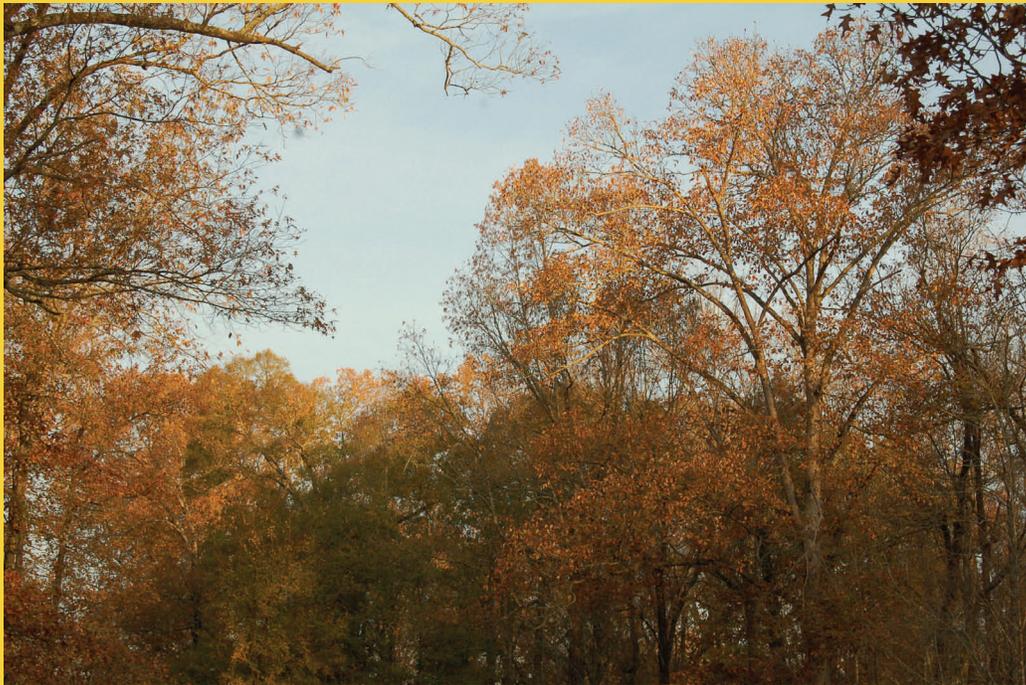
A second lesson is to be patient with ourselves. Again, not an easy task.

We all need to see the Monkey Mind for what it is and allow it to be quiet. Notice I said 'allow'.... this is not something that you can force.

In my experience I have found it easier to trick the Monkey Mind into silence using the focus of the martial arts or nature to draw me out of myself and allow me to be the observer of the self. Of course, the instant you notice that the Monkey Mind has gone to sleep, is the instant it wakes up and you begin all over again.

Such is the nature of the journey.





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