

The Inner

Life

Life²



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Introduction

Spirituality, the big questions, our inner lives, consciousness – call it what you like, but human beings have explored this issue for thousands of years, and doing so can nourish and enhance your life, regardless of whether you hold religious views or are a committed atheist. Everyone can gain something from exploring their inner lives.

At Life², we have no religious views to push, but we want to encourage people to explore this issue because it can bring fulfilment and pleasure to our lives – whether we are religious or not. We aim to talk about these topics in a way that is accessible to all, in order to show how everyone can benefit from exploring their inner world.

This booklet aims to do just this. It examines what we mean by ‘the inner life’, why it matters and how we can get the most out of our own inner lives.

Part 1

What is the inner life?

The best definition of your inner life is that it is “what it is like to be you”. It’s hard to imagine a more important topic for any of us. In this booklet we will explore the idea that you have far more choice in the quality of your experience of life than is usually supposed.

Being you is a unique perspective on the world, one which only you can ever experience. Nevertheless, the inner life in general is not something strange or mysterious. On the contrary, it is such an everyday matter that we can easily take it for granted and certainly overlook the need to know or find out more about it. It is simply what goes on in our minds or consciousnesses, but not just the parts we put into words and certainly not just the rational bits. Every aspect is included, for example emotions, sensations, desires and aversions.

We could use “mind” or “consciousness” to describe this unique subjective reality but those words have baggage of their own and besides, “inner life” somehow better captures the variety, the uncertainty and the swirling continuity of what it is like to be us. So the inner life, we will say, is the whole stream of what we think, feel, desire, believe, sense, remember, imagine and so on.

Try to imagine that you had no inner life. No sensations, no feelings, no thoughts, not even awareness that there is nothing happening - just nothing. Perhaps it is impossible to imagine this.

To imagine yourself without an inner life is to imagine you were an inanimate object such as a stone. You can picture a stone from the outside of course but you can't imagine being a stone because there is nothing to imagine. A real stone has no experience - its history is just what happens or is done to it.

We on the other hand, in common we must suppose with other animals, do experience what happens to us - and much more besides. In many ways, our inner lives as humans are more important and richer than our external lives. They are not only what make us human but what make us the particular humans we are.

For example, very similar external things might happen to two people who react in completely different ways and thus have different experiences. Let's say they both slip on ice and break their arms. (They are people in similar circumstances so that any differences are not consequences of their age, say, or their means.) After they have been treated, one person (Jack) regards his accident as something of a tragedy and feels very sorry for himself. He is angry and wants to blame someone

but he also believes that other people should put themselves out to make allowances for his condition. The other person (Fred) wants to carry on as normal. He regards the accident as a bit of a joke, just "one of those things", but he is conscious that there are plenty of people worse off than he is and is grateful that nothing worse happened.

Not only does the same external event result in completely different experiences for Jack and Fred, it may have completely different consequences for their inner lives going forward. Jack is perhaps reinforced in his belief that the world is unfair and he is particularly hard done by, Fred notices the kindness of strangers and will continue to make light of setbacks. But their stories are quite different and the difference lies in their inner lives even though the external events are identical.

Part 2

Why does our inner life matter?

You cannot help having an inner life - it will go on as long as you are conscious. So, you might think, the inner life needs no effort and no attention. Things happen and you like them or dislike them. You do stuff and you enjoy it or you don't.

The fact is though that whatever happens in your inner life must be your whole experience of living. If you put a stone in front of a wonderful sunset the stone derives no benefit, but a person can appreciate or even marvel at the sight. From our earliest years we learn what gives us pleasure or pain, for example, and thus we can adapt our actions to seek one and avoid the other. The inner life determines entirely what the quality of any life is like for the person living it.

Add to this the obvious fact that we never control the external world exactly as we would like in every particular. (The external world here includes other people, all of nature and society and even our own bodies.) "Call no man happy until he is dead" said the ancients: no matter how well external things are going they can change in a heartbeat. Even the richest, most powerful person in the world cannot control the external world completely: they may protect themselves from some events better than a poor person could but they can still for example have accidents or get sick. Even if they are as lucky as it is possible to be they will still get old, suffer losses and eventually die.





The inner life and happiness

This leads us to a conclusion which is as old as thought itself but is still arguably the most important insight human beings have ever had. If we hope to live happily we cannot rest that hope entirely on the external conditions we face. We might be lucky but even with the best luck possible we will still have to cope with many difficult circumstances. The odds are anyway against supreme good luck all the way through our lives, nor can we rely on our own prowess, brilliance or any other quality to tame external conditions in their entirety. We may alter these conditions to some extent but in the end they provide the backdrop against which we must find happiness.

