

The BUS route to Happiness

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To Naomi, Thomas and Jo.

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The BUS route to happiness.

Chapter 1 – Introduction

Where the bus route begins

Hello there! In this book I've written about the advice I've read, mainly on the bus, on how to be a bit calmer, kinder, wiser, and happier, and how to get a slightly different perspective on life.

I'm aiming this advice mostly at my children, and I've written this book to help me pass these recommendations onto them. It's up to them if they want to read this when they're older, or use anything in here! It's also guidance to me and anyone else too. I've also written about what has helped my very mild anxiety and stress in the past. Hopefully, you'll find it helpful as well.

Like everyone, I'm an imperfect human being and am a work in progress. I'm still practising the things in this book, and I often go wrong. I'm not an expert in the subjects here, especially in mental health issues. No. I'm just an ordinary bloke that's read a few books on the bus and I've done a bit of research. That sums up my knowledge.

If you read this and have mental health problems, seek independent medical help. I have in the past; there is no shame or stigma here.

This book is a light-hearted look at what I've learned. There are a few jokes, and they're probably terrible, I'll apologise for them now!

If I'm honest, these pages are actually a cathartic writing project that's got a bit out of hand!!

I wrote a lot of this book on the bus on my phone. If there are any bumps in the reading experience, it was due to the many bumps in the road on the bus commutes! This is also my first book, so please go gentle with me!

There will be a bit of deliberate repetition in this book too, as I hammer a point home. Also the book is designed for you to dip in and out of the advice, so I repeat things to make some sections self contained. Think of it as happiness wisdom déjà vu!

Science fiction references are in here too, especially from Star Wars, because I think the films have a lot of wisdom in them, probably because they've liberally borrowed from Eastern philosophy.

I have a few autobiographical details about me throughout, and I hope I won't come across as self-indulgent. I'll relate my experiences to some of the ideas from the books and articles I've read. In the endnotes I'll detail the writers who've accompanied me on the trips backwards and forwards to work.

I'll also have a lot of bullet points, because:

- I like bullet points.
- I think they help make it easy to read shortened points.
- I like bullet points.

Here's some background about me to set things up. Bear with me. I live in Leeds, which is a city in Yorkshire, in the North of England, with a population of nearly a million people in the vicinity. I moved here from my hometown in Hastings, on the south coast, in 1993, when I did my degree. I've lived and worked in the area ever since.

Before 2015 I got to work by walking or driving. I'd never commuted using public transport before.

When I moved out of the city centre to Bramley in West Leeds in 2009, I drove to work. I went Freelance in 2013. From 2014 I worked a lot from home, and I decided I wanted a full-time permanent job, in an office, with a steadier income. I moved into a full-time corporate web designer role in the city centre in 2016. Having experienced the cost and logistical difficulties of city centre parking, it was a choice between getting a bus or a train to work. Trains were too overcrowded and irregular, so I decided to use the bus.

Headphones were my entertainment distraction of choice on the bus, with games and news websites. I always seemed to find the journey long and frustrating even though it was between 25 and 40 minutes depending on the traffic. My bus trip wasn't a long commute! What the hell was I complaining about? I'm a bloody commuting light-weight!

It was after several weeks of me moaning that my lovely wife, Jo, suggested I read some books on the bus. Oh dear, she unleashed a monster! I disliked bus journeys, so buying books seemed to me like turning a negative into a positive. I was about to learn an incredible amount, and the bus rides would zoom by.

So here I was in the middle of 2016 with an urge to buy books. This urge coincided in June with the referendum which decided the UK would leave the European Union, infuriatingly named Brexit. Reading politics on news websites wasn't helping me make sense of some of this. I have never felt so angry about a piece of news, not since the Iraq war in 2003. Brexit was also a historically horrendous move, in my opinion.

So maybe you think I might be over-reacting, but I was almost shaking with anger on the bus the morning I saw the announcement of the referendum results. I was not alone in being emotionally affected.¹

So why was I enormously grumpy? Here are some bullet points to illustrate my internationalist and Euro credentials:

- I've studied European politics and the benefits of EU human rights laws when I was a student.
- My first web design job in Leeds in 1999 was to provide free web designs to businesses in Leeds, funded by the EU European Social Fund.
- My first Freelance contract in 2013 was for an online electronics retailer that sold all over Europe. I designed emails translated by EU citizens that I sat next to, to sell to those territories.
- A contract in 2014 saw me working on a project with a company set up by Bosnian refugees who had escaped the civil war in the early 1990s as children. Bosnia is not in the EU, but it gave me an appreciation of the benefits that immigration and refugees can bring to an economy.
- I currently work in a large global corporate business, and our department has employees from the EU, and across the planet working in our office.
- I've DJed and promoted club nights in the past with guest DJs from across Europe and the world.

- I hear dozens of different languages and accents on the bus every week. I live and breathe a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural life, and I love it.

My goodness, you might say, what a lot of virtuously diverse bullet points and how typically metropolitan, elite, globalist and well, er, liberal. But my reality working on the world wide web is that I work without borders. Brexit goes against my internal narratives, against my day to day functioning. My friends are University educated mostly, well travelled, tolerant and open-minded folk, so I'm aware I live in a political bubble. However, my parents are right-wing Brexit supporters, so please don't get me wrong. I do understand why many people wanted to leave the EU.

Don't worry. I'm nearly finished with Brexit!

Another thing about Brexit that made me angry is that it rids my children of EU citizenship, something I have personally really valued. An imperfect union of once rival European countries, with free movement, workers rights and human rights is something I genuinely believe is a brilliant achievement. I feel my kids won't get to benefit from the philosophy of international peace, co-operation and international citizenship, and that worries me. It's a situation enough for me to fear for their future.

After several millennia of conflict across Europe culminating with the flattening of most cities in the 1940s, we have had an unprecedented period of peace and prosperity across Europe for the last 70 years. I'm not sure this has been fully understood or valued. I still don't. In the UK there is currently political deadlock and crisis when I write this in 2019.

The point of my introduction here is to illustrate my elevated levels of stress and anxiety brought on by the early days of Brexit. After all, if I felt like this, I can only imagine how the people I had

worked with, that came from EU countries, now perceived this development. I know of a local Polish shop owner who had received racist abuse in Bramley on the week of the referendum result. I know things may have felt a lot worse for EU citizens living and working here.

Yeah, anyway, in the summer of 2016 I was angry and worried. Then Donald Trump was elected as president in the USA in November. Cherry on the cake, that was!

What I didn't realise then was that these events were to be the catalyst for self-discovery on my bus journeys through some rather specialist books. I often referred to them as my esoteric bus books. Please don't think I'm a deranged, sanctimonious hippie. Not yet. There's plenty of time for that.

By reading books and related online articles on the bus I went on a mission to try and work out how to cope with an uncertain, uncomfortably changing world, which appeared to be unravelling many things I very much valued.

The bus route of the title of this book is the journey of my book reading. It is also a rather convenient abbreviation B.U.S (Be here now, Understanding, empathy and compassion, Shrink desires) which will be explained later.

This book was born out of the advice I've read to be a bit happier and bit less stressed despite events going on around us. There's a lot in the world to be anxious about, but there always has been and always will be. I hope this book helps you even a little.

As Jo's friend said, "You've only got one life, enjoy the ride", even if your life is at times comparable to a bumpy bus ride in Leeds.

Fear, uncertainty, doubt

I've occasionally had flare-ups of mild stress and anxiety in the past, usually to do with life events such as job losses, business losses, divorce and now upsetting political events.

I like to define my terms because language can be inaccurate and confusing, so you'll see me explaining basic words and phrases a lot. The definition of stress in the dictionary is, "a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances."²

The definition of anxiety from the dictionary is, "a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease about something with an uncertain outcome."³ So I felt a few of those things, with the political uncertainty, and so I started reading books on the bus to try and help.

I began by reading books on how to survive a nuclear war and disaster, especially. Part of this was planning for the worst possible outcome of a Brexit and Trump world and part of it was my dark sense of humour. This wasn't a practical strategy, but I did find out that in the event of a nuclear war getting into the countryside to produce food and uniting with multi-skilled people was the way to survive, if I survived the initial bombs! None of this was helping my anxiety at the way the world was going, so different reading was required.

The discomfort of fear and uncertainty about the future is something I very much believe I share with the people who voted to leave the European Union. It's a standard part of the human experience. There's much to fear, with uncertain jobs, population changes, sensationalist media, climate change, technological change, not to mention the personal problems everyone faces.

Brexit was just an intense incident for me (and for many other people who voted to remain in the EU) as it hit my values and beliefs particularly hard.

Fear, uncertainty and doubt are everywhere today and are all things manipulated by businesses who want to increase dissatisfaction with an aspect of our lives into a sale. Fear is manipulated by politicians trying to gain a vote, or by social media companies who want us to see advertisers, which is how they make their money. Fear of missing out (also called FOMO)⁴ is a big part of their way of keeping users on social media platforms. Fear sells, if I have any anxieties or insecurities, there will be a product to be sold to me. 24-hour news media also want your attention and shocks sell. Much of the news is designed to cause outrage and is just “outrage porn” as blogger and writer Mark Mason points out.⁵ In fact with a limited attention span, there is a whole “attention economy” competing for your attention, and grabbing your primal fears is one way of beating the competition. Fear is part of the market.

Powerlessness, fear, lack of control, lack of freedom are all feelings that I’ve felt over a couple of years before Brexit where I lost a contract and eventually two businesses, so these were all familiar emotions. Some of these events were due to poor decision making on my part, but much of it was outside anything I could control. I now found myself again in a situation where fate played a hand, and I felt upset, so I resolved to find out about wisdom and skills that could help me, and maybe others, to feel happier.

Reading books on the bus widened into a more general interest in the thing called happiness and in certain helpful philosophies that anyone of any political persuasion can find interesting. Reading wasn't as much a source of self-help therapy for me as it was a way to put things into perspective. I wanted to reduce my anger, my unease, my stress levels, and to try to make myself a better human being... without sounding like a pompous arse!

How to use this book

Coming up in this book we'll look at happiness and wisdom and what they are, then some ancient wise philosophies and some newer ideas, which I've read on the bus. I'll then describe how some of these ideas can be applied practically, which I've found helpful for my happiness.

The book has two introductory chapters, three chapters of theory, a chapter on psychology and happiness, another introduction chapter, three chapters of practical advice from the theory and a final chapter of general advice. Phew!

Chapters three, four and five are philosophies and theory, if it gets a bit heavy skip ahead to chapter six, on psychology and happiness, which describes useful therapies and self-help strategies inspired by the previous philosophies. Chapter seven onwards gets you into the practical advice.

This isn't a self-help book, it's a "here's a bunch of ideas I like, use these if you want, but go out, find your own ideas that help you and figure it out for yourself book." Snappy, isn't it? This book is also partly a personal journey, figuring out how to be less annoyed, calmer and happier generally.

In the following chapter, we'll look at the relationship between wisdom and happiness, because a lot of what I read on the bus was what I would call pretty wise advice.

Chapter 2 – Happiness and wisdom

This book is to make people a little happier, not to treat mental illness, although there is stuff that might help, this isn't the aim of the book.

What exactly is happiness though? Being happy is a state of “feeling or showing pleasure or contentment”,⁶ it's a temporary state, so it assumes that we may not have it for long, and as we'll see, being sad sometimes is fine. Happiness isn't joy or ecstatic states, and we can either feel it inside or display it externally.⁷ Increasing happiness can be as simple as the elimination of dissatisfaction, reducing the things that make you miserable and doing more stuff you enjoy. Your happiness is also very related to how other people close to you feel and what their moods are. You can gain happiness in very different ways.

I believe your happiness shouldn't be at the expense of other people's happiness. As a contentious example, if you are happy to be wealthy (and as we'll see, money doesn't usually lead to happiness) it shouldn't be because you made money underpaying miserable workers who worked to give you the money. There's an undercurrent of the ethics of happiness in this book. Ethics in the dictionary is, "moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity."⁸ Behaving well to people and acting kindly can make you happy. A good goal to have is to help yourself *and* others to be happy. We are more than just ourselves, as we'll see, and the more happiness for everyone, the better!

So I'm not just talking about an individual's psychological happiness in this book. It's not all about “self-improvement”. What

I've been reading about is the happiness of you, me and us, and it's often rooted in philosophy. We sometimes say, "You've got to be philosophical about it," when talking about a problem, but we rarely actually think or talk about philosophy. Compared to other complexities in modern life, philosophy isn't that hard to wrap our heads around. Fixing a computer problem is often far harder to understand than Zen Buddhism. Honestly working out why there was a crash in Windows is harder than trying to work out the meaning of life!

Why would thinking philosophically make you happy? Happiness is sometimes derived from philosophical wisdom, and there's an interrelationship between the two. You could say if I was wiser and knew reality better that might make me depressed. People can be sad and wise. Wisdom doesn't automatically give you happiness. However, unwise decisions don't, generally, bring happiness to other people or you in the long run. Being wise enough to limit unwise actions can only be good for your happiness.

Certain wisdom has definitely helped writers to improve their happiness because they've written tonnes on it, then I've read it on the bus. Maybe they made lots of money selling books, and the money made them happier? Although I appreciate the irony of that statement, most of these wise ideas are freely available with a little searching.

Getting any happiness from wisdom depends on how I define wisdom; I'm coming to that, folks. Here I'm aiming to cherry pick wisdom that aims to increase happiness. It's made me a bit happier, so there! Much of the purpose of the ancient wisdom and newer ideas, I'm going to chat about, is to reduce suffering and sadness. Wisdom and philosophy are often seen together in popular culture. There's always the cliché of the contented wise monk or sage advising with a knowing smile, like Yoda in Star Wars. Wisdom is often seen to lead to happiness. Some studies show

that, “wise reasoning” does lead to happiness, and if you become wiser you can be happier, the happier you are, the more you can behave wisely,⁹ so there’s something in the basic argument.

I think it's worth keeping your eyes on the prize of being wise. Right, let's get to define what I mean by wisdom.

There's a defined difference between wisdom, knowledge and intelligence. Wisdom is, “the ability to use your knowledge and experience to make good decisions and judgments.”¹⁰ Wisdom is being sensible, having understanding, using knowledge well, “the ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense and insight”, it is “unbiased judgment, compassion”, “non-attachment, and virtues such as ethics and benevolence.”¹¹ Wisdom incorporates emotional intelligence, “tolerance for the uncertainties of life”, “optimism”, “seeing the big picture” and acting in the “common good”.¹²

Knowledge is the “facts, information and skills acquired through education and experience”.¹³ Intelligence is “the ability to acquire knowledge and problem solve”.¹⁴

Looking at these definitions, maybe wisdom should be valued a bit more than knowledge and intelligence, often it isn't. Wisdom is the “good” method in which knowledge and intelligence are applied.

Science and technology, for instance, can be used very unwisely by decision makers. Science was arguably applied unwisely in the creation of nuclear weapons. Ignoring pollution, climate change and the environmental damage caused by our civilisation's technology is unwise. Science is fantastic when used wisely and could solve most of our problems, giving humanity a fantastic future.

There also seems to be a trend in society and politics today to celebrate the unwise. A lot of politics thrives on fear, anger, hatred, prejudice and ignorance. Politics needs wisdom. Humanity needs wisdom. I think the media needs a change in mind-set to increase our wisdom. Sensationalist and simplified sound bites of complex issues sell more than nuanced, well thought out arguments. We also need wisdom on a personal level to make our lives and the lives of people around us a little better. So the books I've read have, I believe, some great themes to be a bit wiser.

We all want to be happy. The wisest course, for the common good, is making the most people around us happy too. But don't exhaust yourself making everyone happy all the time, that's not wise, there's a balance to be had!

Wisdom is often the attempt to create unity, and it's far better to make friends rather than to sow discord and make enemies, it's better to try to build bridges rather than build walls. Causing disunity and creating enemies will come back and haunt you and isn't a good strategy for anyone to pursue.

Wisdom connects to the concepts of intelligence, knowledge and compassion, but also spirituality. Wisdom (or Prajna) for Buddhists is seeing the world as it is, as impermanent and totally interconnected, rather than with our individual preconceptions, and we'll cover this later on.¹⁵

It's useful to compare these definitions of wisdom to "philosophy" which according to the dictionary definition is, "the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline." It is also a "particular system of philosophical thought."¹⁶ Both of these definitions could apply as a collective spread of ideas or to a more personal belief system.

Spirituality, happiness and wisdom

Some of the ideas in this book overlap philosophy and "modern spirituality", but they're just the ideas I like best and have found most useful. Spirituality has the dictionary definition of, "relating to or affecting the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things."¹⁷ However, in his book *Spirituality a very short introduction* Philip Sheldrake makes the distinction between the modern definition of spirituality and the old meaning. The old definition separates matters of the body and the things living "under the influence of God"¹⁸ (or gods presumably).

The more modern definition of spirituality is concerned with:

- The "holistic", which is defined as, "the belief that the parts of something are intimately interconnected and explicable only by reference to the whole"¹⁹ (we'll come on to this lots in Zen).
- The "quest for the sacred" as Sheldrake points out.²⁰
- The mysteries of the "human condition" and a search for meaning.
- The nature of the Universe. Modern spirituality may or may not have beliefs about God.

Now it's worth seeing how the two definitions of spirituality contrast to the meaning of religion which is defined as, "the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods." Religion is about "devotion", "faith and worship",²¹ it "is a cultural system of designated behaviours and practices, morals, worldviews, texts, sanctified places, prophecies, ethics, or organisations, that relates humanity to supernatural,

transcendental, or spiritual elements. However, there is no scholarly consensus over what precisely constitutes a religion”²² according to the ever-present Wikipedia.

“Wow Glenn, what a lot of definitions we have here”, you might say! If you keep some of this in mind later, it clears things up. Hang on in there!

Modern definitions of spirituality are also about the “quest for meaning”, but religions also have the same quest. As we’ll see much later, meaning and purpose all have positive impacts on our happiness. Inspiration to find meaning and purpose and be happier can come from many different sources.

You can get meaning, purpose and happiness from religion or spirituality, but this book isn't really about that route to happiness. It's about the route I've found by reading on a bus, thinking critically and looking for lots of different ideas about happiness. One thing I found is not to look for happiness too hard or put pressure on myself to be happier.

Later on, I will mention Zen Buddhism and Taoism that are religions practised today. I also describe Stoicism, which had religious aspects. All three philosophies have spiritual aspects, by the modern definition. These traditions all contain wisdom that try to make us happier. I was looking for wise stuff that would be an antidote to what I believed were less than enlightened times that I was finding in the news.

Don't let anything above put you off if you are firmly in the sceptic camp. I sit firmly with my feet on the ground. Well usually! OK, I can be a total space cadet sometimes! I'd say I'm spiritual but not religious and usually my best answer to, "what's out there" is, "I don't know". I'm very questioning and have a very independent, free-thinking mind, so I have never blindly accepted dogma. My

spiritual beliefs, whatever they may be, are irrelevant to this book; I think you can find nuggets of wisdom pretty much anywhere. I've always had a real interest in Eastern philosophy and spirituality. That said I wouldn't suggest that I'm a Taoist, Buddhist, Stoic or subscribe to any single idea.

I've also got a big interest in popular psychology and social sciences (my degree was in sociology and media). These were a few of the first books I sought solace in, especially alternative views of how to view society.

I was on an epic quest for wise stuff that would make me feel a bit happier. I've even found some pretty damn good ideas, whilst exploring philosophy and the modern definition of spirituality, such as finding what's really valued and meaningful to me, and getting a different perspective on life and reality. This perspective has included having a holistic view, having less attachment, being more compassionate and changing my relationship with time. I would suggest that you read up on ideas that you think would work for you, because everyone is different (well up to an extent, more on that later).

First, I needed to look at some of the problems out there that might be causing me unhappiness and how to look at them a bit differently.

Negative emotions and getting philosophical perspective

"Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering"²³ said Yoda in 1999's Star Wars, The Phantom Menace. So the Jedi were probably onto something with the problem, I'm aware that one emotion doesn't necessarily

lead to another, but fear, anger and hate are what I would call related negative emotions.

The negative approach of fear, greed, ignorance and prejudice seems to be everywhere if you read too deeply into the news. As I've read more books and articles, what I think we need is to take the attention away from the negative and focus on the positive. So rather than focus on or be motivated by fear, greed, ignorance and prejudice we can create lives for ourselves based on wisdom, courage, generosity and compassion. The preference is to focus on building positive approaches and emotions. However, I don't think it's realistic to be positive all the time, or even desirable. Fear has its place; it stopped our ancestors getting eaten by lions, or modern day folk getting hit by the bus. There are also lots of shades of grey. I often can't describe how I feel, and I'm regularly between fluctuating moods.

