

The Transformative Power of Practice

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What is Practice?

A central component of any change process – personal change or organizational change – is the concept of practice. But what is practice and why is it so important?

Practice is simply the act of doing something, whether that something is as complicated as doing a piano solo or as simple as washing the dishes. We call it practice when the act becomes a repeated behavior.

Practice can be both distinct and indistinct. We can set aside time to intentionally focus on our practice, such as when we set aside time to practice a musical instrument, practice basketball, or practice meditation. Practice is also indistinct in that we are always practicing something, whether we are conscious of it or not. The ritual of our morning coffee and newspaper, how we behave in meetings, our attitude when it is time to do unpleasant activities – in all of these situations we are practicing how we should be, though usually without conscious intent.

This is important because generally speaking the more we practice something the better we get at it. Our experience of course teaches us that sometimes we practice and we don't seem to get better, but in fact we are getting better – we just may not be getting better at what we want. Each time we practice piano with a grumpy attitude, then we may get better at piano, but we will also certainly get better at being grumpy. Or when we practice meditation and consciously allow ourselves to daydream, then as time passes we get better and better at daydreaming while sitting ever so still. Practice is always happening. It is continuously shaping us: opening us up to new ways of being, or increasingly calcifying the way we think, act, and feel.

There are two central areas we need to focus on to understand practice as it relates to how we grow and change: default practices and intentional practice.

Default Practices

Default practices are the deeply rooted behaviors that we do automatically, consistently, and unconsciously in response to any given situation. By automatic we mean that it is the primary reaction that is triggered in us when we are in a particular situation; consistent means that it is the reaction that we engage in more often than not; and unconscious means that we do it without being consciously aware that there are probably other responses that we could choose in the situation. For example when we feel a conflict arise at work and we find that we begin to start avoiding the issue or avoiding the people involved, then we are probably engaging in our default practice around conflict. The behavior happens

before we know it, and when we finally realize the behavior we are doing, it usually seems like we had no choice, or it was the only thing to do in that situation. They are so rooted in us in fact that often they feel like who we are... "that's just me, that's what I do." This sense of ourselves is natural, we identify with what we experience over time. But where do these kinds of behaviors come from?

Default practices are learned behaviors and reactions that are inherited through our life experiences. Our families, cultures and the social conditions in which we live invite and at times demand certain ways of being. Violence, oppression, rejection, loss, or other situations that threatened our safety as children (and as adults) all played a role in shaping our default practices. We have a practiced response to anger or to sadness, a practiced way to interface with power and intimacy, and countless others. These practices were formed at a time when we needed them – they played a crucial role in our survival and our ability to belong.

However, because our default practices have often been shaped out of difficult experiences when we had limited means of dealing with and processing them, these practices often don't align with our present-day values, politics, and/or what we most care about. We can find ourselves acting and reacting in ways that make us more difficult for others to trust, less effective in our work, or more limited in our approaches to systemic change and movement building. Where once they were essential survival strategies, they may now be problematic. Because they are so practiced and have now become unconscious behaviors we can feel like we have no way to change them.

The good news is that we can learn to observe our default practices, instead of reacting out of them immediately. We can learn other ways to take care of what they were taking care of – other ways to deal with conflict, power, our own and others emotions and need for safety. We can begin to purposefully take on practices that align with our values, to become organizers, leaders, and people who more embody or model the social visions we hold.

To become more aware of your default practices begin to pay attention to your own automatic reactions. Do you move toward or away from conflict? Can you feel and tolerate your own emotions (sadness, anger, guilt, joy, fear) or do you need to rid yourself of them by denying them or putting them out on someone else? When you don't understand or know what to do, do you cover it up, blame someone else or take more responsibility than is yours?

The easiest way to learn about your default practices is to feel your own sensations and emotions and to observe your own thoughts. Meditation, centering practices and self awareness are new practices that can help you learn about your default practices. By building awareness of your default practices you begin to uproot them. You stop the automatic reactions and prepare the ground for new ones. You build in time between your internal reaction and your external action. You can feel more without reacting. This allows you to begin to make choices and take actions more aligned with your values and your politics.

Intentional Practices

Intentional Practices are those that we choose to do in order to transform the way we show up in the world. Through new practices we increase choice and alignment with our values.

When we begin to look at our own practices and then practice on purpose, the first thing we want to ask ourselves is: “What matters to me?” “What do I care about?” “What am I committed to?” The answers to these questions become the guide for taking on new practices. Organizationally we want to ask similar questions: What practices do we need to be in as a staff and organization? What practices do we want to support in our member base to align with our vision and political commitments?

There are three key aspects to the transformative power of practice:

1. Practice is organized around your commitments. What are you committed to? What practices will help you realize this commitment? The answers, individually and organizationally, act as the guide to developing your new practices. These questions can be answered based on your mission and politics and/or based on what default practices you want to change. For example if you are committed to building a strong movement beyond any one organization, then you may consider engaging in a practice of regularly assisting organizational allies, even if your organization gets no immediate benefit from it. Your organization could have a monthly practice of giving another organization 5 hours of volunteer time, helping them build a skill around something that your organization has expertise or competency in.

