



## Working with Subtle Habits

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### The Premise: Start with Serving the Client

A coach brings many needs to the coaching relationship. The need to make a living, the desire to help, the need for approval or validation of an identity as a skilled coach; these are just a few. They are, of course, legitimate. However, they often get in the way of serving our clients, especially when we are unaware of them.

It is only through recognizing, acknowledging and temporarily placing these needs in the background that we are able to be as effective as we must be in supporting our clients. Service is the aspect of coaching that holds the most promise for our own rigorous self development. I am suggesting that this commitment drives the on-going personal work that is required of us to coach well. Serving selflessly means continually recognizing and letting go of the “self” that arises as we coach.

Ultimately, this means that we seek to support our clients in moving beyond needing our services. If we are subtly or unconsciously creating dependency, we are not truly serving their needs; we are taking care of our own. Part of our job is to make what we do explicit, to take the magic out of it so that the client learns to coach herself. In this way, she becomes self-generating.

The foundation of a coaching relationship is a win/win agreement that also serves the needs of the coach. Coaching is not about self-sacrifice and martyrdom. At the same time, once this framework is established, we seek to “place ourselves in service” to the client’s outcomes and learning. Inevitably, this commitment will challenge us to be selfless, to serve, to set our own needs aside in the process of supporting the development of the other.

This short essay is intended to provide a conceptual framework for those who take on the challenge of coaching mindfully, of using our coaching as an invitation into our own development work.

### Presence and Mindfulness

The internal experience of mindfulness is at the core of coaching. Mindfulness means being fully attentive and present with the client, and free of our own desires and attachments. It means being fully appreciative of our clients, and seeing them as whole. With mindfulness, we can see and serve the client fully. Without mindfulness, our own conditioning will show up as distractibility, overactive thinking, an urge to say something, an anxiety or confusion, a judgment, or a strong opinion about what the client “should” do.

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As we cultivate mindfulness, we become more and more able to recognize these as products of our own conditioning. As we notice them arising, we set them aside and come back to the present and to our client.

### **Habit Nature**

Many things get in the way of our efforts to be fully present. Generally, we can attribute these impediments to our “conditioning,” our unique habits that have become established over a lifetime to enable us to survive, to feel good about ourselves, and to have a firmly established identity in the world. These habits evolved over our entire lives. They are deeply wired in us; they’re embedded in our personalities and in our nervous systems. Our unique constellation of habits is what we call personality.

In essence, mental habits help us establish who we are. It is through our own unique patterns of thought and behavior that we project our individual personality into the world, and shape the world’s response to us in ways that validate our sense of security and self-worth. However, habits, especially when tightly held, also give our personality a certain forcefulness and rigidity which can make it more difficult to be present with our clients.

Habits are neither inherently positive nor negative. They do, however, have consequences for us and for our clients. Befriending our habits means becoming intimately familiar with them, seeing how they serve us and how they get in the way of our service to others, and learning to recognize them as they arise in order to have choices. A few examples of these habits include:

- projecting on our clients out of our own experience,
- seeking validation of our own identity or competency,
- being “asleep at the wheel,” lulled by routine,
- holding a rigid philosophical position that precludes another’s truth,
- judging ourselves or others,
- emotional triggers,
- behaviors in which we engage to avoid embarrassment or threat,
- distractibility and obsessive thought patterns that keep us from being present,
- “expert mind,” or excessive reliance on what we already know.

As you can see, these habits may well serve our own comfort and our sense of competence and well-being. They are also our single greatest impediment to service and to presence. The aspects of our personality that we’re not aware of are the very things that trip us up in coaching and in life.

The trick is to playfully investigate what makes us tick, to be relentlessly curious about our own natures. When we do this, when we become more competent at observing ourselves in



action, then our habits begin to begin to loosen their grip on us. We can still choose to follow a habit if it serves us and our client. But at least we see what is happening and make a conscious choice about it, rather than being “hijacked” by a default process of which we’re unaware.

Choicefulness, and presence, is what we’re after here. Let’s take a look at some distinctions that will support our ability to observe ourselves more precisely, and then explore how self-observation can help us cultivate the necessary awareness.