In his book, *Buddhist Boot Camp*, Timber Hawkeye (yes that's his name) tells the Native American story of two wolves:

“The old man told his grandson, ‘There is a battle between two wolves inside all, of us. One is Evil (it is anger, envy, greed, resentment, inferiority, lies and ego), and the other is Good (it is joy, peace, love, humanity, kindness, empathy and truth)’ When the boy asked, ‘Which wolf wins?’ the old man quietly replied, ‘The one you feed.’”²⁴

In an ideal world, there's the suggestion that we should each strive to have positive emotions and thoughts three times as much as we are negative emotions and thoughts.²⁵ A 3:1 positive to negative thought and feeling ratio would be great, but I think to get to a 2:1 positive to negative ratio would be a start, or even aiming to be a few percentage points happier like Dan Harris in his book *10% happier*. Even a small boost in happiness can make a difference, so we need to be realistic when we start our journey in trying to be

happier. As my old Scottish Nan used to say, “Try and keep your thoughts high”. It is a great aim, but negative thoughts are sneaky and powerful little beasties.

Negative emotions could be fear, sadness, anger, worry/anxiety, disgust or guilt. All emotions have a purpose, we evolved as social animals, and they all had their place in our small tribes and out in the wild, but these emotions are not so functional in a modern world.²⁶ That’s not to say they’re all unhelpful.

However, it’s OK to be sad sometimes, no, really. It’s a natural response. We need sadness; it’s evolved to tell us something is wrong, or something needs fixing. The same goes for other “negative” emotions, like fear and anger. They are there for a reason. It’s OK to have these negative emotions, but how we deal with them and react to situations is, to an extent, in our control. Stopping the feelings from arising is not. If I’m in a bad mood and stressed, trying to over-think myself to be positive by will power alone isn’t going to work, and chances are I’ll feel like a failure. Forced positivity is awful, and there are no rules, or consequences here for getting it wrong; I’m also not forcing any perspective here, just some ideas I’ve personally found interesting and helpful.

The type of wisdom and approaches I’ll discuss work best practised when things are going right, so when things go wrong, some of it will be remembered and make things a little less awful. I’ve never thought there will be any radical results from the books I’ve read. You won’t magically become a Yoda-like calm, wise and happy sage from this book. Sorry about that. Some things have made me think, and I’ve tried to fit them into my life. These ideas won’t work under all circumstances and they might not work for you, but you need to work out how to become a little wiser and happier for yourself. There are some ideas about how to do that later.

There are three major ancient spiritual traditions I’ve read about,

Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Stoicism, and I'll be looking briefly at the core philosophies. Modern psychology has looked at these ideas too. Therapies like Mindfulness-based therapies take inspiration from Buddhist meditation, and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) takes inspiration from Stoicism²⁷ and teaches skills to help a patient's mental health. What I feel is missing from what I've read of both therapies is a more in-depth understanding or teaching of the philosophies that partly inspired them. I think they focus on skills to help manage emotions, rather than on the theory about how to view the world and in the book *Philosophy for Life*, Jules Evans makes a similar point, especially about positive psychology.²⁸

There's a lot of non-science in some of these philosophies that are unlikely to be proved, so it's fair enough that psychology excludes parts of them. I'll talk more about modern psychological interpretations of Buddhism and Stoicism later on. I'm not going to discuss much of the impossible to determine religious or metaphysical aspects of the philosophies (such as reincarnation), but I will focus on practical perspectives that I've found helpful managing negative emotions. One interesting thing is that ancient philosophies like Stoicism had no idea of a division between psychology, religion or philosophy; it was all one encompassing taught wisdom.

So let's get started in a brief and straightforward summary of the philosophies, with the first one; Taoism.

Chapter 3 – Taoism

I've been interested in Eastern philosophies since I did martial arts as a teenager and Taoism was the first one I learned of.

Taoism, usually pronounced Daoism, is a Chinese philosophy that goes back at least 2500 years ago.²⁹ It most likely originated from ancient Chinese hermits and monks who looked very, very hard at nature and the patterns they found there.

As Benjamin Hoff says in *The Tao of Pooh and the Te of Piglet* (which uses Winnie the Pooh characters as examples of Taoist virtues), Taoism's "key principles are natural simplicity, effortless action, spontaneity and compassion" it is "happy, gentle, childlike, and serene".³⁰

If we reduce Taoism to the absolute essentials, it would be to:

- "Observe, deduce and apply".
- See as if it's the first time you've seen things.
- "See simplicity in complexity".
- "Notice patterns and relationships".
- "Study the natural laws" around us and work with them with as little "interference and effort" as possible.³¹

The main themes in Taoism that I've found useful are below.

The Tao

Taoism is named after The Tao, loosely translated as “The Way” which is a nameless, indefinable process, flow and principle underpinning the Universe.³² The Tao is vague and mysterious according to the main book of Taoism the Tao Te Ching, which translates more or less to, “The Classic of the Way's Virtue” or, “Authoritative handbook of the Way and its power”.³³ It's a natural way that shouldn't be defined by blunt language but lived intuitively, by being spontaneous and living in harmony with your own nature and with the natural process of the wider natural world. Lao Tze was the supposed author of the Tao Te Ching, he may not have existed or written the book, but it's part of a broader Chinese tradition of martial arts, (including Tai Chi), medicine, nutrition and ethics.

Yin and Yang

The Yin and Yang symbol is very well known. It's a circle split by a black and white interlocked halves, with a white circle in the black half and a black circle in the white half.

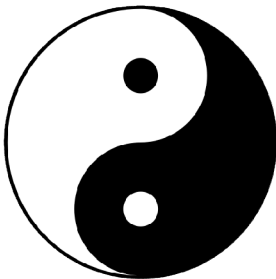


Figure 1 - Yin and Yang symbol

Taoists see that "complementary, interconnected, and interdependent"³⁴ opposites make up the Universe, neither of which are good or bad. For every opposite element, it has a little of the opposing part in it. Yang is the masculine, day, light, and hard aspects of the Universe. Yin is the feminine, night, dark, and soft aspects. The definitions of Yin and Yang are arbitrary, the point I take away is that without night we can't have the day, without male we can't have female, without negative we can't have positive. The opposites need each other. They're inseparable. They can't exist without the other, and both have aspects of each. There are no binary opposites as such, only a holistic whole.

The symbol represents unity, balance and harmony, mainly in nature, it also represents change over time, and it's occasionally imagined as rotating. Night turns into day, for instance. Many characteristics of life that we think of as opposites are purely fictional. It isn't good or bad; it's all relative.

There's a Chinese Taoist proverb that is brilliant at illustrating that "good and bad" are just our beliefs of a situation:

A Chinese farmer finds a horse, and his friend says, "How lucky", and the farmer says, "Maybe. Who knows what's good or bad?"

The next day the farmer falls off the horse and breaks his leg, and his friend says, "How unlucky," and the farmer says, "Maybe. Who knows good or bad?"

The day after a squad from the army comes to draft the farmer into fighting in a war, they see his broken leg, and they leave him alone. His friend says, "How lucky", and the farmer says, "Maybe. Who knows what's good or bad?"³⁵

So, what you define as a negative could lead to a positive outcome, a positive could lead to a negative. For every bit of negative, there's a little bit of a positive, for every positive, there's a piece of the negative. Nothing is ever totally "good" or "bad". Of course, life is full of shades of grey, not just black and white. In some ways, that's the point of the Yin and Yang symbol. Nothing is entirely 100% one way or the other at all times.

We need to have a bit of perspective on reality. If we look at the Yin and Yang symbol, "positive" and "negative" make up one whole, there isn't any whole without both. Everything happens as it happens. There isn't really positive or negative only the way we feel about situations. We need to look at the whole picture and focus on the way there could be a light at the end of the dark tunnel, and a bad situation might lead to something good.

Even a missed bus might not be the start of a bad day.

Naturalness and spontaneity

The Tao is often seen as a process like water.³⁶ Taoists believe that if you go with the flow and live according to your nature and live in a less over-thinking and more natural and spontaneous way, you can increase your well being. I suppose that means you need to know your own nature before you can act according to it, and as the Taoists point out, you need to behave according to some virtue and with the Three Treasures in mind (see below). So Taoism would suggest not forcing actions and outcomes, but to bend in adversity rather than pushing back. Taoism uses the example of a reed bending in a river as an example of how to behave in adversity. Taking paths of least resistance to your goals is most effective, in the same way.

In politics, Taoists are very hands off, allowing people to get on with their lives without any interference from the government and admiring leaders who have a very light touch.³⁷ Taoism is all about leaving things to settle, to let events take their course, to allow life to flow the way that feels natural.³⁸

Wu Wei – non-action and effortless action

Wu Wei is the action of inaction, which sounds pretty contradictory really. Following Wu Wei means not to grasp, strive or fight the ebb and flow of life³⁹ and to make as little effort as possible⁴⁰ with free-flowing spontaneous and efficient actions. It “means no going against the nature of things”.⁴¹ It’s all about less or minimal effort, or even effortless effort and acting with intuition rather than with forced intent. It is the art of not trying too hard and of untroubled and easy-going actions. Wu Wei suggests an absence of hurry, a purposeless and “aimless, empty life” which has the freedom of “wandering nowhere”.⁴²

Being flexible and adaptable like water means you're not resistant, but pliable, accepting the course of the flow and current of life, whether that becomes rough or smooth. The aim is to be in tune with our own nature and nature outside us. The mind needs to be clear, tranquil and calm to have an egoless “no mind” and “no self”, both concepts used in Zen Buddhism. We’ll come onto this later. The point is not to over think, to relax, to react to things by going with the grain, with the flow, with the path of least resistance, keeping it simple and letting things settle by themselves. Involvement with the world, for Taoists, should be with a gentle touch and with a harmonious unbiased approach.

Te – virtue

Te (pronounced De) is usually translated as "moral character; virtue; morality",⁴³ it is living and working by following the Tao and having sensitivity and an awareness of it. So for Taoists, if you are to have virtue, you can't be domineering, or forcing, or grasping, or regulated. Instead you must be laid back, positive, peaceful, generous and of course spontaneous.

The Three Treasures - Kindness, Simplicity, Humbleness

Chapter 67 of the Tao Te Ching describes the three treasures:

"I have Three Treasures that I hold and guard.

The first is Kindness.

The second is Simplicity.

The third is Humbleness.

With Kindness, one can be courageous.

With Simplicity, one can be generous.

With Humbleness, one can be the lead to provide guidance."⁴⁴

There are some varieties of translation with this text. This one is pretty self-explanatory, primarily the three jewels of Taoism are the core virtues of:

- Firstly kindness, compassion, and love,
- Secondly simplicity, moderation and spending little money,
- Lastly humbleness, humility and modesty.

Kindness for yourself, others and nature is self-explanatory and we'll cover this loads later.

Simplicity is a core feature of Taoism, as a principle of the “uncarved block”. As Benjamin Hoff says, “things in their original simplicity contains their own natural power, power that is easily spoiled and lost when that simplicity is changed.”⁴⁵

Humbleness is to “reduce the ego to nothing”, which is similar to Buddhist ideas, it aims for cooperation with people, sensitivity to our surroundings and contentment with what we have.⁴⁶

All of these are things you’d expect from a nature-focused philosophy, which values people living within nature and according to natural laws, with natural rhythms and according to their own nature.

Chi

I’m going to mention Star Wars again because the Force in the films was very loosely based on Chi (also known as Qi or Ki) in the Taoist philosophy, “It’s an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.”⁴⁷ George Lucas loved Japanese Samurai films,⁴⁸ and as I’ll mention later, Zen Buddhism inspired the Samurai, and this had Taoist influences. Where Tao is the flow, process and balance of the Universe, Chi is the energy throughout the universe derived from the Tao. Modern science obviously doesn’t recognise any of this. Martial arts often refer to Chi, and things like Feng Sui refer to it, which helps you position your sofa in your living room according to where it won’t block the flow of energy!

Even though Chi is a mystical energy with no scientific basis, there are some practical applications of the ideas around it.

Ki (which is the Japanese for Chi) was at the centre of the form

of Karate I did (Shoto Ryu⁴⁹) which had elements of Tai Chi. Thinking about the concept of Ki was a way of focusing a body's limited energy with concentration, relaxation, calm breathing, centralisation (balance) and harmonising, which is being in tune with yourself and with an opponent.

Being aware of your body, with control of breath, relaxation and concentrating on the external world are very useful in reducing symptoms of anxiety. Awareness of our energy levels can help us understand the required levels that we need to cope with the things that life can throw at us.

This form of Karate especially emphasises mental discipline and also had elements of Zen. I only did it for 18 months when I was a teenager, but it's been pretty influential in my life, giving me a lifelong interest in Eastern philosophy. I left my Karate club to follow my other interests at the time, which were beer, DJing and girls!

What Chi based martial arts teach us is that the mind and body is one thing. It's a "mindbody". For instance, a relaxed mind means a relaxed body. Also relaxing the body and posture can help relax the mind.

Tao wrap up

So there you have Taoism, when I get on the bus in the morning I have to accept the bumps in the road, accept the route it takes and the nature of the passengers and myself. I have to go with the flow, enjoy the process of life and the journey. The next helpful themes in the books I've read come from Zen Buddhism.

Chapter 4 – Zen Buddhism

My interest in Zen Buddhism again comes from my teenage time doing martial arts. Zen was influential in the ideas of some Chinese and Japanese forms, including Kung Fu and Karate. The point of Buddhism is to reduce suffering, so it's helpful for happiness!

Zen Buddhism originates from Chan Buddhism in China, which was a form of Buddhism that had been initially imported from India and was influenced by Chinese Taoism.⁵⁰ Zen Buddhism was introduced to Japan in around the 12th Century.⁵¹ The word Zen comes from the word Chan, which means, more or less “meditation”.

Zen Buddhism is a calm, kind and peaceful philosophy which above all emphasises sitting meditation and seeing into the nature of things.⁵² The benefits of Zen include increased concentration and inner peace, not to be confused with inner peas. Sorry, bad joke, but sometimes you need to give peas a chance.

What Zen points out is that we all have the ability and some control to awaken and see things about our nature and the way all things are without our prejudices and beliefs clouding them.

Rather than being entirely based on scriptures, books and religious text, Zen is a religion of meditation practice in monasteries. It's well known for Koans, which are occasionally paradoxical stories to meditate on, which are widely assumed to break down a conditioned and logical mind, but their real purpose is to show us essential Buddhist truths. “The sound of one hand clapping” is the most famous Koan, but most are discussions on how to see the world.

Zen sand gardens and ink paintings (Sumi-e) are famous examples

of an art style that goes back centuries, expressing core values of the spirit of naturalness, minimalism, simplicity, spontaneity and emptiness.

Below are some of the main elements of Zen teaching, with some words in Japanese and Sanskrit (sunyata and dukkha) to make me sound like I know what I'm talking about!

The Four Noble Truths

These are common to all forms of Buddhism. I used the BBC religion website as a source here.⁵³ The Four Noble Truth's are:

- 1) Suffering and dissatisfaction (dukkha) exist. Suffering takes the form of old age, sickness and death, but also in dissatisfaction and being unfulfilled. We all have desires that don't get satisfied, and expectations that don't get met. Any satisfaction we do get is only ever temporary, that's because everything changes. We often don't want things to change, and that is suffering too. We all also experience pain, both emotionally and physically. That's the first truth.⁵⁴
- 2) The cause of suffering and dissatisfaction is desire. Desire includes grasping, wanting and craving. We can have the desire for material things, pleasure, not being in pain and outcomes. We also have the desire for an "individual life",⁵⁵ permanence and certainty, where none exist. Greed, anger, envy and hatred all spring from the ignorance of not seeing the world the way it is; we don't have a permanent or individual self, what is "me" is an illusion.⁵⁶ We aren't separate from everything else. We can't control an interconnected and impermanent world, even though we

desperately want to.

- 3) Removing desire removes suffering and dissatisfaction. The way to do this is to free ourselves from attachment to material things and to the things we want to happen. We also need to free ourselves from the idea of a separate self (see emptiness below). We can't change events, but we can change how we react to them, letting go and having less attachment to expectations is one way to overcome the desire of things to be a certain way.
- 4) The end of suffering and dissatisfaction is by following the Eightfold Path:

The Noble Eightfold Path

- 1) Right View (or Right Understanding): Our actions have consequences, we reap what we sow.⁵⁷
- 2) Right Thought (or Right Intention): We are what we think. It emphasises peacefulness, having compassion, understanding the nature of suffering, and knowing that everything is impermanent and that we don't have an individual self.
- 3) Right Speech: Not lying, not having divisive speech, not being abusive or using harsh words.
- 4) Right Action. Being in harmony, being peaceful, not stealing, not killing, not overindulging in sensual pleasures,⁵⁸ avoiding sexual misconduct, not committing fraud.

- 5) Right Livelihood: Not having a job that kills, harms animals, makes weapons, exploits or causes harm.⁵⁹
- 6) Right Effort: This is the idea to make an effort to create positive states of mind, free from ill will and dark thoughts.
- 7) Right Mindfulness: Increasing awareness of states of mind, emotions, body, sensations. Being fully conscious and not absent-minded or on autopilot.
- 8) Right Concentration: This is developing mental concentration, mainly through meditation.

Now we come to an overview of concepts slightly more specific to Zen. For the Japanese subject names below, I'm using William Miyagi book *Zen for beginners*,⁶⁰ and I referred a little to the Zen concepts from www.zen-buddhism.net.

Meditation (Zazen). Practice rather than written teaching.

Zazen meditation is the core practice of Zen. It is just sitting, that's almost all there is to it. Zen monasteries ask monks to sit in a very particular position (and an uncomfortable one if you ask me). Strict followers of Zen and monks especially sit for hours at a time in meditation. Meditation aims to let thoughts, judgements, images, opinions and ideas pass by like clouds without getting caught up in them. You concentrate, focussing on the here and now, on breathing, sights and sounds. Part of the aim is to break down all of your language, social conditioning and understand of what makes the “self”. You need to see you as you are, at this moment. You are not your thoughts. You are a holistic body,

related to the world outside and more than just working parts. Habitual cycles of thinking aren't particularly realistic representations of reality, here and now.

Zen focuses very much on meditation practice as a priority rather than on studying huge religious texts. Although there are some texts to consider, it is secondary to the regular practice of strict sitting meditation.

The fantastic English philosopher Alan Watts helped bring Zen to a broader audience in the West when he lived in America. He became well known to the “beat generation” in the 1960s. He was critical of Zazen’s formal seated meditation, saying, “A cat sits until it is tired of sitting, then gets up, stretches, and walks away”.⁶¹ Watts wrote mockingly of Westerners who took up Zen meditation seeing them as, “The uptight school ... who seem to believe that Zen is essentially sitting on your ass for interminable hours,”⁶² as Tim Lott writes.

There may be less formal ways to meditate that may, or may not work to gain an insight into the nature of our existence in the here and now. However, for Zen Buddhists, the rigorous and exact posture and method of sitting in Zazen,⁶³ often in a lotus position, is part of the way to focus the mind and it works for many millions of followers.⁶⁴

Emptiness (Sunyata)

A Zen Buddhist goes into a pizza shop and says, "can you make me one with everything?" It's an old joke. Sorry about that!

Effectively we are already one with the Universe. There isn't an “us” and “everything else”. It isn't “you” and the “Universe”, it's

“Universeyou”.⁶⁵

We are brought up to define every object around us as individual things with our language, science and education. We see everything as separate entities in a Universe made up of stuff and things. Zen and Buddhism generally see everything as empty of definition. Our knowledge and understanding that comes to us through language are a “Maya”, as it’s called in India, an illusion. Our descriptions of separate things are inaccurate.

Matter, senses, feelings, mind and our understanding are not separate things⁶⁶ and don’t stand alone.⁶⁷ There is no independent existence of anything, including you. Everything in the Universe is dependent on everything else for its existence. Brad Warner in *Hardcore Zen* uses the metaphor that our individual selves are waves in an ocean. We are all part of the water.⁶⁸

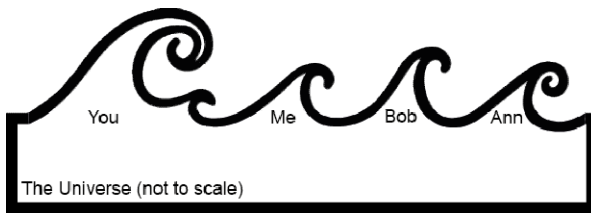


Figure 2 - Universeyou. Adapted from Brad Warner's illustration⁶⁹

"We are all the leaves of one tree. We are all the waves of one sea," as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it.⁷⁰

Everything in the Universe is so interconnected, interrelated, interdependent and ever-changing that it renders independent definitions irrelevant. A significant aim of Zen and Buddhism is to see this and experience it first-hand. Separate things only exist in relation to one another. “Emptiness” or “voidness” in Buddhism

means that all items in the universe only exist in relationship to other things. Everything is interrelated to and interdependent of everything else.⁷¹

As Shunryu Suzuki put it, language, definitions, “isms”, opinions, beliefs, ambitions, ego, are the “small mind”. The “big mind” is awareness in the here and now, of oneness with the Universe, with a peaceful, compassionate mind, aware of the connection of all things.⁷² The Universe is an all-is-one thing. Everything in it is empty of definition and is ever changing.