2. Practice lays bare all of our resistances to change. It is like a backdrop, a canvas against which all of our anxieties, fears, anger, denial are vividly painted for us to see, if we choose to see them. Each time we do the practice, even if it is a practice we relish, we will find that one way or another some part of our “selves” will want to resist it – to find some means of escape and relief from the practice. This desire for escape may be subtle or it may be pronounced. It can become particularly noticeable once the practice moves past the initial novelty stage. The desire to escape the practice shows up in a variety of ways, tailored specifically to our unique persona and hot-button triggers. It can show up as boredom, anger, frustration, discomfort, fear, daydreaming, exhaustion, sleepiness, fake joy (trying to make the best of it), and many others depending on the situation and your personality. And the bonus is if the practice is sufficiently frequent and consistent, this glorious picture of our resistances, or variations of them, gets painted with startling regularity. They will show up again and again – they are actually there for us to see them all the time if we are present and attentive. You can track these reactions and use them to help you see the default practices you have been in. This can inform what new practices you can engage to shift toward what and who you want to be.

You can expect that you will have a complex relationship to new practices. Sometimes you will likely love them and other times hate them. You are purposefully changing yourself, changing your practices, and this involves being uncomfortable. It can feel weird, not like you, or surface old emotions, memories, and struggles that you have tried to stay away from. All of this is normal in the change process. Throughout, we want to keep orienting back to what we are committed to. This mission, this commitment, needs to be emotionally, intellectually, spiritually and politically engaging enough to you to mobilize you through discomfort. Before you begin your new practice, remind yourself of your commitment – why it is that you are practicing. This then becomes a powerful aspect of your new practice and helps build a sense of conscious purpose toward positive change.

3. Practice begins to orient and shape how we show up in the world. Practice changes our minds, bodies, and moods towards the new way of being, because we are in fact momentarily living a new mental narrative, a new emotional orientation, and a new physical shape. Each time we do the practice we are spending that moment of time interrupting the old habits and living the new pattern that we seek to put into place. Literally, as we practice new movements, internal conversations (reminding yourself of what it is you are committed to) and new emotional states, we are creating new neuronal pathways in the brain and new muscle memory in the body.

So we want to ask ourselves, “What is it that I want to be practicing?”, and take this question seriously. If what you want for yourself is being present with yourself while you can also listen to others, then this is what you need to practice. If you need to deal with certain emotions, like anger or grief, more effectively, you need to practice facing these emotions and learning to feel them, instead of avoiding them. If you need to learn how to give direct and useful feedback, or ask for it for yourself, you’ll need to practice feeling but not acting out of your anxiety, and squaring up to direct conversations with care. Each practice can be built to have you be more present and more choice-full (less reactive). Each practice can be designed to help you learn and then embody a new skill, or way of being.

Once you know what you care about and have built a relevant practice for that, you want to practice regularly. You don’t want to wait for the heat of the moment to try to practice something new, you want to practice it like you would the piano or basketball, during practice time, daily.

Practice while being present. Pay attention to your mental narrative, emotional orientation, and physical organization of your body as you practice. Feel your sensations and your breath. Watch if you go into default reactions or old practices. If you notice you are there, come back, and make the correction. Move back into your new practice, even if you need to start over. Anytime we slip out of attention and the present moment, we run the risk of practicing unwanted behaviors, and we definitely practice being out of attention. On the other hand if we practice with consciousness and intention we hold the capability of fundamentally

changing how we show up in the world. In this case we are practicing what we seek to become and also un-practicing our old habits.

Practice is transformative because you begin to embody new ways of being. Through repetition what was a new practice becomes natural, easy, a new habit. You are in fact beginning to become somebody new. You will begin to see more clearly and quickly the choice that opens up in the moment about how you want to be. We are what we practice. Are we practicing what is most aligned with our vision for the world, for justice? This is where we want to continue to hone ourselves, organizations and work.

The Road to Transformation

Practice is the fundamental element of transformation. If we are going to practice towards transforming how we are, then we should strive for mastery at the level of change we seek. We may not get there and we may not even ultimately wish for mastery, but the intention of mastery can compel us to put our best effort forward in our practice, to be fully present and committed to what we are doing.

Transformation will always at some point engage our emotions and an emotional process. Nothing is wrong with this, it is just to be expected. As we change default practices and engage in new practices the internal terrain of who we are is changed. This often brings old avoided emotions to the surface to be dealt with and healed. Transformation can also bring new emotions that we may be unfamiliar with or not yet identify with, be it compassion, fear, full hearted commitment or having to confront the unknown. The more you notice your emotional landscape being changed, stirred, and engaged, the more you know you are on a road of transformation.

At the end of the day there are no shortcuts or magic tricks. Practice offers this brutally refreshing reality: practice only puts into place what you practice. If you don't put in sufficient practice, embodiment of the new way of being simply won't come. In fact the key to good practice is to accept this fact and to strip away all that is superfluous and distracting from the bare practice itself. Strip away the stories and narratives about how difficult and punishing the practice is. Strip away the stories about what a great person you are for walking the path of practice. Release the desire to be seen by others as magnificent or as a martyr. Simply practice with intention, and pay attention to what happens.

Each period of practice is a flagstone on the path to self mastery. Self mastery is a path that we are always on. In fact it can be said that we are never not on a path to mastery because we are always practicing. We may not be conscious of what we are practicing in any given moment, but the fact remains that we are constantly in a process of mastery. The long path to mastery has the power to transform who and how we are.