

LESS

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Discussions and meditations on
simple, contented living

Dan Peppiatt

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contented living

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With Gratitude

There are far too many people to thank than I have pages for. I owe a great gratitude to all those that have played some part in my own personal story, in truth there is no doubt that every encounter I have ever had, whether I perceived it positively or not, has left some impression.

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Foreword

For over half of my life I have been searching for an elusive something. The problem was, although I felt sure that there was undoubtedly 'something' missing, I didn't actually know what that elusive something was. It turns out that it can be very hard work indeed hunting for the unknown.

Let us not pretend that such high aspirations are some type of glamorous spiritual quest. At times, often for long periods, this has left me a very confused, grumpy, dejected and depressed individual to be around.

It took me the best part of three years to get this book together and a lifetime of reading, research, quiet sitting and general life experiences to formulate my ideas in a palatable way. 'Less' has been many other books, in many other incarnations that never felt quite right until I awoke one day with the entire structure spontaneously in my head.

It is unlikely that any of the ideas are purely my own. Like anyone who has a thirst for the big question, the only question - 'Who am I' - there have been so many influences on that journey that one forgets who said what after a time and essentially, it is irrelevant anyway. What I hope that I have achieved though, is to present some otherwise complicated concepts in a palatable format, taking what I believe to be the key elements of many teaching and philosophies and adding

elements of my own understanding in a simple layout with a common theme.

I had thought for a long time that I needed to write a single groundbreaking book. That it had to be a masterpiece, perfectly accessible for everyone regardless of their background or experience. Of course I'd fallen into my own trap, nothing is ever the perfect tool for everyone, no lesson is universally useful and nothing is ever perfect outside of the personal perspective of an individual.

So I'm just going to leave it as it is for now, typos, grammatical errors, my own little understanding of things, warts and all. For a one book sort of guy I have surprised myself as I already have ideas afoot for new ways of explaining similar concepts in a future book or books. Who knows, maybe they will be more accessible to those who just don't get 'Less' or maybe they won't!

But as I'm always telling everyone else, just share what you have to share, you have no idea of its significance or importance. People will take exactly what they need from whatever you deliver and if they feel that they take nothing at all, then that's just fine too; hopefully they will find what they need from another source, or even better still, from themselves.

I wish you all the best of luck on your own personal journey. Try not to take it too seriously or you will fall back into new traps of your own building. Enjoy each and every step as if it is

your last, after all, at some point it will be and if you don't see that as an inevitable fact, then you are going to be in for an almighty shock one day :)

Less

Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.

- Marie Curie

I had been hijacked. Hijacked so suddenly, unexpectedly and violently that I nearly crumbled and collapsed. My body knew it long before I was even conscious of what was happening. A feeling of total dread and panic so intense that it seemed as if an invisible hand was pushing me to the floor. My throat was tight, so tight that I could barely swallow. It seemed as if all of the energy had been drained from my body. My arms and legs were jelly. I felt sick to the pit of my stomach and my breath grew ever more rapid and shallow. I desperately wanted to curl up and go to sleep.....

Many of the people that I have worked with would call this a panic attack from their experience, but it was so familiar to me, from so early in my life that I had no label, no point of reference to distinguish it as that. The

symptoms were exactly as I remembered them, each and every morning that my mum would drop me at the gates as a school-phobic five year old. The only difference was that I was now aged 41 and sitting in an airport departures lounge.....

After all of the time I'd spent practising mindfulness and meditation, sharing it with others for goodness sake, this couldn't possibly be happening to me. What on Earth was the problem? I was supposed to be going on a surfing holiday, alone, for a week in the sun!

But that was the problem, I was flying to one of the Canary Islands, in the middle of the Atlantic and my irrational mind was suffering from a spontaneous and extreme episode of separation anxiety. No doubt its origin was that very first day of detachment from my mum all those years ago and all of the subsequent years, well into my teens when it never got any better. Now the sudden thought of being on an island, unable to get back to my family if they needed me was equally overwhelming.

Of course I'd worked away a lot, even abroad, but all of these places, in my mind I would have been able to 'walk' back from if need be - a 'fact' of twisted logic allowed me to manage the situation - geography couldn't separate me if I could theoretically walk home.

But on an island? What if some global catastrophe struck, if internet hackers, smoke from a volcanic eruption or some other unforeseen event downed all flights? I'd be stuck far from my wife Gemma and the kids on an island in the Atlantic. As a surfer I pretty much live in the sea, but I think it would be well beyond even my abilities to swim to the coast of Africa and then walk home. I was deeply, very deeply, indulging my racing mind by this stage, the stage

when illogical thoughts start to seem oddly rational.

I rang Gemma. It was still only 7am as I was booked on an early flight and after years of living with an anxious husband she guessed immediately what was going on.

‘I’m coming home’ I croaked down the phone, my voice so tight I could barely speak. ‘I just want to come home’

This made things worse as I had a strong flashback to muttering the exact same words as a frightened child, something I’d never remembered until that moment.

Thankfully, she calmly took over during the absence of any rationality on my part.

‘You’re not coming back home’ She told me with a bit more firmness than I’d hoped for. ‘You’ll be really unhappy with yourself if you do. Don’t run away from this, you have all of the tools to deal with it, you need to start thinking less right now.’

*That was enough for my real self, the self that isn’t the mind or the body, to take a step back and find a tiny moment of space from the panic that was smothering me like a heavy blanket. I remembered that I did have the tools I needed. All of the time spent practising, observing my mind over the years, it hadn’t been to **prevent** experiences like this from arising - to become some sort of emotionless robot - it had all been about how to find clarity and deal with them when they **did** arise.*

‘Calm your breathing, find a focus, move yourself away from your thoughts and call me back when you are feeling clearer. You know exactly how to sort

this out for yourself'

My eyes were watering, I was holding back a flood of tears, barely and I was very conscious that a room full of people were seated all around me.

Avoiding eye contact with anyone, just like I used to do with the other kids at school each time this happened, I wandered off to find a seat at a cafe that hadn't yet opened for the day. I began with the simple process of observing my body and my breath, not rejecting anything that was arising, simply watching the emotions, thoughts and sensations as they swept powerfully over me like waves and then letting them go as they passed away.

Seeing that they weren't as permanent and solid as they had felt, the mind gradually loosened its hold and within ten minutes I was at least consciously aware again. I could see that there was no need to indulge my thoughts or the unpleasant feelings in my body any more; I could allow them to simply be there by giving them less attention, not more. In fact, just being aware and present with them was so much simpler and effortless, there was nothing to resist, no struggle with a state that felt unwanted. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my shoulders - there was nothing whatsoever to do.

You see I've spent at least three quarters of my life running from these things, these sensations and thoughts, these fears, anxieties.

Like most of us, I've been running *after* the things that I thought would make me happy and running just as fast *from* the things that I imagined were making me unhappy.

Chasing the next holiday or travel experience so that I didn't have to be at home where I thought all my problems lived. Saving up for a more reliable

car or pair of trainers that I thought would be the answer to my current transport or girlfriend problems. Running from people and situations that I thought were making me miserable and in contrast seeing other people that I thought seemed happy in what they were doing and then completely changing my career to see how that happiness felt. Chasing new ways of thinking, philosophies and meditation techniques in the hope that they would ease the mental agitation that I was feeling. I'm not kidding! I wish I was because it was so exhausting!

The inescapable truth though was that it felt exactly the same, only in different shoes, in a different car, a different country, a different job, a different meditation practice, Even working with those same people that I thought were happy with their lot, I'd find that of course the reality was that they were just as discontented as me, just as unhappy, actually often more so.

It was all to do with chasing MORE. More experiences, more things... more happiness, more escape. Eventually I reasoned, I *would* get to the end of the rainbow, if only by sheer effort - I was obviously not trying hard enough. That must have been the problem.

So I worked more, leaving a career as a school teacher, starting my own business, working more hours and weekends, meditating more, later into the evening, reading ever more self-help and philosophy books. But the elusive pot of gold never materialised, even when I had everything that I imagined I needed to be happy - and to be fair, compared to a lot of people, I had pretty low standards so it wasn't too hard to get to that point.

There is a strong argument to be made, that most of the crises the modern world faces today can be traced back to a pervading drive that yearns for

‘more’. From our worsening environmental situation to plummeting mental health, it is this constant craving for both material and internal ‘more-ness’ that is unfulfillable and ultimately damaging.

We simply want to be *more happy*, we always have, and so rationally we imagine that ‘more’ will achieve that. When we eventually exhaust our search for more material things, we attempt to put ‘sticking plasters of more’ over the situations that seem to threaten us - more recycling, more angry voices, more meditation, more prescription and non-prescription drugs - but these do not address the root cause.

There needs to be a complete shift of mindset, *away* from the paradigm of ‘needing more to be happy’ in order to bring about real and lasting change; more will never fill the hole we fill inside....

B o t t o m l e s s

Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction.

— Erich Fromm

The problem with more, is that there's always more of it. No wonder it's so damn addictive, it's a bottomless pit that can't be filled. That's why capitalism has been such a lasting economic model - it can't fulfil itself because it constantly works towards growth. If it worked towards 'enough for everyone' it would have come to a balanced standstill long ago. We are only too aware of that right now in modern society: massive gaps between the 'haves and have-nots', natural resources dwindling, mountains of waste piling up, the oceans, animals and plants that we share our planet with, all suffering because we take *more than we need*, without restraint.

How much do you really need?

How much do you really waste?

How fast are you running towards more?

Are you *really* more happy because of it?

‘More’ certainly doesn’t seem to be a healthy or effective model for moving out of the *mental unhappiness* that almost all of us are trapped in either.

Whether this is an occasional or more long-term issue, I have met very few people that aren't afflicted by it in some way, shape or form. Even those that seem superficially happy always seem to suffer from the same underlying feeling that 'something is missing' from life. Spiralling rates of mental ill-health in the modern world, suicide, anxiety and depression among them, bear witness to this.

I imagine that everyone reading these words has either suffered themselves, or knows of friends and family that do. Moreover, many of us don't even realise that we *are* suffering. We are all so adept at keeping ourselves permanently busy and occupied - very effective distractions from having to be with or confront our internal pain. From obsessive behaviour around work, pastimes, religions or other preoccupations, through to casual drinking or drug taking - legal or otherwise - as a reward for 'getting through the day', I know far too many people who, even with an outward 'spiritual practise' can't sleep at night without a few glasses of wine, a prescribed antidepressant or a joint.

Something is very broken in our relationship with the world.

H e l p l e s s

You're here because you know something. What you know you can't explain, but you feel it. You've felt it your entire life, that there's something wrong with the world. You don't know what it is, but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad.

- Morpheus; The Matrix

Ironically with all of this 'moreness', we seem to have less and less connection to both ourselves and to those around us. A lot of this seeking more, actually revolves around a misplaced search for security. With most of us cut off from both a sense of who we really are *and* the security we would have found in the past as part of a tribe or extended family, we lack the tools and the confidence to deal with our own modern environment.

Are we simply craving more and more security from other sources because we feel helpless in so many ways?

As human animals - because that's what we are, animals in fancy dress – I would argue that we feel totally out of touch with the modern world. It may seem like a distant memory, but for almost all of our history we would have felt a strong connection to our natural environment, the plants and animals that shared it with us, the jungles, woodlands, savannahs - wherever we called 'home'. We would have known how to survive, what we needed, what the threats were and how to deal with those - either alone or together. But the world we inhabit now is *anything but* natural and we simply don't understand how to deal with it - our world may have changed drastically, but we haven't evolved in a way that has kept up with the pace of that change.

How do I deal with an angry email from my boss or customer? How do I deal with the fear of not being able to pay my rent this month?

There isn't a tribe that has my back, I can't throw a spear at an email or run from it to escape the stress that it is causing. Likewise, my only safe haven, the very roof over my head is at threat if I can't afford to pay for it. I can't just go and collect enough wood to build another shelter in the park, or rely on the tribe to help me find a home - if I'm lucky I might be able to crash on a friend's sofa for a time. We feel isolated and under threat from an invisible foe - in every way up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

So logically, in an unpredictable environment that we lack the skills or community power to cope with, we look for security *outside*.

If we can't gather a tribe maybe we can gather 'virtual security' - savings as a financial safety net, further education to assure future employment, pay rises, new cars, better training, bigger houses, pension schemes, insurance for unforeseen medical, life, pet, house, car and travel situations, endless

information in the palm of our hands - desperately seeking *more* material safety to help us cope.

Eventually many of us come to the conclusion, normally after a great deal of exhausting searching, that this external ‘moreness’ will never fill the emptiness that hounds us. You only need to look at the sad state that many of the super rich and famous fall into when this truth crashes home, they apparently have absolutely everything - possessions, fame, security, the best health care money can buy - then very publicly we watch them fall into utter despair. They are the prime example of those that realise, very experientially, that money and fame simply don't buy happiness.

When this realisation dawns, we often, quite logically conclude that if the solution isn't to be found outside in the material world, then maybe it can be found *inside*. Perhaps religion, health, strict austerities or spirituality, might bring relief from the anxiety that haunts us. So we chop and change between diets, gyms, exercise and fitness programmes, belief systems, self help gurus, online courses, yoga styles, meditation, mindfulness, prayer, hymn, therapy-searching for a safe haven from invisible threats and seeking the thing that we feel is lacking, if not outside then inside.

**Outside or inside, more, more, more.....in a quest for what?
Less unhappiness? Less suffering?**

You've got to wonder if maybe more isn't the solution - or at least more of what we have been chasing anyway. We've tried more for a long time and no-one seems all that much better off for it.

Maybe more just creates a feeling of needing more?

Have we built a hamster wheel of more? Are we not only stuck on that wheel, but have we actually forgotten that we are even on it? Are we constantly running with more and more effort towards a future that never arrives? As we do so does that little hamster wheel become more and more damaged, more worn out on every level?

If more is wasteful, never-ending and not particularly effective at solving our problems, perhaps we need to shift our perspective away from that model and try something else.

How about *less*?

What if you could achieve an even better version of your life with *less stress, less energy, less anxiety, less fear, less effort?*

By letting go instead of clinging and grasping.....?

Peerless

Great things are not accomplished by those who yield to trends and fads and popular opinion.

- Jack Kerouac

I'm not a great one for observing pointless rules and codes of conduct just because someone else has decided that they are 'right and correct'. I blame my grandad for this, he was a hilarious character and a law unto himself - I don't think I ever saw him without a cigarette in his mouth, sometimes two; I rarely heard him utter a sentence without an obscenity included for good measure and I would giggle as he'd sing songs out loud in public about eating worms and having no friends. He just didn't seem to follow the rules of society that everyone else did. When my brother and I were still very young, probably aged around 6 and 8 he would take us fishing, only to get to the lake he would make us crawl, on hands and knees, giggling his way through the bushes behind the fishing wardens hut so that we could avoid

paying the 'pointless' fees for the day.

It was a time when most households had only one car and with my dad at work in his van, if we needed a lift somewhere my Grandad would often be called upon. To get from our house to the other side of town was a bit of a long way round because between us stood an enormous public park. Of course cars were forbidden in the park and there were bollards up at the entrances that only the park managers and the emergency services had the keys to remove for access. Somehow my Grandad had realised that his little Austin Princess was just narrow enough to scrape through said bollards, with literally half an inch to spare. But of course it cut off five minutes of driving. So there we would be, my brother and I laughing hysterically in the back, my mum in the front hiding her face with embarrassment as my Grandad drove casually through the middle of a public park whilst children played on the swings, adults played tennis and older adults played at lawn green bowls. He always kept things simple - A to B, no fuss.

Just like my Grandad, I wanted to keep this little book as simple as possible. I have tried to cut out any instructions or rules to follow - it is all too easy to fill a book with yet more guidance. Believe me, I've read most of them, tried the meditations, the spiritual practices, the funny breathing, odd pretzel like exercises, in fact I've spent probably 25 years investigating such things. The conclusion I have come to is that they probably all have some element of exactly the same root truth. If they all seem to originate from a single fundamental truth, then the conclusion can only be that these various interpretations have all come from the same origin, something shared by all of us, that we all have access to.

Logically then, if we already have access to some ‘inner’ truth or wisdom, most of us have simply overlooked or forgotten it.

Is this not what all of the great philosophies and religions point to at the heart of their teachings, just presented in different ways?

Bearing this in mind, the intention here is to offer as little as possible, there are lots of *hints* at simple alternatives hidden in plain sight, likewise lots of questions to ponder and answer for yourself. I hope that you don’t simply buy into anything that I say; it would be far more useful if the words simply inspire a sense of ‘what if?’ A powerful enquiry that you then could explore in depth by yourself and prove to be useful or not from your own, direct experience.

What *I think* is far less important than what *you feel*, what your gut instinct tells you. Remember, I’m not promising you anything except for the potential you already have: a simpler, more efficient life and a quieter, less agitated mind.....

Part One is a series of short topics and simple question around how *less* might allow us to find a happier way of being, of suffering less and of simply being happier.

In **Part Two**, some of the concepts come to a rather ‘far out’ conclusion, but if it doesn’t make sense right now, or just isn’t useful, then let it go and take

what *is* of use to *you*. You might find that other things make more sense at a different time or place in your life. Equally, just because something seems relevant now, never be afraid to let go of it later on. Useful is only useful when it's useful, after that it is just baggage! What you need now is absolutely perfect for right now - trust that to be true and you are half-way there already.

