

ABC anchor **DAN HARRIS** talks meditation with **SHARON SALZBERG, JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN & MARK EPSTEIN**

SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE

NOVEMBER 2014

Get off the wheel of **Habit**

How to free yourself from habitual patterns of thinking, relating, and acting.

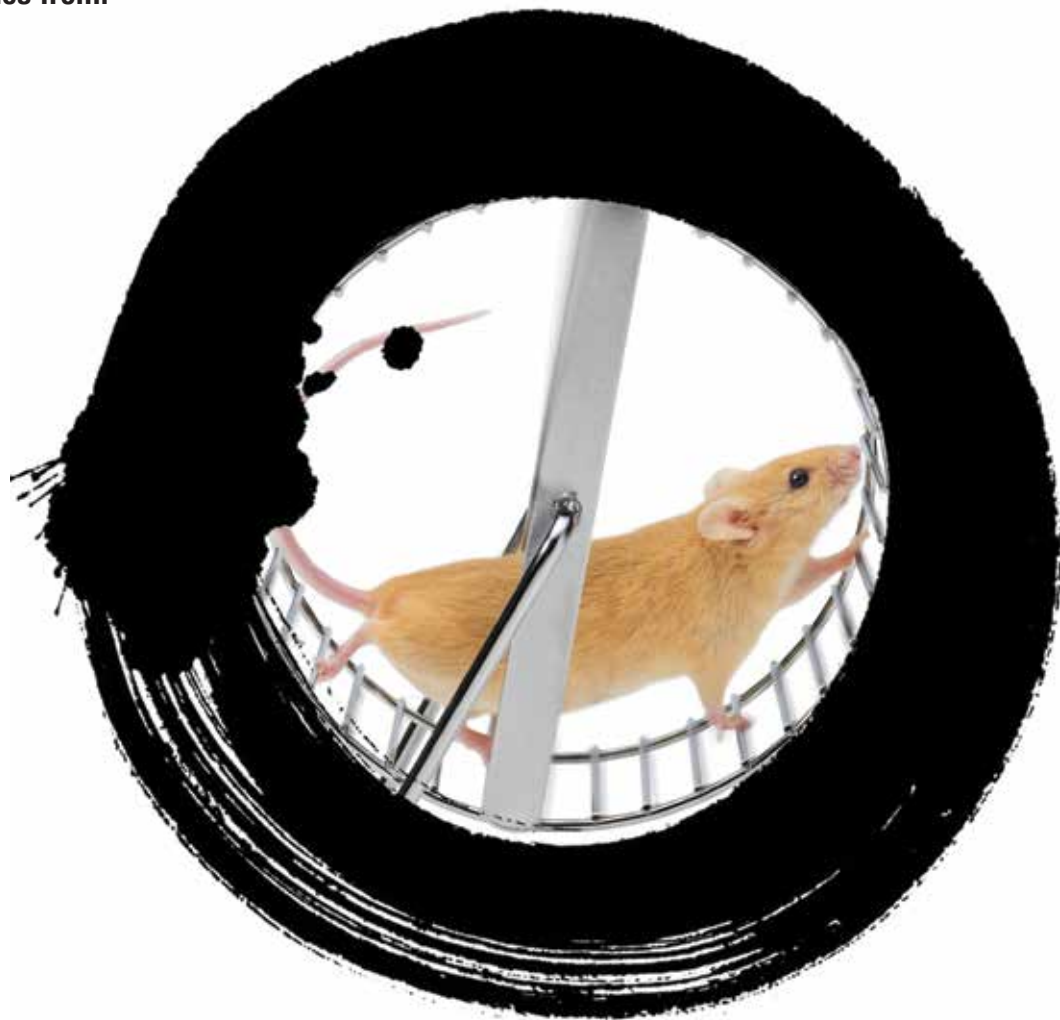
It's the whole point of Buddhist meditation. (They don't call it the Wheel of Life for nothing.)

