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## Context to the nugget

A lot of our habits are often sub-conscious. How do we ensure that we don't become a slave of our habits but really perform our habits with awareness? In one of my earlier conversations, Devdutt Pattanaik contrasted the Indian emphasis on awareness with the western emphasis on habits. James speaks about the Japanese system of pointing and calling and uses that example to talk about how we can perform our habits with awareness.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And just talking about habits and awareness we often hear people talk about the downsides of habit because it indicates some sort of conditioning, where we lose control over our reactions but in the book you talk about building habits with awareness and you refer to the pointing and calling system that the Japanese use in the train stations. I found that absolutely fascinating and thought provoking. So, talk to us about this phenomenon and the implication for us in the way we think about cultivating habits.

James Clear (JC): Well, so the challenge and I'll get to the story about the Japanese in a moment, the challenge is that in the beginning a habit is... so the technical definition of a habit is a behaviour that has been repeated enough times to be more or less automatic. So, things that you can do without thinking, brushing your teeth, tying your shoes etc. but in the beginning when you are building a new habit it does not occupy that automatic space; it's a very effortful conscious thing. So, the problem is that because it's not our automatic response that moment of action often passes us by and that's for building a good habit. For changing our current habits, however, they do occupy that automatic space, there is something that we do without even thinking about a lot of the time and because they are so automatic we often perform them without even realizing we are done with the action before we even notice that we did that. So, there is this method which is called pointing and calling that I think helps raise our level of awareness about our current habits and once we become aware of our habits then we can change them, and then we can start to more meaningfully adjust them. So, the story, and I actually saw this when I went to Tokyo, if you walk around Tokyo, go to a train station what you will see is this interesting pattern where when the train pulls into the station the conductor will point at like a signal and say the signal is green or the point of the speedometer and say the speedometer is 30 km an hour. Outside on the platform other employees are doing similar things, they are pointing up and down the platform and they'll say the platform is clear. The cleaning staff even as they walk on to the train in between sessions to clean it off, takes the trash out and so on, they'll point at each car and say the car is clean or the trash is clear and things like that. The purpose of this is that for anybody who does the same kind of job over and over again like a train conductor pulling into the station it becomes kind of automatic, it becomes habitual. So, it's very easy to overlook your mistakes. So, by pointing and calling by literally physically pointing and saying

out loud what you are doing you are raising the level of awareness of the action. People don't use the phrase pointing and calling but you can see them do this kind of thing all the time in daily life. So, for example, I have friend who... she'll leave the garage door up accidentally some times, and so now every time she pulls out of her garage she points at the door and says garage door is down or when you are getting ready to go on a trip or leave your house for a few days you might double check everything and say I have my keys, I have my glasses, I have my wallet and you are like touching them in your pockets while you are doing that. So those are all examples of pointing and calling to try to double check, to raise the awareness, to be more aware of what you are doing and if you want you can actually use that same strategy when you are trying to build or break habits, So, for example, if you want to stop snacking when reach into the cupboard to get out a cookie or go to the pantry to get out a snack you could say, I am about to eat this cookie and I don't want to because I am trying to stop snacking and just the act of saying that out loud before you do it might be enough to prevent you from it. It sounds silly, it sounds a little like over the top to do it but it can be a very useful strategy early on so that you become more aware of your behaviour.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I should give you a context of where this question came from. Earlier in this podcast series, I was speaking with Devdutt Pattanaik (DP) a thinker who draws lessons from Mythology and talks about its application in daily life and in business. I happened to ask him about how we could build habits and what can we learn from Mythology. This is what he said

*DP: "This concepts of habits is a western idea, habit is a bad word in Indian philosophy, another word for habit is conditioned I am conditioned to do it, conditioning there's a pavlovian response, a god has a habit of salivating whenever the bell rings and the west has made it a virtue action without thought is habit repetitive action without thought is habit."*

*Indian thought is all about awareness, it's all about awareness, why are you doing what you are doing, why are you not doing what you are not doing, once you are aware then you realize what is of value to you and what is not value to you, so then breaking habits becomes difficult, there are good habits there are bad habits, habits are good or bad depending on context, so you will find people behaving, that's why I always find, when experts come to Indian they have tough time because their habits suddenly in the new context they don't know because oh my god there's no place to run, oh my god they don't have this thing because of their habit, you become like an animal and habit really goes to the lower part of your brain not the upper part of your brain and habit is about avoiding life, you do habits like it's an addiction, it's an autopilot and it's addictive, like I have habit of writing, but its addiction if I don't write I get withdrawal symptoms, which means I have trained my body to be in pain when I don't do it and to get pleasure when I do it and I am not aware of it I am just doing it mechanically, so we are an awareness culture, awareness culture not habit culture"*

DJ: It was interesting to hear James speak about the fact that baking a habit does not mean that we become conditioned to it. There is possibly an opportunity to perform the habit consciously rather than by default, thereby bringing it back to our levels of awareness. One of the many things that we could do well to learn from the Japanese!

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## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Devdutt Pattanaik that is referenced: [Building Habits vs. Enhancing Awareness](#).

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### James Clear - Nuggets

- 52.00 James Clear - The Full Conversation
- 52.01 James Clear - Journey to studying habits
- 52.02 James Clear - Building habits in the right areas
- 52.03 James Clear - Keeping the identity small
- 52.04 James Clear - Plateau of latent potential
- 52.05 James Clear - Systems versus Goals
- 52.06 James Clear - Building habits with awareness
- 52.07 James Clear - Environment and habits
- 52.08 James Clear - 2 minute rule - the gateway habit

### About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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