As I understand Zen, a significant reason for meditation, mindfulness and a full concentration on the here and now is to lessen the chattering mind, separate the thoughts that make “me” and not see things with my mind as “me”, but see as the “Universe”.

A well known Buddhist example of emptiness is that a “flower” is interconnected with everything else (sun, earth, air, water, nature) to render the word meaningless. All humans are in their essence the same amongst all other humans and all other parts of the Universe. Everything is. There is a real unity between us; there isn’t a self or other.⁷³

Here’s an example. The bus I read these books on was dependent on the rubber for its tyres, which was dependent on people to make them, trees to grow the rubber, the sun to shine for the tree to grow, the big bang to make the sun. We call them “tyres” but they are a reflection of the whole Universe. The word and concept of “tyres” are empty. This goes for everything else on the bus, including the passengers.

Another example is that this book you’re reading now is also connected to everything else, including the sun, as this is what made the tree grow to give it paper. There isn’t really a separate concept of a “book”. Obviously, if you’re reading this digitally, the

separate concept of the device you're reading it on is also empty.⁷⁴

Emptiness also means I can't desire or grasp at aspects of reality. They aren't independent things. Everything is also empty of permanence. Nothing anywhere lasts, there is nothing lasting to grasp at or desire.

If everything is interdependent and interconnected, it means that life is outside my control, I have to accept uncertainty and powerlessness. Desiring to control outcomes is meaningless. There are too many interrelated factors at play to control anything to any real degree.

Another perspective on emptiness is from Tim Lott that, "there is no stuff, no difference between matter and energy. Look at anything closely enough – even a rock or a table – and you will see that it is an event, not a thing". "Every thing is, in truth, happening..." "there is just one event, with multiple aspects, unfolding". "We are not just separate egos 'locked in bags of skin'. We come out of the world, not into it. We are each expressions of the world..."⁷⁵

Atoms make up much of the Universe; they are particles which are separated by empty space. Everything in the Universe, and in fact you, is composed of more empty space than it is of stuff.⁷⁶ Everything in the Universe isn't just empty of independent things and is a unified whole, it's made up of an awful lot of actual physical emptiness.

If I can keep in mind that I'm made up mainly of empty space and I'm empty of an independent self, if anyone says anything unpleasant about me, I can use my imagination to believe that the abuse can pass through me like I'm invisible. It's a Zen superpower!

In the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's net,⁷⁷ everything we call an "individual" item in the Universe is a highly reflective jewel in each crossing point of the cords of an infinite sized net. Every piece has a reflection of everything else in the net, which means every individual item in the Universe has a reflection of the whole Universe within it. What that means is that every human may be tiny in respect to the entire Universe, but we reflect the whole Universe in us all, in the way we've evolved and are interdependent and interconnected to everything else. I really like this view of us. It makes us all beautiful, significant and incredible. It also makes everything else in our world something incredible too.

Hopefully, this hasn't blown any brains. Although, the concept of an independent brain is in fact... empty. Now we move on to "No Self"...

Seeing one's true nature (Kensho) and no self

Seeing our true nature is one of the main aims of Zen. It's the realisation that there is no duality, no opposite or difference between the seer and the seen, or between subject and object, it's one and the same. In Zen, there is no dualism, no divided opposite aspects. Opposing states are equally valuable parts of the whole, just like Yin and Yang. The most crucial non-dual aspect is that there is no real difference between "me" and all the things in the Universe.

Don't forget, rather than the Universe and you, its Universeyou. Zen meditation and mental training aim to see this for yourself. It's **really** seeing the empty nature of seen things and the self. Just seeing things as they are is the essence of much of Buddhist belief.

Kensho is effectively the same as the Buddhist concept of enlightenment and is pretty much the same as Satori below. But as I understand it, Kensho is sometimes seen as a flash of inspiration seeing the self as interdependent and impermanent, rather than having any permanent change in your point of view.

You are empty of an independent self, as is everything else. So there is “no self” or isolated me, we are all “both individuals and expressions of the universe.”⁷⁸ What I call my “self” is indefinable, ever-changing, and there are no barriers between me and the whole universe around me.

Enlightenment and deep understanding (Satori)

Satori is a Japanese term for awakening and deep understanding and is very similar to the broader Buddhist idea of enlightenment and is used interchangeably with Kensho, which is seeing one's true nature. In other forms of Buddhism, enlightenment breaks the cycle of birth, rebirth and reincarnation. Zen isn't worried about what happens after death. It's purely concerned with the here and now. A Zen master was asked, what “happens after we're dead” he answered, “I don't know I've never been dead”.

Zen is all about direct experience from vigorous mental and meditation training. Satori is to see things as they are and know it in your bones. Other life-changing mystical experiences can be compared to Satori, where someone suddenly sees themselves without ego as part of the whole universe. Satori is a direct experience of reality.

Egolessness and no mind (Mushin)

Mushin is a state of mind that isn't wandering, on auto-pilot or preoccupied with thoughts. The mind of no mind isn't full of a self, ego, or emotions. It is just awareness.⁷⁹ It is related to the psychological "Flow" state, which I'll mention later. Martial arts apply this as a way to focus movement without interference from the usual emotional and thinking brain. No mind is also associated with a mind like water, so by being "shapeless, formless, like water"⁸⁰ as Bruce Lee, the famous movie martial artist, put it. With this approach, we can adapt with pure awareness to our surroundings without interference from fear or over-thinking. No mind also gives us a Zen unity with the world around us, active thoughts subside and the mind becomes mirror like, reflecting only what is seen. No mind is an abandonment of your identity and your self in exchange for the freedom to act.

Awareness, mindfulness and seeing (Zanshin)

Zanshin is an alert, relaxed awareness of your surroundings, and again is a core skill in self-defence and martial arts. It is remaining mindful and being prepared to act. It is an overlapping concept of no mind in that we aren't distracted by thoughts, we are in control of our emotions and we can react spontaneously, appropriate to the moment.

When I look at cats hunting or dogs playing, I see no-mindedness and pure alertness and awareness. They are not worrying about who they are and what thoughts are going around their heads.

Zen also requires self-awareness of mental states, thoughts and

moods, but staying with sensory experiences in the present moment and not getting caught up in the thinking mind. This awareness, often found in meditation, “is a total clarity and presence of mind, actively passive, wherein events come and go like reflections in a mirror; nothing is reflected except what is”.⁸¹ Looking inward as well as outward is part of seeing our true nature, the nature of Universeyou. Seeing and awareness of reality is a massive part of Zen Buddhism.

Immovable mind and fearlessness (Fudoshin)

“Courage calls to courage everywhere,” said Millicent Fawcett.⁸² More courage inspires more courage. Trying to be more fearless has a real affect on the world.

Legend has it that the Japanese Samurai tried to threaten Zen Buddhist monks, but they showed no fear of death, which impressed the Samurai so much that they asked the Zen monks to teach them their ways. The Japanese Samurai class and feudal lords certainly built many Buddhist monasteries in exchange for their training.⁸³

The immovable mind is an understanding of impermanence, interconnectedness and our true empty nature, as part of the Universe. It teaches harmony with nature, calmness, tranquillity, even in the face of death. It is a stubborn mind-set. Nothing will stand in your way.⁸⁴

The less thinking mind (Hishiryo)

Animals live in the present moment, without thinking about a myriad of worries and fears. A less thinking more meditative mind is something to attain for Zen Buddhists. It is the wish to stop over-thinking, to reduce constant thinking, seeing anxious thoughts pass by without us getting involved in them. It's an essence of mindfulness and an aim to be more natural and be more "one with the Universe".⁸⁵

Letting go and non-attachment

Non-attachment is a detachment from material things, grasping to beliefs, goals and outcomes and even detachment from my "self", my ego and even my life. It isn't cold detachment. It is just not getting attached to emotions and letting them pass without being caught up in them.

A major point of non-attachment is not to seek anything or look for profit or gain from an activity. It's not trying to achieve a result, and this is known as Mushotoku in Zen. It is the ultimate expression of reducing my desires.

A Zen monk asks his master, "can I use email", the master answers, "Only if there are no attachments". It's a joke. Oh, OK. Not a good one!

Zen and Karma

Karma is interpreted very differently in the West and even amongst Buddhist traditions. To some, it's a scientifically unproven law of the Universe. Our good, bad or indifferent actions are called Karma. Karma produces Karmic Fruit, which is

the product of our action given to us by the Universe or other people. This fruit of our action comes back to haunt us, either at a future date in our lives or a next life after death.⁸⁶

I'm not going to get drawn too much in the various debates of Karma, other than discussing the metaphor that we reap what we sow.

Our intentions and beliefs about an event and a situation will lead us to react in a certain way. Our intent needs some thought. If my reaction to something causes harm, there will be consequences. Even minor things cause little ripples of influence on other peoples' lives. A bit of kindness goes a long way, whether I believe it will come back and haunt me or reward me is irrelevant. I'm not a fan of the idea of an unseen force called Karma, but if I sow discord, division and hatred it does raise the possibility of an eventual negative outcome for me. The reverse is true. Probabilities of help and support coming to me in the future increase if I'm cooperative, collaborative and kind. That's not a mystical universal law, it's human nature. Keep it kind.

As Brad Warner in *Hardcore Zen* points out, because all life in the world and universe is "one seamless whole", it is so interconnected, and interdependent, if we harm someone, we harm ourselves.⁸⁷

Compassion and ethics

Compassion is central to Buddhism. It is core to the philosophy of reducing the suffering of all sentient creatures, so empathy, benevolence and compassion run throughout the teachings. Compassion requires wisdom to understand the nature of suffering, and empathy and kindness to be motivated to give help.⁸⁸

Compassion is king.

"The Buddha was asked by one of his followers if compassion was a part of their practice.

'No,' the Buddha answered. 'The cultivation of compassion is all of our practice.'"⁸⁹

The Fayetteville Zen Centre discusses compassion and quotes two Zen scholars. Christmas Humphries says, "The deepening understanding of the oneness of life produces an equally growing compassion for all forms of life". Philip Kapleau is "...asked where compassion fitted into Zen, he answered, 'Where doesn't it fit into Zen?'"⁹⁰

Buddhism, like pretty much every religion, accepts what's known as the Golden Rule, "treat other people how you want to be treated". The Golden Rule is an expression of empathy, putting you in someone else's situation and understanding their pain. For Buddhists, compassion underpins the kinship we have as impermanent beings, empty of definition, all being a reflection of the whole Universe, which itself is in flux and change.

There are four "Best abodes" demonstrating an enlightened mind: Compassion, loving kindness, calmness or equanimity and joy. You can see a pattern forming here!

Buddhists are very big on their numbered lists of guidelines for ethical conduct and the reality we face. For instance, we are all faced with eight changing conditions:

- Gain and loss.
- Pleasure and pain.
- Fame and disrepute.
- Praise and blame.

Impermanence and change put pressure on our ability to act with compassion. Rules and guidelines in Buddhism provide the framework for kindness, with ethics.

There are five core universal precepts, or general rules to regulate behaviour, in Buddhism, and they are often referred to in the vows when becoming a follower or monk. Many traditions add many more to this, Zen practitioners have 10, just like the 10 commandments, it's a snappy number, and I'll list these too.

The five precepts are:

1. Don't kill.
2. Don't steal.
3. Don't undertake sexual misconduct.
4. Don't lie, cheat, have harsh or idle speech.
5. Don't take intoxicants, such as drink or drugs that cloud the mind.

The Zen Precepts continue:

6. Don't criticise others.
7. Don't boast.
8. Don't be mean or stingy, don't have excessive wants, cultivate generosity.
9. Don't be angry.
10. Don't abuse the three treasures of The Buddha, Dharma (teaching, truth or law of the Universe) the Sangha (the Buddhist community).

As Brad Warner eloquently puts it, the meaning of Buddhism is, "Don't be a jerk. Do the right thing".²¹

Coming up, another Buddhist list: Six roots of mind underpin

Buddhist compassion and ethics.⁹² There are three “positive” or wholesome roots of mind and three “negative” or unwholesome roots of mind and are the opposite of each other.

Wholesome roots of mind (Positive)	Unwholesome roots of mind (Negative)
Love	Hatred
Generosity	Greed
Wisdom	Delusion

Buddhism emphasise the wholesome roots of mind! Meditation and mental training are there to make sure that we stress compassionate and wise thinking.

We’ve discussed emphasising the positive aspects of life earlier in the book, having a compassionate and ethical outlook can help us in our happiness, there’s more on the psychology of why later.

The Middle way

With an emphasis on ethics, not desiring material goods and living a simple life, the middle way in Buddhism essential states “don’t take it too far”; don’t abandon everything for a more spiritual life. So Buddhism doesn’t advise going into the desert to meditate for 40 years and only eating ants.

Zen also has a Middle Way approach between the philosophies of:⁹³

- Materialism, where things objectively exist in reality and can be measured as matter and energy by science,

- Idealism, where all items in the universe are seen to exist as just ideas in our minds subjectively.

Zen goes beyond these two opposing philosophical viewpoints. Object and subject, matter and mind are the same things... the Universe.

Zen is full of contradictory ideas, which it resolves by just observing reality as it is, and we can all see that life is full of contradictions.

Many Zen practitioners also stay very much on the fence, neutral and detached politically, steering away from extremes and in some cases away from any preferences altogether. Any ideology can be taken to extremes, so being moderate and open-minded is a wise state to aim for. The Middle Way does give some hope that we can go beyond any opposing views to find a happy compromise.

However, there is the danger if you sit on the fence, you'll get splinters. Or hurt your balls!²⁴

We could end up with uncomfortable compromises, and lose the strength of ideas in any compromised philosophy as well. There also isn't a middle way between truth and non-truth; For instance, between Earth being a sphere or flat.

Zen does have some great approaches to try and go beyond, and transcend, any reasonable views that appear to conflict. Just observing things as they are, without judgment and learning to be calm in an uncertain, conflicting world is the start.

Impermanence, Imperfection and the art of Wabi Sabi

Wabi Sabi is best known as an art style, such as in ink paintings, known as sumi-e, and in the design of some Japanese gardens and pottery. Wabi Sabi emphasises rustic, imperfect natural charm, weathered roughness, simplicity, change, tranquillity, decay and randomness.



Figure 3 - The Zen ensō

The ensō is a well known Zen symbol. It is an ink brush painted, Japanese circle character, drawn in one fluid stroke. It uses the same technique as sumi-e ink paintings. It expresses enlightenment and is a brilliant example of "the beauty of imperfection" of Wabi Sabi.²⁵

The philosophical side of Wabi Sabi promotes the natural law that everything changes. Nothing stays the same and that no situation or thing can be "perfect" or live up to our expectations of perfection. On a human level, impermanence means that bad emotions and feelings all pass eventually. I'll also die one day. Nothing lives forever. Nothing lasts. Bad things don't last either. Life is messy, and we're all just winging it and making it up as we

go along, if we're all honest with ourselves. I need to accept I'm an imperfect human being, and everyone is. I will make mistakes, everyone does, so this is a lesson to be kind to myself and to be kind to other imperfect people. This is also a really imperfect book, that's something we all have to accept!

There are no perfect things, everything decays and nothing is 100% straight or even. Expecting perfection is utterly unrealistic. No situation can be ideal, because everything is interdependent and interrelated. There are so many moving parts, there are too many variables and factors for absolutely everything in a situation to be perfectly "right". It means we have to expect to compromise and to expect things not to meet our expectations. A realisation of imperfection in everything renders expectations almost impossible.

This philosophy puts a lot into perspective. Every government will eventually fall, every country, every nation-state will vanish. My hometown will one day not exist, or any of the landmarks, or buildings I know. Even the sun will one day die. Impermanence means accepting uncertainty and insecurity, there is no safety net in life, no security to grasp onto, and everything is in flux and change. Changing your view to one that accepts that nothing lasts is very liberating.

Living in the present moment

"Life exists in the present, or nowhere at all, and if you cannot grasp that you are simply living a fantasy,"⁹⁶ said the writer Tim Lott.

For Zen Buddhists, similar to other Buddhists, nothing at all exists outside the present moment.⁹⁷ There is only an "eternal now",⁹⁸ which stretches out infinitely across the Universe. Alan Watt's nails

it perfectly, “there is no other time than this instant... the past and future are abstractions without any concrete reality... the past and future are fleeting illusions”.⁹⁹

Everything is impermanent and ever moving, but the only real thing is a single frame in a chaotic action film. It is this moment here and now. The future only exists in your mind it doesn't exist anywhere else. The past is a memory; it is part of our conceptual mind. The past is dead, gone. It doesn't exist. Considering how wrong my recollection of events is I can relate to this. All our memories are pretty terrible at details. Our memories are regularly wrong and are part of the stories we tell ourselves, for instance.¹⁰⁰ There isn't anything other than now. That's it. Now. Nothing else.



Figure 4 - It's Zen O'clock

Time and our concepts of time are a real source of pain and unhappiness at times. There's a potentially fake Lao Tze quote on the internet that says, “If you are depressed you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present.”¹⁰¹ That quote is a massive over generalisation, but there is some truth there, even if it might be a fake quote.

Lao Tze does say, “Enlightenment of the absolute Tao can free a

person from worries and sorrow”.¹⁰² To Taoists personal peace is through: oneness with the way of nature, being humble, being temporary custodians of property, being free of desires and flowing like water through life, adapting effortlessly to circumstances. Zen, being influenced by Taoism, would see living in the present moment as the same, peacefully aware of now and nothing else. The past and future don't exist; we live in a timeless now, a single Universal event, a single process and flow. Zen Buddhists encourage us to live in the moment and not wait for a future moment to come, or think obsessively about past events. Try to enjoy now. There isn't anything else.

We also have to accept that everything in time is impermanent. Accepting that everything eventually changes form and nothing lasts reduces some of our worries and fears. Even the bad stuff goes away given time.

Right, that's the basics out of the way, strap your selves in for the really brain-bending Zen time stuff — deep breath.

Zen time

Dogen Zenji in 13th Century Japan discussed "Uji" or "being time",¹⁰³ he is challenging to understand but effectively says that time is made up of all things in existence. All things or existences are linked and become time.¹⁰⁴ Time is relative to the things experiencing it, so the "self" is time itself. I told you this would hurt your brain!

Time only makes sense in Zen with the interrelationship and interdependence of all things in the Universe, which are temporary. Past and future don't exactly exist. Every “thing” in the Universe exists as a single undivided event. What we call the

“self”, and all objects in the Universe, and all time are one thing. Time is made up of a unified present moment experienced by all of the interconnected things in it. As Dogen says, “what we call yesterday and today are actually one time... Time itself does not flow.”¹⁰⁵ Everything in the Universe is this moment now.

Zen perspectives do get confusing on time. In the same way that Zen sees everything in the Universe as interconnected and whole, so is time. The past and future is like a river sharing water; it is interconnected with now. The typical perception of time is that something happens that causes an effect on something else. Buddhism emphasises cause and effect strongly with the idea of Karma. For every action, there is a reaction. However, “there’s an idea in Zen that cause and effect are simultaneous and time is illusory”¹⁰⁶ as Brad Warner puts it.

It’s all getting a bit like the Doctor Who quote, "People assume that time is a strict progression of cause to effect, but actually - from a non-linear, non-subjective viewpoint - it's more like a big ball of wibbly-wobbly... timey-wimey... stuff."¹⁰⁷

Another sci-fi reference here, but, the film *Arrival* (which I love) has Zen *ensō* symbols used as an alien language, and the story almost hints at Dogen’s concept of all existences being interconnected and making time.¹⁰⁸

Dogen has the crazy sounding view that the Universe and we vanish and reappear in every moment,¹⁰⁹ like a repeating frame in a roll of movie film. What he’s partly expressing here is the problem that a present moment goes so fast, living in the now is often lived in a memory. We never see the current frame of film. Anything could be happening around it.

Zen believes that “time” and “being” are bound by our flawed language and concepts. With Zen practice, you can get a new

perspective on the Universe and the world around you, which is effectively "timeless" and "beingless".¹¹⁰

As we saw in the Middle Way section, our subjective views of reality are as important as objective reality in Zen. If we do an activity where time flies, time will to an extent really move faster for us, because our existence is linked with time.¹¹¹ The way we think of time is just our memories and the way we have been brought up to think of time.

I know, science has a very accurate picture of time, and we have things like accurate watches and clocks, but Zen doesn't try to contradict science, this is about how we as humans imagine time, talk about it and view it. It's a philosophical perspective, and if used right, it can bring us a lot of peace. Time is a powerful factor in our happiness.