Happiness, if it is possible at all, must therefore depend on how we experience the external world and what it throws at us. Thus **happiness depends crucially on our inner lives**. This simple conclusion, as we will see, has profound consequences.

Habits

Happiness, if it is possible at all, must therefore depend. Think for a moment about your everyday experience. What happens in the external world constantly produces effects in your inner life. You smell cooking and feel hungry, say, or someone does something that makes you feel pleased, or angry. You read something in the newspaper that sets you off thinking about a certain topic, or perhaps you just allow your mind to drift and thoughts seem to appear from nowhere.

It seems that you can direct your thoughts to some extent but a lot of the time they are just reactions to what is happening externally or inwardly. Feelings and emotions are even less biddable: you might feel sad, angry or joyful because of your own thoughts or because of something external that happens but you can rarely choose what you feel.

Your inner life thus seems to be under your control only to a limited extent. If the quality of your life and in particular the possibility of living happily depends on your inner life this is at first sight a major problem: you seem to be stuck with how you are. You are either a person with a sunny disposition or a misery, depending



on how you react to things, but that's you. So it might seem that the inner life cannot be arranged to provide happiness any more than can the external world, and perhaps the best you can do after all is to put yourself in the way of as many of the external circumstances that please you as possible.

This is a very widely accepted conclusion, in fact it might be said to be the basic assumption of our consumer society. It is completely wrong.

Changing habits

First, notice that the problem is not that the ways you react inwardly are random. You do not, say, feel disgusted and angry by a news report one day but find it amusing another. Your inner life displays patterns, regularities and habits. Like everyone else you are a creature of inner habit, indeed it is these habits which make up and define who you are. Your tastes, beliefs, emotional reactions and so on may change over time, but at any given point they are as they are and you will react accordingly.

Second, notice that the patterns or habits can and do change. You may have exactly the same taste in foods as you did when you were three, but it is unlikely. Beliefs about any given subject often change as you find out more about it. Not only do habits change, but you can deliberately change them. You can for example learn a new language, or learn about a certain type of music

or art, so that what seemed incomprehensible becomes something you enjoy.

This leads to an extraordinary opportunity. If we could identify habits of the inner life which, broadly, resulted in happiness we could cultivate those habits and the result would be a happier and more fulfilled life. We need not abandon attempts to change our external circumstances, but we could be happier when things went well and able to deal much better with external setbacks and mishaps. By focusing on and changing the habits underlying the inner life we could live more and more happily. If this is possible, it is surely too good an opportunity to miss!

The nature of happiness

But what is happiness? Surely different things make different people happy so that it might be impossible to draw any general conclusions about happiness itself or the inner habits which might underlie it?

This apparent problem is much reduced once we understand that happiness depends on the inner life. If, as we have discussed, external conditions alone cannot maintain happiness and happiness which depends on external conditions is always vulnerable the key question we need to ask is what conditions of the inner life equate to happiness. At minimum we need to understand the nature of the inner state of contentment or happiness that is induced in us by the things we like.

We can identify a wide range of positive inner states: happy excitement, peak experiences like ecstasy or orgasm or bliss, quiet contentment, exultation, joy, satisfaction and so on. Any of them, while they last, might be equated with happiness. But the real problem is less how to choose between these states, and more how to live so as to make the most of all of them. In particular and as a good place to start, we may ask how to avoid the negative states which exclude them.

By considering what causes unhappiness and how to avoid it we can move forward towards being happy without having to be absolutely precise about the end state. This makes sense anyway because the end state is a matter of subjective experience which we need to encounter to understand fully. We can't know exactly what it's like to arrive until we get there. To cannibalize a phrase from Karl Marx: philosophers may interpret the inner life in various ways, the point however is to change it.

The contented heart

Nevertheless, we can say a great deal about the state of the inner life that is our goal. For example:

- Excluding unhappiness cannot of course mean excluding all negative external events - they will creep in whatever we do. Our aim is simply to cope with such events as well as possible by cultivating a high degree of equanimity or resilience.