You will, I hope find much of the book *uncomfortable* to read - it questions almost all of the core beliefs that we have about how, as individuals, we can 'thrive' and be 'successful' in the world. Remember though, just because the majority believes something to be the norm, that doesn't mean that it is correct. We laugh now, but not that long ago, everyone thought that the world was flat - saying that, some still do. Likewise, Darwin's theory of evolution directly opposed the prevailing belief that the world was created by an omnipotent God figure. Many of Darwins' predecessors were literally cast out of the scientific world for suggesting such heresy.

But it is the Einsteins and Darwins, the Gandhis and Martin Luther Kings of this world that achieve truly great things. They refuse to toe the line, to bend the knee, they dare to be different and to speak their own truth. You will need to be no less brave to take a leap of faith and trust in yourself, to explore a different path when everyone is following a road named 'more', to stop running and start letting go.

P a r t O n e

Powerless

P o w e r l e s s

What does a man need - really need? A few pounds of food each day, heat and shelter, six feet to lie down in - and some form of working activity that will yield a sense of accomplishment. That's all - in the material sense, and we know it. But we are brainwashed by our economic system until we end up in a tomb beneath a pyramid of time payments, mortgages, preposterous gadgetry, playthings that divert our attention from the sheer idiocy of the charade. The years thunder by, the dreams of youth grow dim where they lie caked in dust on the shelves of patience. Before we know it, the tomb is sealed.

- Sterling Hayden

The *power* of less is a contradiction to everything that we have been taught to believe. After all, how can we possibly be strong without power? Yet just because common wisdom sees power as a positive attribute, that simply doesn't mean that it's true. The incredible potential that lies in being powerless is a theme that crops up in all sorts of teachings from the Bible to

the Tao Te Ching.

Although we might think that the sense of craving more arises from inside of us as a natural impulse, *more* is actually an *instruction* with only one goal.

More has power over you, you don't have power over it.

Contrastingly, less is where the potential for freedom truly exists - less is the freedom to *not take*, to not seek the limelight, to not collect more of what we don't need. It is less baggage, less weight, less burden in every way.

To trust that we *are* enough and will always *have* enough - now that is real power in your hands because only then do you have the freedom of choice to step off the hamster wheel of more at any moment of your choosing.

Chasing 'more' requires ever more energy, yet in the chase we still sense that there is no power over the destination. In comparison it is impossible to pursue 'less'. After all there is nothing to do, nothing to seek, you simply let go! Even the concept of 'letting go' is somehow a relief. Picking up and carrying an over-packed suitcase is total misery, the strain, the aches, the inconvenience - but the power to simply let go of it, that is total joy!

Allowing ourselves to be powerless or simply finding ourselves powerless without a choice can seem like the worst thing imaginable, but there are endless stories of people who have found themselves in exactly this situation and have experienced profound awakenings as a result. As a surfer I can see clear similarities occasionally when I am out surfing on bigger days, when the sea is full of power. Occasionally you get swallowed by a wave and feel

the palpable mass of ocean above, forcing you deep down towards the sea bed and sometimes pinning you there. Experience tells that there is absolutely no point in trying to overpower the force of the ocean - it would be a foolish struggle, you would panic and it would probably be the last thing you did. It is what puts most people off of surfing anything higher than their heads - the fear not of drowning necessarily, but of being in a situation where you are totally out of control and powerless.

Ironically if you completely relax, accept that you need to give up your need to control and just wait for the ocean to finish with you, eventually you pop up like a cork. You might not believe me when I say this, but it is a strangely wonderful sensation to simply submit and allow yourself to be tossed and thrown about like a rag doll. To accept that you have no power is in some way very comforting, it puts you firmly in your place and you realise how miniscule and insignificant you really are, it is clear that you can't always win by effort or struggling.

‘When do you cling on to power?’

Do you feel a need to be in control all of the time?

Why is that?

What happens if you let go of that need, how does it feel?

What’s the absolute worst that could happen?

Try relinquishing the power that you don't need, to cling to. Stop struggling against the irresistible flow of life and the chances are that it will leave you with greater energy reserves for actually living your *real* life rather than chasing an *imaginary* life. Let's take a deeper look at why that energy we are saving is so important....

Wasteless

W a s t e l e s s

A number of samurai were debating which of the two great swordsmiths of Japan was the greatest. Who made the most efficient sword for battle?

Whose blade wasted the very least energy going about its work?

They decided to set up a test....

Burying the point of the first sword in the bed of a stream they then threw a fine silk scarf upstream.

As it floated down towards the blade and finally met with its edge, the sword cut the silk in two so effortlessly that the scarf lost no speed at all on its passage.

'Incredible' shouted one of the Samurai. 'No blade could be any more efficient than that, it simply isn't possible!'

Nevertheless, to be fair they set up exactly the same test for the weapon made by the second swordsmith.

Exactly as before they released a silk scarf upstream, once more it headed directly towards the second blade, then at the very last second, just before touching it, altered course, flowed around the blade and carried on its merry way down to the sea.....

The Samurai stood in awe. 'This blade is so efficient that it doesn't even need to cut...'

This is all about efficiency, something that I am particularly fond of in every aspect of life and one of my favourite science topics. Now, science lessons were largely boring, and I say that as a past science teacher! Even when I was getting paid good money to teach chemistry I still wanted to be outside playing in the woods and climbing trees!

Let me remind you though, of the only science lesson that you really need to know -

The Law of the Conservation of Energy:

'energy can't be created or destroyed it can only be transferred from one form to another'

Take a battery and wire it up to a spinning motor - congratulations you have just transferred that stored electrical energy from the battery into kinetic (movement) energy in the motor. Remember that?

We would do well to remember, above all else, that life is all about energy transfer.

Why?

Because '*Where attention goes, energy flows*'

Realistically all that we can really do in life is to decide what to do with the limited energy available to us - where to focus and direct it. It's no good on

your deathbed wishing for more energy or another chance to use the energy you had. Too late I'm afraid. Use that energy wisely now.

Although energy can't be destroyed, it can certainly be 'lost' to other places where it wasn't directed and that lost energy is wasted because it is then no use at all - for example, the batteries we talked about can lose energy as heat in the wires that transfer the electricity to the motor. The motor itself can lose energy through friction and the resulting heat build up.

Why is that important?

Because it's **inefficient**, the motor turns more slowly gets hot and wears out quicker, the batteries will need replacing more often, what a waste of useful energy.

Just like the battery, wires and motor, we can also lose our energy to other places if we don't direct it efficiently. Possibly the most important questions that you could ask yourself before you read any further are...

What do you use your energy for?

Where do feel that your energy comes from?

Do you use your energy efficiently or feel a sense of 'wasting' energy?

How do you share your energy with others?

After all *wasting less energy might actually be a more efficient way to live* in every sense? When things run efficiently everything tends to tick over much more smoothly in every way.

Motionless

M o t i o n l e s s

Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans'.

- John Lennon (Beautiful Boy)

A horse and rider suddenly came galloping at full speed through a small town. It seemed as though the man must have somewhere very important to go. Ten minutes later they returned racing in another direction, then barely ten minutes passed before they came into town yet again, this time heading off down a different road

A bystander watching all of this from the pavement couldn't contain his curiosity any longer and when they came tearing past him next he shouted, "Where on Earth are you going in such a terrible hurry?" The rider, out of breath and disorientated shouted back.. "I have absolutely no idea! Ask the horse!"

The single most efficient way of conserving our energy is to practice more

‘stillness’ in life.

Are you really living or just existing?

Are you missing the very thing that you spend your time plotting and planning for?

Are you running, chasing, just like I said that I was?

Is there ever a time when you are simply ‘doing’ or ‘being’ for the sheer pleasure of ‘doing’ or ‘being’?

Are you ever *truly* ‘still’ and fully present in the moment?

It might not be a great leap of the imagination to compare the average persons state of mind to a car; a car that simply isn't running as smoothly and efficiently as it should. You can't quite put your finger on exactly what's wrong with the car so its hard to fix it, after all you wouldn't go to a garage and say 'I've got a problem with my vehicle, please replace everything'. No, to identify the problem better, you would sensibly first pull over and stop the car, turn off the loud radio, wind up the windows and then when all other distractions and sounds are removed, listen closely for any odd knocking, rumbling or grinding noises, any odd smells or feelings. Once you have located the source of the problem it will be much easier to make a repair.

Life is exactly like this; it has infinite potential to teach us everything that we need to know, but we rarely give it the chance to because we are never fully attentive to it, we never really stop, turn off the distractions and listen.

In fact our *actual* life is the only teacher that we ever really need, if we

would only, truly, live it.

We might start to see how we react to situations, why these reactions really arise and how we can maybe handle everyday situations more efficiently so that the course of our life feels more free flowing rather than a series of exhausting challenges to be ‘won or lost’.

To be motionless, in body but especially in mind allows you to see what is really going on, both around you and inside of you. It’s a little like the difference between continuing to drive your car with a dirty windscreen, covered in dust and bugs, or taking the time to clean it all off and seeing how much clearer the world becomes.

When we are *really* still, everything seems to be clearer. Why don’t we do this if it has such great potential? Because when we are still it generally means that we have to be alone with our own mental chit chat, the voice in our head that we can’t seem to quieten, the voice that says ‘What on Earth do you think you are doing, not planning for the future, not working for something, not chasing a goal. What use is just being or doing without any ‘purpose’ or motivation?’ We really don’t like that feeling and we give up our stillness in order to shake it off.

So we run from - or after - that voice: from project to project, goal to goal, one event to the next. We burn up masses of our precious energy in this constant movement, hurrying, rushing and scurrying about like ants, always on yet another busy mission-running from the past or chasing the future where we tell ourselves that if we get everything just so, just right, after a lot

of hard work, eventually we will be able to sit back, entirely relaxed and finally be still, be content. Hmmmmm.....

Anyone that has ever managed to sit quietly for even a few seconds, maybe watching a sunset, sitting listening to the birds in the park, even on a bench just observing the traffic passing by knows that you can find peace right now, at any moment if you just *stop* running. Who'd have thought! That thing that we thought we were chasing was right under our noses all along?! The irony is that logically we can only ever be here in the now and we only ever are here in the now, it is just our mind that wanders elsewhere and then the body and the mind don't feel completely together - you get this odd feeling of being detached and not 'whole'.

To put it another way and this is the great news, you don't need to *do more* to become present, in fact you don't need to do anything at all, as usual you need to *do less and let go*, specifically let go of mental wandering and just *stay* in the moment. All that there ever exists is now, this very moment; that means that time is just an imagination, a dividing up of endless consecutive 'now thoughts'. Step out of time and simply *be* in the present moment.

P e r s p e c t i v e l e s s

It's useful to go out of this world and see it from the perspective of another one.

– Terry Pratchett

A traveller visiting a foreign country for the first time disembarked from the plane and went to take a coffee in the arrivals hall. Sitting with his drink he struck up a conversation with the elderly airport worker on the stool next to him.

'You look as if you have lived here a long time, I expect you know a great deal about this country. The people of my home are generally grumpy in nature, they are often unpleasant and bicker constantly. Tell me, how will I find the people of your country?'

'You will find them very much the same' Replied the old man.

The next day almost the same situation arose with a different traveller striking up the same conversation with the same old man.

'You look as if you have lived here a long time and you must know a great deal about your home. The people of my country are friendly, helpful and always keen to make friends, please tell me, how will I find the people of this place?'

'You'll find them very much the same' Replied the old man

Do you see the cup as half full or half empty? There are countless throw away sayings like this but they are full of more wisdom than we can imagine.

Although it may not be obvious, each one of us largely shapes our own view of the world, in fact we pretty much create our own universe. Overlaying our expectations on the blank canvas of life is a bit like taking a jug of plain water and adding a flavoured cordial or syrup to it. Essentially the water is always the same, it is untainted to begin with but an individual might add a bitter lemon cordial to it that makes them screw up their face or a sweet orange flavour that makes them smile from ear to ear. Both parties begin with the same plain water yet the end taste is very different depending on what *they* poured in to it.

Put simply, expect negativity and you will most likely see negativity all around you; in contrast, look for the positive in any situation and you will of course discover it; be fearful of the world and every situation will appear to be a veiled threat; have an air of defensiveness about you and you will seem to encounter confrontation in others too. Life in its untainted pureness is without any of these views imposed upon it, only we as the observer add such strong flavours.

So why does this happen? How we view the world is largely down to our personal perspective and that perspective is subjective. That is to say that two different people can see exactly the same event in two opposite ways; the ‘actual’ events may happen in a fairly 'fixed' way but how they are interpreted is very much down to the observer. How the observer frames the experiences of life is in turn a product of their points of reference: upbringing, past experiences, culture and so on.

A simple example might be if you were involved in a minor traffic accident. One point of view could be ‘Oh no, what a disaster, now I have to get this fixed and deal with the insurance company all because this fool pulled out in front of me.’

But another interpretation of exactly the same incident could be ‘ Thank goodness nobody was hurt, it's only metal and plastic and at least we were all insured. That person seems so shaken up by a moment of losing concentration, I do hope they’ll be OK’

The actual end result of this same occurrence will be the same - the car will eventually get fixed, the claim will be settled and life will continue as it does, however the effect it has in the interim upon your own life will be largely down to how you frame it. If you had, for example parents that were always talking about other people behind their back, always blaming and finding fault then chances are that your default setting would be similar. However, maybe at some point you actually bumped into the back of another persons car, they were very understanding about it and didn’t cause a fuss, this might affect how you then react in a similar situation later in life should it occur to you. It is almost impossible to factor in all of the possible reasons why we view things as we do, fortunately we don’t need to know why, we simply

need to be aware when we *do*. This is very significant because when you are aware of your own behaviour you stop being mindlessly reactive and start to navigate life with more intelligent choices.

If you don't learn to be aware the problem just grows ever larger; by repeatedly perceiving events in a certain way, there comes a tendency for this expectation to flavour our entire life experience. Eventually our tendency to see the best, worst, or whatever in situations actually moulds the unfolding events of every moment. It can seem like every incident of the day, every conversation we have is tinted with a certain flavour.

It isn't unusual for you to start attracting other individuals that are on a similar 'wavelength' - people that enjoy moaning find consolation and normality in the company of other chronic moaners, likewise people with a positive outlook on life are likely to seek out the company of others with a similar positivity. You reap what you sow....

Do you have a friend or family member that always seems to be arguing or falling out with someone?

Do they seem bewildered about why so many people appear to be 'against' them?

Are there are other people that you know who seem to drift through life without a care in the world, who wear life lightly and allow things to go over their head?

How about you? Do you expect life to unfold in a certain way? Are you always expecting the worse to happen, stumbling from one crisis to the next or do you see the best in everything?

Why do you think that is?

Aimless

A i m l e s s

*The true adventurer goes forth aimless and uncalculating to meet and greet
unknown fate*

- O. Henry

I was working as an installation artist at large music festivals with my best friend Jonny. We had just rolled off the ferry at the Isle of Wight, en route to an event. Sitting in the cab of Jonny's lorry, 'Captain Benbo', were the two of us and the legendary Sam Bear who we had taken out for a rare weekend away. Behind the lorry we were towing a music stage on a very large trailer at least another 4 metres long and weighing in excess of two tonnes. That's quite a lot of weight to get moving.....and to stop.

Driving carefully enough or so we thought, Jonny rounded a blind bend on a narrow country road and as we came out of it we were confronted just metres away by a long line of stationary holiday traffic. Johnny had no

option to slow steadily and come to a halt in time, the road was barely wide enough for us as it was and there appeared to be nowhere to go to avoid a collision. He slammed on the brakes, the trailer jackknifed and as we skidded towards the car in front we all closed our eyes, pushing hard against the dashboard, or in Jonnys case against the steering wheel, braced for impact. But no crunching sound of metal came in the next moment as it should have done, instead we felt the lorry sliding improbably sideways across a strangely crunchy surface. As we opened our eyes we found to our great surprise that we had somehow slid to a complete standstill, sideways, into a gravel driveway previously hidden by two giant privet hedges either side of it. Not only that but this driveway was exactly the length of the lorry and trailer combined. It is no exaggeration at all to say that to park there intentionally, even with no other vehicles on the road and half an hour to get into the space would have been almost impossible. Yet without any aim or intention whatsoever that is exactly where we had ended up, in exactly the right place at the right time. As such situations demanded I burst into nervous belly laughter, quickly followed by the other two. Less than half a minute later a police car joined the queue of traffic just two cars behind. I quickly picked up the road map and we all sat, biting our lips and pretending to read it as if we had pulled in to check on directions....

To be aimless sounds very out of place in our driven world where there is such a focus on achievement and direction. ‘Aimless’ is usually an insult directed towards someone that is deemed to have no ambition or drive, almost as if we are judging them to have no ‘purpose’ in life. Yet frame it in a different way, just like O. Henry did above, and to be aimless can start to sound quite appealing, a real doorway to adventure and possibility!

We might want to begin by questioning why we believe that being aimless is such a bad thing?

Are the aims of most people in modern society really all that worthy or useful after all? In our natural state as human animals would our aims not have been simply to feed ourselves and our families? To survive another day? I doubt that until more complex societies arose with imaginary rules and roles, that we would have started aiming for a higher position or 'more respect'? There is certainly an underlying 'something' here about status and being valued by others which we will discuss more in the next section.

Almost everything that we have ever done has had some attached purpose, even the things that we seem to do for fun. Every few years of school seem to have the sole purpose of deciding your next grouping or grades, there appears to be little about the benefits of social, health and personal wellbeing in the education system. Even hobbies can often seem to have an underlying purpose of 'improving'; whether this is judged against our own current ability, or against that of others, in competition. We leave education, find a means to earn money, the purpose of which is generally to buy comfort, which for most people means a house and car. We save up pensions with the purpose of retiring eventually...and if we are lucky we get there and have a few years in an ageing body and failing health to show for a life-time of working towards ever unreachable aims.

