

by Phillip Moffitt

*If you want to make
lasting change in
your life, practice*

STARTING OVER



As a meditation teacher, I'm often solicited for advice by students who are seeking to change their lives in some way. They may want to alter an aspect of their behavior or their emotional life, or improve their relations with others. They almost always report that they have tried to change but fail time and again. I listen to each person's story and tailor my response appropriately, but the essence of my response is almost always the same: If you really want to change your life and are having difficulty doing so, then you need to master the practice of starting over. More than any mantra, resolution, therapy, or self-help technique, this is the practice that creates real, lasting results.



illustrations by Alex Nabaum

Living proof of the effectiveness of the practice of starting over is 38-year-old Taryn, a student in the Sunday evening mindfulness meditation class I teach. Taryn is a successful midlevel manager in a fast-growing company who makes a positive first impression, but her career has been stalled and she has a long history of personal angst. When Taryn first started attending class six years ago, she was close to losing her ability to function effectively both in her high-pressure job and outside it. She had difficulty trusting even her friends; she got into adversarial relationships at work with both peers and bosses; and her romantic involvements had been one disaster after another. A therapist might say that a hypercritical, affection-withholding, competitive mother and a nice but weak and unprotective father were the source of Taryn's problems. In fact, three different therapists had told her just that. But despite knowing why she had trust and communication issues, Taryn continued to suffer, which ultimately brought her to meditation.

One recent evening Taryn came up to me after class to discuss whether she should take on a new opportunity at work. Twice she had been passed over for a senior management position, so this represented a chance, at last, to dem-

onstrate her capabilities. It was also the perfect setup for all of Taryn's patterns of self-destruction to be activated because it involved a major, long-term project that meant creating new business practices across divisions in her company. A few years ago, I would have been reluctant to encourage Taryn to accept the promotion because she would most likely have failed. Now, however, she has a new base of personal power that has changed who she is in relationship to others at work and in her personal life. She now knows how to "just start over" whenever something goes wrong or when she is worried that something might go wrong.



why resolutions fail

I first heard the phrase "just start over" used to describe a spiritual practice some 20 years ago from the Buddhist meditation teacher and author Sharon Salzberg. During a mindfulness meditation retreat she taught at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, Sharon related her struggle with learning to meditate—how she would become lost, distracted, and discouraged and would constantly second-guess herself and her teachers. Gradually she learned to ignore the mental and emotional chatter and to

just start over by meditating on her breath as she had been instructed. “Just start over” became her mantra, which she now teaches to her students.

Each time Sharon repeated this phrase during the retreat, I was deeply inspired. I realized that she was pointing to a radical attitudinal shift in which you cease to be reactive when you are knocked off your intended path. Instead, when you discover that you have lost your focus, you just begin again without getting caught up in emotional stories about why you can't achieve your goal, or judgments about how unworthy you are or why the change you seek is impossible. With Sharon as my inspiration, I set about developing “just start over” into a daily life practice.

As you know if you've ever tried to meditate, the mind is constantly being pulled away from its object of concentration by bodily sensations and mental activity, causing you to lose awareness of the present moment. In this same way, when strong feelings arise during your daily life, you get swept up in the story they create. You lose the awareness that gives you peace of mind in the face of difficulty and that enables you to respond skillfully to events.

For instance, let's say you are anxious at work or prone to argue with your significant other, and your goal is to stop being this way. Usually after you make a resolution to change, something throws you off track, and the undesired behavior returns in full force. Once again you are completely lost in your anxiety at

continued on page 140

practice, practice, practice!

Starting over is a powerful practice, but don't be surprised if you can't sustain your initial commitment to it. Fortunately, there are three simple things you can do to build this capacity in a relatively short period of time.

1 First, establish a motivation to practice starting over by observing what happens when you waste time feeling discouraged, escaping, or indulging your restless mind. In the week ahead, notice how many times you get knocked off balance when something goes wrong at work or in your personal relationships. Don't judge yourself for getting lost. Just be mindful that this is what is happening to you. If anything, be compassionate with yourself. After all, getting caught in your reactive mind is painful. Once you're able to acknowledge how much emotional energy and time you waste, you start to realize that the starting-over practice matters and that it is worth the effort it requires. You will have the aspiration, motivation, and conviction to persevere. As F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote, “Vitality shows in not only the ability to persist but the ability to start over.”

2 Second, select a couple of aspects of your daily life that you want to change and begin to practice starting over. Maybe you'll choose a person you find difficult to interact with, or a particular task at work, or perhaps some behavior related to diet or speech. When you discover that you have gotten lost, say to yourself, “Yes, I just got lost, *and* now I'll just start over.” “And” practice empowers you to remember your intentions and goals, and it helps you move through negative feelings and return to the present moment. Try practicing this way for three months in these two areas, while maintaining mindfulness of all the times you don't start over in the other areas of your life. You will start to notice a difference. Seeing this for yourself creates more faith and, therefore, still more motivation. Then, when you feel ready, add yet another aspect of your life to your starting-over practice. Be prepared for disappointments and for forgetting your commitment; after all, you are teaching your mind a completely new automatic response.