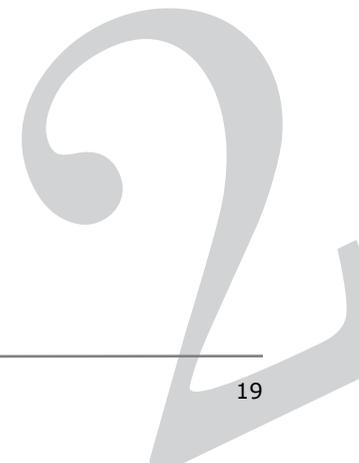


- We need to be able to deal with strong negative emotions like anger, hatred, envy and self-pity whenever they arise and preferably allow them to arise as little as possible. It is, after all, difficult if not impossible to be full of anger or hatred (or any of the others) and to be happy at the same time.
- We need to be able to deal with unhelpful thoughts and beliefs - for example worry, self-doubt, prejudices or beliefs about others which lead to negative emotions - a task which needs skill in language and in particular skill in changing the stories we tell ourselves.
- We are all subject to desires and aversions which are usually harmless and the stuff of everyday motivation, but can sometimes become serious obstacles to happiness when they get such a grip on us that “we cannot live without” something. We need ways of loosening the grip of desire when necessary.
- We need to celebrate and be grateful for what we have and can do, rather than focusing on what we do not have or cannot reach. Making the most of and being grateful for what we have is essential to living happily. Being patient when everything is not to our liking is the other side of the same coin.

In summary a happy inner life involves at a minimum cultivating habits to deal with negative aspects of thought, belief, emotion and desire, while also cultivating positive habits of enjoyment and gratitude.

Perhaps there is more, but to go this far would already be a massive achievement. We could live in full awareness of the wonders around us; free of corrosive hatred, anger and their cousins; free of fear, worry and bitterness; no longer ruled by our desires and aversions.

Clearly this is an ideal, a direction to travel. It would be state of profound inner peace which we will call the contented heart, a rival standard to the frantic collection of goods, services and property which our society now equates with happiness. But it is still a secular standard: it does not depend on any religious or supernatural belief although it comes to the same conclusions as many religions about how best to live. This would be genuine happiness, not based on luck or external circumstance but on the inner life.



Part 3

How to improve your inner life

We have discussed how the contents of the inner life can be seen as the product of patterns or habits: we think and feel in ways that are not random responses but are a mixture of instinct, learning and experience. The suggestion we have made is that these habits can be shaped deliberately to lead us in the direction of greater inner peace and towards the ideal of the contented heart.

There is an analogy with learning and modifying physical skills as we might for a work task or for a game. We notice what is going wrong, we discover what would work better (perhaps from someone else) and we practice the new technique until it becomes natural to us. The old, unhelpful habit is displaced by the newer, more “fit for purpose” response. A skill in this context is nothing more than a useful and deliberately acquired habit. So what we are suggesting by analogy is that there are skills of the inner life, skills of happiness. We can learn and hone these skills and apply them in difficult situations, living with an art based like all arts on our skills. This is the art of being happy, the art of living well, living skillfully.

Practice

We will suggest in a moment what skills are needed, but notice first that the key to any skill is practice: informed repetition, feedback, correction and more repetition. Think for example of learning to play a



sport: from beginner to world champion the process is one of incremental improvement through practice. Even world champions still practice and improve. Thus whether there is some final point to be reached in this art of living is irrelevant. If (as seems likely) there is not, we simply go on improving our inner habits and becoming more and more content throughout our lives. It is the direction which matters.

These inner skills differ from external skills both in their importance and their universal application. They can be applied everywhere in our lives, not just in some segment of it, making up a way of living with happiness as the focus. They can also be practiced anywhere in our lives.

There are certainly techniques we can use to practice “off line” but if we are practicing the art of living well it is natural that our own daily lives are a main arena of practice. We will frequently get things wrong but this is an integral part of the process and should be welcomed as an opportunity to create change, for such is the nature of practice. This approach will not give us instant fixes: practice of any skill takes effort, attention and time. Among other things, that is why it makes sense to practice even when external conditions are not demanding, because it may not be possible to acquire the skills we need for difficult times when the need is already present.

What, though, should we practice? What are the skills we need? It helps greatly to have a systematic approach, a framework to guide our practice and help us identify

problems and areas for improvement. This is often what religious systems provide, for example the Buddhist “Eightfold Path” or Christian systems of spiritual exercise. But such systems are naturally embedded in the particular beliefs of their faith. In the next few sections we set out an approach which concentrates on five skill areas chosen because they directly address aspects of the inner life which can get in our way and prevent us being happy. We do not claim that this is the only way to achieve a contented heart, just that it is understandable and it works!

This approach is taken from the book “The Lost Art of Being Happy - Spirituality for Sceptics” by Tony Wilkinson, where it is explored in greater detail than is possible here. The five skill areas we will explore are mindfulness, benevolence, story, letting go and enjoyment.

1. Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the skill of paying attention, in particular to how our own inner life is operating, what habits are at work and how they are affecting what we think and feel. With this ability, we can begin to observe what stands in the way of inner peace and thus what stops us being happy. For example, suppose that we have a strong aversion to a particular person - we are not sure why, but something about them makes us uneasy and irritated. By paying close attention to what happens within us, we might be able to observe the mechanism - perhaps for example they remind us of

someone else. If we can see clearly what happens we can at least consider what steps might be necessary to put matters right.

Mindfulness is thus used to bring the habits of our inner life into our consciousness. Instead of inner habits and patterns simply pulling us this way and that, we can become aware of what is going on. Thus mindfulness is the essential diagnostic skill for the inner life, helping us to discover what it is going wrong, what unhelpful habits are at work. Only with such a skill can we begin to shape our inner habits in the direction of greater inner peace. By analogy, if an athlete or an artist is not getting the performance they want they might ask a coach or teacher to help them identify where they are going wrong. Mindfulness acts like this in the inner life, where no external coach can watch the performance. It allows us to observe what we do and how: how anger arises in us, why we crave to eat or drink too much, what the patterns of thought are that deflate our confidence. Mindfulness is awareness, fuller awareness of our own inner lives.

Like most skills, mindfulness is not an all or nothing matter - lights on or lights off. As mindfulness is practiced it naturally becomes stronger. In the beginning it might take great effort to "catch yourself" in the act of subverting your own happiness, but with a little patience you may find it possible to observe (for example) "Oh look, I seem to be getting angry about being stuck in traffic even though I'm not actually in a hurry" - and with luck the anger no longer has you

completely in its grip. As you progress the anger in similar circumstances may only be mild irritation, or best of all may not arise at all.

Since mindfulness consists of paying close attention to what is happening in the inner life it is best practiced by reminding yourself to observe and only observe. There are many ways of doing this. The best known practices are forms of meditation, for example those which try to focus attention on the breath. Watching your own breath is surprisingly difficult at first, because your mind jumps and flits and gets bored very quickly. That however is the point, because we are not used to holding attention steady, even regarding it as a virtue to be able to do many things at once.

But if sitting still does not suit you, there are many ways in which mindfulness can be practiced which involve movement, even intense activity - dance, martial arts, running, yoga, for example. Like sitting watching the breath such activities can be done mindfully or not, but all of them are done better if done with full attention and without allowing the mind to wander. If extraneous thoughts or feelings do arise, they are just to be observed and allowed to pass as one returns to the job in hand.

2. Benevolence

For the second family of skills we use the umbrella term benevolence, to include in particular compassion, kindness and love. It may seem strange that such



qualities are described as skills since they are more usually regarded as emotions or even virtues. But there is nothing strange in the notion that we can learn to love or learn to be kinder by making the effort to do so. Thus compassion, kindness and their cousins can certainly be learned skills whatever else they may be.

The great value of these benevolence skills is in weakening the negative emotions which so often cause turmoil in our inner lives. Anger is the prime example, but hate, jealousy, envy, spite and so on are members of the same family. Is it possible to be angry or full of hatred and experience inner peace at the same time? It is hard to see how.

The negative emotions must have had some evolutionary point or we may assume we would not have them. But they are not useful in the context of a life focused on happiness. There is much to be said for the view that aggression from others is better met dispassionately anyway, with a calm that can defuse, deflect or even deal with attack without the distraction of wild emotion. But here we are concerned with the inner life effects of the negative emotions, and we can see that they are not compatible with inner peace.

The proposal is not that we hide or suppress these negative emotions. If we experience strong anger or hatred it doesn't help the inner life if we learn to disguise our feelings externally or restrain our actions. Our inner peace is gone anyway. We are concerned to weaken the habit of becoming angry, ideally until anger

no longer arises at all but more realistically until when it does arise we can catch it quickly and dissolve it so that inner peace returns.

We can develop different ways of looking at the actions and motivations of others as a way of displacing negative emotions. Instead, for example, of regarding someone's rudeness as a personal insult, we might look at it as an expression of their anxiety or insecurity, or as stemming from a confusion that they cannot help. It does not actually matter whether we get the story right because we are not trying to change the other person's behaviour, we are trying only to change the inner effect it has on us.

We might reflect more generally that most people passionately want to be happy but not everyone accepts or understands the importance of inner peace in achieving this aim. Hence someone whose actions seem to be motivated by anger or hatred is likely to be in a state of confusion about the role of the inner life and the necessity of inner peace. Here is a reason for compassion: this person is thwarting their own deepest desire.

Another approach is to reflect that we allow ourselves far more indulgence and latitude when we judge our own behaviour than we afford to other people. Perhaps because we feel our own motives are transparent and our actions for the good, we judge our own actions less harshly than those of others, giving ourselves the benefit of most doubts. So we could say compassion

for others is no more than regarding their actions as we regard our own - we look for the best interpretation.