OK, my brain has melted. What this whole bizarrely sounding section means, in simplified terms, is Zen believes that space and time and everything in it is one lump, one event and that our usual ideas of time are pretty wrong.

We all have the mental ability to destroy our past and future, or at least our attachment to it, if we want. You can't regret a past or worry about a future that doesn't exist. Dwelling on the past and anxiety about the future can be tamed with the Zen focus on the present moment, and only concentrating hard on this moment, even if we can only do that for a few minutes a day. Doing the impossible and going backwards in life or wishing we were in a far off future often causes pain. Moving one step at a time in our present is far better for our happiness.

We can change our relationship with time and change our perspective of it. "Zen is a liberation from time" as Alan Watts' puts it.¹¹² We can change our beliefs and thoughts about our past

and future. These ideas are incredibly powerful and liberating if we think about it.

Beginners mind (Shoshin)

"Beginners mind" is an open-minded view, with no preconditions and an eagerness to learn. "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few,"¹¹³ as Shunryu Suzuki says. Putting knowledge and experience into the back of the mind and thinking clearly, without prejudices can really solve problems.

Having child-like open-mindedness is excellent for changing focus from your mind's chatter. Can you see anything new on a regular journey? Look out for new things when you move around in your day. Can you hear anything new in a familiar bit of music? Can you hear any new sounds on the bus or a routine journey? Approach setbacks from this moment now, and don't look back at previous solutions, to get a fresh perspective, so you can set up plans to move forward. You can empty your head of past prejudices and concerns and have a much freer view on things.¹¹⁴

The final destination

The final bus stop approaches for everyone, and I won't get too depressing here, but death has cropped up a fair bit on the bus books I've read, mostly in a positive sense. For Buddhists and Taoists, life couldn't be life without death, but they aren't polar opposites, they make the whole Universe what it is. Ultimately, death cannot be resisted, it has to be accepted.

We can all play our part in making the journey of life a pleasant one

for ourselves and others. A decent appreciation of our mortality and the mortality of others is a start.

I like the concept of interconnectedness and interdependence in Buddhism which argues that we're part of a broader natural process of life, not small or insignificant, but part of the whole. We contain so many aspects and elements of the Universe. Shunryu Suzuki discusses that our lives come from a metaphorical river, and we become individual water drops when we are born and free fall in the waterfall of life. When we come to the end of the waterfall of life we return to the river.¹¹⁵

Another Zen proverb, demonstrating life and death, has two waves in the sea talking:

“I'm tiny and the other waves are so big. I'm a rubbish wave.” The other wave says, “You suffer as you haven't seen your original face. A wave is just a temporary form. You're really water. Once you realise your fundamental essence, you won't be confused, and your suffering will go away. We're all part of a greater self.”¹¹⁶

I take some comfort that my wider human family will continue after I'm gone. My even wider natural family on Earth, and out in the Universe will also continue. Maybe I'm a bit of a hippie, but I think we can take some solace with what I believe are some beautiful perspectives in Zen. We're an important link in a vast natural process. We can control the fear of the last bus stop when realising things like this.

In Buddhism, you are a valuable part of the whole. We are all a reflection of the whole Universe. If you doubt you're part of the Universe, breathe in the air that's been around our planet for hundreds of millions of years, made of particles and energy originating from the Big Bang. Your body is made up of elements

from exploded stars.¹¹⁷ When you die, generally no energy or matter is lost, it is just transformed into something else, just as energy and matter were transformed into you when you were conceived. You really are a “Universeyou”.

To Taoists, having natural calmness and observing nature is one way of accepting inevitable death. Lao Tzu says in Chapter 16 of the Tao Te Ching that we must “maintain calmness with sincerity in order to observe the growth and flourish of all beings. It is in this way that one can understand the law of nature. All things and beings will eventually return to the original source. This is called ‘peace.’ ‘Peace’ means returning to our original nature”.¹¹⁸ The original source and original nature of Zen is the Universe.

Most people worry about their consciousness surviving after death. However, Zen thinkers question where our consciousness comes from and what it is. Consciousness is defined as, “The state of being aware of and responsive to one's surroundings,”¹¹⁹ and, “awareness of one's own existence, sensations, thoughts, surroundings.”¹²⁰

Zen Buddhists ask questions like, is our consciousness actually us? Is the mind just a sense organ? What makes a thing “living”? Is the Universe more alive than we realise? Is consciousness part of the way we sense the world around us? Do we receive consciousness from outside our minds?¹²¹ Does the Universe see itself through our eyes?¹²²

These questions might make some scientists scowl, but I think Zen gets to ask some interesting philosophical questions about our existence, without really coming to a firm or dogmatic answer. Zen Buddhists would suggest practising meditation, keep asking questions, observe reality as it is and work it out for yourself. Focusing on what we are now is more interesting than worrying

about where we will end up. One thing for sure is that our language and thoughts about our reality don't always give us the whole picture.

I don't know if we have an immortal soul, or what happens after we die, no one knows if they're honest. Regardless, Zen has a very poetic and comforting philosophy about life and death, in my opinion, whatever's waiting for us after life.

In Zen, I am part of the whole, and the whole goes on.

Zen wrap up

So there we have Zen. It's not easy to swallow that the cause of suffering is dissatisfaction and desire. If I cut my leg off with a chainsaw, I'll be suffering. My desire doesn't seem to have an impact. However, this is a bit of a misunderstanding and mistranslation of “*dukkha*”, which is the concept of dissatisfaction *and* suffering. My desire for the past to be different, or craving my leg back, does nothing to ease my suffering. In fact, it increases it vastly. Zen promotes a type of radical acceptance of the situation as it is, in the here and now, because the present moment is all that exists.

Buddhism is similar to the philosophy of Existentialism, made famous by philosophers such as Jean-Paul Satre. Brad Warner puts it like this, “Existentialism was a reaction to essentialism. Essentialism said that our essence – which you can think of as something akin to our true purpose in life – comes first. Existentialists said that, no, first we exist, and then we figure out what we out to do”.¹²³

Existentialists say we have to find our purpose and meaning in life

and be responsible for our actions in a changeable and irrational Universe. The difference is that Buddhists are optimistic about that fact, Existentialists aren't. We'll come onto discussing about finding your own meaning, purpose and values later on.

Being calm and kind is a significant focus for Zen and Buddhism through meditation and adopting Buddhist philosophies and wisdom. Radical acceptance doesn't mean apathy or total detachment. Letting go of negative emotions and accepting what's happened just means moving on afresh, it doesn't mean giving up on what matters to you. The engaged Buddhism movement allows for political campaigning to try and change the world. Although some Buddhists feel that non-attachment and becoming a calmer, kinder person is enough to make the world a better place.¹²⁴

Chapter 5 – Stoicism

I stumbled upon Stoicism by chance after hearing an interview with the London based philosopher Jules Evans. Stoicism is a philosophy that I think can be used brilliantly with Taoism and Zen Buddhism to help increase happiness. Well, I would say that I'm writing a blooming book about it!

The dictionary definition of a Stoic is someone "determined not to complain or show your feelings, especially when something bad happens to you."¹²⁵ The philosophy is different from the dictionary definition. Surprise!

Stoicism is a philosophy originating in Greece around the 4th century BC and was taken up by Roman philosophers including the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius. The Stoics lived in a time of war, political strife, slavery, fear, disease, uncertainty and upheaval. The philosophy translates well to our time of information overload, complexity, overwork, noise, bustle, social media pressures, distraction, mass marketing, uncertainty and fear. Much of the human condition is universal, life is uncertain and worrying, but the causes change.

There are a lot of similarities between Stoicism in Greece and Buddhism in India, which was developing at a similar time. It's possible there was some contact across trade and diplomatic routes.¹²⁶

Stoicism is called a "perennial philosophy" by philosopher Pierre Hadot¹²⁷ and is a term used by author Aldus Huxley in the book of the same name. Perennial philosophy, or occasionally referred to as perennial wisdom, uses the term perennial in that it is long lasting, like the plants. I suppose like weeds. They're long-lasting. Did you know weeds are only called weeds because we call them that? They

have no other definition than being unwanted plants. Humans spend a lot of time deciding what is or isn't wanted. Our descriptions of life are a bit odd. I digress horribly.

Donald Robertson cites four very familiar themes that Stoicism and “Oriental philosophies” share that Hadot sums up:

1. Humans aren't isolated and independent creatures. We are interdependent and interconnected to all other humans and the “bigger whole” of the Universe.
2. The only thing that matters in life is moral integrity, honour and virtue.
3. Kinship for all humanity. The wish for wellbeing for all humanity.
4. Concentrating on the present moment, mindfulness and being here now.¹²⁸

Perennial philosophy (or perennial wisdom) looks at common parts of religions and is often associated with New Age thinking. Whatever your opinion of that, looking at the similarities in ancient wisdom is useful, especially as some of that wisdom is still an influence of psychology in the 21st century, including in therapies such as CBT which I'll mention later.

Stoicism is best known for their argument that we can't control anything much in our lives other than our beliefs, and our actions. We need to accept what we can't control and to foster a sense of optimism.

So we'll now start with control. Something I can control is the order of this book. Unfortunately, you, dear reader can't control that, so you'll have to accept my way of ordering the text. You'll

have to be stoic about it.

Focus on what you can control, accept what you can't. Learn what you can control.

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference”,¹²⁹ is the Serenity prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr an American Theologian. It's read at the beginning of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and describes well how Stoic philosophers approach the idea of what is in our control and not.

It sounds simple. We need to focus on what we can control and accept what we can't. Learning what we can control is seriously tricky. We don't have control of who we are born to or where. We can't control whether we are in a rich or poor environment when we are young, or if we have a nurturing supportive or loving background. We also can't control world events, the government we have, the economy, or if a war arrives in our country. Even our choices and future plans can be massively constrained. Finding what we can control is difficult.

Epictetus was born a slave in 55AD, was freed and became a philosopher. He knew human suffering, just by studying philosophy! He listed things that are in our control and not. According to Jules Evans these are the things Epictetus believed are **not** in our control: “our body, our property, our reputation, our job, our parents, our friends, our co-workers, our boss, the weather, the economy, the past, the future, the fact we're going to die.”¹³⁰

The things that are in our control, according to the Stoics, are the following enormous list:

1. Our beliefs.
2. Our actions, from our beliefs.

That's it. I told you it was a big list! According to the Stoics, we can only control what we believe about external circumstances, this includes controlling our opinions, desires and some of our thoughts. Stoics believe we can only choose our attitude to events. We can also choose and control our actions from these attitudes and beliefs, to an extent.

However, we have no control over some internal factors, such as if we are straight or gay, and we have limited control over some very ingrained mental habits and mental health issues. We can control our inner thoughts to an extent, though. We can challenge our beliefs and manage internal talk.

We have limited if no control over external factors and we need to accept this. Otherwise, we feel powerless, helpless and anxious about events in our life. All of us are the product of past events, almost all of which have been outside our control. What's good and bad about a situation is often just our belief about the situation and these beliefs are found in a lot in political opinions especially. As Epictetus says, "There is only one way to happiness and that is to cease worrying about things which are beyond the power of our will."¹³¹

To the Stoics, the only things in my control are my beliefs, my actions and reactions from those beliefs. These are the only things that the Stoics see as "good" or "bad". Everything outside of my control is called "indifferent".¹³²

Here's a Stoicism example. If I go for a job interview and I get

the job, I didn't control my success. The interview panel made the decision. If I fail, I can only be responsible for my beliefs about my situation and any actions from my beliefs, but not the things out of my control. Beating myself up about my failure, that wasn't entirely in my control anyway, is a waste of my time and thinking. Ultimately all I can do is my best, at that moment, under those circumstances. For a job interview, I can practise my interview technique and research the job, but believing I can do better before or after the event isn't helpful. I will feel miserable if I believe I made mistakes, believe I didn't prepare and assume I didn't do my best. I will feel much more positive if I believe the interview and performance were in the past, was almost entirely out of my control, and that I could learn and move on. Pretty much all outcomes in my life are out of my hands, but I should do my best and focus on managing my beliefs and thoughts about a situation.

Our beliefs about a situation are the leading cause of our suffering for the Stoics.

Other examples of what I can and can't control include the environment. I can't control climate change or the damage to the world, but I can do little things like recycling, flying less, selling the second car (which I did), using the bus (hence this book), tidying up rubbish near the house and feeling smug for writing about this. You might not care about these things, but you get the idea in the example. I can't control horrible events in the news, but I can be kinder to strangers I meet, I can smile at shop keepers and even, gasp, bus drivers. I always thank the bus drivers. It's a damned hard job. Have you seen the roads in Leeds? That is something no one can control.

We can control little things, and tiny amounts of snowflake kindness could cause an avalanche. As Marcus Aurelius said, "be satisfied with even the smallest progress."¹³³ Working out what we can control in our lives is something that takes an awful lot of

thought and imagination. I'm not there yet, it's tough. But with a bit of practice, I can recognise that the interdependent complexities of life do limit my control, and I have to relax, breathe and go wherever the bus ride takes me. As the Taoists farmer said, "who knows what's good and bad"? An adverse event might turn out well in the end.

Stoics only ever desire what is in their control. Wanting an event to be a certain way which is outside my control will only cause upset for me.

Accept what you can't control. Love your fate (Amor Fati).

Stoic acceptance of what isn't in your control is summed up by the Latin phrase Amor Fati: love your fate. This quote was borrowed by the philosopher Hadot from the philosopher Nietzsche.¹³⁴ Yes, this Nietzsche is the same bloke that said: "what does not kill me makes me stronger". I'm not sure this is a sympathetic perspective, but it does sum up when adversity may be an opportunity for you to develop or grow as a person. Although the phrase isn't a consolation if I cut my leg off with a chainsaw, or if something genuinely awful happens to someone. People do bounce back and even thrive after unimaginable tragedy and adversity. Like the previous section on Zen, our cravings for things to be a certain way often lead to suffering. Acceptance helps us move on quicker after an upset.

What loving my fate advocates is to accept and "live in harmony" with my fate as Donald Robertson discusses in *Stoics and the Art of Happiness*.¹³⁵ To Stoics, everything is already predetermined and fated. That doesn't mean taking an attitude "what's the point in doing anything anyway?" If all our futures are "written down"

and will happen out of our control, it seems to make all our actions meaningless and pointless. However, Stoics believe that our thoughts and actions are a “string of causes” that forms the whole Universe. This interdependent web of interconnected actions is similar to Buddhist concepts in some ways.

Our actions do affect some outcomes in the world. Things are “fated” only by causes and situations that come before our efforts now, and the past is outside our control. Fate hands us conditions we have to deal with, then at that point, our actions become “fate” working through us. Fate is consequences made of actions, which means any misfortune is an opportunity to demonstrate how we can make the best of what fate has determined. We can prove our virtue, positivity, worth and training. We have to love our destiny.

To illustrate this, here’s a bus metaphor (I know, it’s another one. At least it’s not a sci-fi metaphor). I don’t have any control over the route of a bus, or if it gets stuck in traffic, or if it breaks down, these are predetermined by "fate". I can choose which bus to get on and when to get off after the past factors are decided. I can also decide my beliefs about how I want to behave as a passenger and choose how I react to the problems of bus travel.

Fate makes things like blame and responsibility problematic. If a person attacks me, this is fate working and is a circumstance beyond my control. Dwelling on blame isn't helpful. I need to adjust my reaction and move on. I can't blame fate or even myself for things outside my control. This belief in lack of control makes concepts of blame and responsibility tricky.

Are there dangers in believing we have little or no control?

The Philosopher Isaiah Berlin (yes another philosopher, sorry about that) was critical of the school of philosophy known technically as “determinism”, which Stoics arguably were members. Determinism sees all of history and events being determined by previous causes which are outside of our control. He was critical not because of whether determinism might be correct, but because of the lack of blame and responsibility that is a result of that idea. People believing in determinism in philosophy are often seen as the arch-enemy of people who believe in human free will, which would give us the freedom to act no matter our upbringing or external issues. Obviously there are theories in between.

Isaiah Berlin argues that if we have no freedom to act, because of our past, what's the point in doing anything to change the status quo? It could also serve as an excuse for bad actions if there is no blame and no responsibility for our past that's been outside our control. The same goes for praise for good actions. There's no point in praise if we have no control over events and our responses.¹³⁶ I think we can go beyond blame or praise for a large amount of people's behaviour. The judgment isn't helpful.

Stoicism seems to me to be more subtle than saying that we have no control. My interpretation is that even though our past fate is fixed, our beliefs and reactions from them can still be controlled to an extent.

Some of your beliefs will come from the environment you live in, which might be your background, culture or social group. But the responsibility for your beliefs is most likely your own.

Today we have an unprecedented ability to find out about different views, and we have more freedom than ever to choose our own beliefs.

Stoics argue that we can't control our beliefs in the past, but we can control them now, and we have a responsibility to do so. People can and do change under the right circumstances, so there might be a tiny ray of hope that we have some control to change our beliefs. In fact racist people with difficult backgrounds do change their beliefs.^{137 138}

We have to understand what we can and can't control. We all have, I think, a responsibility about how we choose our beliefs and reactions to events, people and situations. We need to understand that so many people have no control over their past circumstances, whether they are poor, educated, and healthy, and also the country where they live. Those people might have some control of their own beliefs, but that often won't help them out of situations that are outside of their control. Because of this, I have chosen the belief that my beliefs should begin with empathy and compassion. Everyone else's beliefs are outside my control, however, and I have to accept that.

Events aren't a problem; your reaction is.

Epictetus said “men are disturbed not by things but by their opinions of things”¹³⁹ presumably he even included women in this assessment too. It's how you react to situations which is important. The Stoic aim is for calmness, and indifference to pleasure and pain. As we've seen, you may have a lack of control and lack of free will, but you do have control of your reactions and actions.

As the psychologist Deanna Troi on the Starship Enterprise, in Star Trek: The Next Generation said, "feelings aren't positive and negative, they simply exist. It's what we do with those feelings that becomes good or bad."¹⁴⁰

To summarise a bit, the Stoics believed that you have pretty much no control of your past and the events in your life, but you do have some control of your beliefs and actions. Many beliefs will be formed from your past experiences, and you'll be precious about some of them. But if they get in the way of your happiness, they might need modifying where possible.

Your reactions need to be quickly accepting of what you can't change and positive towards what you can, to tackle your problems. To Stoics, your beliefs about an event influence your emotions about an event. It's not the adversity that often causes you suffering; it's your opinion about it. That's not a suggestion for relentless "positive thinking" which will make you feel worse when the thinking fails to deliver. What Stoicism suggests is being very aware of how your beliefs, thoughts, thinking patterns, and attitudes about a situation create your "emotional reality".¹⁴¹

We often cause ourselves emotional pain through our thoughts. If we notice the unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, we can learn how to react to events more rationally, resiliently and bounce back better from adversity.

Observe and question your thoughts, opinions and emotions about a situation. They are often unconscious and unhelpful.

The Stoics noticed that we often go through life on autopilot, often daydreaming, lost in thought with no idea where our emotions and thinking comes from. The best way to bring beliefs and opinions under review is to observe them and ask questions, such as why do I think and feel this, what belief is behind this emotion? Is the automatic thought about an event realistic; is there evidence for this thought? If not, is there any other way to look at the situation that is more helpful? Stoicism is a practical philosophy, and it asked followers to question their automatic thoughts regularly, to study and write about them. Questioning assumptions, using critical thinking, examining the evidence, considering alternative perspectives and considering consequences are all part of how the Stoics tried to tame their thinking.¹⁴²

Practise wisdom with maxims and short phrases.

Maxims are easily remembered short phrases of wisdom. The dictionary definition is, “a short, pithy statement expressing a general truth or rule of conduct”.¹⁴³

Epictetus in his book, *The Enchiridion*, he wrote a string of maxims that we’ve discussed. As his first line he wrote:

“Some things are in our control and others not. Things in

our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions”.¹⁴⁴

Maxims, also known as mottos (or aphorisms if you're posh), are everywhere. “Do unto others as you want others to do unto you.” “You're never too old to learn.” “Too many cooks spoil the broth”. “The pen is mightier than the sword.” I could go on and on about examples. Very often, they are clichéd, overused and make people roll their eyes. But any overused wisdom has lasted for a reason, sometimes they are handy, sometimes I suppose they're not, but the point is they're easily remembered.

In the way that the Stoics use maxims, there is a danger that we put pressure on ourselves to follow them and feel bad when we fail to live up to them. Maxims should be realistic and achievable. The best way for the modern use of maxims is to use them as guidelines, not strict rules. If we fail to follow them we should accept it, and modify any beliefs, so we know that we mess up from time to time and we can learn. We need flexibility with maxims, and they should, like everything, be used wisely. If a maxim doesn't work, don't use it. That said I've used them, I've written some down with other values, and have tried to use them, and it has been a help to me, more on this later.