What are you aiming for right now? A new car, new kitchen, better physique for the beach holiday?

List some of the things that you have chased over your lifetime - it will be an enormous list, from a magazine that you craved as a child, the new shoes that you 'needed', through to the better job.

How much energy and time did you invest in chasing them?

Compare that to the 'reward' that came when you got what you wanted.

Could you have spent your time and energy better with hindsight?

Are you still stuck in this pattern?

If that's the case, what makes you think that pattern won't just continue forever if you don't change it?

It all seems a bit weird when you think about it. As if someone, somewhere has pulled such an enormous and brazen confidence trick on us all, that the entire world has fallen for it without question.

What makes you so sure that you know the direction you should be heading anyway?

Are the aims and purposes of what you are doing and what you have done really what *you* wanted from life or are you just falling into line with the aims and expectations of those around you and society at large?

Maybe being a bit aimless isn't such a bad alternative, all things considered? After all, if we focus on an imagined destination or purpose too intently, we can often miss the potentially wonderful journey on the way, blind to

wonderful opportunities and deviations, because we are so fixated on reaching an end point.

There really is a wonderful sense of adventure in having less purpose. In trusting and giving yourself fully to the journey, every moment becomes the purpose in itself. Allow yourself to be a little more aimless and you might actually find that not only are you able to appreciate the moment all the more but you might open yourself to all sorts of new possibilities that you never even imagined existed for you!

It is an awesome feeling to wake up and say to yourself...I wonder what today will bring? Immerse yourself in the potential of the unknown!

Needless

N e e d l e s s

Reduce the complexity of life by eliminating the needless wants of life, and the labours of life reduce themselves.

- Edwin Way Teale

We were in our twenties and in our infinite but naive wisdom, had decided to up sticks to rural France, an hour from any real sized town. Why? Because you could still buy a smallholding (albeit derelict) for less than £15,000! In England that would have just about bought you a new family car. For some reason we had gotten so restless that we had made the move to the empty barn and collapsed cottage that we had purchased in the middle of February. That year was an especially cold one, moreover we had no electricity, heating, sanitation, in fact no roof or floors - they had all collapsed into the cellar many years ago. We did have an outside cold water tap though, which was useful!

Arriving in the thick of a serious gale after a 13 hour drive from England, we opened the door of our creaking old van and Gemma's cat 'Willow', tore off into the howling wind. For all of our calling and shaking boxes of cat biscuits she still hadn't returned by the time it got dark and we collapsed, shivering from exhaustion in the back of our van. Lying in silence, we didn't need to speak - this wasn't the dream we had imagined for so long. It had been a stupid idea; why had we moved away from our friends, our family? We weren't adult enough to deal with this sort of thing on our own, we needed real 'grown ups' around us, people with more experience. We couldn't even speak French for goodness sake and we had decided to rebuild a house that was barely four walls. It seemed like we needed an awful lot and were missing most of those things - building knowledge, local connections, a grasp of the local language, friends and familyeven our cat. Willow found her way back in the middle of the night, crying loudly outside of the van door and within a year of that evening absolutely every other thing that we needed appeared in exactly the same way, just when it was meant to. To cut a very long story short, we did rebuild the cottage, entirely on our own and we had our first ever home which was the start of a long chain of events that followed through the rest of our life.....

We have explored many topics thus far, but as with so many behaviour patterns that we get into, they are much easier to break down if we understand the root source - where does this feeling of needing more come from?

Maybe it comes from the primitive need for acceptance that humans all possess as primarily social animals?

Almost all of us have been told, from our very earliest memories and by almost every authority figure that ‘more’ will make us happy and probably earn us more of something; be that respect, financial reward or whatever. When we ‘behave’ well as children: draw a nice picture or eat with our mouths closed at the table, we might earn praise or a sweet or other treat from our parents or grandparents. At school we worked hard to gain good grades or a comment or sticker in our books from the teacher - yet more seemingly external rewards. At work, a bonus, promotion or a pat on the back from the boss is an indication that someone else thinks that ‘we did good’ - we are ‘useful’ to the business tribe.

Did we personally want to do the maths for own pleasure, or behave well for our own enjoyment as kids or make greater sales of double glazing at work? I doubt it.

Chances are that we were succumbing to one of our deepest survival instincts - the need to be accepted by the group. Simply put, in our ancestral past - especially when we lived tribally, in a world full of predators, limited resources and enemies - we were very reliant on being part of a tribe or clan to survive. Just like youngsters in many inner cities nowadays; if you run with a gang you at least have their protection from other gangs, however if you are on your own then you are fair game for anyone on the street.

We carry this need through to every part of our lives, we just don’t realise it: the need to be accepted for having the ‘right clothes’ the ‘right car’, the ‘right job’ in the ‘right company’, the need to have as many likes as possible on our social media posts. They are all desperate cries to be accepted by the missing tribe so that we feel safer.

Connection and community is an incredibly powerful and enriching part of being human. We love to share, to talk, to listen and however much we discuss less in this book, nothing can replace greater healthy connection with other humans. Even if you are scraping a living with barely enough financially to pay the rent each week, to find community and connection with other humans in some form is always free. There are clubs, community groups and volunteer organisations that are open to everyone - often people in exactly the same situation and this powerful connection can instantly remove a feeling of isolation. However poor you are, however socially anxious, marginalised, shy or lonely you feel, it is almost certain that you can find and be welcomed into some social network, which if you crave connection will enrich your life in many ways.

What I must say though, is that *lasting* internal happiness and contentment does not come from external acceptance, any more than it comes from acquiring external wealth, material goods or life insurance. Humans may be social animals, but there is no evidence that we are evolutionarily pack or herd animals. I know very happy people with masses of friends and I know just as many that are wholly content with their own company, or just passing acquaintances with others. Each to their own and vive la difference! What I do know though, is that we feel much safer in our environment when we are able to draw upon our own internal resources and when we feel safe and comfortable in the knowledge that we can stand on our own two feet and trust ourselves.

Think back to some times in your life when you went it alone and realised that you actually were enough. Maybe you were five years old

and riding your bike without trainer wheel or stabilisers for the first time; maybe you finished a wonderful model or picture; or fixed something entirely on your own, or took your first terrified flight, or travelled to a new country, even though you were afraid - those rewards are intangible and lasting.

What does that feel like to be independent, self-sufficient?

You have grown in some unfathomable but unmistakable way and you need no-one else to tell you or offer you any sort of reward for it; not only that but the benefits will last forever as an internal resource to draw upon not only for yourself but for others that you might share them with too.

In our ancestral past these skills would have made us more confident that we could survive on our own merits if necessary. In the modern world we get exactly the same mental reassurance when we simply take the time to remember that we *are* competent and will always have everything that we need, however much we doubt it – it is the doubt that grinds us down far more than the actual lack of something that we need. If in doubt just remind yourself that right now, all you need is the very next breath. This is one of my favourite 'meditations' when anxiety or depression seem totally overwhelming. All I need to remember is to focus on the next breath, if that breath comes then I already have everything that I need in this moment...and as some comfort, I remind myself that if the next breath doesn't arrive for some reason, then at least I won't need to worry any more. Its a win win situation!

Fearless

F e a r l e s s

"I'm not afraid of death. It's the stake one puts up in order to play the game of life."

- Jean Giraudoux

There was once a great philosopher who was incredibly wise. His spiritual teacher as a child had owned an antique teapot that he treasured greatly. One day whilst the teacher was out, the young boy accidentally dropped the teapot. Hearing his teacher return, he held the broken pieces hidden behind his back.

When the master appeared, the young boy asked him innocently: "Teacher, tell me, why do people have to die?"

"This is only natural," explained the old man. "All things have to die and have only so long to live. There is nothing to fear or dread in the temporary nature of what is natural and unavoidable"

The young boy sighed with relief, producing the broken pieces from behind

*him, he explained:
“Today, it was time for your teapot to die.”*

Previously we explored the fear of rejection by our ‘tribe’, friends, family or society and our overwhelming need to be accepted. We touched upon the fact that the tribe ensured our chances of *survival* and therefore we are wired to crave their acceptance. Of course this underlies both our greatest craving of all - survival and our greatest fear of all - death, for to die is to simply disappear right?

Like many kids (and adults) my youngest daughter knows what she likes and she likes what she knows. She has to be encouraged to try new foods, to try out new clubs or activities, to read new books rather than re-read the same ones over and over again. Almost inevitably though when she actually tries a new book, film, food or experience she falls in love with it and has no idea why she was resisting it. It’s quite logical really, we tend to know what we like, because from a survival point of view we have tested it, found it to be acceptable and therefore it becomes a safe bet rather than an unknown entity.

This theme transfers into the way that we cling to our lives themselves. We have no idea what it means to be ‘dead’ because as far as we can tell or remember ‘alive’ is all that we have ever known. It follows, naturally, that we always want more of that ‘aliveness’, we want to cling desperately to it. Yet life and death are flip sides of the same coin, they are not in opposition as we might imagine them to be, neither of them can exist without the other. We may well fear death above all things but without it, what is life? Isn’t death needed for life to simply be ?

Mark Twain is famous for the quote *‘The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.’*

Imagine that you are out walking, you may all of a sudden become aware of the sound and feel of your breath. Just a moment before, the breath wasn't within your 'reality' and so to all intents and purpose it didn't exist - of course the breath was always there, it didn't appear from nowhere and when your attention is taken by something else in the next moment breath doesn't simply vanish back into nothingness. Just like awareness of breathing, our life, the thing we understand as 'us' can't have just appeared from 'nowhere' and it can't disappear into 'nowhere' when the physical body dies. It simply isn't possible.

This is a radical notion for most of us to contemplate, so for now just allow it to be there as an idea and we will discuss it in greater detail in part two.

We fear so much of our lives, we fear the hidden dangers, the rejections, illnesses, the unknown - all of them boil down to a deeper fear of death or an effort to ensure our survival. This fear stops us from doing so many things that we would otherwise love to explore, it prevents us from enjoying the full richness of our lives as it becomes inflated into unhealthy anxieties of all kinds.

What do you avoid doing because you are afraid - travel, new experiences, taking chances, social interactions?

**Dig deep down through the fear - what is the really holding you back?
What's the absolute worst that could happen in the situations you avoid?
Effortless**

E f f o r t l e s s

When I'm running fast, I don't feel anything, it's effortless, it's like my feet don't even touch the ground, it's like I'm flying.

- Evelyn Ashford

When I was starting out as an installation artist everything seemed to click into place. I'd meet one person after another who would suggest the next event the next meeting, the next project...it all unfolded seamlessly and effortlessly.

There then came a moment when things seemed to stall - I had received my biggest commission so far. When an opportunity arises my rule was to say yes and then worry about it afterwards but here I had become unstuck; a large national water company wanted me to create a 4 meter tall steel tree with interactive water features for kids to explore the topic of water conservation.

The problem was twofold - firstly there was no advance payment and I had absolutely no money to purchase the hundreds of metres of steel bar that I needed to make a twisted and gnarled trunk and branches. Secondly I had to

make this steel appear 'wood like' in some way. I had the idea of rusting the steel but to get the texture and colour that I wanted would take a long time, probably years. What a sticky spot to be in!

At that time the cheapest workspace that I could find was a ramshackle workshop on a farm in the Essex countryside, a typical old farm with machinery and junk dumped all over the place and various anarchic artists in similar workshops. One day, scratching my head over this financial and aesthetic problem, I went for a short walk around the farm buildings. The farmer had already said that I could use any scrap metal for other projects that I found, after all it slowly got rid of it for him. I happened to see a bit of rusty steel bar, sticking out of an enormous bramble hedge. It was about a foot long, just the right colour and texture but obviously several hundred metres too short. I went over anyway and as I got closer I noticed that the steel was much longer than I had thought, as I peered into the hedge it vanished into the depths of the thorns. As I started pulling at it, more and more and more started to appear, in all sorts of lengths, welded together at all sorts of odd places, some parts oddly, having old scraps of material wrapped around them. I imagined it must have been a long abandoned fence or some other 'farm' structure. The colour and the texture of the steel was so rusted that it almost looked woodlike. I cut long lengths off and kept pulling out more until I had, after around two hours pulled out more than I could ever use.

Needless to say I was overjoyed, and I spent the next two weeks welding it all back together until I had a four metre replica of an oak tree with branches reaching for the sky in front of me.

I had told a few people the story and then one day the farmer appeared looking white faced and asking me where the metal I'd used had come from. As I explained he looked even paler ...the steel, it turned out, actually belonged to another artist. In two years I'd only seen him there a handful of times but he was a very quiet and slightly menacing looking character. It turned out that he had built this odd and twisted sculpture called 'Decay' about ten years before and had spent a lot of time each year covering it in all sorts of odd chemicals and wrapping it in cloths soaked in dog excrement to create exactly the gnarled and decaying effect that I was looking for. Strange but true! I was more than a bit shocked and for weeks afterwards planned my apology, although I wasn't sure how you could ever make up for destroying a ten year art project.

He finally appeared and unable to bear it any longer I spilled the beans, he took an overly long, silent pause to consider what I had done, then finally came to his senses.....'Well I did call it Decay, it has certainly lived up to its name!'

When you embrace being fearless, aimless, motionless, selfless and useless, when you feel less disconnected from everything around you and start flowing through life with total and complete efficiency it feels effortless. Effortless generally comes when you stop resisting the natural energy and flow of things; you start to appropriate some of that energy and steer it in your own direction.

There is an uncomfortable tension in the body and the mind that accompanies effort and yet almost everything that we do, even meditation for most people is effortful. Most people still buy into the peculiar belief that everything

should involve some deal of struggle to be of value. I find that really strange - whoever said that should be the case? Often people say to me 'you look so busy, you seem to work so hard'. When I say that isn't the case, that in fact I feel like I do very little and life just seems to unfold for me, people are often speechless - it simply doesn't correspond to what society believes life should be - a constant struggle.

In fact there is an unspoken agreement that we should always look busy, be rushed off our feet, be exhausted from our constant activity; to admit otherwise might suggest that we are what? Lazy? Undeserving?

But why is that? Realistically it makes no logical sense at all, surely the wisest man would cut efficiently and cleanly through life, like a hot knife through butter?

If we want to sail a boat to a particular point we have options: we can run with the natural current or go with the wind (both of which take very little effort whilst feeling entirely exhilarating and connected) OR we can row *against* the wind or current, either of these options requires a lot of effort, feels very much like a battle of 'me against the world' and is completely energy inefficient - no doubt leaving us exhausted in the process.

'Ah' you might say 'but the current will only take us where it is flowing and the wind will only take us where it is blowing. If we want to get to a certain point not in those directions it will be very difficult if we are just constantly swept along.'

This is true, but a wise sailor will neither row against the wind or current nor simply get swept along by it. Because they understand not only the

conditions they are in, but also the vessel that they are sailing, they will be able to harness the power of the wind with a sail and tack across its direction to get where they need to. Likewise using a tiller and rudder they will be able to take the power of the current and redirect it. They know and importantly *accept* that there is a limit to which you can 'force the point' when you sail upwind or carve against a current and that is the same intelligence that we need to adopt when we are sailing this existence of ours through the winds and currents of life.

When life seems to be set squarely against you and everything you could *logically* try has failed then it may well be time to sit back, take a rest and wait for the tides to turn or the winds of fortune to change.

I can trace back long series of events in my own life where I simply allowed myself to follow and fall into the natural unfolding of things. As opportunities fell squarely into my lap I accepted them, even if I was afraid or doubtful about my ability to take them on. These inevitably led to another set of 'coincidences' or avenues to explore and as a result I have led a very fun, eventful and varied life thus far, experiencing things that I never imagined or anticipated.

At other times, even though I have really *thought* that something was a great idea, or I desperately *wanted* it to be just so, I found that the circumstances of life simply wouldn't align in a way that facilitated it to happen. As I learned not to force things too hard in these situations, almost invariably later on an unforeseen situation would arise that made me see why these ambitions had not naturally unfolded.

Taoism calls this **Wu-wei**, it means effortless effort or actionless action, we

might better think of it as total efficiency of energy in our activities. As we trust more and more that life isn't separate from us and that we aren't separate from it, we will be more open to see that it has a natural intelligence, an energy of its own, that we are connected to but do not and cannot govern. When a person becomes more sensitive to both feeling and trusting this flow, the less they will feel like life is a constant uphill struggle and instead they will start to enjoy the mystery as it unfolds. It doesn't mean that we sit around and just wait for things to happen, or expect that life should be easy. Not at all. What it becomes instead is a perfect dance, where sometimes we feel that we are leading and sometimes we are being led, the difference is that we tune in to when those shifts occur and we do not fight them.

Can you think of a time in life when everything just seemed to unfold with very little effort, almost as if it was meant to - sudden meetings or coincidences that seemed to help a plan move along? How did that feel? Were there other times when life felt like walking through treacle? Did they work out in the end? Were they worth the effort?

Timeless

T i m e l e s s

Your timeless self does not age and has no fear of the future. Contemplate your physical self and all its possessions, and practice laughing peacefully at it all.

- Wayne Dyer

A fisherman was sitting on a bench in front of the beach early one afternoon, enjoying the sun and the sound of the sea. A rich man hurrying past, looked a little disgruntled and asked him why he wasn't at work?

