

Investigating Compulsive Reactions

When we act upon an urgent compulsion to have our way, we harmfully impose our will upon others or to influence a situation. Overcoming a compulsive reaction requires us not to act on the urge to harm others for self-benefit. When first aware of an entanglement with a compulsive reaction, we pause, the all-important pause. Within the pause, we turn to investigate our intentions *before* we act.

Rashly acting on a compulsion prevents the sacred ways to unfold. A longing for what we want and the belief that we know better than others fuel our willingness to force a desired outcome. Underlying the longing and superiority, we find confusion and ignorance.

The compulsive feelings of urgency override our cognitive dissonance, the anxious feelings we have when our actions do not align with our values.¹ Anxiety warns us that we do not know what to do as we feel torn between acting on our urgent willingness to harm and not doing what the reaction wants us to do to preserve adherence to our values.

We strongly attune ourselves to this emotional warning of a cognitive dissonance. An inability to stay with the breath during meditation also signals an active compulsive reaction as a reaction strongly focuses our attention on the urgency to act.

When investigating whether to act upon our compulsiveness, we hold the compulsion within a gentle presence. In meditation, keep the compulsion alive within presence without acting upon it. Hold on to the compulsive energy as it rebounds inward to find its source – the center of pure energy, our awareness of the sacred. Finding that source within a compulsion dissipates the compulsion. We stay with that center of pure energy until we have calmed ourselves to avoid reenergizing the compulsion.

To diminish our vulnerability to compulsive reactions, we can investigate the nature of the compulsive reaction when we feel calm. Some questions we might ask ourselves include:

- What did the compulsion want you to do?
- What triggered it?
- Can you identify the longing of the reaction?
- What lies underneath that longing?
- How could you meet that deeper longing in valued ways?

We may find that our willingness to harm hijacked a longing that we did not know how to meet in valued ways. Our self-centeredness found a way to immediately act upon that longing based on earlier behaviors that worked in the past for us to have our way. By the time we answer these and other questions about our urge to act, we have likely defused the urgency.

¹ **Common Values of furthering life on Earth (work in progress):** loving awareness of the sacred and the sacredness of all life, reverent contentment with the arising experience, surrendering to the sacred knowing how to further life on Earth, compassion, harmoniously interacting with others by knowing the sacred equality and unity of life, equitable sharing of the Earth commons, acting in valued ways that further life on Earth, and restoring and renewing our balance with Earth, life, and the sacred. By living in these ways, we deepen our loving awareness of the sacred and sacredness of all life.

A transformative practice to dismantle compulsive reactions calls on us to renounce doing whatever specific action we felt compelled to do. Renunciation takes the what the compulsive urge wants us to do off the table for further consideration. It opens us to consider other options that have greater alignment with our values.

Compulsivity arises out of ignorance and confusion about how to respond to a longing. The reaction would impose our will on others to make the situation more to our liking. The wise do not act when they do not know what to do as that only makes the situation more difficult and confusing. In a situation that triggers compulsiveness, nonaction allows the situation to unfold on its own, which includes our own unfolding. With the support of the path, we come to know how to respond in ways that further all.

Knowing how to derail impulsivity before it overpowers our purpose to further life on Earth gives us a powerful tool to diminish the hold our willingness to harm others has over us. The more we use this practice, the sooner we can release ourselves from its thrall. Each time we use this practice, we diminish the strength of the emotional wave.

Confusion and ignorance lie at the bottom of our compulsive willingness to impose our will upon others and the situation. Once we accept the depths of our not knowing, we open to the sacred. Once we acknowledge that we do not know what to do, we allow sacredness to unfold within our lives. The wise do not let external circumstances trigger them to act. Instead, the wise act to bring into life the sacred ways.

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