

Habits and the Dharma, January 22, 2025

When we look at the evolution of humanity, we come to see that our brain evolved into this marvelous highly efficient control center. Whether we perform simple or complex tasks, it is fascinating to see, what our brains are capable of doing.

If we take a moment to see the multitude of tasks we perform on a daily basis, we might wonder, how we are capable of doing all this? This is where habits enter the game.

In order for us to function efficiently, we have developed certain habits.

Habits make our daily lives easier by performing certain reoccurring tasks habitually and by doing so freeing up valuable mental space.

Over the last few weeks, I paid close attention to my daily routines, especially my morning routine. Besides the physical ones, I was also paying close attention to the mental ones, habitual thinking patterns.

All of these automated movements, these habits, help me - help us - to be more efficient. Just imagine how much energy we would have to bring up each morning to figure out how the coffeemaker works. That would be very inefficient. So habits exist to help us be more efficient in our daily life and free up mental space for other processes.

Habits can be acquired intentionally to either change an existing habit or cultivate a desired one or they can be formed unintentionally. Either way, they are formed through repetition and consistency.

We can not talk about habit formation without talking about long term potentiation and neuroplasticity. Let's take a look at what those terms mean and how processing in the brain works. Our brain processes information through neural connections. A neural connection is the point where two neurons meet and where communication happens, it is also called a synapse. There is a gap between the neurons and the communication happens through neurotransmitters. These points of connection allow our brain to process information and enable thoughts, emotions and actions.

A neural pathway is a series of neural connections and when they get repeatedly activated, the synaptic connection between the neurons gets strengthened. This is called long term potentiation, LTP. "Neurons that fire together, wire together", Dan Siegel. The synaptic connections become more efficient in transmitting the signal between neurons and as a result, the habit gets solidified through repetition. The more the action is performed, the stronger the behavior gets. LTP is reversible, through neural connections not being reinforced.

The LTP is located in the Hippocampus and plays an important role in learning and memory and thus habit formations.

Neuroplasticity plays a crucial role in the formation, as well as transformation, of habits. It is the brain's ability to change and build new connections as a response to new experiences and habit changes. The more often the action is performed, the more the neural connections in the brain get strengthened. Some habits become so ingrained into our brain, that we might find it difficult to change, adjust or replace some of them. This is where the benefit of our mindfulness practice comes in.

The dharma can be of support in choosing and nurturing ethical and wholesome behavior through mindfulness and investigation. Those help us to uncover unethical, dysfunctional habits and negative self talk. Right effort gives us the ability to keep observing when an unwholesome thought is about to arise or has arisen and choose to redirect our energy towards the formation of wholesome patterns.

Mindfulness, investigation and right effort are observing specific routines in order to see if they are wholesome or unwholesome. Buddhism intervenes into that habit in order to cultivate a more effective lifestyle (right livelihood) and to bring spiritual benefits to its fruition.

Forming health supporting behavior through cues:

In psychology the word "habit" means there is an action which is triggered automatically, because there is a contextual cue which is connected to the performed action.

To put it in simple terms: "It is for example the habit of washing hands (action) after using the bathroom (contextual cue) or putting on shoes (action) before leaving the house (contextual cue). This can be of support when we want to create a healthy habit by connecting it to existing tasks or habits we perform daily.

There is an interesting study which looks at the benefits of health supporting behavior when participants choose a health promoting behavior and tie it to an event which repeats daily. An example is to eat a piece of fruit after breakfast. The "eat a piece of fruit" is the chosen, health promoting behavior and the "after breakfast" is the daily cue. The daily ratings of the participants showed a steady increase in habit strength and a plateauing after 66 days. It was interesting to see that the occasional skipping of the health promoting behavior did not impact the overall success or outcome.

Here are some helpful guidelines when making a new healthy habit:

1. Decide on one beneficial, wholesome habit you want to implement. Make small changes rather than big ones.
2. Choose a simple action you perform on a daily basis to be the anchor and also to act as a reminder to repeat the desired habit
3. Plan when and where you want to perform the task. The more precise you can be, the better. For example, each day at 9pm I sit down and meditate. Or: when I wait for my coffee to get done, I perform arm circles. Consistency is key to keep going and strengthen the habit
4. When the time comes, perform the action. Make sure to be consistent.
5. Remind yourself, that with practice and some patience, over time, it will get easier and the action will be performed more automatically

Other ways to support habit formation:

Some people may find it helpful to have a tick sheet to track their success.

Join a support group where you find like minded people

Find a partner for added accountability

Use an app with a reminder (ex insight timer app) and track your success

My research about the power of habits concludes that mindfulness, investigation and right effort, together with the power of repetition as well as consistency seems to be the recipe in uncovering unwholesome habits and replacing them with new, wholesome ones.