'I catch all of the fish I need in the mornings, then I can simply enjoy the sea every afternoon' he replied

'But if you fished in the afternoon too you could make more money' The businessman parried

'Why would I want to do that?' Asked the fisherman

'Eventually you could buy another boat' The businessman quickly answered

‘But why would I need another boat?’

‘Then you could employ another man to fish as well and make double the money you do now ’

*‘But what would I need that money for?’ The fisherman scratched his head
‘So that you could sit on the beach every afternoon and do nothing.....’*

Maybe to be really free, we need to move completely out of our ideas of future and present?

Ask yourself is there *really* an actual future and past outside of your thoughts? Can you even wrap your head around that question?

We imagine that the past existed but isn't it just a vague outline of a 'past now' that we have lumped into an artificial 'event' in our mind. Don't we overlay those memories with our own emotions and judgements? We must, because we all have different recollections (sometimes very different) of an apparently same past event.

Likewise, we think that there is a future, but every 'now' just becomes the next now in an endless stream of continuity, we can only truly exist in the millisecond. If we *really* knew what was to come we wouldn't be surprised and discontent when life simply doesn't go exactly as we expect it should; yet experience tells us that is the case, we frequently find a wide chasm between 'actual' life and our expectations of it.

You could argue that almost all of our mental dis-ease or un-easiness is a result of this 'being stuck in time', that is to say living life out of the present. Of course we can't ever truly exist out of the present moment, it is impossible to exist anywhere *but* the present moment; this experiential logic tells us that

time only ever exists as a function of the mind.

Replaying past memories can be the source of great depression, reliving traumatic events or churning over things that have happened that we now miss: people and situations that we might not bear witness to again. Living yet stuck in a past moment stops us from moving on, like the walking dead we exist but are entirely disconnected from the richness of the experience. In contrast, future projection, not being present in the now is to not truly live, it is the root of much of our anxiety, constantly searching for certainty in a future 'now' that we can't possibly foresee and that will never come.

How much would you pay on your deathbed for even an extra day of your life? Everything that you 'owned' I'd guess? If you had just one day left you wouldn't waste it dwelling on the past or worrying for the future, you would fully live that day, immersing yourself in its richness, its vividness, its clarity.

Why wait until that last day?

Why not immerse yourself now?

We imprison ourselves within this cell of imaginary time, its deadlines, constraints and limits. Allowing ourselves to enjoy and embrace activities that have no specific purpose, no financial or other material benefit, goes against almost everything that society tells us we should dedicate 'our time' to. From childhood, schools, well meaning parents, politicians and the consumer driven modern world remind us to *invest* our time for some as yet unknown future gain. To be busy, to work harder and to be seen to work hard by others -apparently that is the key to happiness?.

For the first half of my life, I fully subscribed to this - why wouldn't I? That was what everyone told me and what everyone around me believed too. At school I always worked hard, putting in the hours of study to make sure that I achieved the high grades that everyone, including myself 'expected' I was capable of. I invested years of my life into building up my first and second businesses and get them off the ground until they were 'successful' at least.

Then one day I had the good fortune to work alongside a very sensible lady indeed. She pointed out that my most valuable asset wasn't my house, nor the business that I had worked so hard to build up but simply my time. My 'time' was 'my life' and what I was essentially doing was selling my life, and considering how valuable that was I was certainly selling it cheaply on an hourly rate....

It's so strange, we wouldn't sell our car or house for less than it was worth - in fact we will often haggle over the price of an old bicycle or something else that we are selling with the buyer, even if it is just for a few pounds? But how many of us sell our lives cheaply, as if they are a commodity to be frivolously given away?

There are endless tales of individuals that have improved their lot in life, dragging themselves up from tough beginnings. What we mustn't lose sight of though is that this doesn't become an end in itself. I know many people that have done such a thing; with little if any help they have created a 'better' life, built a business and so on to facilitate this. But there comes a point when we need to stand back and say 'Where is the balance? At what point do I stop working harder and harder, giving all of my time to grow this business, just for the sake of growing the business'?

It's the easiest trap to fall in to, just look around you. Think back the needless topic, there is a lot of crossover here when we start to join up the dots. What do you *really* need and what are you willing to give up for that?

Know when you have hit a good balance....

Where does your time go?

Can you really 'waste' it?

Isn't it *all your* time, whatever you are doing?

Is that just a matter of shifting your perspective or do you need to make other changes?

Careless

C a r e l e s s

Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma - which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of other's opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary

- Steve Jobs

Somewhere in the desert on the outskirts of Cairo...

I'm starting to feel my anxiety intruding like an unwelcome guest. I glance across at Gemma - she raises her eyebrows and I can tell that even she isn't sure about the situation we have got ourselves and our young children into. This only inflates my impending sense of doom... Lila is nearly five years old and Jaia has just turned two. They are already well travelled, to the South of

Egypt, backpacking around Morocco, Turkey and exploring half a dozen more sedate countries to boot. We are being driven into the desert by someone we have never met to a destination we don't know and nobody has been told about it.....

It seemed like a great idea, if a slightly odd one, even by our standards. We had been staying in a hotel on the very edge of Cairo city, out in the suburbs of unregulated buildings that we might in other circumstances call slums or shanty towns.

Our hotel itself was of an OK standard and we had immediately formed a friendship with the cleaner Mahmoud although he spoke not a word of English and we had a bare minimum of Arabic so all communication was by pointing and sign language. Already he had been indulging the tiny Jaia, who refused to eat the food on offer at breakfast. When he discovered that she was a huge fan of falafel (or Tamaayah as they are known on a million street stalls in Egypt) he started bringing her in a falafel in flatbread every morning for her breakfast, purchased no doubt from his favourite street stall, wrapped in greasy newspaper and with the usual accompaniment of fried and mashed aubergines. Needless to say he and Jaia were soon firm friends.

On the fourth day we returned to our room after breakfast to find a crumpled note on the pillow, which, sadly I don't have anymore although I remember the gist of it quite clearly as it was so unexpected and unusual.

Dear Sir and Madam,

My name is Dr Idris (such and such) I am a good friend of your friend and cleaner Mahmoud and he has asked me to write this as you are already

aware that he speaks no English.

He invites you to visit the home of his family tomorrow morning after breakfast as it is his day off. His brother in law will pick you up further down this road next to the stall selling sweets and coca cola. Please you must tell no one at the hotel of this plan because it is forbidden for workers to make such contact with guests and he would be likely to lose his job immediately. His children will never get the chance to visit other countries and he hopes that instead he can bring your family and their culture to them.

Yours etc

I handed the note to Gemma and she read it through too. It wasn't unusual for things like this to happen, I could recount many other times when we were younger and travelling alone that we had ended up invited to such random events across the world, but now we had two little humans to look out for as well. It did seem a bit odd that we had to meet in secret and not share our trip with anyone, we had absolutely no idea where they were going to take us and with very little effort and a simple excuse we could have talked ourselves out of a potentially unknown situation the potential awkwardness that the excursion might bring.

Needless to say, the next day after breakfast we found ourselves in a rusty, sun bleached Mercedes saloon, bumping along an un-tarmacked road further and further from civilization. We left Cairo far behind and rumbled out into the Sahara desert, with a driver that we had never met before and who had not spoken a word since we got in aside from a toothless grin and the words 'Mahmoud friend?'. Every now and then the engine would start to splutter and stall, the driver would touch a religious amulet that swung from the

cracked rear view mirror, mutter something like an incantation under his breath and pull a mysterious length of string that snaked out of one of the fan vents in the dashboard. The string must have been attached to some relevant part of the engine because all of a sudden there would be an increase in revs a roar from under the bonnet and we would be off again, turning onto smaller and smaller roads, passing increasingly fewer mud walled, tin roofed dwellings until we were eventually just bumping along a hardened, rutted track. We passed crumbling step pyramids, a far removed spectacle from their great cousins on the cities edge, literally at the bottom of peoples fences, no signs, information boards or tourist buses giving any indication that they were ever visited. I could imagine what anyone at home would be saying, the words 'terrorist' 'kidnap' and other such nonsense sprung to mind, a lifetime of brainwashing by much of western media and society. There had been a spate of terrorist attacks in the Middle East and just a year later there would be a horrific attack in Cairo itself which would destroy tourism there for years to come. Of course we hadn't actually told any of our family about this planned trip because, surrounded by western news and media, we knew exactly what they would say....

Finally, after about an hour we pulled into an otherwise unremarkable area surrounded by a series of four or five, squat, light brown, mud-walled homes. Our driver, still nameless but smiling honked his horn and from the nearest home to us, barely the size of an average western garage, emerged a beaming Mahmoud, a pregnant lady I took to be his wife and three other children all looking as excited as if santa had just been dropped in from the North Pole.

Our little family and theirs spent the next few hours in an easy silence

communicating by sign language, sitting on the floor in the one room that comprised their home as they fed us an endless stream of fruit, vegetables, cheese, olives and flatbreads. As we sipped sickly sweet, strong black tea, the children played as happily as if they were neighbours on the same street with a doll that only had one arm and some very ancient toy cars. When we finished our time in Cairo we left them everything that we had brought with us - even Jaia's pram for the new baby.

Our lasting memory of that trip to Egypt is not the pyramids, the sphinx or the packed museums of the city, but of that one unexpected day, where we said no to our cares and submitted ourselves into carelessness.

There is a great analogy here that you would do well to remember - don't live your life by the the cares that the rest of society have decided to live by. By this I mean that most people are living in the same daydream, bound to the fears that society has handed down to them and crippled by their cultures' fundamental beliefs about reality and 'how things are in the world'.

I suspect that the advice that we are given is, more often than not, heartfelt and well-intentioned. Yet the question we have to ask ourselves is whether it is actually *well informed* and from a place of wisdom? A lot of well meant advice does not come from a position of a neutral, calm and wise intelligence rather it originates from limited understanding and a root of fear.

We would do well to care a little less for the literal advice of others and learn to trust ourselves, follow our own truth, our own intuition and gut instinct. I'm not saying that we should ignore advice, often it can be useful and

sometimes it is well given, but we should certainly take the time to evaluate it and possibly pay more attention to the underlying intent, as that often carries the more ‘pure’ intuition of the advice giver.

What you will probably notice is that there is actually a close similarity between your own intuition and the intuition of the advisor, even if the methods are different because of course we can only suggest advice, that is to say ‘techniques’ that we are familiar with.

To take a simple example, go to a western doctor with symptoms of depression and they are most likely to advise a course of antidepressant medication, go to a doctor or medicine man in another culture and they might prescribe a change of diet, meditation, a cleansing ritual to exorcise certain spirits - their intention may be the same and their intuition in diagnosing ‘depression’ (or whatever they call it) could also be similar but the advice they give is based on their own, limited understanding and toolbox of fixes.

Trust your gut and it will start talking to you more often. You do know what is best for you, who on Earth do you think could possibly understand *you* better than *you*? Remember, most people are in exactly the same boat and don’t even understand themselves, however ideal their life looks from the outside! Don’t rely on them to fix your problems when they probably can’t even fix their own.

Do you trust yourself and go by your own gut instinct or are you guided by the cares and opinions of others about what you do? Are there times when you doubt the ‘common wisdom’ of society or the ‘general consensus’ but feel that they must know best?

Can you start to speak your truth and feel confident that it is your right to do so, even if it is just in a small way?

Speechless

Speechless

Meditation is to be aware of every thought and of every feeling, never to say it is right or wrong, but just to watch it and move with it. In that watching, you begin to understand the whole movement of thought and feeling. And out of this awareness comes silence.

- Jiddu Krishnamurti

I was a supply teacher at primary schools for many years, I have lost count of the funny stories that happened in my time but one of them has stuck very solidly in my mind as a lesson about language, coherence and the power (or lack of it) in words.

I was covering an infant class, the kids were very young around 5 years old. That morning it was assembly and we filed into the hall with the rest of the school. It so happened that this was a Church of England school and on Thursdays the local priest came in to talk to the children, This particular fellow was a vision of orthodox and strict views - wholly unsuited to young children if you ask me. He also struck quite a sight, over 6ft tall, baldheaded and clad in one of those long black robe things that some priests wear.

Standing at the front he addressed the assembled rabble sternly, holding court on the perils of sin in a language way over the head of anyone in the room and repeating some far fangled tale from the old testament that even I didn't understand. My class especially looked totally baffled and sat whispering to each other, looking at the sunny field outside the hall or casually picking their noses and eating it. He came to the grand finale, something to do with hell and damnation with much ado and waving of arms then asked the confused room if they had any questions at all. One of the less 'sharp' members of my cover class raised his hand. I nearly choked in surprise - I couldn't imagine that he had understood a word of what had been said, I could barely get him to finish a line of writing before the day was out.

'Yes young man?' Asked the unwitting priest pointing a long bony finger at the boy.

Without a moment's hesitation, little Tommy spat out the question that he had obviously been waiting patiently for thirty minutes to ask...

'What colour is your car.....?'

For all his apparent wisdom, the priest was left utterly speechless.

The problem with words is that they simply don't work when it comes down to describing concepts that are beyond our understanding. The priest in this story could have talked for another three hours but the language he was using was so completely alien to the youngsters listening that Tommy would still have asked the same question. Words are powerful but they are also limited and that is something very important that we shouldn't overlook.

Most of the 'content' that we absorb, process and deliver - in books, on

podcasts and discussions, even our very thoughts, are of course made up of words. Ironically it is our attachment to language, and its 'meaning' that limits our understanding of the existence we are trying to explain - the problem is, language works within very specific boundaries.

There is no doubt about it, language is a great means of communicating and processing on a gross level. It is a big step up from hand signals, it allows us to efficiently deal with the other people in our own daily lives, permitting us to explore, explain, describe and instruct, actions, objects, past, present and future. However, language is simply too limited to describe 'deeper' ideas, often they are simply inexplicable 'experiences'.

You know that feeling when your hair stands on end as you listen to a beautiful piece of music or watch a breathtaking sunset? Try to explain that feeling in words (not the hairs standing on end but what it really makes you feel like)..... Can you do it? Can you really explain to someone what that feels like? Can you even explain it to yourself?

The most important question is - does it need to be explained? Isn't it just a thing to be felt? However well I explained it, it wouldn't help you to feel it, that feeling just happens, I can't teach it to someone else. Its a bit like suggesting that you can teach someone to fall in love.

It's an experience beyond explanation, just as enlightenment, awakening or whatever you want to call it are also. Using words to explain things beyond explanation is like trying to untangle a knot by using another knot!

'It is like a finger pointing to the moon, don't concentrate on the finger or you will miss all the heavenly glory!'

- Taoist saying

What is not being said is just as important, if not more so, than what is being said, hence the saying, read between the lines is so useful on many levels.

The assumption that words alone can somehow free us, leads many people ever deeper and deeper into a search for the next thing, the book that will make them finally happy, the yoga teacher or style that can unlock my suffering, someone somewhere must be able to explain what this is all about. Maybe I can talk or think my way out of this cycle of suffering, anxiety or depression, if I can only find the right words to explain it, suddenly everything will make sense

The above 'finger pointing to the moon' quote has been attributed to everyone from the Buddha to Bruce Lee, but who said it is irrelevant. The sentiment is important, the finger (words, thinking, explanation) has no power whatsoever, it simply hints at the *way*, it isn't the way in itself, yet so many of us make this mistake. It is like a dog that has lost its ball, the dogs' owner points to where the ball is in the grass but the dog can only stare towards the hand, fixated by the finger. It lacks the comprehension to see that the finger is just pointing the way, just as every religion and spiritual teaching is also just a signpost, to something *beyond that* which it attempts to explain.

Humans become even more tangled in discussion and analysis of the finger than the dog! At least the dog just stares; humans will wage wars that kill tens of thousands of people and span hundreds of years, all over disagreements about the finger. They will talk and debate endlessly about the purpose of meditation, the difference between meditation and mindfulness,

whether one school or technique is better than another. All the while they waste the real opportunity to live the 'feeling' of those verbal intentions, meditations or suggestions and *experience* them – wasting the chance to walk the path as they instead choose to argue over where it goes.

Of course we can see that it is easy to fall into this trap, it is so much easier for a mind that thinks primarily in words to imagine that it will find the solution to our deepest problems hidden within yet *more* words.

We often understand better when we just allow things to simmer, try not to give the words too much thought, absorb the sentiment, the feeling but not the description, you will take exactly what you need from them and that will rise to the surface exactly when it is ready. Don't worry about the words, they aren't important.

Can you try being speechless? Say less?

Blow your trumpet less? Can you be quick to listen and slow to speak?

The person that can't stop talking verbally will never be able to stop talking mentally.

Limitless

L i m i t l e s s

Your only limitation is the one you set up in your own mind

- Napoleon Hill

The student and the master were sitting under a tree.

‘What is the use of this tree?’ Asked the student tasting its fruit and screwing up his face? ‘The fruits taste sour and are useless for eating. The limbs are twisted and useless for timber. The branches are thorny and useless for baskets. This tree is useless’

‘This tree is entirely useless’ replied the master ‘and in its uselessness lies its very usefulness.

Because of its sour fruits it has not been picked and has borne many saplings; because of its twisted knotty limbs it is useless to any carpenter and has never been chopped down; because of its thorny branches, it has never been plundered by basket makers.

Whilst the apple is seen as a fruit tree and stripped bare each year; the

straightest most splendid oak is perceived merely as good timber and the willow is limited by it's value for basket weaving, this tree stands alone, at a great age, entirely useless, free of striving, not trying or wanting to be 'special' or anything other than itself. Because of this it is able to relax, to be entirely at ease without any other purpose, it is truly limitless.'

