



June 2011- Practical Life Skills to integrate with your regular yoga practice

Decision-making is the reasoning process we use to select a course of action from among any number of possibilities that present themselves mentally or otherwise. Making a decision either can involve a period of deliberation or seemingly none at all. Friends, family and others, sometimes even complete strangers, will advise us to stop and think before making a decision and never do the first thing that comes into our heads. Contrast that with wisdom passed down through the ages recommending we go with our instincts or that we listen to our hearts.

"Once you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen." –Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1803-1882.

It turns out that our emotions are much more important in the decision-making process than previously thought. The Institute of HeartMath has conducted more than 16 years of research and has compiled substantial data about the role of emotions and the brain in decision-making. Quite often the choices we regret are the products of unmanaged emotions, but when we allow calm and intuitive heart-based feelings to guide us the outcomes of our decisions are far more favourable.

When the Heart Decides

Researchers with HeartMath and other organisations believe intuitive feelings emanate from the heart. They have found evidence showing the human heart has an intuitive intelligence greater than science and medicine have historically believed. Even without our realising it, the heart guides us in much of what we do, but often we allow our brains or our unmanaged emotions to take the lead role in our decision-making and later regret our choices. We now know the heart has a powerful electromagnetic field and complex nervous system and circuitry that generate up to an estimated 60 times the electrical amplitude of the brain. The electromagnetic signal our heart rhythms produce can actually be measured in the brain waves of people around us. We also know our heart-rhythm patterns say a lot about our emotional balance and the stress we are experiencing: The calmer we are the more regular our heart-rhythm patterns are, and the more stress we feel the more irregular the patterns are. Researchers at HeartMath and elsewhere have concluded the heart possesses its own organised intelligence network that enables it to act independently, learn, remember and produce feelings. Until recently it was believed only the brain was capable of these functions. Through years of studies involving thousands of people, researchers at HeartMath and elsewhere have shown when we intentionally experience positive feelings such as care and appreciation we can improve our heart-rhythm patterns. That means reduced stress, getting sick less frequently, thinking more clearly, even living longer. So go ahead, let your heart decide perhaps use one of the Heart Math techniques herewith.

Of course the ancient texts of yoga have documented similar knowledge dating back thousands of years. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (3:34) it says " The Atma is realised by reflection at the heart centre (anahata chakra) In this context one can create a mental image at this centre, chant a mantra , continually repeat an enquiry about a certain aspect of existence (as in jnana yoga) and many other practices . This centre is so powerful for it is the seat of the emotions. These emotions when purified and one- pointed are transformed into devotion , one starts to transcend individual identification and this is the reason why the *jiva* (individual embodiment of consciousness) is said to reside at anahata.

The Five Steps of "Freeze-Frame"

1. Recognize the stressful feeling and freeze-frame it. Take a time out.
2. Make a sincere effort to shift your focus away from the racing mind or disturbed emotions to the area around your heart. Pretend you're breathing through your heart to help focus your energy in this area. Keep your focus there for 10 seconds or more.
3. Recall a positive, fun feeling or time you've had in life and attempt to re-experience it.
4. Using your intuition, common sense and sincerity, ask your heart, "What would be a more efficient response to the situation, one that will minimise future stress?"
5. Listen to what your heart says in answer to your question. It's an effective way to put your reactive mind and emotions in check and an in-house source of common-sense solutions.

"Heart Lock-In" Technique Using Music

1. Find a comfortable spot to sit and relax and close your eyes. Now just relax and breathe deeply.
2. Next, focus your energies in the heart area.
3. Send a sincere feeling of love or appreciation to yourself and others. Just relax in the heart until the music stops.

Both of these techniques are from HeartMath, "From Chaos to Coherence"

The "Cut-Thru" Technique The Cut-Thru technique is designed to address the negative "thought loops," self-perceptions and set emotional responses that are frequently triggered by novel situations. Thus, individuals are taught to alter their automatic responses to stress that are generated by old emotional programs involving hostility, guilt and anxiety. They are taught to generate new, more appropriate responses through the induction of a positive emotional state. This is achieved by the practice of a number of specific steps that help reorient perception of past, present and future stressors and reduce or eliminate unproductive mental and emotional responses.

1. Step 1: Individuals take an "inner weather report" and identify their current emotional state. If their current emotional state involves worry, anxiety, or distress ("rain"), then individuals are shown how to shift their mood and choose a more positive perspective ("sunshine").
2. Step 2: Individuals focus attention in the area of the heart, holding any remaining uncomfortable feelings in that area. This aims to prevent any mental attempts to analyze the feelings of discomfort, worry, anxiety, or guilt which would lead to a re-entry into the negative thought loop. If unpleasant feelings still remain, individuals are instructed to "stir" or "blend" them in with the positive feelings generated in Step 1 while maintaining their focus of attention in the area around the heart. While it is difficult to develop scientific descriptions for subjective experiences, many individuals report that they perceive a mixing or stirring sensation in the area of the heart during the practice of this step. One physiological correlate commonly observed during this step is the appearance of a sinusoidal heart rate variability pattern .
3. Step 3: Individuals consciously generate a feeling of inner peace and calm. This state promotes increased coherence in a number of physiological systems and facilitates a clearer perspective on the situation that led to the emotional turmoil.
4. Step 4: Once individuals are in a state of increased physiological and emotional coherence, they go back in time to re-experience the original feeling of care they had about the situation or person and examine how the negative emotional state developed. The purpose of this step is to understand the difference between care and caring too much, or "overcare" (Childre, 1996), which is associated with emotions such as anxiety, worry, and guilt. This step helps the person discriminate the fine line between a balanced, healthy caring perspective and the dysfunctional worrying, over-attachment, and disappointment that characterises "overcare." It has been suggested that "overcare" underlies many well-recognized negative emotional states, such as anxiety, guilt, and hopelessness (Childre, 1996). Such states, if left unchecked, can lead to exhaustion and burnout.
5. Step 5: Having generated feelings of positivity, calm, and understanding, individuals determine what a more efficient response or solution to the situation would be and enact it.

-- from "The Impact of a New Emotional Self-Management Program on Stress, Emotions, Heart Rate Variability, DHEA and Cortisol", by HeartMath staff: Rollin McCraty et al