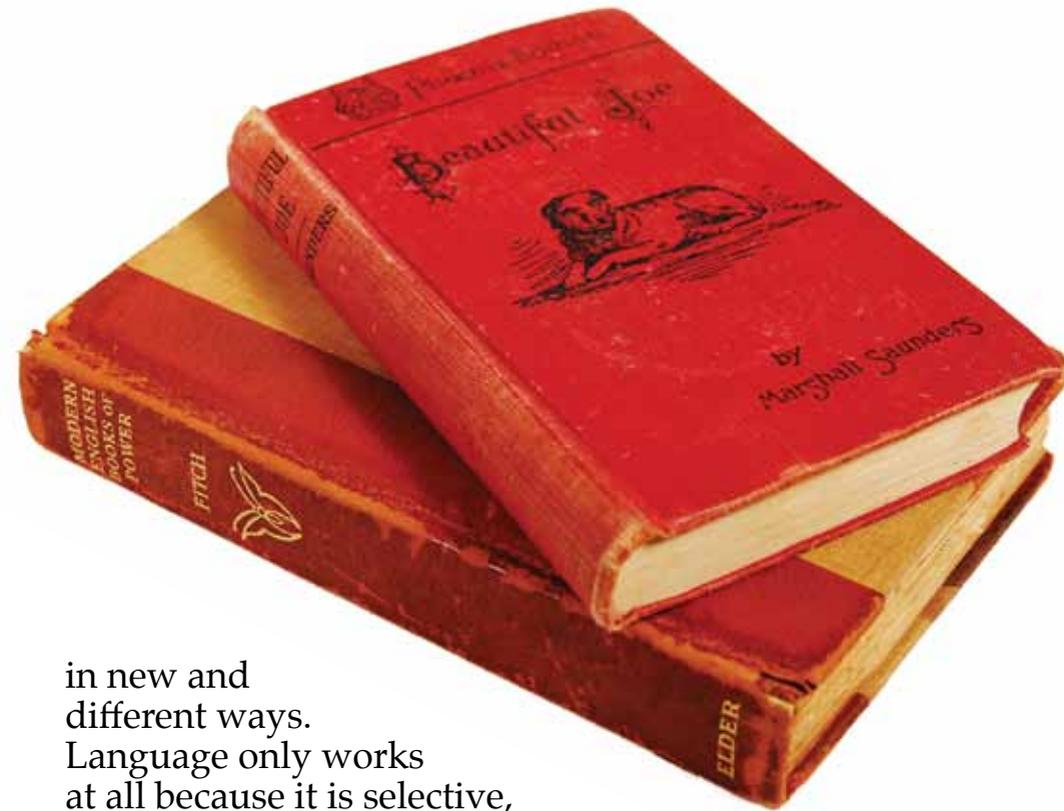
Adopting a kinder external approach may help us to change our inner perception of others, but it is the inner and not the external effect which is important in this context. We may have to “fake it until we make it”, but the feeling of compassion will inevitably follow if we persist in searching for the perspective which allows us to see others, however badly they behave, as like ourselves and not as aliens or enemies.

3. Story

Story skills are the ways we deal with those habits of language and belief which prevent us from achieving and maintaining inner peace.

Language and belief are the structural skeleton of the inner life. What we believe shapes our inner world, not least because it is our image of the external world. Our beliefs are a complicated interaction between the world and the language we use to describe it. Language and belief are closely intertwined, we cannot have one without the other. But the ways in which we can describe depend on the language we have.

If for example you took up a hobby (collecting porcelain) you might of course learn many new facts (new beliefs) but you would also learn an extension of language, so that you could describe part of the world (the details and varieties of porcelain, in this case)



in new and different ways.

Language only works at all because it is selective, it makes distinctions, misses out some bits of information and places emphasis on others. This is not a defect, it is the only way language could work.

So too our beliefs are descriptions from a particular perspective using a particular apparatus of language: they are stories we tell about the world. Everything we know or think we know, all the everyday things but also all of science, religion, history, mathematics and all the rest, is story. We swim in a sea of stories, but stories (like language itself) are selective, for they miss some bits out and draw attention to others to keep the narrative flowing.

Our beliefs throw up many different kinds of obstacle to achieving and maintaining inner peace. Beliefs can be so familiar that we do not question them even though they are false. Mistaken beliefs can lead us into further mistaken beliefs, unfounded emotions, desires or actions. In such cases ways to realise, understand and correct the error may be vital to restore inner peace.

Anything that can help our ability to think clearly and calmly may thus be an advance towards the contented heart. There is nothing in this ideal which is anti-thought or anti-reason. More careful thought, not less, is usually the remedy.