I have a good friend when for many years we were living on a canal boat. Whilst I would work a few days per week and enjoy the simple pleasures of a 'low needs' lifestyle on the canal with the rest of the family, he worked very hard, built up a business working on his own and had a very comfortable life, an incredible boat, but almost no time left to himself. By the time we met him, he had fifteen employees and ten vehicles to run and was apparently a financial 'success story' to the outside world after coming from humble beginnings. Yet he was limited by the very character that he had sought to become - a successful, wealthy and powerful businessman. For all of this, he knew that the 'businessman' character wasn't his *true self*. He was constantly stressed and coped by turning to drink and drugs as a way to cope. When he saw the healthy work-life balance that we seemed to have struck, we got to talking a lot about this topic. I wasn't preaching about it, he was simply asking all of the questions that he needed answering. It was as if a lightbulb went off in his head, as if it hadn't occurred to him that he had *become* the person that had actually created the situation he was in. Initially he was very hesitant to let go of what he had taken so long to build up, of course, why wouldn't he be? It's easier to take a chance if you have nothing to lose but when there is a lot to risk that becomes all the more difficult. Yet within barely a year he had dropped all of his staff - sharing out the work between them on a self-employed basis; he cut the lease on his 10

vehicles and was back to working on his own again with one van. Ten years later he says that he has never been happier and on an hourly basis, is barely any worse off financially and a lot richer in life!

I have worked personally with many, many people whom I have seen entirely change their lives in front of me over the course of a year in similar ways. Our personal limiting beliefs are often different - some simply don't believe they are 'good enough' to deserve anything better for themselves due to being told this by parents or peers; others are limited by their current positions - it is very hard to throw in the towel on a lifestyle that is comfortable, in order to do something more 'risky' even if you passionately desire it. There is a greater risk involved, you have set up very strong self restricting limits. Almost everyone, just like my friend in the story above, is limited by a belief that only 'more' can make us happier. Because of that, we might hesitate to let go of comfort, a secure job, accumulated possessions and so on. Like the quote at the head of this section says: we can often cope with the misery of a life we know but not the fear of the unknown alternative. To be really limitless, without imagined walls or barriers to your potential is an incredible thing.

What limits have you set up for yourself?

Who do you *think* you need to be? Why? Where does that belief come from?

What role do you limit yourself to?

Why do you think you need to do what you spend most of your time doing?

Once you are clear about these surprisingly simple questions, you might find that it is a lot easier to start letting go of them and as soon as you do you will be amazed how things just start to unfold for you, simply because you have provided space for that to happen where there was no space before. You have opened the door to being limitless, now you just have to walk through it....

Doubtless

D o u b t l e s s

When you come to a fork in the path, take it

- Zen proverb

When I was in my early twenties myself and Gemma (my now wife) were travelling in Eastern Turkey-at the time a region engulfed in a civil war with the Kurds. There were hardly any travellers around but one day we met a Brit on a motorbike who had ridden it overland from India en route to his house in France. At the time were clueless about what we were going to do after our own travels had finished - we certainly didn't have enough to buy a property in the UK and didn't want to get into horrible debt doing so. This brief meeting sparked an enormous chain of events that I can almost trace back from where we are today. Inspired by his tales of cheap property in France we went back, fell into an effortless coincidence of easy jobs and cheap accommodation, saved solidly for eighteen months and before we knew it had enough to buy the derelict smallholding in rural France that I mentioned in an earlier story. For exactly the money we had saved in a year

we managed to buy several acres with two barns and a fallen down house with no electric, water, sewerage, collapsed floors and the remnants of a roof. We had scarce funds left to do the mountain of work that it needed, so we decided, with little to no building experience that we would do it all ourselves. The funny thing was, we never doubted for a second that we would make this project work. There was certainly some uncertainty from our friends and family but to be fair nobody tried to dissuade us in any way, I think we were so confident that it would all come good that they simply believed us. Being doubtless not only inspires yourself but inspires those around you to believe in the impossible.

From that experience we went on to fit out a river barge from scratch and to achieve many other things that we had no skill set to fall back on. Simply being doubtless that 'you can' is far more powerful motivation than any training or qualification will ever be.

When we realise how we were limiting ourselves through our beliefs and we start to then drop those, the next step is to become *doubtless* that everything will be just fine now that we are allowing it to unfold! Doubtless that what is happening is *exactly what should be happening*. Doubtless that everything is unfolding in such a way because it is the *only* way and the most *perfect* way that it could possibly unfold.

This is a hard thing for most of us. We sincerely believe that if things don't go as we imagine that they should, then they are going 'wrong' or 'incorrectly'. What on Earth makes you so certain that things should go to 'plan'? Surely if that were the case then everyone on the planet would have to have exactly the same plan in mind? That obviously isn't the case because

the peace of the world is constantly torn by struggles between different peoples plans and agendas - from world religions that don't agree and wage holy wars for centuries, through to disputes between former 'friends' about the most trivial matters.

Make no doubt, there is a whole lot of letting go and accepting less control here; even accepting that if things don't go exactly to your plan, that's okay, it's still totally perfect just because you don't like it! In fact you will really start to suffer a lot less when that happens and you can just accept it.

Think about this as an example: you have been delayed somewhere on your travels, maybe at an airport or train station. Lots of individuals are all waiting to get where they need to be - all with the same basic 'plan'. You do a bit of people watching and you notice that there are some people making the most of the situation, maybe chatting to family or even to strangers - maybe making a new friend out of the situation! Others are reading a book or listening to their headphones, they might even be calmly altering their travel arrangements. There is another set of people, red in the face, maybe pacing up and down, snapping at their children for the slightest reason and complaining angrily about the situation to staff - who are probably powerless to do anything about it whatsoever.

I'm not suggesting that we should stay silent about injustice or never complain, what I am saying is that the individuals that simply can't let go of their 'plan' are the ones suffering here, that is clear to see. Some other people with exactly the same itinerary may be equally inconvenienced but are suffering nowhere near as much because they are, sensibly, letting go of a

need to control a situation that is out of their control. If you have any doubt about this, travel to any third world country - public transport runs on a time schedule all of its own, its unpredictable, crowded and invariably hot. Yet there is a mass acceptance of this by the majority of the population, they are used to things not going to their personal agenda and so it has become, through experience, much more efficient and less stressful to simply allow things to unfold.

It's important to note here that being doubtless and accepting the natural flow of things is not to be confused with blind faith. That is something very different to acceptance.

Blind faith is *disempowering*, one can become completely detached, feeling like they have no control over their destiny, simply trusting to unquestioned beliefs or teachings.

In comparison, acceptance requires us to be fully aware of the moment. Only in that complete awareness can we see with clarity that everything is just as it is and be doubtless of the fact that its just perfect -whether we believe that we like it or not. From this place of clarity we are then *empowered* to make the most intelligent, intuitive and efficient decisions about how to respond to our current environment.

Do you see the difference? To be doubtless is to have an effortless and totally efficient connection to the universe whereas blind faith is a very inefficient disconnection. When there is no doubt, there will be no hesitation and when there is no hesitation everything unfolds exactly as it is meant to - then the struggling stops as you realise that the only thing you were struggling with was yourself.

Blameless

B l a m e l e s s

To attribute your bad luck or good fortune to external sources is to believe that as an individual you are of such divine significance that the universe sees fit to conspire for or against you...that seems very weird if you ask me

- that one's mine

I had never been so ready in my life to scream at the heavens and blame it for the series of events over the past few days...

Lila was six months old, we had returned to the UK for her birth as the French health service hadn't 'permitted' a home birth as our house was too isolated. Since then we had returned to France to live but rather than feeling more complete, it now felt more empty. We had nobody to share our new treasure with, no family and friends to coo over her or change her nappy. We had £4000 in the bank and had, as a temporary bolthole, found the impossible - a tiny narrowboat for sale in the UK at exactly the right amount. Sure it was fibreglass and 40 years old, no-one knew who had built it or why it was such an odd shape, but we could afford it, it sort of floated and it

would have to do for now.

When we arrived to pick her up the vendors had already headed off to Spain for their retirement. It was four days before Christmas and we were using the timeframe between now and the new year to move her from Worcester to Cambridge - a pretty long canal journey by anyone's standards. The Canal Trust always close and repair the canals over winter but allow a brief window over Christmas for people to make necessary journeys...such as this.

Things didn't start well. There was a handwritten note on the tiny fold down table from the past owner - 'Good luck, so sorry I dropped a spanner and broke the fuel filter housing. Luckily I found a replacement in the spares box and have left you to change it'.

This was an ancient 1950's 'Petter' diesel engine, changing the fuel filter housing wasn't a simple screw on screw off affair. It involved 'sweating' the old pipes off and soldering the pipes back on afterwards with a blowtorch. Of course I had no blowtorch or solder with me, it was 4:00pm on a Friday afternoon, the shops shut at five and wouldn't open again until after xmas. I didn't even hesitate, jumped back in the car, raced around asking people for the nearest plumbers merchants, bought necessary blowtorch, flux and solder, then tore back. Almost dark I squeezed into the tiny, damp, engine compartment with a torch clamped between my teeth, only to find that the blowtorch was faulty or had run out of gas. Now with 15 minutes left I hurtled back to the shop just as they were closing up and begged them to replace it. Subsequently, by the time I'd finished it was completely dark...this was to set the scene for the next few days.

At this point I could have started the process of blaming events and people

for what appeared to be bad luck, in fact I probably did. However what I didn't consider until much later, was the amount of good luck that I was overlooking at every turn. We just don't see all of the great little turns of fate that every day brings.

So....

Good fortune I overlooked 1: Because of our time in France I'd become a very proficient plumber, installing the entire water and heating system in the house. What good fortune to now have the knowledge and skill I needed to get that filter on and off.....

Good fortune I overlooked 2: The shops were still just about open, and just about is all that I needed them to be.

Day two, it was bitterly cold but our friend Nick turned up to help as Gemma had to stay inside with Lila and the feeble, smoky wood-burner. Nick thawed the frozen coils of rope from the roof by holding them over the chimney - it was that cold! We had barely motored a couple of miles and I looked down to see, rather surprisingly, sparks coming out of the exhaust. I glanced at the temperature gauge and it was in the red. We quickly pulled over to the bank, checked everything obvious and could see no water moving through the cooling system. The valve that allowed water to enter from the river to cool the engine was shut! When the past owner had done a little work on it previously he had obviously shut it off and forgot to re-open it. We opened the valve, set off again but the temperature rose once more. It now became clear that the water pump had burned out due to 'running dry' with no water

in it.... There was some deliberation and then we fell back on plan B.... with nowhere to buy a new pump at this time of year and with no engine to use, we would pull her along the bank for the next fifteen miles to a boatyard where we could leave her and arrange for her to be craned out and moved by lorry to Cambridge after Christmas.

After the first day of pulling we agreed it wasn't pleasant but walking our way through the long dark tunnels by lying on the roof with our feet in the air was quite fun! We had managed to cover about ten miles, took her through the next lock and moored up for the night.

Good fortune I overlooked 3: Nick wanted to stop before the lock because we were so tired, but for some reason I insisted that we get through one more lock before bed, I had no idea why until we woke the next day...

The next morning Nick woke up and climbed out of the hatch for some air. He looked back in shortly after and muttered 'I'm just going to take a quick walk'.

When he didn't return after 10 minutes I decided to check he was OK, when I climbed onto the back deck I was more than a bit shocked to see that the entire stretch of canal that we had motored through the evening before was completely empty of water. It was like someone had pulled out the plug, there were boats just sitting down on the mud. If we hadn't 'locked through' we would have been sitting there with them. When Nick returned, it seems odd now but all I could think to say was 'Where have all the fish gone...?' We called the Canal Trust to let them know, apparently now and then, local kids would open the lock gates at night and drain a section out 'for a laugh

either that or a submerged shopping trolley was stuck under the gates that we had wound down last night.....

That wasn't the end of the problems, the canal ahead of us had entirely frozen overnight. We couldn't just pull the boat through and break it because ice could slice through the fibreglass hull like butter. Team talk convened, we came up with the plan that one person would go ahead, throwing the anchor on a rope out into the river and break the ice whilst the other single handedly pulled her through. She wasn't a heavy boat but this nearly broke our spirits, it was painfully slow progress and we winced as the ice scraped along the sides of the boat. After an hour or so we were almost relieved when the ice cut clean through the rope and we lost the anchor altogether into the murky darkness.....

Very soon after, a man appeared from an ancient looking cast iron barge, moored to the bank just past where we had come a scupper. It was 11am, he was already drunk and about to head to the pub, but informed us that as long as we had it back by closing time we could use his boat to break the final 3 miles of ice to the boatyard as his barge was 'So thick, ice wouldn't touch it'. Thank the heavens! We said that of course we'd pay for the fuel we used and buy him a drink, at which point he noted that he wouldn't need fuel money because his engine hadn't run for over two years. He'd meant that we could pull his boat the three miles, then pull it back home, then pull ours up through the cleared ice.....

So we did...

Good fortune I overlooked 4: The drunken man on the boat woke up just at

the right moment and if it wasn't for Nicks presence today, I'd have given up already

Good fortune I overlooked 5: The owner of the boatyard was a workaholic and was still there on Christmas eve; he loved the story so much that he craned it out for next to nothing and we only had to pay for the lorry to move her....

*We vowed never, ever to buy another boat.
Needless to say, less than a year later we did....*

We could have blamed every one of those turns of misfortune, as if fate was pitted against us, but there were just as many moments of good luck that meant we actually got there in the end. Of course none of it really had us in mind it all just happened, but it can be very easy to get into a mindset where we don't see it that way...

Being blameless follows logically on from being doubtless. It means not to single out events, things or people as the causes of your state of mind, be that a positive or negative state.

Most of us are trapped in a culture of blame; without any hesitation, we blame our suffering, angst and anxiety as well as our pleasure and happiness on external phenomenon, that is to say on the world that we perceive to be outside of ourselves.

If we are 'happy' then we are almost certainly content to 'blame' it on circumstances that we perceive to be in line with how we think things should

have gone or be unfolding. Maybe we received some praise from a work colleague, maybe we won a competition, maybe we are enjoying the taste of a chewy toffee, maybe the weather is sunny and warm. Our perception of reality ties in with what we wanted it to be.

In contrast we quickly blame our suffering on external circumstances too. We may even in different situations imagine that we suffer from conditions that might otherwise cause us 'happiness'. For example the chewy toffee that we had one second before enjoyed, might suddenly pull out a filling and then the very same thing causes us to suffer. We are driving along enjoying our brand new car, the newness and feeling of this machine along with the attention it is drawing seems to be causing us great joy and we can't imagine it to ever be otherwise. We are so busy bathing in this imagined admiration that we aren't paying attention to the road and drive into the tail of the car in front of us. Suddenly the car that a moment ago seemed to be such a source of positivity is dented and damaged at great cost. Now we find ourself surrounded by entirely unwanted attention from the very same onlookers an angry driver in front. In the blink of an eye we can blame the same external conditions for happiness or suffering. The car now appears to be making us unhappy whereas it had previously appeared to be the source of our happiness. Peculiar?

When we start to become doubtless that the universe has an intelligence, that life doesn't happen *to us* as we imagine, it *just happens*, we will then start to become part of that happening. At that point we have begun the process of becoming blameless. We stop wasting our precious energy blaming everything else for how we feel. When we cease blaming we will stop feeling

powerless about those situations, we can take our power back, no longer feeling like a victim at the whims and fancies of the 'external world'. Instead we discover a new power in the recognition that things just happen and we just happen to be a part of the play going on - how we are affected by them is largely down to our perception and our choices about how we react.

Do you imagine that things happen 'to you'?

Does that make you feel powerless?

Are you able to shift your perspective a little?

Maybe try to make a list of all the things that *haven't* 'gone wrong' today; from the moment you opened your eyes this morning and realised that you could still see.

Pointless

Pointless

There's nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be..

- John Lennon

It was early morning, 6am or so on a cold January day in central London. We had arrived at the crack of dawn to open up a multi-floor venue near London Bridge for an all day charity fundraiser with some of the most popular yoga teachers in the country and hundreds of people booked to attend. As we got closer to the building, an old industrial warehouse now converted into a giant multi-use space, it was clear to see that, not unusually for London, there was someone huddled asleep in the doorway. On a makeshift bed of flattened cardboard boxes, surrounded by several cans of special brew and empty plastic cider bottles, they were wrapped in so many old blankets that it was impossible to see a figure underneath. I took it upon myself to gently wake the sleeping figure. He as it turned out to be, woke with a start, no doubt used to being attacked or threatened in such a vulnerable

state. I quickly reassured him that we only needed to get in through the doorway and he visibly relaxed. As the others unlocked and went inside I asked him if he'd like to come in for a coffee and some breakfast with us. Within five minutes, the ice was broken, he was no more or less than me in my eyes, nor his own. We were just two humans having breakfast together. He chatted openly with everyone present, curious about what we were doing and us in turn curious about how he had come to be living in this doorway. The story wasn't important, it was just as sad as the many you would hear if you spoke to a dozen others in a similarly desperate situation - a combination of bad luck and circumstances combining in an imperfect storm. We invited him to stay for the event, he had never practised yoga but empathised with the cause that we were supporting - raising funds for war stricken refugees and was keen to get involved and help out. All day he stayed, pitching in and helping the event to run smoothly, unrolling yoga mats, making tea. I gave him thirty pounds to go and grab some more candles for the meditation - there was a lingering doubt in the back of my mind that we might not see him again, but sure enough he came back with a receipt and the candles.

