

# Mindfulness and Behavioural Change ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 How can we apply the classificatory system to behavior change?

00:00:05 One of the ways that this classificatory system can be applied is towards behavior change.

00:00:15 Often when we think about meditation, we think of it in terms of achieving certain pleasant subjective states or certain wisdom insights.

00:00:26 Definitely that is a side of the meditative endeavor.

00:00:32 But I think that it is extremely important that objective behavior change be included in the stated goals of the meditative path.

00:00:49 What do I mean tangibly by objective behavior change?

00:00:53 Well, I mean things like one's habit around food or substances.

00:01:01 If one is using tobacco or other drugs or alcohol and one wishes to reduce that or eliminate that, that would be a behavior change.

00:01:15 Eating the right amounts of the right things, etc., that would be a behavior change.

00:01:23 One of my biggest issues behaviorally is a tendency to procrastinate and to avoid responsibilities.

00:01:32 So being more responsible, that's a behavior change.

00:01:37 It turns out that there's a basic principle for applying meditation to behavior change.

00:01:47 And that principle is external behaviors are controlled by sensory events.

00:01:56 For example, let's say that you would like to stop smoking.

00:02:01 You decide, I'm going to stop smoking. Now what happens?

00:02:07 Well, you have the urge to smoke. But what's the urge to smoke?

00:02:12 Well, sensorially, you are having withdrawal from nicotine. That creates uncomfortable touch.

00:02:21 You feel nervous, frightened, irritated. That's uncomfortable feel.

00:02:28 You have images, mental pictures of smoking.

00:02:35 And when you have that mental picture of smoking, again, you get a pleasant feel.

00:02:41 A smile comes on your face.

00:02:44 You have talk about how uncomfortable you are.

00:02:49 But you also have talk about, well, maybe I should start again. I really deserve it. Blah, blah, blah.

00:02:58 So some combination of touch, feel, image, talk, either pleasant or unpleasant,

00:03:07 is creating the carrot and the stick sensory events that are your urge to smoke again.

00:03:17 The carrot part is, smoke again and you'll have this pleasant feel.

00:03:22 Your talk is telling you that and the image is reinforcing it.

00:03:26 The stick part is, if you keep abstaining, you're going to have these unpleasant touches and these unpleasant feels.

00:03:35 So the urge is coming up tangibly in terms of four sensory events.

00:03:41 If you can untangle those, meaning keep track of them,

00:03:48 then they won't crisscross and multiply into a force that you cannot resist.

00:03:57 In other words, if there's ten units of force in touch, likewise feel, image, talk,

00:04:05 that is driving you to smoke again, by what mathematical formula do we compute the aggregate force that is in that urge?

00:04:18 Well, I would claim that if you can keep these elements distinct in awareness as they are arising in real time, moment by moment,

00:04:26 that you'll have exactly what's there. Ten plus ten plus ten plus ten.

00:04:31 So that's four times ten or forty.

00:04:35 If you cannot do that, they will crisscross, cross-multiply, creating the impression of ten times ten times ten times ten,

00:04:45 or a force of ten thousand that you cannot resist.

00:04:49 Applying mindfulness to these will reduce the power of the urge and make it easier for you to not give in to that urge.

00:04:58 Also, if you have equanimity, if you open to these things, you'll discover that actually what you thought was ten is actually just two.

00:05:09 Most of the power in these things is in the resistance to the things.

00:05:15 That's being multiplied, say, by five in each case.

00:05:19 Really, once you have equanimity, so you reduce your grasping around the sensory event to one-fifth of what it was before,

00:05:32 now you've just got two plus two plus two plus two.

00:05:35 So that's like eight, and the urge is, you can stay with it until it passes,

00:05:41 and you can do that over and over again until the urge doesn't come up again.

00:05:44 So that's the basic meditative principle behind behavior change,

00:05:50 as applied to a specific of resisting the urge to reuse tobacco.

00:05:57 But you can substitute any behavior that you're trying to get over, and the principle will be the same.

00:06:06 It will either just involve the subjective system of feel-image-talk, or it will involve in some way touch plus feel-image-talk,

00:06:16 in other words, body plus mind.

00:06:19 Now, there's another basic principle in applying meditation in general and mindfulness in specific to behavior change.

00:06:30 What I just described, the first basic principle, which is to deconstruct the urge meditatively,

00:06:40 if you attempt to apply that principle, it will either work or it won't,

00:06:46 meaning that you'll either achieve the behavior change you want, or you'll fail to achieve it.

00:06:51 It is not guaranteed that the mindfulness alone will achieve the behavior change.

00:07:01 So if you attempt to apply the first principle, which is, see that the object of behavior is being controlled by sensory events,

00:07:11 and then you deconstruct those sensory events with concentration, clarity, equanimity skills,

00:07:16 that's the first principle, if you attempt to apply that first principle and it works, great, you've done your job.

00:07:26 It is possible that it might not work. It's insufficient.

00:07:31 So the second principle says if that doesn't work, then you have to go for an external accountability structure of some sort.

00:07:41 That means you have to go to a counselor, a therapist, a 12-step program, a sponsor, a friend, a something that's on the outside

00:07:54 that is giving you manageable assignments in changing your behavior.

00:08:00 So you combine that external accountability structure with the continuing of your meditative approach.

00:08:08 And that, with time, should get the job done.

00:08:14 For example, in my own case, one of my habits, which was a pretty deep one, a 10-year marijuana abuse situation,  
00:08:24 literally evaporated without the tiniest struggle, literally overnight, as the result of applying a mindfulness technique.

00:08:39 On the other hand, another major behavioral struggle that I've had in my life, which is with procrastination and avoiding responsibility,

00:08:49 well, I ended up having to have 18 months of psychotherapy with a psychiatrist, a real doctor, an MD.

00:09:02 And by the way, this wasn't all that long ago, maybe, I don't know, six years ago or so.

00:09:09 So I needed to create for myself that accountability structure because the meditation alone wasn't doing it.

00:09:16 However, the combined effect of the psychotherapy and my meditation practice was very strong,

00:09:27 stronger than they would be individually, so they potentiated each other.

00:09:31 And I've been having a lot more success with that than I ever thought possible.