Maxims aren't supposed to be powerless clichés or meaningless platitudes. They're to help us remember certain aspects of wisdom previously researched and read. That wisdom can be used to reduce anxiety and improve happiness, if only a little.

Maxims were used by Stoic masters to pass on knowledge to students. Memorising wisdom so it could be applied in everyday life was essential for this very practical philosophy. The aim of the Stoic was eventually to become a sage, a mythical figure of ultimate

wisdom! Memorising maxims was part of life for students on their way to sage-dom.

As my wife Jo says "words are powerful" and the right ones can help us in our lives.

Practise your philosophies: Live in agreement with nature, live by virtue and live by kindness.

For the Stoics, philosophy wasn't an abstract thinking subject; it was a practical training regime which led to practical psychological benefits.¹⁴⁵ At the time there were not the fragmented intellectual subjects there are now, philosophy for the Stoics encompassed politics, psychology, sociology and theology. For Stoic students, they kept journals to track progress, noting their achievements and problems faced by applying their philosophy through the day and recording days since the student had been angry, for instance.¹⁴⁶

"Live in agreement with nature"¹⁴⁷ was one of the practical Stoic maxims, which seems very Taoist. To Stoics, our human "reason", our ability to think things through, is the most crucial part of nature. Our reason is a gift from nature, and it makes us different from the rest of the animal world. We can adapt to nature and preserve our selves, but it's also in our nature to live harmoniously, be sociable and cultivate virtues. Stoics were determined not to succumb to anger, hatred and rudeness, and not to become like wild beasts. They valued a calm and reasoned approach to all things. In that way, you need to understand your natural reason and understand the internal thoughts and emotions that make up "you".

"Live by virtue" is another maxim. Stoics argued that we need to practise our philosophy, practise self-improvement and practise virtue and ethics. Stoics define virtue (areté in ancient Greek) as living a life of wisdom, compassion, justice, fairness, courage, excellence, humility and discipline.¹⁴⁸

For the Stoics virtue is enough for “Eudaimonia”, which translates as flourishing, happiness and the good life. If we practise Stoic virtue, we make not just ourselves happier but others happier too. Virtue can be learned and practised and increased in people. We chose our perspectives; we can change and chose wiser ones.

Stoics believed we have ethical obligations to our community and humanity in a spirit of kinship.¹⁴⁹ That is best expressed in compassion and kindness. Stoics understood our interconnected nature and that our natural human reason are things we share. They expressed a desire for the wellness of all people. As discussed, this is a common factor of perennial philosophies, including Taoism, Zen and Stoicism.

Marcus Aurelius wrote both of the below maxims.

“Kindness is invincible, provided it’s sincere.”

“It’s courtesy and kindness that define a human being... That’s who possesses strength and nerves and guts, not the angry whiners.”¹⁵⁰

Being kind is being Stoic.

Plan for the worst. Practise misfortune. Plan to cope before you hope.

Bruce Lee said, “Do not pray for an easy life; pray for the strength to endure a difficult one.”¹⁵¹ This is both a Stoic and a Zen attitude.

Marcus Aurelius said, “When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can’t tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil.”¹⁵² He also says, “death and life, success and failure, pain and pleasure, wealth and poverty, all these happen to good and bad alike, and they are neither noble nor shameful - and hence neither good nor bad.”¹⁵³

The above quotes almost sound like the Taoist “who knows good or bad” proverb I talked about in the Yin and Yang section. “Bad” and “good” will happen outside our control. Things will always happen that annoy. We can cope by focussing on what we feel is good and dismiss the bad. However, good and bad alike are what we define events to be; neither may actually be the case.

As Shakespeare has Hamlet say, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so".

To the Stoics, the goal of philosophy is to “cultivate rational and realistic beliefs”.¹⁵⁴ Trying to think positively all the time is bad for us, it’s unrealistic. If we learn how to accept bad thoughts and feelings, we are more likely to be resistant and resilient. Desperately hoping and having positive desires for outcomes is likely to cause more suffering. Seeking only pleasure and making distractions to avoid bad experiences won’t help us to cope with uncertainty and adverse events either.

Stoics meditated and used maxims to think of the worst things that could happen, a type of negative visualisation,¹⁵⁵ practising misfortune in their minds and how they'd cope. I'm not sure if that approach is a psychologically sound practice. There is a little truth in planning for the worst, even if you also hope for the best, although that might be wishful thinking. The main thing that Stoics wanted to achieve with imagining catastrophes is to understand that “negative” outcomes are in fact “indifferent”, they like Taoists ask “what is good and bad”? Facing awful things with calm, reason and wisdom was their aim. Increasing anxiety, circular thinking and future worries about events wasn't their objective, although I can't help thinking this method might have caused it in some of their students.

As an example, if you are in a disaster on a ship you are more likely to cope by imagining being in the accident (please don't dwell on this). That means you have had a chance to prepare, so, for instance, you look for exits, lifeboats, think of scenarios, and listen to safety advice every time. You can prepare to be calm. It's useful to know that helping other people helps chances of survival in any of the worst case scenarios. Ordinary people survive terrible things every day and there's no reason to think that you can't cope with most situations, even though it's difficult. You can change your belief to believe you can cope.

The thing to take away from this is to focus the mind on building resilience, understanding what we can and can't control, cultivating beliefs and opinions that can adapt to unfortunate events. We need to practise all of this in good times, when things aren't bad, to prepare for when things inevitably go wrong.

“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man,” said Heraclitus (a philosopher from Greece, born around 550AD). We change, circumstances

change, like Zen impermanence, we need to be accepting that the metaphorical river of life that we step in may get rough.

The view from above. Looking at the big picture.

Stoics had a fantastic visualisation technique for putting their problems into perspective. They sat down and imagined themselves lifting off the ground, going into space and looking down on the Earth. This “view from above”¹⁵⁶ gave them a new perspective on their problems of the day. They then went further out into space and into the stars and got an even more distant perspective than that of viewing our globe from above. From a view of being in the stars, amongst the whole Universe, Stoics could imagine seeing how petty and small some of our trivial conflicts, worries and problems are.

If I imagine myself amongst the stars, I hope I have some oxygen. For this entirely philosophical visualisation technique, I will imagine myself as a disjointed spirit, astral projecting somehow. Just go with it.

Once I have got around the practicalities of the technique I can see how utterly massive space and time is, with hundreds of billions of stars in our galaxy, hundreds of billions of galaxies and the possibility of infinite alternate dimensions. The point of this perspective is to see how small our problems really are.

Another broader view is over time, such as asking yourself if the problem you are worried about will matter in a year, or five years from now.

It’s also worth asking if the thing that worries you will make any substantial difference to your life (or others) and try to be less

concerned. As Marcus Aurelius puts it, "learn to be indifferent to what makes no difference".¹⁵⁷ It's surprising how little something causing significant worry now will no longer matter in a surprisingly short space of time in the future.

As Jules Evans points out, you don't want to go too far with these zooming out and distancing techniques. Like in the Zen ideas of non-attachment, we don't want to become too detached, aloof, neutral and unbiased, we want a middle way. We also don't want to trivialise our pain or the pain of others in suggesting this technique. It's one to try and see if it works for you.

Stoic optimism

Optimism and hope must be tempered with reality.¹⁵⁸ For the Stoics, we must meet and accept the cold hard facts of our situation first, and recognise our judgments about the situation second. Optimism is a judgement, and so is hope. Without acceptance, optimism leads to false hope and disappointment. The people that are the most optimistic about the buses running on time are regularly the ones most disappointed.

With that caution in mind, optimism is a glass half full view, it recognises the possibility of a situation allowing us to adapt and thrive, even in massive adversity. Nature has given us our natural reason to be resilient and to change our beliefs to fit an event.¹⁵⁹

We can turn "obstacles into opportunities"¹⁶⁰ if we focus on our virtue and our reason, and then our opinion about events can become more realistic and even "positive". Focusing on virtue and reason should mean that our emotions are no longer full of fear, anger, envy and all those moods that cause us distress.¹⁶¹

Bad stuff happens; we can accept it and then see it as an opportunity to learn, maybe gain strength and wisdom from it.

Stoic mindfulness, awareness and living in the present moment.

Stoics studied the world around them. In trying to understand how to live in accord with nature; they needed an objective study without applying judgments.¹⁶² Seeing things as they are is close to the Zen principle of Zanshin, of mindful awareness and seeing.

Having your attention on your thoughts and beliefs as much as possible was a core strand of Stoic ideas, to study when our beliefs caused us unwanted emotions and thoughts about events. They encouraged focusing on those emotions in the present moment. Stoics very much encouraged delaying reactions and postponing actions when our emotions rise.

Marcus Aurelius cautioned about worrying about things outside our control, such as the past, and future. We need to accept nature and fate, concentrate on the task at hand and on our virtue.

He asks, “For every action, ask: How does it affect me? Could I change my mind about it?”¹⁶³ He then gives two steps, “The first step: Don’t be anxious. Nature controls it all.” “The second step: Concentrate on what you have to do. Fix your eyes on it. Remind yourself that your task is to be a good human being; remind yourself what nature demands of people. Then do it, without hesitation, and speak the truth as you see it. But with kindness. With humility. Without hypocrisy.”¹⁶⁴

Donald Robertson writes about “Stoic Self monitoring”¹⁶⁵ from

Stoic practice he suggests being mindful of our thoughts, feelings and our actions, through the day and making a chart of any problem events or moods. The table should include four columns:

1. Date time and situation	2. The feelings experienced	3. The thoughts that caused the feelings	4. The Actions, what you did or said.

As we'll see later, this is very similar to psychological ideas like the ABC approach or CBT. However, these are from Stoic practical strategies that would have been taught over 2000 years ago. Stoics encouraged concentration on tasks now, with virtue, ethics and calmness, whilst monitoring our thoughts and feelings regularly.

Wrapping up Stoicism

The practice of applying Stoic wisdom has to be a balancing act between acceptance and action. We need to understand what we can't control then accept it. When we think we can control things we need to apply good actions from our natural reason. We certainly can control our beliefs, attitudes and thoughts, and our actions from these, to an extent and with some practice.

There have been several times in my life that I've had to accept circumstances. I had to give up DJing. Playing music until 3am and getting home at 4am, and then getting up with two young children at 7am wasn't practical any longer, so I had to accept giving up a beloved hobby, move on, and do other things. Like writing this book!

Acceptance could be taken to the extreme, however. There are extremists and moderates in every philosophy and ideology. As in Buddhism, advocating radical acceptance without question, could lead to a misguided Stoic acceptance of exploitation and inequality. We might ignore opportunities for change, and there might be minor things we can do to help ourselves. For example, communicating our grievances and co-operating with others to improve conditions in our workplaces and communities. Change wouldn't happen under a blind acceptance of the status quo. We need to keep our eyes open to possibilities for positive change, but then accept things if that change isn't possible. We can then move on and look for other ways to make a positive change.

Understanding what you can and can't control is an art form.

Chapter 6 – Psychology and happiness

So far, I've discussed three ancient philosophies that have both a spiritual (or religious) tradition and a practical psychological benefit in helping to bring us a bit more happiness and wisdom. Now I'm going to briefly review some modern psychological ideas that have been directly or indirectly inspired or have similar themes to the previous three philosophies, before moving onto some more practical advice from these ideas.

I'm going to add a disclaimer here. Although I have a degree in social sciences (sociology, yeah I know, but it's probably more helpful to society than you think), I'm not a psychologist or behavioural scientist. So this chapter is from books and articles I've gone out and read, rather than any formal training. I've also deliberately chosen the subjects related to my interests.

If you have any mental health problems such as long term or severe stress, anxiety and depression I think it's worth moderating your expectations about how well these approaches might work. They might work, but the first place to go to is your doctor to start a journey on the road to finding out what will work for you. The below is probably most effective in mild cases of mental illness, as in the mild cases of stress and anxiety I've had in the past, and some of the below has helped me.

I think this chapter is best practised when the bus of life is running well and without adversity. It should help build resilience for the future when things go wrong. This book aims to increase happiness, and wisdom, and that's what I'm mainly focussing on here.

Knowing ourselves

I've read loads of articles and a few books that list all sorts of habits and mind-sets of happier or more contented people. In many respects, satisfaction and contentment tend to be preferable to any unrealistic expectations of long term states of joy and happiness. We have to have the expectations that we all get down, miserable and sad from time to time, that's normal and natural. Generally, a life of contentment and satisfaction can come from:

- Being able to talk to a few close friends and relatives.
- Having meaning and purpose in our lives.
- Learning new things.
- Exercising (which release endorphins, which can act as a natural anti-depressant).
- Doing things that get us into a “flow state” (more on this later).
- Finding out what we're good at and then playing to our strengths.
- Developing optimism and building our kindness.¹⁶⁶

Having, purpose, meaning and playing to our strengths means that we have to have some knowledge of ourselves. “Know thyself” is a classic Greek maxim meaning it's rather useful to understand ourselves. The problem with this is that we actively construct our identities, and our ego regularly stops us seeing things as they are, as the Zen philosophy puts it.

Thinking we can know ourselves can also prevent us from changing bad habits or things that need to be changed because we believe that it is part of our unchangeable selves.¹⁶⁷ As Zen points out, we have no self, no permanent, independent “me” and we also radically change over time. I’m not the same person I was as a teenager, thank God! If we are to know and understand ourselves, we have to know that our “selves” aren’t permanent even if we want them to be. But sometimes we want to change, and do you know what? We can all change.

Neural-plasticity or Neuroplasticity is the scientific discovery that our physical brain biology can change and adapt to the environment. Our brain is plastic and malleable to change and this is part of our evolutionary background. We can also change our thinking with training and learning. The American comedian Ruby Wax, who gained a masters degree in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MCBT) from Oxford University,¹⁶⁸ put the benefits of Neural-plasticity in capitals. I won’t. It’ll spoil the flow. She says, “Our brains can be trained to change for the better!”¹⁶⁹ As an example, Buddhist monks under a brain scanner have different regions of the brain light up in different colours when they meditate, compared to people untrained in meditation.

If we think about “knowing thyself” then it might be a good idea to work out what we’re good and bad at doing. It’s useful to understand what we enjoy and don’t as well, but we need to know that all this can change. We can change ourselves too. Most of all, we can change how we think about things, we can change our beliefs and opinions about external events, just like the Stoics pointed out. We are not static, unchanging individuals. We are connected to the wider world, interconnected as we saw in the Zen section. We can adapt our brains. Even if we can do that a little bit, to help us feel a bit more contented, then that’s a real achievement. How we do this is something we all have to figure out. Meditation and mindfulness might help here, and there are

some more tips on the way!

The biggest problem with knowing ourselves is that much of what we think is pretty wrong...

The way we think we think isn't the way we think.

Even if we find things that can train our brains to feel calmer, kinder and a little happier, there is the problem that very often we have no idea why we're in a bad mood and no idea where our thoughts come from. Stop what you're reading and think to yourself, "where did my last thought come from?" There will be a bit of a chain of thought maybe, but honestly, it only goes so far. You'll find that most of a train of thought is unconscious feelings and fragments of memories that lead to a conscious thought; well at least it is for me!

Moods and stress could be from "everyday factors" as writer Oliver Burkeman points out, they could be from the acronym HALT, Hunger, Anger from past events, Loneliness and Tiredness. Simple things kick off our dark moods, and our awareness of what those are is often limited.¹⁷⁰

Oliver Burkeman also has a twist on how our moods might be seen by ourselves; however they arise. Anxiety, for instance, is hopeful as we wish for good outcomes. He states, "You wouldn't feel anxious in the first place if you had no freedom, and if there weren't at least the possibility of things turning out well."¹⁷¹ I'd add that the source of anxiety is often caring about things, and that's also a positive thing. Caring too much might be seen as a cause of anxiety too, but the world is too full of caring too little, so this isn't a negative trait either.

All of our emotions have had some evolutionary source; they often don't work so well in our new modern world environment. I don't think we've adapted fully to live in the 21st Century. Humans were never built to live in such a world of information overload, complexity and regularly frenetic activity. We all have natural emotional responses, they have a function, and they typically go wrong.

In his book, *The Chimp Paradox*, Professor Steve Roberts believes that our evolution has seen our mind split into three distinct (and much simplified) entities; the human part of the brain, the computer and the chimp. The computer is the memory and fast, automatic thinking, the human part of the brain is the rational thinker, and the chimp is the emotional evolutionary throwback to our wilder ancestors. We need to throw the chimp brain a banana and put it in a box from time to time, to let it get the “negative” outbursts out of its system.¹⁷²

The Chimp Paradox comes from a common model. Our brain has a fast, instinctive, automatic “System One” part of the brain and a slower, reasoning and logical “System Two” section of the brain.¹⁷³ System Two is the bit that would have been favoured by the Stoics. We have an animal, wild, instinctive “lower” mind and a rational, logical “higher” brain. So far, so obvious. However, it's in Daniel Kahneman's work where he states that System One thinking can lead to shortcuts and biases, which cause us problems.

We have an awful lot of unconscious biases, (also called cognitive biases), mental short cuts and logical fallacies, which are “reaching conclusions without facts” and “wishful thinking” as David McRaney puts it,¹⁷⁴ these are unconscious and cause us plenty of issues in our modern lives.

When we try to know ourselves, we have no idea why we behaved the way we have, and make excuses to make us look like we've just acted rationally. Behavioural scientists have discovered an awful lot of cognitive biases, Wikipedia lists over 100 (yeah I know it's not always the most reliable source). These regularly mislead our lives and impact on how we feel about the world.

One of the most well known cognitive biases is confirmation bias; this is where we rarely objectively seek facts to prove our opinions right and wrong. We discount everything except that which proves our opinions correct and ditch everything else. There are a dizzying amount of things like this in our unconscious mind that causes us internal conflicts, and conflict with people and the world around us. It makes self-awareness difficult, if not near impossible at times. We don't get to see the source of our thinking, and this fits in nicely with the Stoic idea of lack of control and the aim of *Zazen* in Zen that breaks down the pretence of the rational mind. One solution is to read lots on logical fallacies, cognitive biases and the like. Maybe a more straightforward solution is just cultivating self-kindness and going with the flow like the Taoists. Another is to understand the limits of knowing thyself and try and maximise personal contentment.

Happiness and the stories we tell ourselves.

Professor Paul Dolan specialises in the study of happiness and in his book, *Happiness by Design*, he shows us that “happiness is experiences of pleasure and purpose over time.”¹⁷⁵ Pleasure is the stuff we enjoy, purpose is doing something worthwhile, and both make us happy, but not always at the same time. Having kids might give us purpose and therefore happiness, but kids don't always provide us with pleasure. My personal experience disputes this, as

my kids bring me lots of happiness generally! The other aspect of happiness is what we give our attention to. We need to focus on positive influences and aspects in our lives that maximise our happiness, rather than focus on negative things that make us unhappy. Attention is a limited resource, and as mentioned previously, there is an awful lot of stuff trying to get that attention in our lives (social media, streaming media, games, news, TV, mobile devices). We need to maximise the use of our attention to make us happier.

In the book, *Happy Ever After*, Paul Dolan also points out, very importantly, that money doesn't necessarily make us happier. If we're poor we are almost certainly going to be unhappy. The studies are there to back that up.¹⁷⁶ There is evidence that with an income above £50,000 we don't get any happier with more money and more things.

There are many myths that we have as a society that we believe will lead to happiness. Dolan lists these myths as: having children, being married, having success (in either a job or other parts of life), being monogamous, going to university and being healthy. All of these myths have stories and narratives that we tell ourselves will lead to happiness. We have to have our own lives and do the things that make us happy, ignoring social, cultural, family and friend's expectations. This is an unbelievably important point. If we conform to expectations we can often end up in situations that make us miserable. We shouldn't conform to be happy.¹⁷⁷

We all have our stories and narratives, as the illusionist Darren Brown says in his book *Happy*. "We are, each of us a product of the stories we tell ourselves,"¹⁷⁸ he says. These stories shift over time, and we make excuses about why things happened and for behaviours that we and others' have. Our stories make sense about the world and simplify things for us. Our stories can also limit our future by telling us what we are good and bad at, some

consciously some unconsciously. Darren Brown also goes on to say we need to develop robust and resilient thinking, rather than resort to positive thinking.

We can tie this to the Stoic ideas of our beliefs determining our reactions, and as we know, we have some control over our beliefs. Well some, if you discount System One thinking, chimp brain, unconscious biases, thinking shortcuts and fallacies!

Our values in life often determine our beliefs and stories. Refining these are something we can all do. Ask what is it in my life that I value and find meaning from? It's worth keeping these values kind, realistic and flexible. We'll go into this in more detail later.

In Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,¹⁷⁹ there is a pyramid of human needs. The theory is beloved by management consultants and trainers in workplace productivity. At the base of the pyramid is our physiological need (food, water, warmth, rest), safety needs (security, safety), love and social belonging (relationships, friends), self esteem (prestige and feelings of accomplishments), self actualisation (achieving our full potential) which is at the top of the pyramid. Each level of the pyramid needs the item underneath, so we are not going to get any esteem without food, safety and friends. Self actualising at the top of the pyramid is where we can get to our potential, by creating goals and developing our important values.

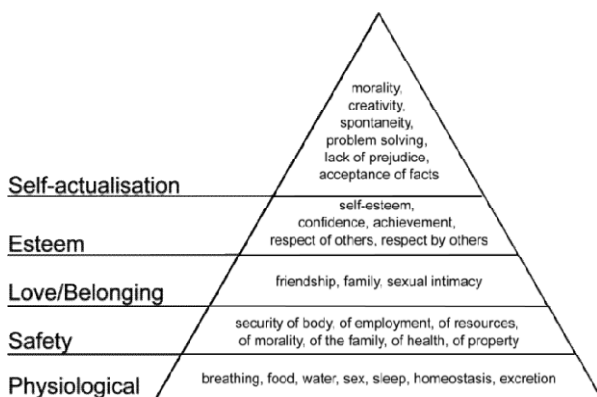


Figure 5 - Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

If we are at a point in our lives where we can refine our values, we are enormously privileged. We have enough food, we aren't being bombed, and we aren't suffering enormous loneliness. This book is made of the privilege of needs met. If there are problems in our lives, make sure the basics are catered for before we advance further up the pyramid.

In the fantastic little book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff and It's All Small Stuff*, Dr Richard Carlson advocates looking at the big picture and gives 100 maxims and expands on them (he's onto something, more on this again later). He suggests not worrying about the little things; they get in the way, let go of problems (as in Zen). He says, "So many people spend so much of their life energy 'sweating the small stuff' that they completely lose touch with the magic and beauty of life. When you commit to working toward this goal you will find that you will have far more energy to be kinder and gentler."¹⁸⁰

Interesting Paul Dolan makes a point that some small stuff, micro happy stuff, is essential for happiness, such as sleep, eating, those little moments of happiness in nature and a laugh with friends.¹⁸¹

Relaxing baths and showers can also add tiny amounts of happiness. It's a matter of finding a balance between the “micro happies” and not getting annoyed by small annoyances. Getting perspective is really helpful, will this matter in five years, does it matter on a galactic scale like in the Stoic view from above? Most things don't matter, try not to stress or get angry. Yes, I know that it isn't easy sometimes.

Therapies - CBT, ABC, ANTs and other therapeutic acronyms.

What is fascinating about some modern psychological therapies used to treat mental illness is that they can be used in everyday life when you're well, to create good habits. There will be some recognisable themes we've covered so far in these therapies below. We already know ancient wisdom has inspired some of them.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is one of several central psychological therapies used today. Cognition is the “mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses” according to the dictionary definition.¹⁸²

So CBT uses cognition, the way you think to “help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave.”¹⁸³ CBT deals with the problems you have now and how to cope, according to the fantastic NHS website and it goes on, “your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and actions are interconnected, and that negative thoughts and feelings can trap you in a vicious cycle. You're shown how to change these negative patterns to improve the way you feel.”¹⁸⁴

Awareness of thoughts should be familiar to us from the Zen

section, moderating negative beliefs and thought patterns is rather Stoic. Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, the founders of CBT both, have referenced Stoicism as an influence in their work¹⁸⁵. Albert Ellis’ ABC model is incredibly similar to “Stoic Self Monitoring” that I listed earlier¹⁸⁶.

The ABC model is:

1. Adversity – something happens. So yes, stuff definitely happens. We’re nailing this model so far.
2. Beliefs – We have our beliefs about the events. Very often negative thoughts. Stoic as hell. Remember the Taoist “Who knows what is good and bad?” and that Epictetus said, “Men are not disturbed by things but their opinion about them”.¹⁸⁷ Our beliefs then lead directly to...
3. Consequences – We have our emotional response.

Now with CBT intervention, we can use exercises to try and change our beliefs about the adversity, reducing the emotional consequences, in theory. If we also challenge our negative thoughts at the point between B and C we can intervene to reduce emotional impact. Again that’s the theory.

Our negative thoughts often materialise automatically as a response to adversity, which often originate from our beliefs, these are known in the psych trade as “Automatic Negative Thoughts” or ANTS for short. These often crop in my head like, “I’m rubbish at this, I’m an idiot”. Everyone has them. Negative thinking has kept our ancestors alive, especially looking out for constant threats out there in the wilderness. It’s not such a useful mental state sitting at a computer.

There are several ways to challenge these ANTs, mainly by

identifying unhelpful thinking patterns. Ask, is there any evidence or facts to back up any of my unhelpful or negative thoughts? Are there any other views or explanations that might explain the situation? How would a friend see this issue? Questioning thoughts is the essence of this.

In *The Little CBT Workbook* by Dr Micheal Sinclair and Dr Belinda Hollingworth, they identify a whole bundle of unhelpful thinking styles, or “common thinking errors” as they put it. These include:

- “All or nothing thinking”.
- “Over generalisation”.
- “Mental filter” (dwelling only on a single or a few negative details).
- Ignoring the positive.
- That things should/must/ought be a certain way.
- “Jumping to conclusions”.
- “mind reading”.
- “predicting the future”.
- “magnifying” our mistakes.
- “personalisation”.¹⁸⁸

I’ll add my personal favourite to the list, catastrophising, “imagining the worst possible outcome” and making a mountain out of a mole hill.¹⁸⁹ I’m a world expert at this one.

Thought diaries, ideas books (which I use), and writing out worksheets can all help to challenge negative thinking styles. Writing down plans to solve problems can help, especially anything that worries you.

One CBT worksheet I have listed four columns:

1. The first column is **thoughts**, and this will also include

my beliefs about a situation.

2. The second is my **feeling** arising from that thought, with a 0-100% scale scoring the intensity of the feeling.

3. The third column is the **challenges** to the thought.

4. The last column is the **feeling** after challenging the negative thoughts, with a percent score.

The table is like this:

My thoughts:	My Feelings from the thoughts:	My challenges to my thoughts:	My feelings after challenging my thoughts:

So in column one, I could have this example, “I’m really worried we might get burgled again”, in column two I could have, “I feel worried, tense anxious” at a score of 90%. In the challenging my thoughts column I put all the things I’ve done to reduce the risk of being burgled, the fact we’re insured, and the chances of it happening so soon after being burgled are slim. The last column lists my anxiety response going down to 20%. The new table is below:

My thoughts:	My Feelings from the thoughts:	My challenges to my thoughts:	My feelings after challenging my thoughts:
<i>I'm really worried we might get burgled again.</i>	<i>I feel worried, tense anxious – the feeling is 90% intensity.</i>	<i>Chances of being burgled again are low, we have new locks and a new gate, all our property is listed and security marked, we've done all we can, being burgled wasn't as bad as I feared, it's only stuff, no one was hurt, we're fully insured.</i>	<i>Anxiety intensity has gone down – it's now 20%.</i>

I can't control whether I am burgled or not, but I can try and control my thoughts and beliefs about it, just as the Stoics suggested. In the “my challenges to my thoughts” column ask about the facts and evidence and question the negative thinking patterns to see if there's another perspective or explanation.

Following on from challenging our thoughts and beliefs, identifying what our “rules for life” are is a useful technique. Now, these aren't our core values as such, but they are the things we believe we should and must do. It's far better to change these rules to guidelines. So when I say to myself “I should be kind,” I change it to, “I'll try to be kind”. When we talk about maxims and mottos for living as we did with the Stoics, and I'll also discuss later, bear in mind that we need to try to avoid absolutes and strict rules for living. We need to give some room for going wrong. If we don't, we end up in some mental conflict and

additional stress for failing to live up to our expectations. Our expectations of ourselves can impact our opinions and beliefs about ourselves.

We all have an opinion of ourselves. If it's low, then we have low self-esteem. If we think we are rubbish at something, we have low self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is your belief in your abilities. In both cases, challenging negative thoughts is a start. Building confidence by understanding what we're good at, practising what we want to get better at, being kind to ourselves, teaching ourselves to be assertive, having an ability to say "no" and reaching out to good friends helps here.¹⁹⁰

The theory of "locus of control" comes in to play here.¹⁹¹ Those with an internal locus of control believe that they can control aspects in their lives and that their effort and ability leads to an outcome, and it's mostly themselves to blame for failure or to praise for their success. Someone with a real belief in their abilities with high self-efficacy would fit into this group. Those with an external locus of control think that little is in their control and external factors are blamed for success or failure. It's worth knowing that sometimes the most talented are the ones who suffer from the most self-doubt.

As we've seen from Zen and Stoic philosophy, it doesn't much matter how you feel about what we can control, our control is limited and rapid acceptance of what we can and can't control is often a better approach. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't become good at things, challenge our negative thinking and try to improve. But we may be limited sometimes by our unconscious, our lack of free will and our unexpected reactions to events. The best advice here is to be kind to ourselves.

Positive psychology

Psychological therapies are usually used when things go wrong. However positive psychology, which we'll come onto next, is to improve life so that it goes right. That's the idea anyway. Positive psychology needs to be differentiated from positive thinking straight away. Positive thinking somehow expects the universe to magic up opportunities if you think positive thoughts. So we have positive outcomes with positive thoughts. Positive thinking builds people up to fall, and makes them feel guilty if they don't achieve the required positivity to make their dreams come true.

Positive psychology, although it contains positivity in a general sense, is evidence-based. Positive psychology, according to Dr Christopher Peterson, is “the scientific study of what makes life most worth living. It is a call for psychological science and practice to be as concerned with strength as with weakness; as interested in building the best things in life as in repairing the worst; and as concerned with making the lives of normal people fulfilling as with healing pathology.”¹⁹²

Martin Seligman is often referred to as the founder of positive psychology and has written several interesting books from the 1990s onwards about what makes a happy, fulfilled and meaningful life. He believed there were three types of happy life that could be studied and measured; a good life, a pleasant life and a meaningful life.¹⁹³

Seligman noted that some people had habits of being helpless in the face of adversity. However, in the book *Flourish*, he stressed that, “the people whom we could not make helpless were people who, when bad events occurred, had the habit of mind of saying, ‘It's temporary, it's just this one situation, and there is something I can do about it.’ That was what he called learned optimism”.¹⁹⁴

Optimism to Seligman is a learned skill.

Both optimism and wellbeing can be measured and increased. Seligman termed the abbreviation PERMA (it's me making things bold below) which includes, “how much **positive emotion**, how much **engagement**, how much goodness in **relationships**, how much **meaning**, and how much **accomplishment**”¹⁹⁵ people had, and he recommended this was a measurement criterion the British government should adopt to measure well being and happiness.

Positive psychology trainers Miriam Akhtar and Dr Chris Johnstone added resilience, mindfulness and the physical body to the PERMA model, as those three are also great measures of well being.¹⁹⁶

Seligman sees three paths to happiness:

- A good life, with engagement and “flow” activities (see the next section for flow).
- A meaningful life, being a member of social groups, clubs, societies, and contributing something greater than yourself. Having a sense of belonging.
- A pleasant life, with hobbies, interests, entertainment and relationships.¹⁹⁷

In the book *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman describe the character strengths and virtues that help us have a happy and wiser life. They write a “strength contributes to various fulfilments that constitute the good life, for oneself and others. Although strengths and virtues determine how an individual copes with adversity, our focus is on how they fulfil an

individual”.¹⁹⁸

Distinguishing between virtues and character strengths they also write,

"Virtues are the core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence... these virtues must be present at above threshold values for an individual to be deemed of good character."¹⁹⁹

“Character strengths are the psychological ingredients... that define the virtues... For example, the virtue of wisdom can be achieved through such strengths as creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, and what we call perspective—having a ‘big picture’ on life.”²⁰⁰

They then categorize and subdivide their strengths and values.

- Wisdom includes creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, innovation and a wise perspective.
- Courage includes bravery, persistence, integrity, vitality or enthusiasm.
- Humanity includes kindness, love and emotional intelligence.
- Justice has citizenship, social responsibility, fairness and leadership.
- Temperance describes forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence and self-control.

- Transcendence has an appreciation of beauty, awe and wonder, gratitude, humour, hope and spirituality.²⁰¹

The point of these classifications is that they are measurable, although measuring psychological personalities is notoriously tricky. If we build on the virtues and strengths they can increase our happiness, and they also overlap our earlier definitions of wisdom, so it's worth bearing them in mind. It doesn't take a lot of looking in the news to see where people have less, and some have more wisdom.

There are several reasonable criticisms of positive psychology mainly that it has to be realistic, there is real suffering, poverty, exploitation and illness caused by external stresses of society, including insecure jobs, political/economic uncertainty, inequality, poor diets, consumerism, and social media. Recording and measuring personal attributes that lead to well being are very individualistic and don't look at the broader picture of external circumstances.

External stresses need to be dealt with, and many of these problems solved. Scientific insight into individual happiness, and increasing it, won't necessarily tackle the widespread structural and social issues that cause unhappiness.

Jules Evans is critical of positive psychology's "optimistic thinking" and over-reliance on questionnaires, which are artificial measures. He also criticises the ideas in positive psychology of not blaming ourselves for mistakes and not taking credit for success, which can lead to lack of responsibility. He acknowledges the influence of Stoicism on positive psychology and questions turning ancient philosophy into a science.²⁰²

As Jules Evans points out with much of positive psychology and other therapies, they have been inspired by the methods, but not

the wisdom and philosophical questioning of Stoicism.²⁰³ The same can be said for many therapies that have been inspired by Buddhism.

There are some excellent ideas in positive psychology, but like all ideas, they can be taken to the extreme and can be approached uncritically.

Flow

Flow is a term used a great deal in positive psychology books and articles. Mihály Csíkszentmihályi originally named it.²⁰⁴ Flow is a “deep absorption in activities”.²⁰⁵ It is a state of intense concentration, where you lose your “self” in your work or things that you are doing. It’s being “in the zone”. Flow is very similar to no mindedness and letting go of your ego that we saw in Zen, where the identifiable you is lost. The flow state is often found when you use your best skills on tasks that require concentration but aren’t too hard. For me, I’ve been in flow states when DJing, when writing, when making art, when drawing and when designing websites. Flow can also be experienced by getting lost in films, books, music, gigs, clubbing and video games.

It’s a state of mind where you can’t remember who you are, and barely know where you are. It’s an intense concentration where the thinking, active mind drops away, as does your entire identity. I’ve often found my ruminations subside in flow states. Rumination is where negative thoughts go around and around on repeat.

Flow is not just found using creative skills. I’ve also experienced flow in martial arts (Karate and Tai Chi when I was a teenager), and running and swimming. I’ve found that having a flow state

can calm the mind and can create a feeling of accomplishment in using my skills well. Flow is an excellent meditative and mindful state to achieve, and we'll see more about these in the next section.

Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn creator of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction therapy says, "Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally."²⁰⁶

Professor Mark Williams, on the NHS website states:

"An important part of mindfulness is reconnecting with our bodies and the sensations they experience. This means waking up to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the present moment. That might be something as simple as the feel of a banister as we walk upstairs. Another important part of mindfulness is an awareness of our thoughts and feelings as they happen moment to moment. It's about allowing ourselves to see the present moment clearly. When we do that, it can positively change the way we see ourselves and our lives."²⁰⁷

"Mindfulness" is a bad use of language, it seems ironic, and it sounds like you're full of mind, when the point of mindfulness is to have a calmer, less full mind. In fact, with mindfulness in Zen Buddhism, we talk of states of no mind and egoless, mental inner peace, with the thoughts drifting by, which are left alone, untouched. What mindfulness essentially means is concentrating on things in the here and now. I'm currently focussing on the sounds on the bus. The rattles, whines, drone and shudders, the chatter

of different accents and languages, the sights and views, while ignoring the smells! I have thoughts wandering by, but I don't give them my attention or get dragged into them. I don't feel like I have a past or future there are just these sensations that I'm concentrating on now. That's how I define mindfulness, anyway.

Meditation and mindfulness exercises

Mindfulness meditation is as simple as getting a five minute timer, sitting quietly and then concentrating on your breaths and letting thoughts pass by. If you get drawn into a thought you bring your attention back to focus on your breathing. Your eyes can be kept open or closed. Doing this every day needs some discipline, and I rarely do it, if I'm honest. But just having 5 minutes to sit without active thinking isn't a bad habit to pick up. You can increase the time and frequency if you feel like it.

Meditation is a common mindfulness practice, but it's not the only one. Concentrating on calm breaths is usually the way that mindfulness meditation starts. Meditation can be done sitting in a formal position like Zazen on a cushion on the floor, or by sitting on a seat.

Meditation is defined as, “a practice where an individual uses a technique – such as mindfulness, or focusing their mind on a particular object, thought or activity – to train attention and awareness, and achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable state.”²⁰⁸ Meditation has been found to change certain brain areas regarding your sense of self, and this can help some people deal with mental illness, like depression, stress and anxiety.²⁰⁹

One meditation practice is calmly sitting quietly and counting breaths. I can't count in situations like these, so I've avoided this,

but it might work for you. You concentrate on the in and out breaths. Taking time out and just sitting and concentrating your awareness is pretty much all there is and it can be done anywhere, including on the bus.

Venessa King makes the point that mindfulness and meditation are not about having an empty mind. Mindfulness is about “noticing when our minds have drifted off, as we don’t usually notice this, and then choosing to place our attention back to where we want it.” ”It’s about not getting caught up in your thoughts, recognising that like clouds, they come and go”.²¹⁰

There is No Right Way to Meditate as Yumi Sakugawa puts it in her illustrated book of the same name. That’s how I feel about it. There are lots of books on meditation, so my advice is to try it and see if you can find a way for it to work for you. If it doesn’t work, then I’d advise just thinking about changing your relationship with time as I wrote in the Zen section and practise focusing on the present moment if you can.

Gill Hasson, in her book *Mindfulness*,²¹¹ describes that there are formal and informal mindfulness approaches. She suggests the informal approach, which is to be aware of what is happening in the present moment. The formal method is seated and timed meditation. I did find formal meditation helpful in martial arts when I was a teenager, to help calm the mind and improve focus, but I like the idea of just keeping it informal.

The primary focus of mindfulness is to be more in the present moment and less in the past and less in the future, especially if these are causing unhappiness. It’s essential to learn from the past and plan for the future (especially in protecting the planet for future generations), but if the focus on the past and future is negative, then it’s probably unhelpful, so the skill is to know when it’s a problem.

Noticing when any thinking causes emotional turbulence is a skill to learn too. As Ruby Wax says in her book, *Frazzled*, "If you notice high gusts of critical thinking or storms of stress moving in, intentionally move your focus to one of your senses (sight, taste, smell, hearing and touch)".²¹² In a mindfulness exercise, she suggests "using sound and breath as an anchor",²¹³ focus on those with real concentration, if I label or judge sounds or the mind wanders, that's fine, no problem, it happens, refocus on the breath and sounds.

I think when the mind wanders, it's important not to believe your thoughts, don't engage with them, don't get dragged into negative thinking and let them pass without judgment. As we've seen, our thinking is often unconscious, irrational, based on cognitive biases and logical fallacies. Why would I believe my mind when it tells me "I'm rubbish" or any other number of negative things about myself? If you apply CBT approaches, such as challenging the thinking and then mindfulness, in not getting dragged into those thoughts, we have a useful set of tools to manage our moods.

We shouldn't think of thoughts and emotions as "solid or real"²¹⁴ we need to let them go and not "latch onto them". It's all only brain activity. We need to diminish the power that thoughts and feelings have over us, and mindfulness is supposed to help.

Our body influences our brain, and our brain influences our body. It's a holistic whole and it's often difficult to determine where the body and mind starts and ends. If I'm stressed, I'm tense. If I'm ill, I'm regularly sad. The brain and body are also influenced and connected to the world around us. We might not be aware of how bad food, pollution, noise, technology and external events all affect our moods, thoughts and bodies. Mindfulness is an awareness of the body and mind while concentrating on it and the world around us in the present

moment. That awareness can help our happiness, and there is some science on meditation that backs this up.²¹⁵ However, there is the criticism that there isn't enough evidence that mindfulness is effective.²¹⁶ This is one amongst several criticisms.

Criticisms of modern mindfulness and McMindfulness

There are of course, a few well-reasoned arguments against modern mindfulness and its approach to meditation. Firstly I've seen several warnings that meditation and mindfulness are not necessarily helpful for people with chronic mental illness, or trauma. There are examples where it can bring out demons and cause mental illness.²¹⁷ With meditation and mindfulness techniques, it's worth starting very small and being cautious.