The end of the day finally came, he stayed with us until the last minute, rolling the mats back up, sweeping the floors and picking up rubbish. We loaded him up with all of the leftover food and parted with a hug and a good luck. Tears welling up in his eyes he thanked us for making him feel part of something again, even if only for a day. That's all it took - more powerful than money, more useful than a cup of coffee, simply to be accepted and not to be judged.

Pointless is a continuation of blameless, in particular where blaming operates at a more interpersonal level. It is a reminder to be less judgmental of others, to literally 'point-less' to stop criticising others.

We all know it in some logical way, but often forget, that the way most of us 'live in the world' is as the sum of all of our life experiences up to this very second. Everything that has ever happened to us, every thing we have ever done, every event and person encountered, every action, word and even every thought that we have had, has conditioned us to be the person that we *imagine* we are now. Of course in an ideal 'awakened state' we would be free of this conditioning and remain 'pure awareness'. However for most of us, and I certainly count myself in this group, this is pretty unlikely to be the case, we are pretty ignorant as to why we are like we are an act like we act.

Importantly and something we often ignore, is that exactly the same rules apply to everyone else too; you could say that we are all daydreaming together. It is easy to point the finger at someone and judge them by their actions or the 'flawed character' that we perceive them to have, but we should remember - they are almost certainly bound up in the same daydream that we are. They are acting as the sum of their life experiences, the things that have happened to them and the things that they have done. When we wake up to this, instead of pointing the finger, we may find that we can empathise with their situation. Even the apparently cruellest people surely didn't come out of their mothers womb in that way - we were all born with infinite possibilities at some point, yet to be altered by the circumstances we were born into.

'But...' you may say 'Regardless of that, I would never do what that person

has done, I would never be so racist and violent' or whatever you happen to vilify the most.

Really? Are you so sure about that?

We forget that we only speak from our own experience and background.

Of course, growing up in the life you might have had thus far, if it were with calm and liberal parents, friends and circumstances, then no, you would most likely not be like that; but walk in the shoes of another, experience exactly the same situations, trials, parents, friends and circumstances that they have endured and don't be so sure that the person you are criticising isn't exactly the person you would have become. Take even the most intolerant, violent, cruel person and allow them to have lived an entirely different life and the chances are that they would turn out totally differently.

That certainly isn't to say that we are at the mercy of our circumstances. That would suggest that we are just a piece of clay to be moulded by others, without any control of our own person. No, we do all have the potential to rise above our situations and seemingly external occurrences, there are many stories of humans that rise from the hardest of lives. Yet this is rare without prior understanding of the concepts that we have discussed already

Of course once you understand the concept the truth of how this works, things are very different. One of my favourite stories to exhibit this is about a Tibetan Buddhist monk, imprisoned during the annexation of Tibet. When asked after he was released, if he had ever been afraid in his years of captivity, he said 'Yes, but only one time.' When quizzed about what terror had finally nearly broken him he simply replied 'Once, I almost lost compassion for my captors'.....

He knew that to point the finger of blame would be totally disempowering. Isn't to point less, simply another way of standing up and saying 'I am the only one who has the power over me? I will choose whether or not to be affected by something or someone?'

Do you find yourself blaming others for your own suffering?

Do you feel that it will reduce your suffering if you can somehow pin it on someone else?

Is it easier to feel aggrieved, as if you are the victim in life?

If so, what happens if you stop blaming others?

What happens if you just accept that life happens?

Could that be empowering rather than disempowering?

F l a w l e s s

You're always with yourself, so you might as well enjoy the company

- Diane Von Furstenberg

A very sad person, unable to love himself or forgive his own faults went deep into the forest to seek out a famous and wise teacher who lived there. When he finally found him and explained his situation the teacher said simply 'Lets take a walk together'

As they wandered through the forest they observed the ancient, twisted and gnarled trees, limbs reaching for the sunshine.

'What do you think of these trees?' asked the teacher.

'I find them fascinating and wonderful to look' at replied the troubled man.

'I'm not sure that I give them much thought at all though'

You know that they have grown that way because of their conditions - the other trees casting shade, the direction of the wind and so on, it has caused them to twist and become contorted, bent out of shape. You do not think them to be ugly and the trees do not judge themselves either, yet without hesitation you make exactly that judgement about yourself, forgetting that you are the

same as those trees - simply a product of the conditions and many other trees that have ever surrounded you.'

If pointless is to stop judging others so harshly, then to be flawless is to know that we, ourselves, are perfect just as we are. We are certainly more critical of ourselves than of anything or anyone else. After all, how can we ever expect to be more accepting of the universe around us if we can't even practice that forgiveness personally?

All of our apparent 'flaws' are simply aspects of us as we are at this *moment*. What we might consider as a flaw in our character might be considered as a strength by someone else, or that 'defect' may come into play as a real strength at a certain point in time. Everything is relative.

As long as we take the opportunity to practice self-enquiry, through deep and clear observation, we will always continue to grow and become the best version of ourselves that we can be. What we might perceive as shortcomings in our character can actually serve as incredibly useful teachings. We can benefit hugely from exploring not only the idea of the 'flaw' itself but also the entire process of judgement that we have constructed around it.

What do you beat yourself up about?

Where does that self-judgment come from?

Is it of use in any possible way - does it serve you at all? If not then why don't you simply let it go?

An opportunity to at least practise self- tolerance is present in almost every

moment. If we are self aware - and that's the only place that the work can begin - then we will recognise all of the moments each day where we judge ourselves. Maybe we have been impatient, snapped at a family member, found ourselves judging another person or being jealous of what they have? Every time we notice this, it isn't in any way useful to judge ourselves. How can judging possibly help? It could be in itself considered a flaw of character surely? It is enough to simply recognise that something happened and accept that it occurred - we can't at this point make it 'un-occur' so let's not bother trying! Once we recognise and accept it as calmly as possible we have already learned from it.

The more we practise this simple technique, the more easily we will spot it when it arises and eventually we will start to catch it just before it happens. At that point we are in a very powerful position, because then we can make a calm and conscious choice to not express that side of our normally reactive character if we choose not to. We have taken back the power over our own reactive self, without any need to suppress it or establish internal conflict.

Peaceful, sublime self-awareness and self-control....

Clueless

The door to God is the insecurity of not knowing anything. Bear the grace of that uncertainty and all wisdom will be yours.

- Adyashanti

An elderly farmer lived a simple life, with only his son to help tend the farm and a single horse to work the fields and pull his cart to market. One morning he woke up to find that the horse had escaped and disappeared. 'What awful news, we are so sorry to hear about your lost horse' offered his neighbours. 'Who knows what is good and what is bad?' he replied with no obvious sign of distress

The next day the horse returned, but following it were three wild, magnificent and ownerless horses that now by rights belonged to the farmer. The same neighbours, now slightly jealous, pointed out what amazing luck this was... 'Who knows what is good and what is bad?' He answered, just as measured

and honest as the day before.

A few days later, his son, breaking in the new horses shortly was thrown by one of the wilder animals and broke a leg.

'Dreadful turn of events, so sorry to hear about your son' Offered the neighbours (now slightly consoled in their jealousy of the farmers recent good luck)

'Who knows what is good and what is bad?' The wise old man returned, unperturbed as ever.

The very next day the army arrived in the region, conscripting for a long and bloody battle that has claimed many young men. However due to his broken leg, the son was of no use and they moved onto the next village.

'Who would have thought that this turn of events could have saved your son from such an awful outcome' gasped the neighbours, amazed at this coincidence

'Who knows what is good and what is bad.....'

To be clueless is to be uncertain, and to simply accept uncertainty as a fact of life is much more logical than constantly seeking it in things that we *can't* possibly know - *that* is borderline insanity

This sounds totally at odds with our current behaviour - we seek some comfort in the mystery of what lies ahead by constantly trying to determine an imagined future. The many decisions that we make each day are often based upon this future guesswork, sometimes it is well informed, often it is not. Of course to be a clueless individual in our society is considered an undesirable characteristic, the modern world highly values the accumulation

of knowledge as a strength. Indeed this goes a long way to explaining why we have become so disconnected from our own ‘internal compass’; we have a thirst for gathering ever more second hand knowledge from outside whilst turning away from trusting our simple, inherent wisdom, inside.

It is a totally logical but entirely overlooked truth that the only real comfort we *can* discover lies not in trying to predict the future but in the acceptance that actually we are entirely clueless about it; maybe we should just try to enjoy the ride! The constant mental effort involved in trying to work things out - to assume we can somehow calculate what is coming - is both exhausting and ultimately pointless, it is also the source of a great deal of our suffering. We suffer when actual events don’t correspond to how we pictured them, there is a clash that happens and a resistance to the surprising new events that unfold, more so if we perceive them as ‘negative’.

Why do we find it such a shock? After all the universe is unfathomably complex, there are so many variables and players involved in every single matter that to think we know anything with certainty is absurd. To take a very powerful (and slightly morbid) example, each day when you wake up, you never consider that it might be your last, but at some point you will wake up for the very last time and what a surprise that will be if you aren’t prepared for it! In fact, this is the basis for one of the most powerful meditations on ‘being clueless’ that there is. In the Buddhist tradition, there is a practice where each morning you contemplate that today might well be your final day - for your physical body at least. It might sound like quite a depressing thing to put yourself through just after waking up but actually it is designed to be incredibly liberating by reminding us that not only should we live each day to

the fullest as if it is our last, but more importantly that we can relax in the ‘knowledge’ that we just can’t know what is to come and moreover we don’t need to.

When I was building up my current business, I came to a juncture at one point when I had the opportunity to turn a corner. I certainly wasn’t going to be the next Bill Gates but I had a very easy opportunity to take it to the next level by taking on work not only outside my quiet neck of the woods, but into London and around the country. I was literally being asked to take my product out there by demand. Fear and uncertainty as a self-employed individual shouts ‘do it now, you may never have the chance again’ but at the very same time in my heart I knew that it wasn’t what I really wanted. One of the things that I fell back on in making my decision was accepting that I was actually clueless about the end result of ‘growing’ the business further. Of course I imagined that great things would come of it but that was simply imagining - an illusion of the future. There was the probability that I’d earn more for sure, but many *unforeseen* things could happen as well, both good and bad. Even if I did make all of this presumed money there were a million things that meant I might not enjoy it or that it might just as well have a negative impact on my life or the life of others. You simply cannot know. This wasn’t nagging doubt or fear, it was a calm acceptance that it is fine to follow my inner voice because actually *I-just-don’t-know*.

That’s the thing about unforeseen events, you don’t foresee them because you think things will unfold in a certain way. You just have to remind yourself that these thoughts are just that, thoughts with no substance. What I was really *sure* about though was my gut feeling that personally I didn’t want to

dedicate my life to chasing more money. This wasn't an imagination of a possible future, it was a very deep truth inside of me. So not only did I turn down the opportunities being offered, but I also let go of half of my existing work. You know what? I'm still here. I have a lot more free time, I see my family all the time, I get to surf, mountain bike, swim in the sea whenever I want, we can't afford to move house or buy a newer car but we still have plenty to eat and are, by and large, happy!

Have you ever been certain of something and then things have turned out very differently?

Do you make a lot of decisions based on a mental imagining of how you think things will unfold?

Do you resist or reject you gut feeling, your inner wisdom because your logic, your over-thinking mind assumes that it knows better?

Does this cause you to miss out on what you really want to do with your life?

Let go of certainty, let go of thinking you know why things are happening and how they 'should' unfold. Let go of control and enjoy less of the stress that accompanies it.

Accept that you are totally clueless.

U s e l e s s

No-one seems to know how useful it is to be useless

- Chuang Tzu

There once lived a very poor lady in a very distant land. She lived a simple life with her four children, their only possession was a battered and broken cooking pot. It was an enormous pot, though the handle had snapped off long ago, it was almost rusted through and most people would have called it useless and discarded it long ago.

But that pot kept them alive, each day she would visit the local market at closing time and collect the bruised and misshapen vegetables that were left, cooking them up each evening into a simple broth that kept her family nourished.

It happened that a sailing vessel needed a cook for a short trip and asked her if she could use some extra money. Of course without hesitation she joined the small crew but no sooner had they lost sight of land than a terrible storm whipped up. Waves crashed over the prow of the boat and it looked sure to

sink but taking turns to bail out water using the enormous pot, they just about stayed afloat. Sails destroyed they drifted for many days, only surviving by catching falling rain to drink in the pot. Eventually they washed up on an island only to be greeted by an angry looking tribe who marched them off to meet their leader. Emerging from a hut came the ruler of the tribe, whiter than snow and shaded by palm leaves that the villagers held over him. It was clear to the old lady that this man was incredibly sensitive to the sun and wanting to alleviate his suffering she offered up her enormous bowl as a sun-hat. The tribe leader was overwhelmed by her kindness, she had changed his life forever! In gratitude he showered her and the sailors with gold, silver and precious gems, sending them back towards home with good directions and repaired sails.

On arriving home the King of the land grew incredibly jealous of their newfound wealth and vowed that he would visit this distant tribe and offer their leader the best things that he owned. Surely if the tribe leader would repay a mere cooking bowl so richly what would he give for great artwork, sculptures and the finest jewellery in the kingdom? He set sail for the island and upon arriving laid out the most fantastic treasures of the kingdom before the tribal lord. Taken aback by such apparent generosity, the leader could only think to offer in exchange the most precious thing that he possessed - so taking the bowl from his head he solemnly handed it over to the King.

The star of this tale, the pot, at no point made any effort to be of use. It was perfectly content to be considered 'useless' just to be itself. Yet without any plan or desire, time and time again it had a role to play in the great game of life - collecting vessel, cooking implement, bailing bucket, rain catcher,

sunshade - until it's very last gift was one that only it could offer: humility to the King.

If we believe in our version of 'self' then we will naturally believe that this 'self' has to have some role, some kind of 'usefulness', in the same way that we define almost everything around us as being useful or not useful to *us*. But what makes you so certain that you should have a particular use? That you should be useful?

The entire idea of being defined by a 'use' actually seems to lessen what I am, it undermines the value of simply being. At the end of the day, simply being is all I truly know, anything else is a mental addition to that.

Yet we usually let this idea of 'use' define our lives entirely; our 'roles' as a father, husband, plumber, lawyer; our direction and future choices. As we attempt to shift into the 'lesser' way of living, as we have discussed through the many previous topics, allowing ourselves to be 'useless' can be a very liberating starting point.

There are parallels with the earlier subject of being aimless here, but to be 'useless' cuts much deeper; it *is* an incredibly difficult idea to take on board as it seems to be entirely central to who we imagine ourselves to be - our purpose in life. Why - almost anyone would ask - would we do anything if it had no use, in fact if we ourselves aren't of any use to others, what is the point of 'us' at all? What *is* our purpose?

Almost everything that we engage with has some sort of measurable use that we overlay upon it. From the resources of the planet itself, to education, even our relationships.

For example, in your relationship(s) do *you* co-exist with the purest

intentions, simply for the pleasure of being in good company and providing love and support, or is there always an element of wanting to be liked or loved in return? Is some sort of exchange expected?

The need to be needed, to be useful and to find 'use' in our connection with others is really pretty dysfunctional when you think about it - what you are saying is that you have a vested interest even with your most beloved.

Likewise to see the world generally in terms of its usefulness to us is an incredibly self-centred view.

There have been some human societies that have not subscribed to this way of seeing the world. For example, many tribal societies living in close harmony with their environment have a deep reverence for the other organisms that share that space. They understand that humans must take some, in order to survive, but this is understood as a necessity, the entirely natural movement of energy through an ecosystem in order for all species to coexist. Other species are not reduced to simply being 'useful' any more than we are 'useful' to a lion or a shark. They are often understood and deeply felt to have an equal significance to humans and as a result of this they are rarely exploited or over hunted - there is a complete understanding that everything is in balance and needs to stay in balance. In contrast modern 'civilisation' has completely forgotten or ignored this balance, what science would call homeostasis. We have plundered every resource, from driving countless species to extinction through over hunting, to mining the deepest reserves of the Earth. Only more recently are people waking up to the impact of what we have done and the irony is that they now want to preserve our natural resources because they see how useful they are to our survival!

What would it *really* mean if you were to be more useless?

Just like the story of the pot, might there not be some deeper, much more profound *usefulness* that you don't perceive?

Can you let go of use? Stop clinging, stop trying to be special, stop driving to be the best, let go of being needed?

Just like the tree in the story, can you find the freedom within that uselessness and as you embrace that might others also see that being useless in the way we normally define it isn't actually all that bad, in fact it can be pretty darn great?

P a r t T w o

C o n c e p t l e s s

The words printed here are concepts. You must go through the experiences.

- Saint Augustine

Here things begin to get a bit more odd. You might find some of the following topics difficult to swallow, that is partly because they can't be understood by the normal 'thinking' mind. To try and think your way to a natural conclusion about these subjects is a bit like chasing your own tail in circles. Even trying to discuss such ideas is impossible, it is a bit like trying to explain the colour green to someone that has always been blind. There is simply no point of reference to work from.

However as we talk around the following topics you might feel a sense of what is being hinted at, it can be very much like glimpsing something out of the corner of your eye, when you turn to look at it, it's no longer there. In this case, as soon as you try to focus your thoughts on it, you realise that *it can't be thought about*. Hmmm very tricky!

Of course, if it's just too darn odd then my advice is to just skip over this altogether; all of the topics that we have discussed so far have great potential to help you see more clearly and when we start to see more clearly often the way reveals itself without needing any help at all.....