Helpful teachings & techniques from:

THICH NHAT HANH

SYLVIA BOORSTEIN

TSOKNYI RINPOCHE



How to Bridge the Gap

Whether we're relating as lovers, friends, family, or colleagues, habitual Drawing on Buddhist and Western psychology, **ROSE TAYLOR** and

patterns separate us from each other and the present moment. **ARI GOLDFIELD** show us how to cut through old patterns and truly connect.

“CAN'T STAND IT!” a counseling client exclaimed. “Every night I come home from a long, exhausting day at work, and there's my partner lying on the couch, expecting me to make dinner for him. If I do it, I feel angry and resentful. If I don't, he gets angry and I feel guilty and sad. I feel stuck.”

Transforming habitual patterns is hard enough when a person is just working on their own issues. It is even harder when the patterns arise in the context of a relationship—whether romantic, professional, family, or friendship. It can be so easy to fall into an automatic pattern of interaction with the other person, in which we do not like what is happening but we don't know how to change it. We end up feeling frustration and despair.

It is no accident that the older, closer, and more important a relationship is, the more entrenched the habits will be—in fact, they are some of the deepest ones in our consciousness. From Western psychology's perspective, these habits were often formed early in childhood; Buddhism teaches that they have roots in both this lifetime and lifetimes past.

From a Buddhist perspective the good news is that deep down those difficult feelings are nothing other than pure awareness, whose energy can help us “wake up” and transform our experience and our relationships. Since such patterns are so deep and have been there for so long, it is no surprise that changing

PHOTO © CHRISTIAN RICHTER / STOCKSY UNITED

5 Ways to Get Free

Here are five techniques you can use to work with habitual patterns as they arise in the moment. In the same way that detrimental habits can become ingrained, they can be replaced with new behavioral styles that feel more wakeful and sane. The key is not to expect any quick fixes—please be patient and kind with yourself.

1. Expand Awareness Gain familiarity with your habitual patterns. Notice how you feel when you act out of a habitual tendency. Notice how particular areas of your body may feel uncomfortable. The more you do this, the sooner you will be able to identify your habitual behavior once it starts.

2. Make Space Simply breathing, relaxing your body, and moving into another stance may be enough to shift from, or slow down, a habitual reaction. So when you notice you are acting out of habit in a relational situation, slow down and take some space. Pause to breathe a few times. Feel how your body posture and sensations reflect your reactions to the situation. You may want to delay interaction by suggesting another time to talk, or by letting the other person know you need some time to think and you will get back to them.

3. Explore Choice When acting out of habit it can be hard even to imagine there are alternative ways of doing things. So it is important to spend some time exploring what other options there are in the situation. Even if these choices seem outrageous or unrealistic, allow yourself to be free and creative. You are not going to act on any of these options yet, so have fun with it. If this step is difficult, imagine how other people, or even characters from books or movies, would act in the same situation.

4. Step into Choice From those options, choose how you want to act. Do not expect a particular result; simply act from the conviction that this is what feels right for you to do. When you first start challenging your habitual patterns, you may feel awkward and wrong-footed, but that lets you know you are in the right place. Even if you choose what you would have habitually done in the first place, it will feel different because you are acting voluntarily and with awareness.

5. Re-Run If you find you have completely played out an interaction from the stuck place of habitual tendency, do not get discouraged or self-critical. It is significant that you noticed your pattern, and you can still work with the situation by re-running it. When did you become aware you were falling into the habit? What could you have done differently? Imagine how that would feel to act in that new way. Doing this will build the power of choice around this habit for the next time it arises. ♦

—ROSE TAYLOR AND ARI GOLDFIELD

them requires time, persistence, and patience. But if we do persevere, the changes that come can be powerful and satisfying. We come to see that relational difficulties are both opportunities for our own awakening and for our relationships to become stronger, more stable, and closer. From this perspective, relational difficulties are precious opportunities.

