

Turning a Ship

Transforming our habits requires a moment of insight coupled with sustained effort.

By [Oren Jay Sofer](#)



Photo by Knut Troim

“Habit is the greatest tyrant,” an elder once told me. By the time we reach adulthood, we’re each carrying decades of habits. We’ve become accustomed to the routines and patterns that we’ve cobbled together to get by.

In spite of our best intentions, without an initial spark of change and a clear path to sustain it, we can remain paralysed by fear or despair, locked in by numbness, or strung out by our addiction to comfort. Whether for individual or collective change, the vehicle to transformation remains stalled if we are unable to break the spell of unhealthy habits.

When seeking change it's tempting to reach for the dramatic catharsis. We long to break the mould in a burst of sudden enlightenment. The reality is often far more humble and mundane. Things change slowly, over time, through incremental shifts. Human beings are complex, living systems where a small change can have far-reaching effects.

I liken the process of transforming habits to turning a cargo ship at sea. A large vessel with that much momentum can't make sharp turns. However, a one- or two-degree course correction of the rudder, if held steady, will take that ship in a very different direction over time.

This process of change often occurs in two stages. First, we gain an insight or new understanding into some aspect of ourselves or our world. This is the initial spark that sets the cycle of transformation going. Insight turns the angle of the ship's rudder.

Insight can feel great. Clarity dawns, and a weight has been lifted. Seeing things in a new light often comes with a rush of inspiration, a sense of freedom or spaciousness. (A lot of energy in both meditation and communication training is aimed at facilitating such shifts in awareness or understanding.)

Many practitioners make the mistake of stopping there. Insight is the *beginning* of transformation, not the end. It opens us to a new possibility, but as quickly as we change the angle of the rudder, the currents of our life come rushing in. The tyranny of habit exerts its force, pushing us back toward our old ways.

This is the second stage: holding the angle. It's what turns a moment of insight into lasting change. We work in a patient and steady way, applying effort to integrate this insight. Each day, we recollect the new perspective and practice this new way of being. Inevitably, we lose our grip and the rudder slips back into its old position. We course correct, readjust, and work to hold the angle. The second stage of change isn't glamorous or exciting, yet it's where real transformation takes place. It takes dedication, patience, and genuine interest to sustain. It's the meditator showing up at their mat each morning, come what may; the artisan diligently throwing another pot on the wheel.

Over time, the steadiness of that effort takes root, and a new way is forged. The old habit is replaced with a healthy one that supports well-being. The transition often occurs so slowly that we only notice it in retrospect. One day we turn around and realise something is different.



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