Philosophers and thinkers talk this 'un-talkable' topic into the ground don't they? Selflessness, abolishing the ego. But what does it mean to be selfless, to be egoless, at one with everything? Motionless and yet entirely in the moment? Certainly our greatest questions, yet one of the most complex topics to explore: who, or more accurately, *what* are we?

It might be easier if we start to consider *what we are not* because we are a lot less solid and permanent than we imagine ourselves to be.

All of the topics that we have looked at so far are elements of our imagined 'self'. They make up many of the elements that we believe define 'who we are' - our worries and fears (fearless), having a purpose or role (useless), a clear direction in life (aimless), judging ourselves and others (pointless), craving and chasing (needless and motionless), trapped to concepts of future and past (timeless), thinking we need to know how life should be unfolding (clueless) and so on. Look back over the topics and you might start to get a sense of this.

Because we frame our lives with concepts such as these, it means that most people have a very strong *connection* to who they think they are. We believe we are the body that we see before us and we believe that this body is animated and brought to life somehow by the thinking emotional

mind that talks to us all day, but is this really so or is it just a mistaken assumption?

We may think that our body and mind are the most precious things that we 'own' and that everything should be tailored around making things just perfect for this 'I'. But if attachment to 'self' is causing me to do all of this running, judging, fretting, suffering, clinging, grasping and so on, maybe the first thing I really need to understand is *what* is this 'self' that I think is so solid and real? That is important, because at the end of the day, it is this idea of 'self' that is directing the course of every single thing I 'do'.

You may think 'my arm hurts' or 'I don't like that person' but who is this 'I' that is aware of that thought? The thoughts can't see themselves can they? Is the awareness of the thought you just had any different than the awareness of a car passing by? If no then what makes the thought any more 'you' than the car?

Could it be that you are really neither the mind nor the body?

Formless

F o r m l e s s

Reality is a formless lure and only when we know this do we dare to be
unreal

- Maxwell Bodenheim

You may look down and see a flesh and bones body before you that seems to be very much 'you', but if this is 'you', then who were you twenty years ago as a three year old child with a tiny body and very different understandings, or as a 3 day old baby? Who will you be in sixty years when you can't walk properly and this healthy body is failing? Where did your solid sense of 'you' go?

Where is the self if you look for it?

In a finger? A whole arm? The entire body?

What would happen if you lost a limb, or were disfigured in an accident, would you be less 'you' or a new someone else?

Science now knows that our body almost totally regenerates its cells every seven to ten years; therefore even if we do look superficially 'the same' to the eye, we are literally a different body. Not only that, but on an atomic level we are shifting constantly, every infinitesimal moment atomic particles are arising and passing away, we are literally never the same physical 'self' from one moment to the next.

Medicine is now so advanced that it could almost certainly remove all of our body except for the brain and probably retain our consciousness - who on Earth would we be then? A brain in a glass jar? We could even stimulate electrical activity in parts of the brain and replicate visual and audio sensations that are normally initiated by the sense organs such as the ears and nose - they already do such a thing with some specialist hearing aids. Dwell on that for a moment, an entire reality created by electrical stimuli....of course, the irony is, that is already how we perceive the world around us: senses perceiving the world via electrical stimuli in the brain to make order out of it all. Did you know we actually 'see' the world upside down due to the way the lens in the eye bends the light coming through the pupil? The brain flips it back the right way up for us! If you hang upside down for several days, your brain will again turn the image the right way up – they discovered that during some very odd experiments!

A very important lesson!

There is however something very, very useful that we can learn from our body, notably from any sensations that arise in the body and the breath. It is something that the Buddha noted as one of his key teachings over a thousand years ago, from his observations during meditation.

As a concept it is incredibly simple, but as a key understanding and practice it is commonly overlooked. He observed that the mind is involved in a chain of reactivity to these bodily sensations, yet we mistake these as reactions to what we believe are external phenomenon. That probably makes no sense. So start by imagining this, you are walking along a dark street at night and you hear footsteps behind you. Your breath becomes shallow and speeds up, your body is flooded with adrenaline and becomes tense - your physical body has reacted to the situation. Likewise, take just a single piece of chocolate and place it on your tongue and within seconds a wave of sensations flood your entire body.

We think that it is the chocolate that we love and the footsteps in the dark that we dislike, therefore in the future we crave chocolate and we avoid dark streets at night, yet not everyone loves chocolate or is afraid of footsteps at night so they can't be a fundamental source of these cravings and aversions. Likewise if chocolate was indisputably good, then the more we ate of it, the happier we would feel but we all know there is a point that we start to feel ill and can't stand the thought let alone taste of another chocolate bar. So what is really happening?

Phenomenon-

Any sight, sound, thought, in fact anything that seems to exist in our world



Cognition / awareness / knowing

There is simple awareness that the phenomenon is present, there is no judgement of it at this stage, just pure knowing or cognition



Re-cognition / Perception

This is a result of past conditioning, cultural background and our own history of experiences. We evaluate the phenomenon that we have become aware of. You could say that in the previous stage we cognized it and now we are *re-cognizing* it. Here we classify it as good / bad / neutral



Sensation -

Based on how we recognize the phenomenon, the breath and body will experience a sensation. This happens with absolutely everything that appears in our world, it's just that some reactions are strong e.g chocolate whilst many others are so subtle that we just don't notice them.



Reaction -

We react mentally to the sensation in the body or breath, even if we aren't consciously aware of it. However, and here is the important bit: because the

chain of reaction is so fast we *wrongly believe* that we are reacting to the original phenomenon. If the bodily sensation feels nice we crave the experience again, if it feels unpleasant we become averse to that experience. Repeated reactions lead to deepening attachment /aversion/neutral which feeds back to our earlier perception

You can see that attachment and aversion clearly arise through this craving to avoid unpleasant somatic sensations and to chase after pleasant somatic sensations. A very obvious example is that if we eat something that we are intolerant to and it makes us sick, we will naturally avoid again it in the future. We not only avoid it but we have a mental aversion to it, albeit a logical one that we have noticed clearly via the obvious cause and effect. However on a much more subtle level there are fluctuations that accompany every thought, experience, encounter and so on in our day to day activities. These subtle signals might include... a longer pause after the inhalation, a shallower breath, a change in the 'vibration' of the body that is either pleasant or unpleasant, tension or relaxation, an almost unnoticed feeling of nausea.

We still react to these more subtle sensations with craving or aversion, the only difference being that we have not made a clear link between what we are reacting to (the body) and instead wrongly believe it to be a reaction to the initial phenomenon at the start of the chain.

This explains why we are running forever - to or from experiences - but can never find lasting peace in this movement. It also explains the root of all suffering which is this total misunderstanding about how things really are, that is to say we are completely ignorant about why we can never find lasting

contentment because we are looking for it in the wrong place!

We forget that everything is transient, nothing is permanent, yet we are seeking permanent happiness in impermanent phenomenon. The phenomenon themselves can never bring us enduring peace because they are always coming and going, only a clearing away of *this* ignorance can bring a happiness that lasts.

You may make a logical jump here in the wrong direction, so from experience I'll take a guess at what that might be....

'Ahh so the *mind* makes all of these judgements based on our sensations, we must be the emotions, memories, experiences - they are real, you can't cut them out or change them. If I can control the mind and stop it from reacting to the body somehow then I will break the chain'.

Good idea. Let's take a look...

M i n d l e s s

?

The man who never in his mind and thoughts travel'd to heaven is no artist.

- William Blake

I recall, with total clarity, the first time that I passed completely 'beyond mind' for more than a few moments - probably because it isn't a memory as such, more of a very simple 'change in being' which was entirely free of thought. I had already had several brief experiences, during longer periods of meditation where I had 'pulled back from the edge' - the edge of what I wasn't sure at the time, but looking back now I see it was the edge of the known, the edge of the mind that I was so totally associated with. It had felt so alien to 'take one more step' that I'd literally been terrified to go there and

in hindsight I was probably right not to venture further because at that time I don't think I was prepared for such a monumental shift of perception.

This time was different, I had experienced a very anxious week, I had another trip to an island to contend with, this time to Northern Ireland. There had been masses of logistical problems around taking pyrotechnics and bottles of gas on a ferry to Belfast, then a few days before there was a weather forecast for one of those once in fifty year type storms. I had to drive through this to Liverpool in the van, catch the Ferry across the Irish sea in the middle of gale force winds, set up, perform and then do the journey in reverse. There was no chance to back out, it was Halloween and one of my shows was the star attraction on Belfast docks, I'd been paid already and had no money to return if I pulled out or couldn't appear. It was a stressful time.

The night before departure I was pretty much on edge, I sat down to my meditation to try to find some distance from my thoughts. It was moderately successful, I finished up and went to bed.

When I woke in the morning things were very different, I recalled everything that had been 'making me anxious', I was very aware of those things, but it seemed as if they had no power over me whatsoever, they simply weren't integral to who 'I was'.

I drove the very long journey to Liverpool through the storm in total peace, there was no anxiety or stress, I arrived at night and my Ferry was the last one to depart before the rest were cancelled. The Irish sea is rough at the best of times but this crossing was diabolical, even the staff were being sick. I passed the entire journey in an unaffected bubble, completely aware of the conditions yet totally undisturbed by them in any way.

The rest of the journey and the work went equally smoothly and I floated all

the way back home in the same cloud. In the world but not 'of it'. I have no idea why this happened, sometimes we get so stressed that we literally snap and put the mind aside, maybe my practice up until then swung completely into motion. I don't know, all that I know is that it lasted a day or two longer then faded very naturally away.

It returns with increasing frequency, sometimes for short periods sometimes for long, I don't know why and I don't try to work it out. What I do know is that once you have experienced the space outside of mind and thought, you realise that there is absolutely nothing to do to get there, it is entirely effortless.

It may be easy to grasp that the physical body is in constant flux and that we can't inherently 'be' the physical body for all of the reasons discussed above. But what about the mind then? That's not physical, it doesn't age does it, it doesn't change?

What is the mind? It is our thoughts, feelings, emotions. But are these in any way solid? If the mind was truly us then it would never alter, it would be static, if not then it is effectively an infinite number of different minds, changing just like the body every second.

Even the thoughts that we think are so strong and unchanging are fragile and impermanent. We may love our partner deeply for many years, the apparent centre of our lives, we might see no wrong in them, but as time goes on the relationship might break down, we may find ourselves in a divorce battle, hating them more than anyone else in the world and desperately wanting to hurt them. You see it all the time.

Let's take another common example - many people are raised in a certain religion and as far as they are concerned for much of their lives the world is ordered in a certain religious way, then suddenly something prompts them to completely reevaluate their entire belief system or vice versa, people 'find God' all the time - from serial killer to devoutly religious in the blink of an eye. It seems then that our emotions and our thoughts are just as changeable as our physical body. They are no more a permanent self than the body is, both of them are constantly changing and therefore we could literally say that we are physically an mentally infinite different 'people' or 'selves'.

But if this attachment to mind is so strong, how on Earth might we go about moving away from it? That's a very good question! The bad news is, it's not going to be easy! The good news? It is *absolutely* possible!

T h o u g h t l e s s

We are what our thoughts have made us; so take care about what you think.

- Swami Vivekananda

For many years I worked as a school teacher, at first I taught secondary science but when I became bored of that I moved to progressively younger classes until at one point I was teaching reception!

Now, much of what you 'teach' at that age has nothing to do with academic knowledge but more to do with basic social skills. I'd often find myself marking some books with a long line of patient kids waiting, inevitably there would be one who would skip the entire line, appear at my side or behind me and start tugging my trouser leg to get my attention.

When I started teaching I would stop what I was doing and sort out what they wanted as I thought I would get some peace and quiet. It doesn't work, what happens is that they learn this is the way to get your attention and not only do they do it all the more but their friends start doing it as well.

Very soon I learned that the best thing to do was entirely ignore them, sometimes they would tug for five minutes and I would carry on marking or talking until finally they went back and sat down or even better joined the line at the back. They didn't go away, but at least they had to wait their turn until I decided it was fine to pester me!

Just like the school pupil in the above example, we can learn *not to engage* with those distracting, idle thoughts that tend to consume and dominate us for most of our waking (and dreaming) hours. When we do manage to untangle ourselves from them, gradually they grow weaker and fainter because nobody is listening anymore, eventually you just don't notice them unless you choose to engage in useful directed thinking.

When you were younger you might have been afraid of an imaginary monster in your cupboard or under the bed. It doesn't matter whether the source was simply your imagination or that an older sibling had told you a scary story, the fact of the matter was that you *believed* there was a monster - you had heeded your thoughts. Gradually your thoughts grew around that belief, convincing you in ever greater detail that there *was* a monster lurking there. Every creak of the floorboards or gurgle of the water pipes became a growl, every shadow through the window was a beast about to pounce. Because you believed, the monster became very real in your thought based reality and so of course it grew in power.

At some point (hopefully by now) you rationally started to doubt it, or were re-assured by someone you trusted and eventually you stopped believing in it altogether. When that happened the monster simply vanished, never to be seen again because your thoughts around it lost their power. This is what

happens with thoughts when you repeatedly remind yourself to be heedless of what you *think* is entirely true and real.

You have already, by reading this, started to doubt the ‘realness’ of your beliefs and the thoughts that grow from them and every time that you now disbelieve them they will grow weaker and weaker until they eventually become so weak that they seem to stop coming altogether, because like the pestering school pupil, no-one is listening to them.

Each thought only exists for a limited period of time, that period is infinitesimally small. We may believe a thought to last for ages but really it is just a chain of thoughts leading from one to the next, or a similar type of thought being churned over repeatedly for example 'I'm so worried about my exam tomorrow I just can't get it out of my head'. It is the feeling that there seems to be a constant, never ending stream of thoughts that convinces us that 'we' and our thoughts are one and the same.

That constant stream of thoughts, clumped together, is what makes up the thing that we call ‘mind’.

Think of a car journey somewhere, the journey is made up of countless tiny parts as the car moves along, but we mentally 'clump it' into one long journey instead of a billion parts. Thoughts are just like this. If I asked you to pinpoint one part of the journey as ‘the journey’ you couldn't do it, equally if you said that it was all of the parts together then that would be inaccurate too. Likewise mind is just a fiction, it doesn't really ‘exist’ as we imagine it, it is just a stream of infinite unconnected thoughts..

After all, there *are* moments without thought, we find ourselves speechless at a beautiful sunset, wrapped up in playing an instrument or gardening or meditating and we realise that we haven't had a thought for some time. The 'I' that we believe ourselves to be didn't vanish just because there were no thoughts occurring, this tells us that the thing that we feel to be the 'I' must be something other than thoughts. That's almost possible to understand, but to actually put it into practice is another thing altogether. We are so intimately connected with thinking that we fall into it without realising almost constantly. If we managed to stop believing in our thoughts, after all we have seen that they do sometimes stop, even for a short time, then what about the many 'states of mind' that the thoughts are at the source of? Feelings and emotions; anxiety and depression, happiness and misery? They can seem so powerful that it feels as if they define who we are. But just like thoughts, are they as permanent as we believe?

We could think of all of these conditions as having something very significant in common, they are all **states of mind** and.....

Every STATE

- **ST**arts
- **And**
- **TE**rminates

When we are wrapped up in our states of mind it seems very much as if they are an overwhelming, solid, permanent 'thing'. As we discussed in the formless section, they create a sensation in our body that we react to either

because we like or dislike that sensation. But what we must remember as we break down this chain of reactivity is that all of these feelings and emotions, all of these fluctuations are just STATES, they Start And Terminate, appear and pass away. Learn to ride out the storm with patience and detachment, knowing that they won't last and you are half-way to moving past the hold they seem to have over you.

H e e d l e s s

Men suffer because they take seriously what the Gods made for fun

- Alan Watts

What if we could shortcut the process of moving out of our mental suffering? To cut the chain earlier in the process before thoughts even take hold? To be heedless means to stop listening so strongly to our thoughts and indeed the thoughts of others - to stop taking on beliefs just because they occur to us or are fed to us.

Why can this be a shortcut to moving beyond thoughts? It is all but impossible for most of us to actually force ourselves to stop thinking and to be honest even if it is possible it probably isn't worth investing the massive amount of time and energy required to do so! We would still be using the mind after all, we would have to think about not thinking!

The fact of the matter is, that asking the mind to stop thinking is a bit like asking the eyes to stop seeing. Seeing is what the eyes do, why ask them to stop doing what is most natural to them? That would establish massive internal conflict and be a huge waste of energy. Likewise the mind thinks and it thinks very well. Directed thought is an amazing human skill that has enabled us to solve many of our survival problems and create an extremely comfortable environment to live in. But you might agree that random, constant and endless mental chatter is our curse to suffer for this gift?

One might sensibly wonder why we believe these thoughts to be so solidly a part of who we are, indeed why they seem to form the very essence of our being? In other words why don't we just see them as passing thoughts in the same way that we recognise the sound of a passing car as a transient sensation. We don't mistake ourselves to 'be' the sound of the car going by.

Most likely it is because unlike the sound of the car, our thoughts *appear* to be incessant, that is to say that they never seem to end or be separate from 'us'. One thought streams effortlessly into the next and the next. I might start by thinking about the food shopping that I need to buy - a perfectly useful thought just doing its job - yet twenty minutes later I realise (or most likely don't) that somehow that has led to a lengthy 'chain of thought' and I'm now churning over how much I hate my boss. I am totally preoccupied with this endless chatter that always appears to accompany me and so I mistakenly assume that I 'am' those thoughts.

But with awareness we know this not to be the case. There are moments when the chain of thought breaks, even if it is momentarily. A breathtaking piece of theatre or music, nature in its raw beauty, we are struck by moments when words and thoughts elude us, often in the face of the indescribable.