Another major criticism is that mindfulness, and indeed, many positive psychology measures are there purely to improve productivity in an uncaring workplace. In the absence of unions and with reduced labour laws, responsibility for well being has been seen to have moved from collective bargaining to the individual employee. If I'm stressed, it sometimes feels that it is my responsibility to sort feeling better about the stress, no matter where that stress comes from. Knowing what I can and can't control and accepting the rest isn't always straightforward in the Stoic sense, where external stress is concerned. Sometimes things need to change in workplaces.

Stress costs employers an enormous amount in sickness, £6.5 billion a year in the UK alone.²¹⁸ Almost all workplaces I've worked in have had some form of mindfulness training. It's relatively cheap in proportion to sickness costs to get mindfulness trainers in.

Maybe mindfulness training is less expensive than asking employees to work fewer hours or work in less stressful ways?

I know I sound cynical here, but look, it's probably true. It's also worth noting that there has not been one jot of Buddhism or related perennial wisdom in the work environments I've been in when mindfulness is delivered. There isn't a lot of discussion about letting go of grasping, desires or acquisition of profit. Mindfulness without proper employee engagement might be seen as simply being used to maintain a status quo in the workplace. Training to reduce stress doesn't ask questions about strategy or internal politics that people might find difficult. Thinking Stoically, we need to analyse what we can and can't control and then involve the right people. Collaborating and co-operating go beyond solving our individual mental well being. I've found discussing and brainstorm issues that are causing me (and others) stress with managers, colleagues and friends far better than using mindfulness in most circumstances. It's more likely to help others too.

McMindfulness is the criticism that a lot of modern mindfulness teaching is separated from the ethics and philosophy of Buddhism, and is sold as a commodity for selfish individual improvement. Zen teacher David Loy wrote in 2003 that, "uncoupling mindfulness from its ethical and religious Buddhist context... may be leading to an unfortunate denaturing of this ancient practice."²¹⁹

David Loy believes mindfulness has been reduced to a scientifically studied "stress reduction and attention-enhancement"²²⁰ technique. He notes that mindfulness is a "distinct quality of attention"²²¹ inseparable from the factors of the Noble Eight Fold Path, "the nature of our thoughts, speech and actions; our way of making a living; and our efforts to avoid unwholesome and unskillful behaviours, while developing those that are conducive to wise action, social harmony, and

compassion.”²²² He believes that reducing mindfulness to an “individualistic and consumer practice”²²³, for our own personal transformation ignores the understanding of interconnection and interdependence and doesn’t allow for the “critical reflection on the causes of our collective suffering”²²⁴ those things in our society and organisations that cause us stress, as I’ve said.

Ronald Purser suggests we move mindfulness from "me to we", and focus our awareness not just on ourselves and our own problems, but focus on civic, collective, structural, social, cultural and ecological issues.²²⁵

The point of Buddhist mindfulness is to destroy the ego, not to self improve and increase egos. Professor Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh demolish modern mindfulness training in their book *The Path*:

“But mindfulness was intended to break down the self. Buddhism is the doctrine of no self, and Buddhist practices as a whole are designed to do away with the notion that any sort of individual self exists. Yet many of these aspects of Buddhism have been discarded, and instead, it has been distorted as a way of looking within and embracing the self. It has become a form of exotic self-help: the doctrine of no self utilised to help people feel better about themselves”.²²⁶

These concerns have been acknowledged by Jon Kabat-zinn who says, “Some have expressed concerns that a sort of superficial ‘McMindfulness’ is taking over which ignores the ethical foundations of the meditative practices and traditions from which mindfulness has emerged”²²⁷

"Without an understanding of nontheism and the motivation to benefit others, meditation practice can degenerate into self-

absorption and escapism," says Judy Lief.²²⁸ Meditation needs to work alongside two other things; loosening our grip on our rigid views and opinions, and in having positive, harmonious action with others. Mindfulness should give us focus and perspective, with ethics and compassion. There's the danger that modern mindfulness teaching will simply encourage apathy, inaction and empty self-improvement practices.

After all, mindfulness is only one part of the Eightfold Path to end suffering in Buddhism. There are seven extra steps to a moral path to help our happiness. Simply put, mindfulness needs ethics and values to be a meaningful activity. Bank robbers raid mindfully. That puts it into perspective.

Valuing mindfulness, as a preferable mental state is also an issue. Mind wandering is the opposite of mindfulness, but it isn't always a bad thing, it can make time go quicker, especially when waiting for the bus. Daydreaming also can be great fun. It can relieve boredom, which is sometimes useful. Daydreams that aren't negative and too distracting are harmless enough.

The less desirable emotions and subconscious reactions, like fear, anger and lust have an evolutionary function. Maybe mind wandering has a purpose too. It's certainly great in weighing up options, being creative and resolving problems. Of course, you have to have balance not to lapse into unhelpful thinking, over thinking and rumination. Mindfulness perhaps can balance things out.

With all that said, I think mindfulness in any form has a lot of benefits. If mindfulness in the workplace, or anywhere else, alleviate some mental health suffering, it's relatively difficult to over criticise. However, you could argue that without understanding the background to the ideas underpinning mindfulness we can't entirely change ourselves, others and our organisations to be

happier using the methods.

There could be a paradox that self acceptance and accepting the present moment could lead to you being better able to challenge the status quo, and change things around you for the better. Meditation and mindfulness as a force for personal change could help you become more emotionally stable and better prepared to change the world.²²⁹ Personal improvement could lead to an improved world.

I have found informal mindfulness techniques useful. I prefer to call it “awareness in the present moment” to mindfulness, which could be seen as a loaded term. I think it’s good for becoming more aware and taking notice of my surroundings more, which is good for my wellbeing and happiness. In that way, it’s helped me become calmer and kinder, but this has all been used in conjunction with the wisdom and philosophy of Zen. For me, mindfulness techniques and the ethical wisdom from Buddhism (and elsewhere in the perennial philosophy) are inseparable.

Emotional intelligence

We move from mindfulness, and how we use our awareness generally, to how we become aware of our own emotions and those of other people.

You could try and say that any ability is a type of intelligence. You could have, visual intelligence, musical intelligence, philosophical intelligence, logical intelligence, languages intelligence, the list goes on. The problem is intelligence itself is well defined, and there isn't a lot of evidence for other types of intelligence.²³⁰ Emotional intelligence has this problem, but it is a useful idea.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to "recognize their own emotions and those of others, discern between different feelings and label them appropriately".²³¹

It could be argued that emotional intelligence is a component of wisdom, "Wisdom requires a sensitivity to the human condition" as Mike Lehr writes, intelligence and knowledge doesn't necessarily.²³²

However, emotional intelligence can still be used to act unwisely, we can understand emotions and even take a course of action that causes harm, but it can reduce that likelihood.

Emotional intelligence is a flawed measure and model. It has plenty of critics. Measuring anyone's understanding of emotions is tricky at the best of times. What it does do is give us a rough measure of personality, similar to a favourite in psychology, "the big five personality traits" which measures our openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion (the opposite of being shy and reserved), agreeableness and neuroticism (my favourite).

The theory of emotional intelligence is supposed to be a comparable measure to IQ (Intelligence Quotient) which measures intelligence, which is also an often criticised measure. What emotional intelligence does give us is a way of thinking about our personalities. If knowledge can be gained from education to develop intelligence then training can improve our emotional intelligence and our appreciation of our emotions and those of others. If we're more knowledgeable and understanding of emotional states it generally follows that we'll be better equipped to gain a little more happiness and wisdom.

Daniel Goleman, who helped the idea of emotional intelligence gain in popularity, identified five areas of emotional intelligence: self-awareness (know thyself), self-regulation (taking

responsibility), empathy, motivations and social skills (developing communication skills).²³³

This flawed but interesting theory can build on what we've seen so far. Looking at Stoicism and CBT we can improve our behaviours and reactions to other people, by adjusting our beliefs. We can understand that our beliefs lead to emotional consequences. With improving our self-awareness with mindfulness and being a better listener and communicator, we can become better at reading other people's feelings.

Action for Happiness

Action for Happiness is a UK based charity with a simple pledge, "I will try to create more happiness and less unhappiness in the world around me."²³⁴

Their values are:

1. "We can each affect our happiness and the happiness of those around us".²³⁵
2. "We need to prioritise the things that cause happiness".²³⁶
3. "Helping others is essential for a happier society. Self-centred individualism is not the route to happiness".²³⁷

Action for Happiness was founded by Lord Richard Layard, Professor of economics at LSE and writer on happiness. Their patron is the Dalai Lama. They are also a contributor to the Compassion in Politics movement in the UK.²³⁸

In the Action for Happiness book, *10 keys to Happier Living*, a

practical handbook to happiness, Vanessa King lists ten keys to happiness (funny that), backed by 420 pieces of research. The 10 keys spell the abbreviation, GREAT DREAM:

Giving – Doing things for others can increase our happiness and that of others, making someone smile makes us feel good, it takes us out of ourselves if only for a moment. Small acts of kindness add up.²³⁹

Relating – Even small moments of connection can help happiness. Happiness has a ripple effect through our friends and family, we need to build listening skills and focus on positives in relationships.²⁴⁰

Exercising – moving makes us happy, boosts resilience, boosts moods, manages stress, depression and anxiety to an extent.²⁴¹

Awareness – living life mindfully.²⁴²

Trying out – Being open to new experience and trying new things. Learning helps happiness.²⁴³

Direction – This is having goals, choosing goals, writing them down and planning for them.²⁴⁴

Resilience – Our ability to bounce back, we'll cover this next.²⁴⁵

Emotions – We are evolved to focus on what's wrong and on negatives. Notice and name emotions throughout the day to increase your awareness. Gratitude and mindfulness attention can help build positive emotions.²⁴⁶

Acceptance – we need to be compassionate and comfortable with ourselves.²⁴⁷

Meaning – Be part of something bigger than yourself, find interests.²⁴⁸

One great piece of advice to achieve the Action for Happiness pledge is to make "Micro moments"²⁴⁹ or as I like to think of them: micro happies. It's a suggestion to create just tiny amounts of happiness for other people, whether a cheery hello, letting someone into the queue for the bus or just little tiny bits of kindness. Make pleasant interactions with the people around you as often as possible. It's surprising how it can slightly lift your mood.

Resilience and bouncing back

I love this quote, and it sums up the bounce-back attitude of resilience: "Fall down seven times, get up eight."²⁵⁰

10 Keys to Happier living cites a variety of ingredients for resilience based on research by Drs Dennis Charney and Steven Southwick.²⁵¹

1. Use active coping strategies – look at what you can control, do small active things, problem solve, making a plan of action, try alternatives when things don't work, give self-encouragement, look for a silver lining.
2. Think resiliently – challenge unhelpful thinking, seek more helpful thinking, don't beat yourself up. Look for alternative explanations to automatic negative thoughts,

question if you're exaggerating a problem.

3. Use optimism and humour – see the funny side and seek positives.
4. Nurture relationships and help others – know who you can turn to for help so that you can connect with others in adversity.
5. Look after your physical wellbeing – exercise and eat healthily.
6. Have a sense of values, purpose and meaning – focus on what is important in life, have beliefs you can turn to for strength.
7. Know, use and develop strengths – doing what you're good at gives you strength. Look for ways around things you find hard.
8. Keep learning and challenging your self – learn from new situations and experiences.

In *Build your Resilience* by Donald Robertson, he uses several Stoic themes and looks at Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to suggest a course of training in resilience:

1. Trying to control situations and emotions backfires often. “Learning to live” with physical pain, for instance, is the start of learning to let go. Try not to control sensations and accept what you can't control.²⁵²
2. Write down your values in a table, what is their importance to you, and prioritise them from most to

least important. Then decide what values you are neglecting and plan how to prioritise them in your life. To increase things that you value, you need to set goals, and these need to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-limited (SMART goals).²⁵³

3. Mindfulness can help with openness to situations and events, by increasing awareness you can be more flexible and accepting of adversity. You can defuse negative thoughts by making them impersonal, by saying things like, “I’m having the thought that...”²⁵⁴
4. Use relaxation techniques when stress strikes, with mindful breathing and telling yourself to “let go”.²⁵⁵
5. You can set a specific time in the day to worry. Any worries that crop up can be postponed until the specific worry time in the day.²⁵⁶
6. You can train yourself in problem-solving, by defining problems and what your goals are, brainstorming alternative solutions.²⁵⁷
7. Develop social skills and assertiveness.²⁵⁸
8. See your worries as an external observer, “ah there’s a worrying thought that’s happened”.
9. Tackle any need you have for certainty, accept situations as they are.²⁵⁹

From my experience, I would also add saying “no” to the learning assertiveness part of the list. Assertiveness has helped build

resilience in certain work situations. Much of assertiveness is learning to listen, being honest and open when something is wrong, and saying things such as “I believe that”, “I think that”. Making your feelings personal to you ensures that accusations aren’t thrown around. Saying “no” to work tasks if I haven’t got the skills or time requires some confidence and negotiation skills, these can be learnt with practice. A “no” is better than a grudging “yes” and then feeling stressed.

There are also external factors that put pressure on resilience. There are three protective factors of resilience:

- Self-esteem and self-worth.
- A support network of family and friends.
- Societal factors, access to healthcare, housing, recreation and education.

As you can see, the last two factors can’t be controlled and can have a massive impact on the first. You can build your self-esteem and friends, to an extent. Unfortunately, we mainly end up with the Stoic view that all we can control are our beliefs.

We come to the idea of “realistic optimists”²⁶⁰ who change what they can, accept what can’t and find anything beneficial in a problem with “a glass half full attitude”. They look for anything positive in a situation and where they can grow from adversity. The realistic part of realistic optimism ensures that the optimism isn’t just wishful thinking or blind faith. Optimism can be learnt by planning and preparing for bad situations, by challenging negative thoughts as in CBT and Stoicism and by looking at things from other perspectives.

Mental Health First Aiders England (MHFA England) has a fantastic “Stress Container” analogy and interactive chart, which

is a way to try to boost our resilience.²⁶¹ The imaginary stress container fills with the stresses of life. Our coping strategies are a metaphorical tap that empties the container. I have adapted this metaphorical device. Let me introduce you to my magic crap bucket:

Magic crap bucket

There will be some days and events in your life that will throw you so much crap to deal with, that it overwhelms your ability to deal with it. This ability to deal with crap is your imaginary “magic crap bucket”! It’s magic because it magically shrinks and gets bigger.

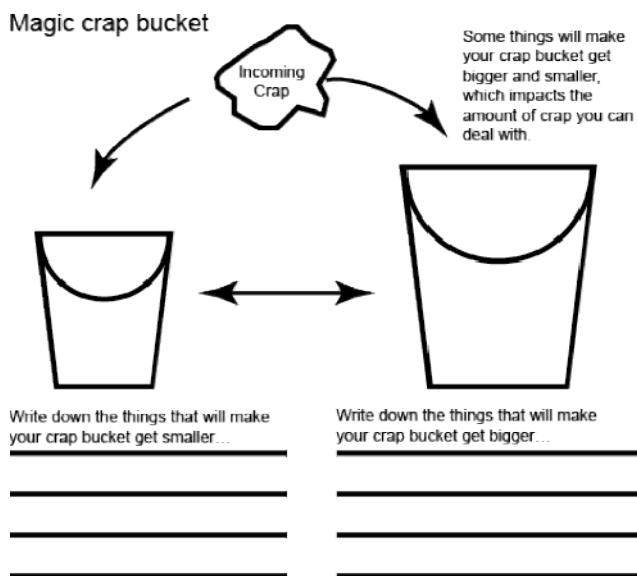


Figure 6 - The Magic Crap Bucket

There are things personal to me that will shrink my magic crap bucket, making it more challenging to deal with incoming crap. Usually, this is drinking too much alcohol, overwork, lack of sleep, lack of decent food or being ill.

There are also things that make the magic crap bucket bigger. This also involves some resilience training. Mindfulness and the philosophy from Zen, CBT techniques and some of the ideas above increase the bucket size. Listening to music, sleep, decent food, exercise and talking problems through are my biggest magic crap bucket size increasers. It is worth writing down what makes the magic crap bucket smaller and bigger to cope with what might fill it.

A complementary approach to expanding the crap bucket is not to fill it. Richard Carson in *Don't sweat the small stuff* suggests lowering your tolerance to stress to alert you sooner to the problem so that you can address the stress. Those with high tolerances will inevitably be under higher stress.²⁶² It's excellent advice. Do everything not to fill the bucket with stress in the first place!

Always remember if you have things regularly filling your crap bucket when you're at your best, and the bucket is big, there will be times that you won't be at your best. If you fill your crap bucket with crap all the time and it suddenly shrinks, the crap will spill over, and you won't cope. The best strategy is to reduce the incoming crap if possible, and for me, that was getting a less stressful job or a shorter commute. Only you can answer what will reduce the stressful crap coming into your life. It's not always possible to reduce the incoming crap, and that's where doing things to expand the bucket works.

Finally, it's worth thinking on the fact that manure in nature has a positive if very smelly benefit; out of the crap good things grow. We can all learn from the crap of life.

Wrapping up psychology and happiness

That wraps up the psychology and happiness chapter. We've covered helpful therapies, positive psychology, mindfulness, resilience and other things that can help us be a little happier. Next, I'm going to start to give some practical advice from the philosophies I've mentioned.

Chapter 7 – The B.U.S route: Practical advice from the books that I've read on the bus

I decided I wanted to pick out the best bits of advice I've gathered from the books I'd read on the bus about Taoism, Zen, Stoicism and bits of psychology, that I can give to my kids, myself and others. I made notes and listed helpful ideas and phrases. I decided that fitting them under useful headings and abbreviations seemed an excellent way to organise the advice. It's also useful to help remember the main ideas.

The Stoic use of maxims inspires the format of the advice coming in the following chapters. They express values in a shorthand, memorable way. Using maxims and memorising what helps to be happy is a bit like a type of mental martial arts training. You can get some mental fighting moves that will prevent you from being grabbed by dark thoughts and your demons. OK, well that's the theory, in practice it doesn't work out so easy!

We've covered quite a bit of ancient and modern wisdom for happiness, some of the themes in the previous chapters have been:

- Using our knowledge well.
- Compassion.
- Tolerance for uncertainty.
- Letting go of desires.

- Understanding our lack of control.
- Understanding what we can control.
- Understanding other people.
- Living mindfully in the present.
- A holistic view.
- Understanding our interconnected nature.
- Living by virtues and values, for the common good.

It's a bit of a list, and there was more.

With these themes, I came up with the headings:

- Be here now.
- Understanding, empathy and compassion.
- Shrink desires.

B.U.S.

Coincidentally it spells the type of public transportation I was on when I read the books that led to me being inspired to write the abbreviation! I mean, what are the chances of that?!

These headings represented the wisdom that I've found useful in my life too. It's advice to help you worry and stress less, based on the three main philosophies and the psychology in the books I'd read on the bus. It also references the aspects of the perennial philosophy I described in the Stoic chapter. My main aim is to be a bit calmer, kinder and have less wants. Hopefully, you will find this useful too, and you can take what good bits you like and discard anything you think is unhelpful

Before my first draft of this book, my outline, three-letter abbreviation was BED (Be here now, Empathy and compassion

and Desire less). Giving the book the title, *The BED route to happiness*, sounds like a totally different book. It sounds fun and rude too. It'll probably be the sequel!

One thing about the BUS abbreviation is that each one has a bit of a moderating effect on the other. Being in the here and now, and having awareness, helps understanding, empathy and compassion, it allows for reflection on thoughts to prevent any compassion fatigue. Awareness in the here and now might stop people taking advantage of my kindness. Self-compassion comforts me for mistakes if I fail to live up to being in the here and now, or if I end up desiring more stuff. Understanding and compassion allow for empathy of other people when they do unwise things to me or others. Well, this is the theory anyway, the point is, take any good idea to extremes and it'll go a bit wrong. The same goes for this advice.

The following chapters are just a way of shoe-horning some mottos and maxims into a simple and conveniently packaged arrangement and make it into something memorable. Structuring helpful thoughts is a handy thing to do, in my opinion.

Again, a slight disclaimer, we're not aiming here for constant joy, but contentment and satisfaction. Happiness in life is as much a lack of sadness, as it is having the "good life".

So we have the convenient three letters of the acronym BUS, each of which will make up the next three chapters, so next stop the advice and maxims! I start the following sections with a brief introduction, and then there are subtitles, which are the maxims. Maxims, as we've seen, were used by the Stoics to train themselves and students in the wisdom that will help them in their lives. I've used these to be easily remembered pieces of advice to help me personally. It's just meant to help a little, I've never expected any

dramatic shifts in how I deal with things, but it has helped as these do pop into my head from time to time.

I've tried to learn these and refer to them when I'm in happy and good moods. The hope is that in remembering the advice and in flexing the maxim muscles they'll help a little when things go wrong, just like the Stoics did. In the last chapter, I'll mention how I designed the practical advice and how doing the same thing might help you, just a bit.