3 Finally, let meditation be your laboratory for training your mind to think and respond in this new way. Meditation is a safe environment for developing the capacity for starting over because it involves only you; nobody knows when you're starting over. Plus, it builds your ability to stay concentrated and focused, so you are less likely to be thrown off center in daily life. It also cultivates equanimity and calmness, qualities that help you simply return to your intention whenever you need to start over. Practicing starting over in meditation is very simple: No matter how many times your mind wanders, simply go back to noticing your breath (or whatever you choose for your object of concentration), without making any judgments. Don't be interested in how well you're staying with your breath. Be interested in how well you start over. P.M.

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work or you are fighting with your beloved. All the old stories flood your mind, along with self-judgment, discouragement, and frustration. You try again and again, but you never gain traction and you come to believe you cannot change.

Often the problem is that you don't yet know how to be resolute without being rigid in your expectations. You haven't learned how to sail the waves of the ocean of your mind or successfully navigate those emotionally charged or intractable parts of yourself that cause the inner storms in your daily life. You have the notion that you must know why you have a problem and that you must get rid of it before you can act in a more self-empowering manner. Starting-over practice takes a different approach. It switches your focus away from dwelling on those characteristics that limit you and redirects it toward recognizing the strengths from which you can realize your potential.

This shift in focus is attitudinal: You simply do what you care about as well as you can. This is a humble attitude, but it is exactly what's needed for you to sustain your resolution. In so doing, you free yourself from your judging mind that thinks it can control

results and creates the grandiose expectation that you can do more than you can do in the present moment. You become a more effective person by simply learning to use your time and energy to do what you can do *right now*.

The Buddha emphasized the need to focus on the present moment and respond appropriately according to one's values, and he rejected speculation for its own sake. In responding to a monk who demanded to know whether the world was eternal and whether an enlightened person reincarnates, the Buddha used the analogy of a man who has been shot with an arrow. If, before extracting the arrow and tending to his wound, the man insists on knowing the name, family, village, and race of the archer, and what the arrow is made of, how effective is he in dealing with his injury? What needs immediate atten-

tion is the situation created by the arrow. Starting-over practice is like this—you attend as best you can to the immediate situation that is challenging you.

COMMIT TO CHANGE

You may find it hard to believe that you haven't already developed skill at starting over. Although you may understand the concept (and no doubt you have "started over" thousands of times in your life), that doesn't mean you've brought mindfulness and intention to it so that it has become a practice. Unless you have, you will be thrown off balance by life's inevitable rough waters as you navigate to transform yourself.

If you believe you are already skilled in starting over, try keeping your mind on your breath for 30 minutes. Observe whether you are able to simply come back to it without any comment or other distraction and really give it your full attention, not once or twice, but repeatedly for the entire 30 minutes. Almost no one can do this without training, and what this exercise reveals is that your mind is

Starting-over practice switches your focus away from your limits and redirects it toward your strengths.

stubbornly independent and that your ego lacks a "just start over" attitude.

Initially, I taught starting over as a daily life practice only on a one-on-one basis to students attending meditation retreats. A silent retreat, with its long hours of sitting in meditation, is the ideal situation for practicing starting over and for realizing that the mind can be retrained. After seeing how powerful a tool it was for helping people transform, I began recommending the practice to students in my weekly meditation class.

For one 45-year-old man whose chronic health problem would manifest suddenly and unexpectedly, starting over involved responding to whatever the conditions of his life were each day. After years of being rendered helpless by his disease and losing his zest for life, he discovered that he could have a rich inner and outer life by

STARTING OVER


focusing on “right now,” despite the turbulence of his circumstances.

Another student, a bright 42-year-old woman whose career had been derailed because of a series of traumatic emotional challenges and who felt shut off from peers at work, learned how to regroup several times each day by acknowledging her feelings of alienation and inadequacy and simply starting over in that moment. She found that if she spent any time indulging in the stories generated by her feelings, they only got worse. I advised her to make immediate contact with others in the office whenever she felt alienated and to do it as a practice, without caring how she felt doing it. And when she started feeling incompetent, I suggested that she select some small task and do it at once. Within a year of practicing starting over, she reported that although she still experienced feelings of alienation and inadequacy, they no longer controlled her life.

Similarly, a 29-year-old woman who had a history of anorexia in her youth and still suffered from feeling that she was too big, learned that she could stop a chain of destructive eating behaviors by noticing when certain feelings of anxiety and unspecified dread arose. Through a starting-over practice, she came to realize that whenever those feelings arose, it meant she had been “shot by the arrow” and that it was time to practice mindfulness and compassion toward herself and to quit all self-criticism. She learned that if she just started over by moving her attention to any of a series of tasks she found stimulating, then the feelings would usually not dominate and she would not spiral out of control. Her situation was particularly difficult because she was convinced she could never change unless she understood why she was the way she was. It was only because she lacked alternatives that she finally responded to my suggestion that she make starting over a practice.