But even when a story is true it can have disturbing effects. We may need then to find a perspective from which the true story can be faced with equanimity. There are many true stories which are bitter and difficult to live with - the loss of loved ones, for example, or our own limitations, even our own mortality. These are not illusions and no amount of careful thought will dispel them. So, faced with such stories, we must ask: what else is true here, how can we tell the story so that this sadness, though real, is not tragic or destructive? What perspective can we find from which we can accept this truth and still move towards a contented heart?

In the most difficult examples, death and bereavement, we will find, no doubt, a tangle of biological instinct, fear of the unknown, deep emotional attachments and mistaken stories about the processes which are

us and of which we are a part. Whatever we find is a starting point from which we can gradually amend the stories we live by, lessening sadness and fear. It is a process requiring patience and application, hard won and easily put off. But clearly we must deal with such “difficult” truths if we are to live in peace. That is why we need the skills of looking into and around every story, looking for alternatives and reframings, finding different perspectives.

4. Letting go

There is one further major obstacle to a contented heart: desire or craving. It would be wrong though to suggest that all desire is problematic, because desire is the main motivator of everything we do. Without it we might for example starve, not through the impossibility of finding food but through failing to want to feed ourselves!

The problem with desire and aversion is that we do not know when to stop. We convince ourselves that we cannot be happy unless we have that thing or that person and thus we are pitted against the world in a contest on which we have staked our peace of mind. If we lose, inner peace is replaced by regret, recrimination or dissatisfaction. But even if we win our happiness is now firmly identified with this external goal, or the next one, or the one after that. We can so easily lose the plot, forget the importance of inner peace and identify our happiness with achieving or possessing.

It does not necessarily follow that we should all live austerely, although a simple lifestyle can be both easier to sustain and less fraught with dangers. The point is not that all possessions are bad, but that our attachment to them, or to acquiring or retaining them, can overwhelm us. To be at peace is to be free of unsatisfied desires, but to attempt to satisfy every desire is to mount a treadmill. The surer route to having no unsatisfied desires is to let go of desires.

Of course we will continue to want and value many things, including possessions, experiences, relationships and achievements. As long as goals do not conflict we can try for as many as we like, but where they do conflict we have to choose. Our usual trick is to persuade ourselves that achieving some goal or other will make us happy, but if we are clear about the link between the inner life and happiness we know that external goals will not guarantee happiness.

Recognising that happiness and the inner life are central does not mean that all other goals need to be abandoned, merely that we must be careful not to abandon the central goal in our enthusiasm for lesser ones. If you can for example live with riches and not be attached to them, not value them above your inner peace, not regard yourself as superior because of them and not fret about their diminution, then you have made great progress towards a contented heart. It is not an easy trick.