When people with even the busiest minds first experience the silence of meditation, even if only for a second or two, it can be a very emotional moment. They are so absolutely used to the infinite internal monologue, that when it breaks for a moment and they find that 'they' are still there, the revelation is nothing short of life-changing for many.

What if we stopped believing in this delusion of thought as 'us'? What if we simply started to become heedless of the thoughts? To stop listening to our idle mental chatter to *stop simply believing* it on face value.

I don't actually need to think about most of the things that I do, most matters are answered without needing to even ask the question. Don't we have a reliable moral compass that guides us through life? I don't need to know that it's *illegal* to kill or steal, I don't need to think about whether I should badmouth someone behind their back, I simply *know* that it feels wrong deep inside of me, it's like an inbuilt piece of software, I didn't have to install it, it comes pre-installed with the hardware!

If we trust, listen to and follow that moral compass, that's all we need. There is no obligation to pursue or misidentify with our idle thoughts and the idle thoughts of others. Nothing good ever comes of it

Be aware of your thoughts when they arise as often as possible. Observe them with curiosity like you would observe a flower or a stranger insect.

Is there any actual 'realness' about them?

Are they any more or less 'you' than the car you hear passing by?

Is it simply the fact that they seem to be constantly there that seems to give them some 'realness'?

What happens if you start to stop believing the idle thoughts?

M i n d l e s s

!

I don't mind and you don't matter

– My Dad

(I'm not sure how wise this was meant to be, it was usually said when
I was being grounded....)

There is a chain here that we might start to see appearing..

Thoughtless □ **Heedless** □ **Mindless**

We have explored that when we believe in (take heed of) a story in our own head, someone else's head or the 'heads' of an entire society or culture, it

becomes a sort of assumed personal 'belief' too. These beliefs then give rise to further thoughts and stories that we build around them and in turn this then creates an entire state of mind - my 'complete view' of the world around me.

For example if I grew up in a country that had banned the use of a certain drug, I would most likely take heed of that advice and absorb this, making it my own. Thoughts would start to develop around the belief that I had adopted; I would likely avoid people that took that drug, probably think poorly of them and judge them in some way as being lesser members of society. Eventually my entire mindset around the substance and everything associated with it, is formed and conditioned by what I was told. However that very same drug or substance might be considered to be a sacred, precious substance by another society - for example many cultures have a history of medicine men or shamans using certain psychedelics that are illegal in the West. In this case I would most likely buy into the belief that the same drug was something precious and to be honoured. Likewise I would see the members of my society that took it as 'special' in some way or 'gifted' most likely an important benefit to the tribe. My entire mental construction would be different.

What are we without mind?

So it is pretty clear to see that the things that we think define our very character are really just long held thoughts that we call beliefs. These are different between individuals and can change drastically even in the same person. You might say that mind is a pretty poor means of establishing an inherent 'truth' about the world, in fact you could certainly conclude that we are all deluded to some degree when we cling to 'mind'.

It follows logically, that in an ideal world we would all be much better off 'letting go of our attachment to mind'. Of course this sounds like an ideal situation, but what would exist if we achieved that? Think back to my story about the fear of stepping over the precipice into 'no mind', that is a very scary and certainly unstable place if you aren't prepared for it.

If we somehow stopped thinking and didn't 'have' a mind what would be left? People imagine that they might simply vanish! Who on earth would you be if you had no mind? A crazy person wandering the street talking to themselves? You already do that, just in your head!

It might help to ask why are we so sure we need mind as a constant companion? Maybe it would be simpler to compare 'states of mind' as we are probably familiar with the fact that we 'feel' these. For example, if I said 'compare a peaceful state of mind to a negative state of mind' that might be helpful. Almost all of us know the difference between how these 'feel'.

Now, if you asked me which I preferred the feel of, I would have to say a permanently peaceful state of mind - it doesn't even have to be amazingly happy - *steady* would be enough. That isn't to say that I couldn't do exciting things, but to me a steady state is calm, it isn't on the rollercoaster of emotions and thoughts that wear us down by constantly changing from moment to moment – a steady state of mind is really just a state where we have detached from our stream of thoughts.

Consider this quietly and you can see how true it is. If you are in a bad mood

for whatever reason, your choices and decisions during the day are likely to be quite different to those you would make if you were in a much happier state of mind. So to be mindless doesn't mean that we lose a sense of 'who we are', it just means to rest in a space of peace and tranquility, and from such a space we will always make more rational decisions and choices, uninfluenced by our ever changing thoughts and moods.

Mindless is the culmination of all the other 'lesses' that we have looked at.

No 'me' and no 'not me'

At this point you might be starting to glimpse that there isn't such a separate, permanent 'self' that we imagine. The way that we think and view the world constantly reinforces the *idea* that there is a 'me' and 'everything else' that is 'other than me'. Of course we can't *deny* that there is a physical body and a mind working, that isn't what I'm saying, what we are talking about is the *sense* of 'self' which isolates us from everything else;. This makes us feel very lonely, incomplete and disconnected in our lives and as we have already discussed, it is the source of our never ending search for more.

But even these other 'things', apparently separate from us, are all dependant on countless causes for their existence. A table is dependant on a tree, the sun and water that grew the tree, the person that felled it, the carpenter that made it, the person that made the nails and glue, all of their parents and their parents parents and so on. It is only perceived as a 'permanent' table by humans due to its shape and function, its usefulness to the imagined 'self' that we have discussed already. A butterfly landing on it, a dog walking

round it, they don't see a table at all, even a human tribe living in the jungle may well not perceive it as a 'table'. Nothing exists of its own accord, separate from other things, not us, not the table, it is only our imagining that they do.

It simply isn't possible for a separate 'I' to exist because it would suggest that we are the same person all of the time and we have seen repeatedly that simply isn't the case on an atomic, mental, perceiving or physical level. Even from the point of view of other people I am not one 'solid version' of me - I am a work colleague to some, a son or daughter to my parents, an enemy to someone that dislikes my character and a best friend to another. We are as temporary as the sound of a passing car, sweeping moods, likes and dislikes, sensations in the body, the 'table' in the room when there is no-one there to use it; it's clear that I'm simply not nearly as 'solid' as I imagine.

Why is this important?

It is important because a great deal of our suffering, as we discussed above - our constant running - is attached to this imagined 'solid self'. Because we mistakenly think that we have 'things' - character, wealth, position, health, reputation - we then suffer if we 'lose' them and we suffer trying to preserve them and most of this suffering is to do with the the shifting out of present that we discussed in the previous section. If we woke up to the simple truth that all things are both temporary and not solidly existing, we wouldn't attach to them so deeply and therefore wouldn't crave them or suffer when they weren't present.

How many times have you heard, said or thought to yourself, ``Why is this

happening to *me*?”

Here’s the thing, I’m happy to tell you some great news: it *isn’t* happening to *you*, however much you believe that it is.

A piano falls off of a roof and lands on your head. Know what? You just happened to be there in not a great spot at not a great time for your body! In the grand scheme of the universe, you really aren’t that important. The universe isn’t spinning around, with you at its centre and all of the other events, people, objects, organisms aren’t conspiring to ruin (or make) your day. Things just happen, period, the piano fell off the roof and you just happened to walk past at that moment. You might well see such events unfolding and take it personally, but it really isn’t *happening to you* - it is a sign of great attachment to ‘self’ and the cause of much suffering as a result (though not as much as a piano on the head). This is one of the most difficult things to let go of; as humans we need to find meaning in everything, we struggle greatly with simply accepting things as they are, we always need to put ‘us’ in the equation somewhere.

Of course this is a massive shift of understanding for most people; don’t go exerting effort trying to buy into it! Simply be aware of the paradox that this separation ‘exists’ but *only* because we construct it in our minds. That still leaves one huge gaping question though....if there is no mind and no body, as peaceful as that might well be, what on earth is left? Why don’t we simply vanish into oblivion? Who, or what am I?

Selfless

‘If you are aware raise a hand. If you are not aware put your hand up. Finally, those of you that aren’t sure if you are aware or not, please put up your hand...’

-Mingyur Rinpoche

After many years of dedicated practise a zen monk had an entirely spontaneous experience that he could not explain, he only knew that he had never felt such lasting peace and clarity before. He went to visit his teacher and asked: ‘Master I think I have experienced enlightenment, please tell me if it is so...’ The master asked him what had happened and concluded ‘No that is not enlightenment - go back to your practise’ A month later and the state of utter peace is still abiding, the young monk returned to his master to double check.

*‘No, what you describe is not enlightenment, return to your practise’ advised
the master once again*

*Another month passes and still the young man is dwelling in states of ecstasy,
more puzzled than concerned he visited his teacher once again.*

*Master, I feel certain that this must be enlightenment’ And he explained the
symptoms once more.*

‘No no. I tell you that is not enlightenment’

*A little perplexed the young monk replied ‘If it is not common with your
experience, then master please keep your version of enlightenment and I will
happily keep mine’*

‘Aha!’ Exclaimed the master excitedly ‘It is enlightenment!’

If we aren't the body, nor the mind then who or what are we really? What is the thing that remains? The true 'I' that is always 'I' and never changes, never goes away, is always present, isn't affected by our moods or environment but sees everything?

The only thing remaining is awareness, presence, witnessing, the awakened one ... call it what you like, they are all names used for the same thing.

Awareness flows through everything, if it didn't then there would be no recognition that 'I' was thinking, just as in the example above, 'I' wouldn't even know that my physical body was here because there would be nothing to be aware of it! Thoughts and emotions would come and go unnoticed, the body would move, age, feel, change unwitnessed.

Awareness is eternal, ageless, unchanging, always present in everything but needing nothing to be. Thoughts and therefore mind for example, can only

exist through the presence of awareness, in contrast awareness doesn't need thoughts to be, it doesn't need anything to 'be'.

Think back to our discussion on STATES of mind. You might have realised by now that **awareness is the only thing that isn't a state.**

Why?

Because it doesn't **STart And Terminate.**

We know this to be true, search as deep as you can for a time when you weren't aware. Is there anything that is, or could ever be experienced by you that isn't experienced by awareness?

Without awareness, we simply wouldn't be aware of it!

A good question at this point might be ...then why do I feel that I am the body and mind?

Because of habit and addiction. Simply put, the body and mind are very much 'in front of us', the vehicle of our awareness if you like. We can become so aware of them that we forget that our true self *is* the awareness and not the thing that we are being aware of. Do you see how easily it can happen?

You, that is to say awareness, has become overly fascinated by the vehicle that it is travelling in; because of this it forgets to look out of the window and enjoy the wonders of the journey that is 'life', they simply pass it by unnoticed.

It might help to think of it like this : your heart beats and your breath moves for every moment of your physical life, they are the primary things keeping us alive and yet, like awareness we entirely overlook them, we hardly ever

notice them. We simply don't see what is in front of our face because we take it for granted and unless something goes wrong with our breath or heart they are otherwise unremarkable - that is to say they plod along, just being what they are , consistently and without much noticeable fluctuation.

Our awareness is very similar; it is *always* present, in fact you might say that it is everything that it experiences, but because the awareness itself never changes or fluctuates, it slips by unnoticed. In comparison the mind is constantly changing from moment to moment; like the noisy child at the back of the class it is unpredictable, fickle and demands our attention. Attention comes out of awareness and becomes fascinated by this constant cacophony and of course mind, enjoying this attention, continues to do what it is good at in order to get more of that attention.

In comparison, awareness is the calm child at the front of the class, absorbed by and quietly going about its work with no fuss at all; as such we don't even notice it, drawn instead to the fuss being caused at the back of the room.

To take another example, imagine a film projected onto an otherwise blank wall. In the entire two hours that the movie lasts (if it is a good one) we may become so engrossed by the detail and activity of the film that we don't notice the wall anymore. We have simply overlooked the wall but in fact the projection can only exist because of it. Furthermore the wall 'is animated' by the projection but in no way whatsoever is the wall ever altered by the projection, even if a million films are directed upon it, the apparent content may change, but the surface of the wall never does.

Awareness is very much like that wall, never changing, untainted and uncoloured by what it animates.

If you have ever meditated and managed to calm the mind sufficiently, you may have noticed this too but not realised.

What most people call meditation is really 'concentration' which is to say a 'forgetting' of other things. Let's say you concentrate on the flame of a candle. Sit quietly and focus for long enough and all awareness, as attention, settles on the candle. Your mind and body effectively vanish as far as you are concerned; all that exists within awareness is the candle and therefore at that moment that is literally all that exists in 'your world'.

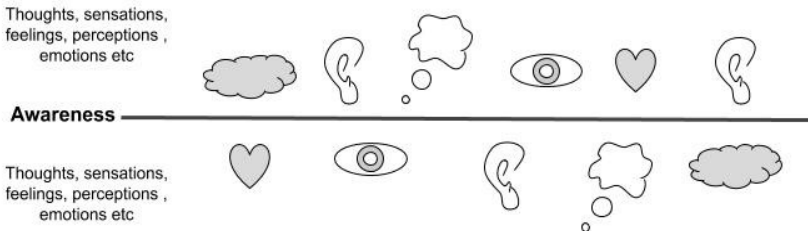
This suggests that what most people perceive meditation to be, is quite an odd exercise if all that they are doing is moving the attention from one thing to another, be that a candle, a mantra, a physical practice of yoga, or whatever. The point of shifting this awareness is irrelevant, it is fundamentally no 'better' for awareness to fix it on the mind than on something other than the mind; imagine if we became obsessed by the candle! We would be overly possessed by candle attention in just the same way that almost all of us are possessed by body mind awareness!

The true value of concentration meditation is not the focussing of awareness in itself and the movement of the focus away from the mind chatter (although this can be a very refreshing break from the mind), it is waking up to the simple fact that all we really are *is* this awareness.

By moving awareness away from the thoughts and onto something else, we may suddenly have the experiential realisation that our world, our entire existence, is simply whatever our awareness is aware of. Move it onto something other than the body and mind and we cease to identify with the body and mind as 'who we are'.

In reality, this awareness is already here, we can understand that logically and we can know it experientially. We don't have to go looking for it and we can't add to it. I can't ever become more aware than I already am, it's simply impossible! That's why awakening, presence, enlightenment or whatever you want to call it is available to us *right now*, in the blink of an eye, not at some point in the imagined future. There is nothing to work towards nor anything to gather, there is *only* letting go. It is an exercise in *not trying*, how can we try to be something that we already are! It's such an absurd idea you have to laugh!

One image that I find useful is the one below: you *are* the line of awareness, simple *knowing*. All phenomenon is known or else it can't exist, that is an undeniable logic. At the same time the knowing *is* the phenomenon, the two are inescapably connected, there is no separation.



The 'line' of awareness continues, even as as phenomena arise and pass away around it: sounds, emotions, love and hate, thoughts, sense perceptions.

Awareness is always present, allowing them to be there, what else could it do? To try and hold back the phenomenon or alter them would simply mean that more, new emotions, thoughts and so on would be added around the line. Still the line would not change, it would just be as it is and always has been. None of these sensations, emotions or thoughts affect the line of awareness, none of these cause it to bend or change direction, it continues totally unaffected, calm, steady, tranquil. Of course it fails to notice itself because it is simple, un-fussed, ever present. Only when awareness becomes overly fascinated by the goings on around it do more and more phenomena arise and we simply ‘forget our true selves’.

No wonder people find it so elusive, its very much like searching round the house for your spectacles, hunting everywhere, turning out the cupboards and drawers, totally perplexed, then realising that you were wearing them all along, the very last place you thought to look, how did you fail to realise that you could already see clearly?

All we need to do is remember. Waking up is simply remembering what we have forgotten.

That’s why it is often talked about as ‘coming home to yourself’. Your real home never went anywhere, you just became utterly sidetracked by an interesting walk and forgot how to get back.

Move your attention to your breath. Notice how it moves and how it feels. Hold onto that and now add awareness of the sounds around you. Maintain both of these and add now notice the palms of your hands. Add as many things as you can until your attention is stretched so far that it begins to blur. There is no concentration anymore, simply a dissolving of

effort where everything is noticed as being present yet none of it is significant. At his moment turn your awareness onto awareness itself.

What happens?

Can you rest here?

Endless

E n d l e s s

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step

- Lao Tzu

It seemed entirely perfect to round things off with this, the simplest and pithiest of quotes, from Lao Tzu, author of the Tao Te Ching, arguably the grand master of less, the author of the ultimate less book, about whom little is known and even less needs to be known.

So where do we go from here? Well this isn't the end that's for sure, it's only just the beginning, yet there is nowhere to go either!

In what seems to be such desperate circumstances of our modern era, we might ask where on Earth we can begin? Is it even possible to put everything right with the climate, with society, with politics, with ourselves or have we gone too far?

The truth is that I do not know, it isn't my place to and this isn't a book

dedicated to knowing.

Yet, as with everything, we absolutely and undeniably *can* begin with ourselves, nobody and nothing can prevent us from doing that and achieving that. When we have persevered with this realisation of our self, whatever else that needs to be done will become entirely clear and doubtless.

As we discussed at the very start, addressing our obsession with more underlies most of the problems that we face today and as growing numbers find that they really didn't need more after all, many of these issues will naturally start to resolve themselves as the tides of change shift.

Even so, for most of us it takes a little practice and perseverance, but you will probably find that above all else you need to start letting go of everything that you *think* you know and begin, simply...
knowing....

Less.

Less and less do you need to force things,
until finally you arrive at non-action.

When nothing is done,
nothing is left undone.

Tao Te Ching

(Stephen Mitchell translation)