SHIFT YOUR FOCUS

So just how do you practice starting over? You shift your attention away from controlling the outcome, and you abandon your usual reactions to getting off track (criticizing, judging, complaining, and



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lamenting). You don't deny your thoughts and feelings, and you don't try to make them go away. Instead, you acknowledge them without making any judgments about them but with compassion for how difficult this moment is.

You then follow the acknowledgment with what I call “and” practice, in which you say to yourself, “Yes, I just got lost, *and* now I'll just start over.” For example, “I feel alienated and think my peers don't like me, *and* I am going to go speak to that guy over there who I usually get along with.” Or, “My body feels weak and sickly right now, *and* I am going to focus on making my child some tea, which at this moment is all I have sufficient energy to do.” You acknowledge your thoughts and feelings, but then you move on through the “and” practice to return to the present moment. You don't forget your goal of making a change, but the focus is on changing the moment, over and over again.

Naturally, you periodically check in with yourself to see if the way you are going about seeking change is working or whether you should try something different. Likewise, you occasionally ask yourself whether you still care about the goal or whether it has changed in some way. But mostly you just persevere. You develop the strength to start over because you're committed to *moving toward* your goal, not to being there.

This is why I call it an attitudinal shift. Your goals matter because they give direction to your life, but your actual life happens in the endless stream of moments that occur between now and when, if ever, you reach your goal. Because your focus is on the journey and not the goal, you find the willpower and the inspiration to start over. When you're able to relate to life just as it is, rather than insisting that it be the way you would have it, you stand a far better chance of affecting how things are, because you're not caught in fear or desire.

PRACTICE PATIENCE

Ironically, the practice of starting over is a more effective way to achieve your goal than constantly fixating on it. That's because most of us are not very good at simply delivering results. For instance, if

you are trying to lose weight, curb your temper, or stop being a workaholic, you know what to do to stop the undesirable behavior, but you don't. Discouragement from your past and imaginings about how bad the future will be drain your energy and cause you to fail. When you embrace starting over as a practice, you focus instead on what you are doing right now and what you need to do or are failing to do. Thus, if you discover you are overeating in this moment, you simply stop eating. If you have agreed to take on yet another work project, you reverse yourself as soon as it dawns on you that it is too much. If you sense that you're losing your temper, you just stop. No drama; you just get right back on your path and start over.

It sounds really easy, doesn't it? But it's ever so hard to do. Starting over requires patience and determination. In Buddhism, those qualities are considered *paramitas*, essential characteristics for spiritual growth. Patience allows you to tolerate the times you fail and the times you then forget to just start over. Determination brings into play the essential energy for directing your attention back to what needs to be done right now. Both are supported by lovingkindness toward yourself, combined with a recognition of how hard it is to stay the course when making change.

GET BACK ON TRACK

For Taryn, who reported one defeat after another, developing compassion for herself was essential before she could begin to practice starting over. When she got into yet another disagreement at work, or had a lousy date, or couldn't speak openly with a friend, she would get so angry with herself that she would shut down. Those around her would be bewildered by her sudden, complete withdrawals.

Through compassion meditation, Taryn learned to tolerate her feelings so that she could stay present with them, and then she was able to start redirecting her attention to just starting over. Because she was disciplined and highly motivated, she became quite effective at starting over once she got a feel for it. She has even learned to laugh at herself when she feels what she calls a "hindrance attack" coming on. In

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STARTING OVER

Buddhism, difficult mental states of greed, aversion, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt are referred to as hindrances. If you fail to be mindful of a hindrance, then you can be caught by it; if you recognize it, then you have options—you can just start over.

In helping Taryn decide whether to take the promotion, I asked her if she wanted it as an end in itself. “What do you mean?” she asked. “How could I not? It is such an opportunity!” I told her that she must be careful not to fall into the trap of making the decision based on a future that may or may not come to fruition. “Does this job seem as though it would be fulfilling even if it leads nowhere?” I asked. She paused, then her face lit up. “Yes, it is the perfect chance for me to express myself,” she said. “This job reflects my values.” She paused again. “You don’t need to tell me: I know it will be a challenge. And I know I will get off course, a lot, but now I know how to start over,” she said with a laugh. She had her answer. As it turns out, Taryn has been able to rise to the challenge and do a terrific job, though she certainly has had to start over again and again. Slowly but surely, Taryn has learned to move beyond her limitations and to live out her potential as best she is able.

What I told Taryn all those years ago when she first came—totally distraught—to meditation class, applies as much to you. If you wish to change some part of your life and are having a difficult time doing so, take these values to heart: Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you cannot change; vigorously fight those inner impulses to distract yourself when difficulty arises; and don’t allow that critical voice in your own head, the one that constantly tries to tell you there is no possibility of improvement, to rule your life.

And when you discover that you have lost track of one of these heart values, just start over. ■

Phillip Moffitt teaches vipassana meditation and mindful movement yoga at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California, and other meditation centers throughout the United States and Canada. For information about his teaching schedule, visit www.marinsangha.org.

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