### **Attachment and Aversion**

Most habits are driven by attachments (experienced as a pull or desire for something, e.g. recognition, compensation, intimacy, spiritual connection, addictions, affirmation of our identities, etc.) or by aversions (experienced as a resistance or avoidance in relation to something, e.g., tension in a relationship, a feeling of incompetence, emotional or physical pain, lack, ineffectiveness, etc.) These attachments and aversions drive our behaviors... we move, consciously or unconsciously, in pursuit of our desires and attachments. We also act, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid the objects of our aversions.

The competency here is to begin to see the ways in which our attachments and aversions “pull” at us, sometimes in very subtle ways of which we’re not even aware. Yet, they can hijack our best intentions, and keep us from being at our best.

### **The Skandhas**

Buddhism teaches that all experience is comprised of five *skandhas* (Sanskrit; loosely translated as “aggregates.”) Any experience can be broken down into these components; the distinctions between them are very helpful in observing ourselves more clearly and objectively.

The first *skandha* is form. Form encompasses our bodies, our sense organs, and all the physical aspects of who we are. Second come feelings, emotions, and sensations. When form comes in contact with something, a sensation arises. If you look closely, emotions show up as body sensations as well. The third *skandha* encompasses perceptions and beliefs. Here, the feelings that arise when form encounters sensations are interpreted by the discriminating mind, thus producing judgments, names for things, and concepts about what it is that is being sensed. Fourth come mental formations. Our usual experience of mental formations is thoughts, images, and self-talk or mental chatter. Mental formations also include the intention and will which determine our activities and ultimately the result of these activities.

The fifth *skandha* is consciousness itself. This encompasses both an awareness of the other four aggregates and the deep unconscious within each of us in which the seeds, or potential, for all the other aggregates reside. In Buddhist belief, when a seed is watered – by us or by someone or something outside ourselves – it will spring into consciousness, and for this reason we must strive to be increasingly aware of which seeds are being watered. Becoming attuned to this process means that we are able to take notice as the most subtle sensations, perceptions, and mental formations begin to arise. This finely tuned awareness (sort of a psychic early warning



system!) enables us to choose whether to put more energy into them or simply let them go as being unhelpful.

Any habitual behavior will manifest on all of these levels. The way to build your capacity for presence is by lightly and consistently maintaining a portion of your awareness (fifth *skandha*) on what is arising in the other four. In other words, pay attention not only to what you do and say, but also to the subtle internal experience of your mind, your emotions, and particularly your body. These are the *skandhas* at work, the multiple layers of our everyday experience.

### **Self-Observation**

The key to not being driven by our own habits is to begin to observe them. By stepping back, by cultivating a portion of our awareness as the “witness,” we become increasingly able to see these subtle levels of our habits as they begin to arise.

Be curious. Design a “self-observation” for yourself. Choose a habit or behavior that you suspect might arise in you as you coach, and that might get in the way of your coaching presence. Build a structure for yourself to observe it. This can be as simple as a few little questions to ask yourself after each coaching conversation.

By directing your attention, with hindsight, to the behavior or mental habit that you’re curious about, you become more able to observe it, and how it arises in the cognitive, emotional, and somatic aspects of your body/mind. Hindsight, of course, is 20/20 vision. However, with consistent observation over time, you’ll increasingly notice the habit or behavior as it arises. This real time awareness, in turn, leads to the capacity to choose whether or not to feed it or let it go in that situation.

Self-observation is not inherently about performance. Performance agendas often feel like pass/fail. Our own standards and self-judgments come in and we get more anxious and tight as we measure our performance against these standards. This, in fact, impedes the learning process and the profound physiological shifts that ultimately allow us to change deeply rooted behaviors.

Yet, self-observation often leads to change. At the least, it leads to the capacity to choose, and, when faced with an opportunity to choose between doing something less compassionate and effective or more compassionate and effective, most of us will choose the latter. What drives this process is curiosity, observation, acceptance. Yet, mysteriously, it leads to increased capacity and effectiveness.

Self-acceptance, dispassionate witnessing of ourselves on a moment-by-moment basis, and the broad awareness of the choices that are before us in each of these moments leads naturally and inevitably towards a greater presence and an expanded ability to serve.



This article was first presented at the 2005 ICF International Conference in San Jose, CA. For more information on working with habits of mind, attachments and aversions, and self-observation, please see Doug Silsbee's 2004 book, *The Mindful Coach: Seven Roles for Helping People Grow*, from Ivy River Press.

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