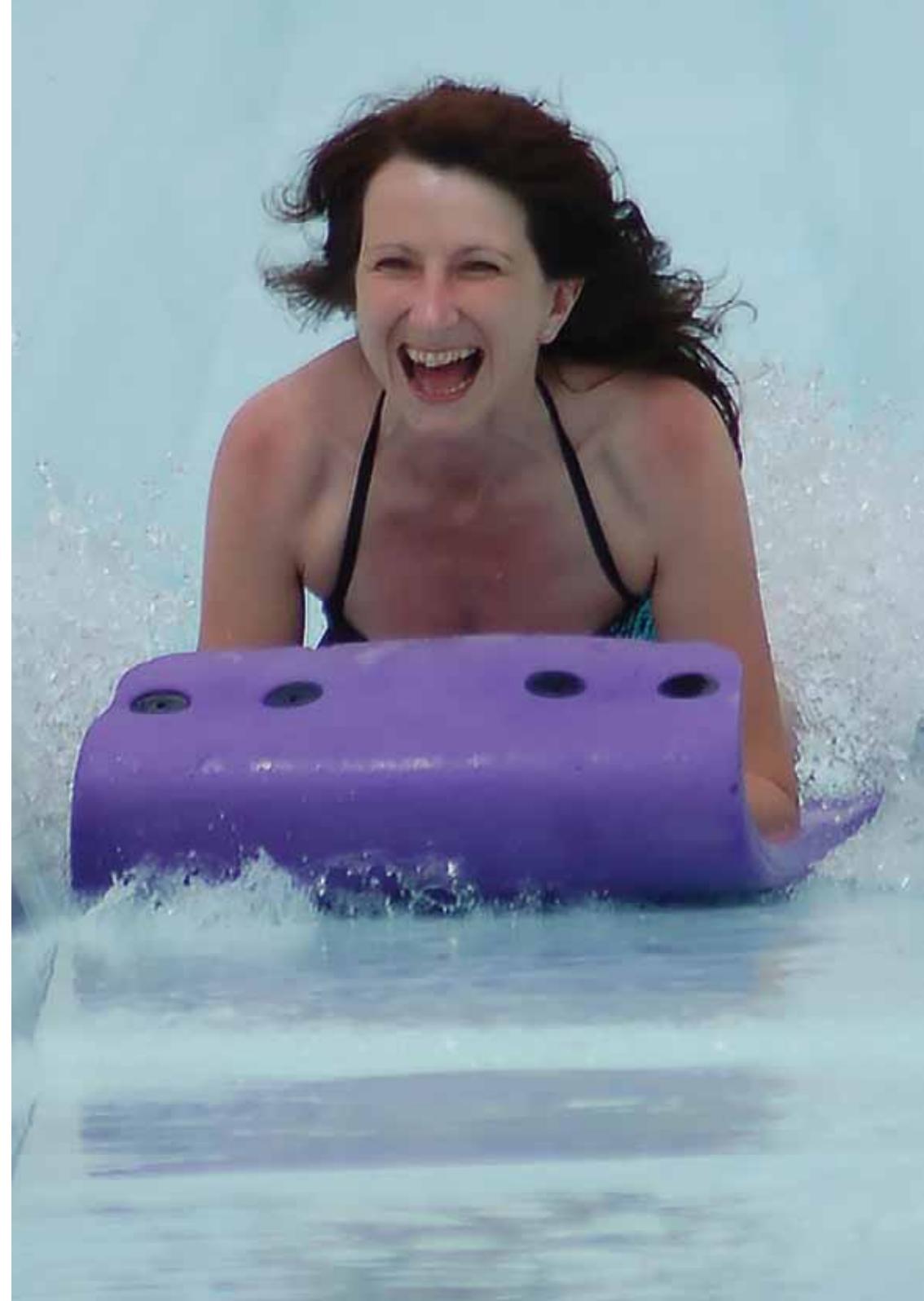


The key realisation is that everything changes and the key practice is constantly to remind ourselves of this. Everything changes constantly and we ourselves are rapidly changing in lives which last only a few decades. Everything is process, not stasis. We must learn not so much to live in the now as to live in the flux, to recognise that everything, even whatever and whoever is most precious to us, will change or disappear. That of course does not mean that nothing is important, on the contrary everything, every moment in its uniqueness, is at once precious and transient - precious because transient.

If we are confident that we have the skill to deal with any everyday circumstance we can let go of fear. Just imagine then if we had confidence that we could maintain our inner peace in all circumstances, because our inner skills were practiced and strong. Even the fear of death could be overcome if we were confident that we had done everything to prepare ourselves for what we believe will happen. Perhaps letting go of fear to this extent is the ultimate prize, the last piece of the jigsaw of living happily, but it depends on living in such a way as to develop the confidence that our inner lives can deal with anything.

5. Enjoyment

The last of our family of skills is enjoyment. Strangely, we can forget in the daily grind of striving and pushing that enjoyment of the process of living is so important. We can even devote ourselves so seriously to altering the habits of our inner lives to achieve inner peace



that we simply forget that happiness is the objective! Happiness postponed is in this context happiness lost.

Among the key enjoyment habits are gratitude, patience and humour. All it takes to turn them into skills is to focus on them, to notice when they are active and when absent and to cultivate them as much as we can.

Take gratitude, for example. Perhaps we are biologically conditioned to focus on what is wrong or lacking in our environment but it is an instinct which in more usual modern conditions can lead us to focus on the 1% which is unsatisfactory and neglect the 99% which is absolutely fine. The habit of gratitude is a matter of appreciating what we have, what is going well, what is pleasant and enjoyable about where we are and what we are doing even if we would rather be somewhere else doing something else. It does not preclude action to perfect the situation, if that is possible, but we can spend a lot of time and effort trying to order the world exactly to our specification only for something to slip out of line just as we think we have finished. To learn to appreciate what we have is not a matter of settling for second best but of appreciating each detail for what it is.

Many religious people understand this attitude very well and make a point of "giving thanks". But it is not necessary to be a believer to feel gratitude. The skill is to be aware of what it is we have reason to be grateful for, not necessarily that we can identify someone we should be grateful to. Every comfort, every beauty,

every pleasure great or small is something to be grateful for and in being grateful we stop and pay attention to the enjoyment it provides. Even the background to our lives provides opportunities for gratitude: for example, merely to live in a society which functions at all is a huge advantage not enjoyed by everyone.