Habitual Patterns in Relationships

When we act out of habitual pattern, we are not fully present to the situation or to the other person, because our feelings and actions are coming from an old habit from our past. In relational patterns, one person often plays a particular role—the listener, complainer, entertainer, supporter, child, teacher, or critic, to name a few—and the other person plays the complementary part.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these styles of engagement; the problems come when we automatically fall into a role and feel unable to behave in another way. This prevents us from experiencing the full range of our being and the other person's too, and disconnects us from the fluidity and changing needs of each fresh set of circumstances. As a result, we can feel bored, dissatisfied, and frustrated.

Even though they make us suffer, it takes courage to examine our habitual patterns and to begin to change them. To foster that courage, it is helpful to hold yourself in a space of loving acceptance.

Practicing Self-Compassion

Jeff, a counseling client, was completely exhausted. He had overextended himself with commitments to friends, family, and volunteer organizations. He felt compelled to keep these commitments without regard to his own health or energy level.

After careful examination, Jeff realized that he had unconsciously believed it was his fault that he did not receive affection from his parents. So he had to work extra hard to erase his guilt and make himself deserving of others'



ARI GOLDFIELD and ROSE TAYLOR are Buddhist teachers, counselors, and co-directors of *Wisdom Sun*, a Buddhist community based in San Francisco. They were delighted that their most recent meditation retreat was attended by both their nine-month-old son, Oliver, and his grandmother, Bridget.

PHOTO © CHRISTIAN RICHTER / STOCKSY UNITED



PHOTO BY ANDY KARR

care. Once he understood this, he began to correct his belief by meditating on the fact that he was blameless in this regard, and by sending himself the love and acceptance that he longed for.

As Jeff's case demonstrates, the cause of many relational habits is a belief that we are flawed, undeserving, or guilty of wrongdoing. Therefore, the practice of affirming to ourselves our inherent dignity, self-worth, and lovability is in and of itself transformational. It helps us to connect with what the Buddha meant when he taught, "All sentient beings are worthy."

You can do this with statements like: "I am lovable" and "I love and respect myself," and by experiencing this warmth and acceptance as a felt experience in your body. This practice may appear simple and straightforward, but that does not mean it is easy. As the late Zen master Kobun Chino Roshi observed, "Self-acceptance is the hardest thing to do." Even so, with practice we can begin to extend kindness, tolerance, and loving care to our uncomfortable internal experiences. This creates an internal environment that supports change and does not punish us when it appears fleeting or distant. Khenpo Tsültrim Gyamtso sang a wonderful verse in this regard:

*Making mistake after mistake, I walk on the authentic path,
Forgetting and forgetting, I rely on unforgetting mindfulness,
Experiencing confusion after confusion, I search for the unconfused true nature.*

So try not to get down on yourself for your hard-to-change habitual patterns, or get upset that you are not "doing better." When you hold yourself in warmth and gentleness, you go a long way toward helping your relational habits transform.

Understand Where Your Patterns Came From

Anna suffered at the office because her work-team partner always commandeered the plum assignments and took all the credit for work they did together, leaving Anna to toil in boredom and anonymity.

Anna wanted to tell her colleague how she really felt, but was afraid to do so, and when she actually tried it, she would get physically dizzy. She tried to "stay with the fear" in meditation, but her anxiety continued to overwhelm her. Eventually she understood that her problem stemmed from her parents and brothers instilling in her the belief that women were not capable of professional competency or success, which she summarized as: "I can't do it." Understanding her pattern, her meditation became more productive and helped her to feel grounded and strong. In time, she began to have more honest conversations with her colleague.

David was young and handsome, and it was easy for him to get dates with women he found attractive. However, he was

➤ page 68



RANGJUNG YESHE INSTITUTE
BOUDHANATH, NEPAL

Rangjung Yeshe Institute's Centre for Buddhist Studies offers Undergraduate and Graduate Programs on campus in Boudhanath, Nepal, in partnership with Kathmandu University.

