

## Denial - It's a Good Thing

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*"A man can stand almost anything except a succession of ordinary days." - Johann Wolfgang Goethe*

In a restaurant, we are given a menu and expected to make a choice about what we want to eat. Once we choose the chicken, we are denying the salmon, the beef and the bouillabaisse, yet we are usually not conscious of this denial. We are only aware of the fact that we are going to have the chicken. For some, there may be regret that we didn't choose the beef because it was just delivered to the table next door and it looks so good, but still the awareness is limited to either one or the other and not the whole picture.

So, what is the difference between conscious denial and unconscious denial? Conscious denial is recognizing the infinite nature of possibilities that are available, accepting what is presenting itself in the moment, and then choosing where to point the mind in the next moment. Unconscious denial is being lost in the content of the thought, or experience, and not being aware of the fact that there are many paths that we are not taking. We are sleepwalking and therefore not conscious of the array of possibilities before us. We are drifting in the current of our "stream of unconsciousness". It can sometimes seem like we can hold multiple awarenesses at the same time, but really it is one thing after another. If I am listening to the sounds around me, that is what I am doing and I have denied paying attention to any thoughts I was just having. I am hearing. When I am conscious of this, it is denial from awareness. First, I have to be aware of what I am presently experiencing, only then can I decide to change intention, or remain with a previous intention, on whatever is arising next. If the awareness is not there, we go down a path of stimulus then conditioned response and get lost in the experience. The conditioned responses are unconscious and we find ourselves in situations where we wonder, "how did I get here?" The thoughts then feed off themselves and create their own momentum.

When we respond to a given stimulus the same way again and again, we create patterns of experience that seem to be "hard wired". If we repeat an activity often enough it eventually becomes automatic, such as driving a car. We can get in a car, turn it on, back out of a driveway, and be half way down the road without being consciously aware of where we are and what we are doing. Eventually we realize where we are and wonder, "Where was I the last 5 minutes". Someone was driving that car. The habit of operating a vehicle becomes "hardwired" in the brain once we have learned to drive and have done it enough. The cascade of neural connections and firings happen automatically. I am not implying that unconscious driving is a bad thing. In fact it is a survival mechanism to automate such a repeated behavior so that we do it effortlessly, and thus more efficiently. As humans, are able to walk down the street and not have to think, "left-right-left-right". This is a good thing. However, we must become vigilant and notice where we tend to become unconscious and lose awareness of our present situation when skillful awareness would be helpful. Such as when interacting with another human being.

Let's return to the driving scenario. If we were to go to Japan, where they drive on the left side of the road, and get into a car in order to drive, something interesting would happen to that autopilot. To begin with, we would find ourselves in the passenger seat if we just automatically got into the

side of the car we were used to getting into to drive. Next, having gotten out and switched seats, we would then realize that the gearshift now needs to be operated with our left hand instead of our right. By now, we are paying very close attention, much like when we were learning to drive. We back out and realize that all the traffic is going in the opposite direction! Now the attention level is extremely high. There is no autopilot now. Except... our feet move the same way because the pedals are in the same orientation that we are accustomed to. The neurology between the feet and brain can remain in autopilot because nothing has changed in this department. However, the wiring in our brain is now forced to make some new connections because there are some crucial differences regarding left and right with regards to the operating the vehicle itself and the rules of the road. The brain must break some of the old connections in order to negotiate this new, potentially life-threatening, situation. We are very present and deliberate with our every move.

In terms of Qi, when we fall into patterns of automatic response, we are limiting our potential for responding to that particular stimulus. Qi flow becomes static or limited and patterns, or habits, come into being. The neurology, the body, the mind all becomes frozen into a particular paradigm. When we limit our possibilities for response, we limit our humanity. We create habits of response that, over time, limit the free flow of Qi. On a muscular-skeletal level, joints lose their range of motion, muscles then weaken, posture becomes fixed, and movement becomes more and more limited. When you see someone from very far away, you could tell something about their age, just by the way they moved. Age and movement are interconnected.

Internally, physiology becomes limited as well. Metabolic pathways become restricted and less adaptable. Our choices become habituated due to limiting, hidden beliefs. The unconscious beliefs create certain responses to certain stimuli; this affects our brain chemistry, which affects our emotions, which then determine our responses, which then elicit new stimuli from the environment around us. The pathways in the brain become fixed when the responses are repeated over and over again.

The good news is we can break out of these "fixed" pathways if we desire. Here are some ways to start breaking things up.

Write with your non-dominant hand. Try taking 10-15 minutes each day and journaling with your left hand, if you are right handed and visa versa if left handed. See what your non-dominant hand has to say. If you are writing on a computer most of the time, just try writing with pen and paper for your first drafts. You can also play with writing with both hands simultaneously. Start a line with both hands in the middle and for each move outward, mirroring what the other is writing. Because we write from left to right, the left hand will be the mirror version of the legible right side. By doing these exercises, we shake up the fixed and stagnant ways we communicate through writing. Just like trying to drive on the opposite side of the road, we are forced to see things from a new perspective. Neurologically we are forcing old pathways and connections to break up and are creating new ones, just by changing sides.

When one is in their late teens and early twenties, so much of life is new and different. New people, places, and experiences are happening all the time. We are learning all the time.

Once we settle down, find a home, a career, a family; we tend to encounter fewer and fewer new experiences each day. We have set routines that continue for years. One day flows into the next without much differentiation. Vacations, if they are in new places, are often the only times for new experiences. Sadly, we tend to make our vacations routine; often returning to the same places year after year. When we do vacation or travel to a new place, especially a foreign country, everything is new and different. We are alert, vibrant, open and curious. Each day is packed with new experiences that we vividly remember. This is one reason we travel; it enlivens us. Because we are

encountering the unknown it can also make us a bit anxious and uncomfortable, which is part the adventure.

Here are some other ideas to break up the old patterning to create space for adaptation and learning.

Try doing some other simple tasks with the non-dominant hand. Brushing teeth or hair, switching knife and fork, even drawing. Learn how to juggle. If you can juggle, learn a new trick by juggling different objects or adding more. We can sleep on the other side of the bed, or change beds or rooms to sleep in for a period of time. Rearrange the furniture and the artwork on the walls. We can take a different route to and from work, or even try a different mode of transit. We can call an old friend who we have been meaning to talk with. We can eat something we have never tried before. We can learn a new recipe and make it. We can talk to one total stranger/day and learn 3 things about them, or just take the time to re-introduce ourselves to an acquaintance we didn't really know that well. Think of someone you would love to get a call from and call him or her! These all might be slightly uncomfortable, which is a sign that we are moving out of our set patterns. Our comfort zone, if never ventured out of, will become our dead zone. We become dead to our experience because it is 90% automatic, which means unconscious.

By denying staying stuck in our old habits we can choose growth, vitality and change.

Viva la difference.

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