It is very tempting to regard our successes and achievements as of our own making. No need then for gratitude, we might think: we earned this success. But even here the cultivation of gratitude can enhance our experience. Our skills have only been acquired through opportunity and the natural gifts to apply ourselves to them. Opportunity might not have presented itself and our natural gifts (the clue is in the name) are certainly not of our own making. So while we rightly celebrate our success we can recognise that we are fortunate to be able even to strive for it: we are not responsible for our intelligence, agility, persuasiveness, or our ability to apply ourselves and work hard.

Without patience, another key skill, we can be constantly frustrated by daily life, throwing away our time because we are so focused that any waiting time is torture, like a child who cannot wait for a cake to come out of the oven. We can even turn to anger, as when our frustration in traffic is vented against some other traveller. Patience is the skill of reminding ourselves that every moment has a value and something in it that is worth valuing. If it is not a moment which provides exactly what we would prefer it still provides something and more importantly, it is a part of our life,

something whose quality is up to us but which forms a part of us.

Humour helps us keep perspective on everything that happens to us. External circumstances and the physical world have little regard for our projects and designs and may constantly thwart or obstruct us. If we regard these setbacks darkly we can become bitter or angry. The same is true even of our efforts to acquire the skills of the inner life, for the process of practice is full of setbacks and we can easily fall into being angry with circumstances or with ourselves. Humour is often a matter of finding a perspective from which life and its difficulties can be worn lightly.

One of the most common defences for those facing really hard lives is to develop humour which cuts their misfortune down to manageable size. We may take happiness very seriously but that in no way implies that we should be solemn about it, a distinction which perhaps sometimes gets lost in religious approaches to inner peace. So humour, the ability to see the funny side of life's difficulties, our own foibles or the arrogance of power, is one of the key skills which keeps us from being overwhelmed and creates the space in which inner peace can grow.

Part 4 Taking action

Once attention is drawn to the inner life and particularly the importance for living happily of developing its skills, its neglect in our culture and education becomes glaring. We often tend to take a passive approach to our inner lives, allowing them to play out as they will. If we habitually find ourselves angry or envious we are more likely to change or avoid external triggers, rather than trying to modify the inner habit which produces that emotional response. The same is true of other negative emotions. We can even be attached to the unhelpful habits of our inner life: that's just the way we are, we say, that's us.

This passive approach is in contrast to our active approach to the external world. Rather than look inwards, we are more likely to try to fix the external world to make our lives more comfortable, whether that means for example looking for a better job (or any job) or campaigning for a cause. The "official" strategy of our culture might thus be described as active externally, passive in our inner lives. In difficult times, when people feel external circumstances are too much for them or too difficult to change, this can even decline into total passivity: passive externally, passive in our inner lives.



People often resist focusing on their inner lives because they fear it means we should be passive in our external lives. If it is suggested that anger is an unhelpful way to respond to external events, for example, because it is incompatible with inner peace, that is sometimes taken to mean that we should meekly accept whatever happens, becoming passive externally even if more active in our approach to our inner lives. But in advocating a more active approach to our inner lives we are absolutely not advocating a more passive approach to our external lives.

The inner life needs more emphasis because its importance is so often ignored. But happiness is not independent of external conditions because at any given moment our responses are determined by whatever inner habits we have developed or acquired at that point. If we can improve the external world why would we not? It is simply that change in the external world should not be sought at the expense of damaging the inner life. We must find ways to live with and be happy despite external conditions which cannot be changed, but we should not lightly conclude that any external condition is unchangeable. Thus the strategy we advocate is an active approach to both external conditions and the inner life.

A way of life

We have suggested that the inner life is neglected in our culture, despite being arguably the most important aspect of our existence for each one of us. In particular, it is the key to living happily, through the moulding by practice of the habits (skills) which underlie our beliefs, experiences, desires and our emotional responses to events. This is not a matter of living a different life, but it is a different way of living. It recognises that the inner life is of central importance and that happiness is not an accidental byproduct of getting and spending.

Attention to the inner life above all leads to awareness that every thought and feeling can weaken or strengthen an inner habit or skill and that we have a choice in what habits we encourage. But only you can change the habits of your inner life: no one else can do it for you and you cannot do it for anyone else. In that sense, your happiness is in your own hands.



Thanks

Our thanks go to Tony Wilkinson for writing this booklet. His book 'The lost art of being happy- spirituality for sceptics' is available now



The inner life

(and how to improve yours)

Everyone can benefit from exploring their inner lives - whether you hold religious views or are a committed atheist. This booklet examines what we mean by 'the inner life', why it matters and how we can get the most out of our own inner lives.