BACHELOR OF ARTS

BA IN BUDDHIST STUDIES WITH HIMALAYAN LANGUAGE

MASTER OF ARTS

MA IN BUDDHIST STUDIES

MASTER OF ARTS

MA IN TRANSLATION, TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION, & PHILOLOGY

SUMMER INTENSIVES

JUNE 10 - AUGUST 7, 2015

• COLLOQUIAL TIBETAN • CLASSICAL TIBETAN • SANSKRIT •
• NEPALI • BUDDHIST STUDIES •

TRANSLATOR TRAINING

JUNE 2015 - JUNE 2016

ORALLY INTERPRET FROM TIBETAN INTO ENGLISH
INTENSIVE 12-MONTH PROGRAM

ONLINE LEARNING

STUDY CLASSIC BUDDHIST TEXTS, TIBETAN ALPHABET OR
CLASSICAL TIBETAN LANGUAGE.

Choose from short or semester-long courses and Self-Study or
Interactive courses. Selected courses earn academic credit.

THE DHARMA COMES TO YOU THANKS TO THE INTERNET!

www.ryi.org/online-learning
START STUDYING ANYTIME!



Apply Now!

www.ryi.org



How to Bridge the Gap continued from page 55

dissatisfied with his love life. He really wanted a long-term relationship but repeatedly experienced boredom with his partners after several months of being together.

At last, he realized that he was looking for partners to care for him in maternal ways that his mother did not. He unconsciously suppressed his erotic needs to insure that they would not threaten his longing for a caregiver. When he realized this, he became inspired to meditate on love and compassion for himself and others. He stopped leaning so intensely on his current partner for soothing and care, and his romantic attraction to her returned.

Anna and David's experiences demonstrate how important it can be to thoroughly explore our habitual patterns until we uncover their root causes. For as long as these causes remain unconscious, they will produce behavior and emotions that are painful and difficult to alter through meditation alone. Inquiry into the underlying causes of our patterns is a way we can develop the illuminating wisdom (*prajna*) that helps us transform our patterns in a profound and lasting way. Combining this self-inquiry with meditation creates a method that is nuanced and integrated enough to handle the complexity of bringing about authentic and stable transformation.

The Importance of Communication

When dealing with habitual patterns in relationships, genuine transformation often requires that the patterns be worked through in relationship itself. This makes sense from the perspective of the Buddha's teachings on interdependence, cause, and result: since the problems manifest in relationships, the solutions require relational change as well as personal meditation and self-inquiry. And relational change requires good communication.

Non-Violent Communication, by Marshall Rosenberg, is an excellent guide to developing communication skills that embody compassion, honesty, and courage. Rosenberg describes a style of communication that refrains from blaming and arguing about who is right and who is wrong. Instead, good communication in relationship focuses on expressing one's own feelings and experience and on being curious about and sympathetic to the experience of others.

When we communicate in this way, our relationships work a lot better. This is not to say that every relationship problem is fixable, nor that every relationship should continue—sometimes it is very clear that the best thing would be for the relationship to end. However, when we communicate honestly about our own feelings and experience, and are genuinely interested in the feelings and experiences of others, we step out of habitual ways of engaging and become present with each other in the moment. This creates the best chance for our relationships to work themselves out in a way that feels appropriate and true to ourselves. ♦

We're pleased to offer you this article from the new issue of **Shambhala Sun** magazine.

Like what you see? Then please consider subscribing.

CLICK HERE
to subscribe and save **50%** immediately.



ABOUT US

The **Shambhala Sun** is more than today's most popular Buddhist-inspired magazine. Practical, accessible, and yet profound, it's for people like you, who want to lead a more meaningful, caring, and awakened life.

From psychology, health, and relationships to the arts, media, and politics; we explore all the ways that Buddhist practice and insight benefit our lives. The intersection between Buddhism and culture today is rich and innovative. And it's happening in the pages of the **Shambhala Sun**.

JOIN US ONLINE

ShambhalaSun.com | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)



SHAMBHALA SUN
BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE