

Using Mindfulness Practice to Deal with Negative Urges

The basic trick in resisting negative urges is "divide and conquer." If we can analyze an urge into its components, it becomes simply the sum of a few basic phenomena, each of which is manageable. Conversely, when we fail to clearly detect these components individually, they crisscross and multiply with each other, producing the (illusory) impression of an overwhelming compulsion that we cannot resist, despite our best intentions.

What then are the natural elements of the urge process which we must learn to detect?

To begin with, part of the urge process usually involves thoughts...memories, plans, judgments, fantasies, wishes or beliefs. Thoughts may take the form of mental conversations with yourself. They may also take the form of mental pictures.

Another part of the urge process involves uncomfortable body sensations. Some of these body sensations are more physical in nature such as aches, tensions, pressures or general yuckiness. Some of these body sensations are more emotional in origin. You may experience the sensations of sadness, irritation, fear, hurt, impatience, agitation, etc. It is important to remember that all emotions consists of a mixture of thoughts and body sensations. The actual feeling part of the emotion is a pattern of sensation in your body. That sensation may be in just one location of your body, but often it fills your whole body.

Finally, the urge process typically involves remembering or fantasizing some pleasure associated with the behavior. The problem is that we only think about the pleasure and forget the far greater pain that the behavior causes. Furthermore, it is important to remember that when you are *thinking* about the pleasure associated with a behavior, you are also *feeling* that pleasure in your body. The body pleasure associated with memory and fantasy is sometimes quite subtle and hard to detect. But if you can detect it, you can observe it with detachment. Then it won't turn into a craving.

As you can see, the urge process is quite complex. It involves different types of sensations distributed in different spatial patterns throughout your body while at the same time images and conversations are taking place in your mind. Moreover, all this is constantly changing. The body sensations get strong then weaker. They shift in shape and location. The thoughts speed up then slow down, get louder then softer.

Basically the urge process is really nothing more than waves of thought in your mind and sensation in your body. These waves erupt and subside moment by moment. But the phrase "negative urge" implies something more. It implies a force that drives us to do a behavior which is not in the best interest of ourselves or our loved ones. So there are two key questions that must be answered. First, how do the thoughts and body sensations turn into this driving force? Second, what should we do about it?

Thoughts and body sensations become a driving force when we lock on to them instead of just letting them come and go. By being very attentive we can break the urge down into its component parts as the urge is happening. We can then watch those individual parts come and go with detachment. The urge then loses much of its force and eventually passes away. Of course it may return again later so we must be ready at all times during the day to detect, observe and stay with the urge until it weakens sufficiently to go on with our lives.

We cannot stop thoughts and feelings from arising, but we can develop the skill of observing them with clarity and detachment until they lose their grip on us. This skill grows with practice, like any other skill. Some people refer to this skill as "meditation." It is part of Step 11 in the 12 Steps.

Each eruption of the urge represents a new opportunity to strengthen this skill.

Now, let me briefly summarize what has been said. The urge process consists of a mixture of thoughts and body sensations. You can develop the skill of observing these without locking on to them. To do this you:

1. Divide the urge process into its parts.
2. Keep track of which parts are present in any given moment.
3. Observe the parts with gentle matter-of-factness, to the best of your ability.
4. Notice how the parts are impermanent, how they rise up and then fade away.

As your skill grows:

1. The thoughts and body sensations have less hold over you.
2. They pass more quickly and easily.

After long and frequent practice you may be able to experience the urge as just vibrating energy, like wind through the leaves of a tree or ripples on a still pond.