

“Goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results.” -James Clear

Stop blaming others to attain ‘clear awareness’

There are thousands of self-help books out there on getting rich, lean, or happy. Many of them focus almost exclusively on getting to some future state and getting there quickly. There’s a singular focus on a result. In many cases, there are techniques that involve short-cuts, relying on mental games to move you in a direction. They dangle a glossy carrot in the form of some desirable state. After many failed attempts to find shortcuts in life, I decided to stop trying to trick myself into doing what may move me in a “favorable” direction. I decided, instead, to be honest and transparent with myself.

Earlier in life, I dabbled with yoga and meditation. Everything I read about these practices spoke to me in terms of developing internal peace. At the time, I failed to stick with the practices. Later in life, I found a Buddhist meditation group in Bucks County; this offered direction and peer support to stick to the practice. In our program, there’s a prayer that states: “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.” Many years later, I now realize that the prayer has many layers to it. Those lines call out the reality of how impactful our thoughts are. The first practice of the Eightfold Path is Right Understanding. We must get to know ourselves—our body and our mind.

We only become what we think if we truly believe the thoughts that arise. This approach is not unique to Buddhism. Many spiritual traditions and psychological methods address how we should not believe everything that pops into our mind. The conditioning we’ve experienced throughout our life has slowly created a system of roots, where unhelpful views continue to develop. Hence, we need to discern between what is true and false and what is beneficial and detrimental. Each of us have a mix of skillful and unskillful conditioning and views we’ve adopted over the course of our lives. The real work is to sit down and question the legitimacy of these views. Just because Magellan was raised to believe the Earth was flat didn’t deter him from exploring and proving otherwise. The Buddha encouraged everyone to test out his teachings for themselves and not rely solely on what he told them. We can’t go through life believing everything we tell ourselves or that others tell us is true. We must develop a system of our own to distinguish truth from falsity.

A few months ago, I had the good fortune of attending a talk by a hall of fame basketball coach, Mike Krzyzewski. He spoke of how he was able to lead some of the most talented athletes in the world. He also coached the U.S. men’s Olympic basketball team. Not surprisingly, he developed a system over the course of his life that relied on five good old-fashioned qualities. First, Communication—don’t lie, cheat, or steal; look each other in the eye, and tell the truth when it needs to be told. Second, Trust—it is the foundation for building any team, including a marriage. Third, Care—you must care deeply for one another; each team member needs to feel part of a bigger cause. Fourth, Collective Responsibility—win or lose *together*; there are no singular pronouns. Fifth, Pride—be proud to be part of an organization that’s bigger than any individual. Coach K held a finger up for each of these as he described them. Then he went back and demonstrated how the importance of each of these cannot be overstated. Finally, when he pulled his fingers back into a fist, he illustrated the real power of a team of individuals, tightly integrating these qualities as a unit creates a powerful impact. He reinforced this by loudly punching his fist into his palm to highlight the impact. As he did this, Coach restated how each of the qualities noted

above is a critical factor and how rare it is to assemble a group of men willing to fully surrender themselves individually, to commit to a larger cause.

I recently started reading *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. It's not your typical self-help book. Clear takes a step back and looks holistically at what it is someone is trying to do. In the example above, he may be okay with looking at the goal a given team is trying to accomplish but he's more interested in the *system* or *method* a coach is going to use to get there. The author states, "goals are about the results you want to achieve. Systems are about the processes that lead to those results."

Many folks that attend our sangha go because they are suffering. Their life is too hectic, they lost someone or something irreplaceable, or they may be looking for more meaning in their life. Regardless, they've heard about meditation and have come to explore what it has to offer. When we meditate, we're hitting the pause button to slow our minds and observe the thoughts. Many people that initially sit in meditation find their minds are going a mile a minute. In this sense, the experience isn't what we'd like it to be so many *turn away* from it. They want the results they've heard meditation brings but they want them immediately.

The interesting part of this is that it mirrors our lives in many ways. There are many occasions in life when things don't go the way we'd like them, and so, we often get agitated. The more frequent this happens the greater the agitation becomes, and we begin to look outward to blame someone or something. It took me a long time to recognize the absurdity of this behavior, but it was a significant discovery.

Buddhism has taught me to appreciate all results—good, bad, and neutral. If we focus on longer term goals as the driving force of our daily behavior, then we'll likely miss out on learning to love the process. There's a delicate balance there. This is at the core of *Atomic Habits*. Clear says, "most people need consistency more than they need intensity."

During meditation, we're developing our own "system" of how we discern how to respond in our lives to the various situations life presents us. Clear awareness is a term used in Buddhism that we're all working toward. It's not an easy term to understand. Think of it as being mindful throughout our day, carefully staying present with our thoughts, actions, and responses. You remain grounded, present, and accepting of what's occurring in your life. We practice being aware of whatever is coming up in our mind and body, and being with it, being ok and accepting of it. Again, meditation is practice so that we can be content with whatever comes up in our daily lives, as opposed to experiencing aversion all the time where we want to run and escape. Slowly but surely, you fall in love with the process.

"Life is a journey, not a destination." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Joe Beck is a member of the Buddhist Sangha of Bucks County, which meets Mondays at 7pm at the Yardley Friends Meetinghouse. All are welcome. Email us at: bsbc19067@yahoo.com. From a Faith Perspective is a weekly column written by members of local faith communities.