These are guidelines, not rules. If we break guidelines, it doesn't matter so much. Advice like this shouldn't be strict. I've sometimes lumped related pieces of advice together for convenience. There's a little repetition as I approach particular advice from different angles.

So here we go on the BUS route! Hold tight!

Below is a summary page describing the three headings that make up the next three chapters and under those are the practical pieces of advice and maxims, (there's also platitudes, truisms and clichés, but don't let that put you off). They're all based on the previous philosophies, ideas and wisdom, but simplified and made easier to digest.

Yeah, there are lots, but it's a summary of everything to come. We'll go into much more practical and expanded detail in the next three chapters.

The BUS route:

BE HERE NOW

Accept the uncertainty of the future and the mistakes of the past and live in the moment. Change focus. Be mindful. Observe your thoughts and emotions, see them as separate from yourself. You are not your thoughts. Notice mind-wandering. Challenge negative thoughts. Your negative thoughts and moods are probably just passing distractions and probably unrealistic. Know yourself. Have purpose. Worry less about what others think. Get out and exercise. Get into nature. Get enough healthy food. Get enough sleep. Use music. Drink less alcohol. Take notice. Be aware. See. Hear. Feel. Observe. Slow down. Relax. Concentrate on calm breaths. Have patience. Use your attention well, on things that make you happy, not unhappy. Limit social media. Limit news. Limit screen time and device use. Read. Learn. Write. Be creative. Over-think less. Don't take things too seriously. Concentrate on one job or thing at a time. Seek positives. Things could be worse. Trust the process of life. Trust the future. Go with the flow. Be a realistic optimist. Plan to cope. You can handle anything.

UNDERSTANDING, EMPATHY & COMPASSION:

Friendliness and kindness for others. Accept others. Be kind to yourself. Accept yourself. Be tolerant and open-minded. Forgive. We're much more the same than different. "Focus on our similarities rather than our differences."²⁶³ We're all interconnected, interrelated, interdependent and made of the same stuff. Love nature. Live naturally. Live easy. Don't work too hard. Do work you enjoy. Manage fear. Manage anger. Don't hate. Rise above it. Judge less. Love. Use imagination well. Be honest. Smile. Laugh. Use humour. Have fun. Persevere. Learn to problem solve. Connect with others. Talk to others about your problems and listen to others about their problems. Help improve conditions for others and yourself.

SHRINK DESIRES:

Less attachment to property, work, money, alcohol, sex, hopes, ambitions, success, plans, opinions, beliefs, time, places, emotions, thoughts, your self and your ego. Let go of "what ifs", "shoulds", ideals, wants, expectations, ruminations and what you fear to lose. Live by values that matter. Think independently. Be questioning. Let go of the small stuff, focus on what matters. Look for a different perspective. Look at the big picture. Don't compare yourself to others. Everything changes. Accept imperfection. This too shall pass. Accept impermanence. Change what you can. Accept what you can't change, then move on. "If you can't change it, change the way you think about it."²⁶⁴ Build resilience, adaptability and flexibility. Build confidence. Manage desires. Obsess less. Resist Consumerism. Live simply. Give more. Expect less. Be humble. Be grateful and satisfied with what you have.

Chapter 8 – Be here now

The first letter of the BUS route is named after the hippie writer Ram Dass' book and the difficult third album by the band Oasis. “Be here now”.

There's a saying, “yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift, that's why they call it the present”.²⁶⁵ Yes, that's cheesy, I know.

Being in the present is what this chapter is mainly focused on, with practical ideas for mindfulness, CBT, changing your relationship with time and advice on healthy living, built on the previous chapters.

In the brain-bending section on the Zen ideas of time, I made the point that the philosophy showed that we could change our relationship with time. We have so many expectations about how the past could have been or should have been, or what could happen or should happen in the future. In my experience, these expectations can lead to stress, sadness and anxiety. Don't forget, no amount of worry makes any difference to what will happen, although that's easy for me to say and I'll forget this point in five minutes and start worrying!

Zen shows that we can pretty much stop the past and future existing in our minds, as we're expected to experience it by our society, media and culture. The only thing that exists is this moment now, and mindfulness techniques can help us here.

There is one little warning about stopping the future existing in our minds. Native Americans have a saying that all our actions should consider seven generations ahead of us. So if you live only in the moment, your actions should be wise, kind and considerate. That

might be kindness to others and the environment, for instance. As I've mentioned mindfulness without ethics goes against the core benefits of Buddhism to reducing your suffering and that of others.

The past is useful too. Having a Zen “beginners mind” is great, but you don't want to make the same mistakes over and over.

I've also found it really difficult to focus on the here and now when my mind is racing and wandering when something has gone wrong, but I have found it to work on occasions to help calm my thinking.

My approach to living in the present is that it can be approached like a type of martial arts training, practised at your leisure when you're mentally well, then it comes into full force when poorer moods attack you. It's something to practise and not to be disappointed when it doesn't work, but to keep it up. We've got to be kind to ourselves when we do get into negative moods, even when trying not to. It happens. Give yourself a break.

The point of this chapter is to be comfortable and satisfied with where you are now because that's the only place you ever are.

Right onto the advice for being here now:

Accept the uncertainty of the future and the mistakes of the past and live in the moment.

My advice here is not to look at the past with regret, don't dwell on past mistakes, be confident in the present and look to the future without fear.

Acceptance of the here and now as it is doesn't mean apathy and fatalism. It means having the focus to recognise and accept what

you can't change and understand what you can change. It's about taking responsibility for your beliefs and acting appropriately, to try and reduce your fear, anxiety, anger and other negative emotions. If you can act to make things better in your life and others, do it and do it here and now!

My Nan used to sing the Doris Day song "Que será, será", written in 1956 by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans:

"Que será, será
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours to see
Que será, será
What will be, will be."²⁶⁶

It expresses living with the uncertainty of the future really well. Uncertainty is never going to go away.

Try and forget the past and future exist. Well, they don't exist except as memory, or thinking ahead. As mentioned previously, our memory favours the negative for good evolutionary reasons. It reminds you not to walk through those dark woods where the damn great wild boar lives that chased you previously.

- If you find yourself worrying about the future, say to yourself, "that future doesn't exist, anything could happen".
- If you dwell on the past unhappily say to yourself, "that past no longer exists, it's done and gone".

In most parts of our lives, we can't go backwards, only forwards. Do we want to go back to the past? We've all moved on, and things have progressed. Every time I've tried to go back to an old workplace or revisit an old relationship it has often caused more

discomfort. Moving forward with the flow of life is usually the way to go.

Forgive yourself for your mistakes, accept them, there's nothing you can do about them. Live in the here and now as much as you can.

Change focus. Be mindful.

If you get caught in negative thinking, you can change focus, think of something else, or seek out something to concentrate your attention on, look for something natural, or beautiful, or arty to focus entirely on. Find a distraction. Changing focus on an activity that can create a flow state is also good.

If I ruminate about something like politics or the news, the best thing I've found is either to let the thoughts run their course or deliberately interrupt them with a new train of thought. Forcing myself to think about sci-fi, superheroes, computer games, or even stuff from this book can help! Find what change in focus works for you to snap you out of the cyclical worry thoughts.

You can use five or ten minutes on the bus, train or tube to focus on the here and now. Slowly bring your breathing into a slow rhythm and let your thoughts clear a bit. You can do a 'scan' of what you're physically feeling in your body, from your head to toe. Wiggling fingers and toes is good, but I'd suggest mostly concentrating on breathing and concentrating on what you find out of the window, see the world as it is, bringing you more in the moment. All of this might sound like mindful hippie crap, but improving awareness even when things are going well can help maintain happiness.

You can see thoughts like passing clouds. Ooh there's a thought, it seems to be about politics again! Bring the concentration back to breathing, seeing and hearing without judgement. Oh, the bus has hit a speed bump. Ow. Where was I. Oh yes, concentration on breathing and seeing. You get the idea.

I don't do formal meditation as such, but these little informal mindful exercises, concentrating on music, on sounds around me especially are quite useful. I try to look at things out of the bus window with an artist's eye, looking at colours, forms, and trying to find the beauty in everyday things.

Using meditation is good, but just trying to practise bringing your attention to the moment now and minimising distractions is a good exercise. The change in focus allows worries to pass by while using the senses entirely. That's the theory. It sometimes even works! The idea is to focus on the external picture, not the mental processing.

Observe your thoughts and emotions, see them as separate from yourself. You are not your thoughts. Notice mind-wandering.

I would suggest observing your thoughts and feelings regularly in a day, check in on yourself. It's a good way to become self-aware.

Thoughts don't make us. They are just biological processes, a bit like farting really, and we don't get caught up in them for hours, unless you really have a problem! See the thoughts as separate entities from the real you. You are more than your thoughts. You have a whole body around the brain that isn't the mind.

As well as an awareness of thinking patterns and moods it's worth noticing when the mind wanders entirely, and if it gets caught up in ruminations, and any circular negative thinking. Being aware of how the concentration gets sucked into thoughts and how we end up on autopilot is very useful in understanding how our minds work. It's all about awareness of thinking patterns from observation.

Challenge negative thoughts. Your negative thoughts and moods are probably just passing distractions and probably unrealistic.

As I've said thoughts are like passing clouds, sometimes light, sometimes dark, but they always pass on by, sometimes the wind is stronger, and they pass faster, sometimes the dark ones stay for days, but they always pass for me. Talk to your doctor if the dark clouds stay longer than expected.

I don't judge my dark or negative thoughts, although I find it's worth naming them and challenging them with evidence, for instance, "oh look it's a self-critical thought, this thought is probably inaccurate, I've succeeded at tasks like this before, I will again". I don't feel guilty or weak for having bad thoughts.

These thoughts are passing distractions, challenge them if needed, but let them pass on their own if you can.

The most important thing is, don't believe your thoughts. They are regularly wrong. Those automatic negative thoughts are most likely unrealistic representations of reality, they are often from your beliefs, and as we know, these can be changed.

Worrying about something won't make the situation any better than not worrying about it.²⁶⁷ Anxious and ruminating thought patterns won't alter reality and won't help decision making or your ability. Reality is there whether worried about or not.

If you feel scared or nervous, try and confront the thoughts and reframe the situation as exciting or as something that can be overcome. Easier said than done, I know!

Know yourself

As we've seen, knowing yourself is fraught with problems when you look at the psychology of the unconscious. Also, bear in mind that the self is ever-changing and dependent on a past outside your control and a myriad of interconnected external factors that connect with you. The self is pretty much an empty, non-existent entity according to Zen. The "self" is the Universe. So knowing that helps. Well maybe.

As they also say in Zen, the mind cannot be grasped.²⁶⁸ We can't know our mind. Our memory is just stories we tell ourselves, and we have often changed so much since the memory it's difficult for us to relate to it. Our mind is interconnected with so many internal and external factors it's nearly impossible for us to understand our minds. Does this help your happiness? Well yes, the limitations of being able to know yourself means not over analysing or over thinking your reactions and being kind to yourself.

More practically, you *can* know what you enjoy and what you're good at, which is very helpful for happiness. It's horrible doing things you don't like and doing things largely outside of your

capabilities. Also knowing what upsets you is helpful and then either avoiding these things or finding what works to cope with situations.

Knowing what makes you happy, what makes you sad, what annoys, what little things make life easier are all things we all need to examine to understand our happiness. It's worth writing some of this down and having some space to think about what makes you happy.

Have purpose

A purpose isn't necessarily trying to single handed change the world. In fact, it can be quite mundane and small scale. I'm writing a book that gives me purpose. Having kids gives purpose as we saw earlier with Paul Dolan's book, but this route isn't for everyone. Finding a purpose does add to happiness, but it's not so easy to conjure one out of thin air. Finding a hobby, club, and a social group is one possible route.

Most of the happiness in life isn't from some sense of permanent joy, but from contentment. Achieving little things towards a greater goal helps towards this feeling. Deciding on some core values and having some direction, even if it's doing something minor can give contentment too. Small pieces of happiness from small senses of achievement do add up.

Some things to help with purpose:

- Find hobbies you enjoy.

- Find like-minded people to campaign or work together on a project.
- Have mini creative projects.
- Set small goals, which will give you a sense of satisfaction once achieved.
- Find things that get you into a flow state of mind.
- Join clubs and societies to give you a sense of belonging.
- Find things to do that have real meaning for you.
- Contribute to something bigger than yourself.
- Find really good entertainment forms that really engage you.

Worry less about what others think

Marcus Aurelius said, “Don’t waste the rest of your time here worrying about other people...”²⁶⁹ Listen to Mr. Marcus, the wise Emperor.

I'm writing a book and am worrying what people will think of it, maybe "bloody hippie", but do you know what? Who cares? Does it matter? It has occasionally concerned me what people think of my choice of books on the bus. Does it matter? No.

In *The Chimp Paradox*, Steven Peters writes that some people suffer from “The Mushroom Syndrome”.²⁷⁰ For people who are worriers,

like me, if you remove one worry another grows in its place, just like mushrooms. The trick is to make sure worries don't keep growing in the place of old ones. Steven Peters suggests relaxing, getting perspective, laughing about it, seeing worrying as unhelpful and accepting that things often take care of themselves, but might take time.

Being concerned about what other people think of me isn't helped with social media. I'm not alone in worrying about what others think. If someone thinks negatively of me, I now believe that says more about them than me. Yes I know that's a cliché, but clichés are overused for a reason.

If people thought the worst about me and said it, I would apply Stoic thinking and try to cope and react well. I'd also think about the resilience advice earlier in the book.

I've made some bad decisions by being worried about what people might think about me, not done things I should have, or done things that weren't wise. What other people think about isn't something any of us should care about. It is utterly outside our control, and to some extent, outside of their control too!

Get out and exercise

I did the “Couch to 5K” running programme when I was 43. Having never been able to run as a kid because of asthma and short legs, I was surprised that my overweight, middle-aged frame could do it. I thought my lungs were going to come out my nose on the first few runs, with my asthma, but I got through it. I now enjoy running and do five kilometres at a time, very slowly. I learnt to swim when I was 44 after being terrified of water, it took me a year to do lengths, but I now can do up to a kilometre at a

time, very slowly. Yeah, I know I sound like I'm bragging. But I am pleased about it!

Both running and swimming I find very helpful in clearing the mind. Several years ago I never thought I could manage this, but if this lazy arse can do it, I think an awful lot of people could too.

Exercise is a natural mood improver; you get a natural high from it. Don't expect to lose a lot of weight from exercise, but increasing your activity means you can move more and burn off more calories. Exercise means more energy, getting fitter, it improves your general health and it helps settle your head. It does that for me. Exercise can boost moods, self-esteem and can act as a natural antidepressant²⁷¹ which can sometimes be as effective as medication in mild depression.²⁷² Running outside in the fresh air is also really good for the moods, I've found.

The main advice is to try and do what you can to keep moving. I know this might be difficult advice for some but... don't sit on your arse longer than absolutely necessary.

Get into nature

Be aware of nature. It can help give you perspective and improve your moods. As my Dad has said in the past, "look at the changing trees; get out of your head". Seeing the buds forming on trees, new leaves, blossom, falling leaves and the changing seasons are a great way to reconnect with the world around you and distract you from the constant passing clouds of your thoughts. Seeing nature is seeing the ultimate big picture and can make your problems look a little smaller sometimes.

Getting into nature is incredibly helpful for mental wellbeing, getting a different view of life and increasing the awareness

muscles. The Japanese recommend “forest bathing”, getting into the woods and being wrapped in the woody, wild world. It does have some surprising happiness benefits. I had some freelance business woes in 2015, and they were lightened by walking along the wooded countryside of the Leeds canal.

Get enough healthy food

I'm a celiac, which means I can't eat wheat. If I do I get stomach bug symptoms and I regularly get almost depressive symptoms, it massively drops my moods because, as I understand it, my gut doesn't absorb the right nutrients for a couple of days, so my poor brain suffers. If you don't eat a balanced diet and eat rubbish without the right nutrients for a healthy body, I don't think you'll end up with a healthy brain. Body and brain are quite connected apparently. I've come to believe that eating home cooked, and healthy food really does contribute to a happy brain.

Get fresh vegetables and fresh ingredients into as many meals as possible. Jo taught me this. Ready meals, pre-prepared sauces and packets contain a massive amount of sugar and fat. My advice, check each package for calories.

Yes, I eat takeaways and overeat from time to time, but too much poor quality food doesn't help my moods, it makes me feel sluggish, stodgy and eventually makes me feel fed up.

In many ways, you can be happy and overweight. You can't blame people who are overweight. A lot of modern food is very heavily sold and marketed containing massive amounts of fat and sugar. But we can resist marketing.

What worked to reduce my weight a bit was counting calories, cutting out sugar and all snacks and as many fatty foods as possible. I'm not perfect and still marginally overweight according to the flawed Body Mass Index (BMI),²⁷³ but it has helped me to have a plan to manage my desire for food and stick to it, but it's not easy and takes practice.

If you would feel happier losing weight try not to exceed your recommended daily allowance of calories, they are listed as Kilo Calories, or Kcal on food packaging, so you can add up the number of calories you are eating in a day. One way to reducing calorie intake is to control portion size, so measure pasta, rice, and all ingredients properly, so you don't overeat.

Fewer portions of food helps to control the amount you eat. Your stomach is the size of your fist so portions of ingredients should fit in your hand.

According to the NHS, "Within a healthy, balanced diet, a man needs around 2,500kcal (or 10,500kJ) a day to maintain his weight. For a woman, that figure is around 2,000kcal (8,400kJ) a day."²⁷⁴ This is an average, however.

Calorie intake depends on your height, your current weight and activity level. You can work out what your daily allowance of calories is on the NHS website on their BMI calculator <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/>, which looks at weight and height and calculates calories from this. This method isn't 100% accurate, but it gives you an idea of how many calories you should take in.

I'm a massive 5 foot 2 so my intake should be between 1557 - 2002 Kcal. That's just half of a 14-inch deep pan pizza a day or a whole 12-inch. You don't get a lot of inches in a healthy diet.

So I can allocate roughly 300 calories for breakfast, 500 lunch, and 800 for tea to keep my calories at the lower end of the recommended allowance, to maintain my weight. Obviously, you will have a different daily total to work with. That has to be a permanent lifestyle change to accommodate this new habit to enable you to keep your weight gain down. Often I don't follow this guideline and go well over the calories, but I never beat myself up about it. But it's a good guide. It's useful to write down and document food and drink each day and estimated calories. If you do go over your daily calorie intake, try and reduce your calorie intake a bit over the following days of the week, or increase your exercise. Also, be aware of your stomach; try not to eat when you're full or not hungry.

Getting into good habits and trying to build a bit of willpower is easier said than done, but it is possible to reduce eating snacks, chocolate, sweets, crisps, and drinking sugary drinks. By starting small, by not using a vending machine at work, for instance, you can slowly begin to bring daily calories down.

Eating healthier does help moods, but so does the odd takeaway, it's finding the middle way as Buddhists would say. Eating crap all the time will make you miserable eventually. Buddhists don't say that. Anyway, everything in moderation!

For a diet to improve moods, the mental health charity Mind recommends eating regularly, managing caffeine, eating your five fruit and vegetables a day, eating enough whole grain, protein and eating probiotic yoghurt for the gut.²⁷⁵

They also recommend keeping hydrated. Drinking water from the tap is dull but is the best. You know, this advice might be a bit obvious, but thirst doesn't make anyone happy.

It's worth remembering that the brain and body are one system, feeding the gut good food and not too much of it will help the mind. Keeping the gut healthy to absorb the right nutrients is also vital for moods too.

Get enough sleep

I like to sleep. Let's talk about sleep. I'm not very skilled at sleep. However, aim to get seven or eight hour's uninterrupted sleep a night. If you wake up and have worries, then break the circular thinking patterns, challenge the thoughts, and let them pass on their way. Change focus on breathing and an awareness of the room around you. Maybe try to refocus on daydreams. Get up and move around, make notes of what's troubling you with solutions and then go back to bed. If sleep is causing problems, see a doctor. Sleep is so vital for a happy brain.

Any amount of alcohol disturbs sleep,²⁷⁶ so avoid it too many times in a week. I've found too much drinking, too often, throws my sleep and my moods.

Keep device use out of the bedroom for better sleep, the light disturbs sleep patterns and ruminating on internet content at night is unhealthy.

Exercise and eat as early in the evening as possible, I find both raise my heart rate before bed if left too late.

Avoid naps after 4pm.²⁷⁷

Too much caffeine during the day disrupts my sleep, especially if I've had coffee or Coca Cola in the afternoon or evening, so cutting that down is good advice. Two or three cups of coffee a day is probably enough. I feel on edge with more.

It's also worth knowing that most illegal drugs will affect your sleep and moods at some point.

Use music

Music is as essential as food and sleep for me. It can massively improve my moods. It is the stuff of happiness. Try using music to make you happy. I won't make recommendations. I have weirdly diverse tastes in music.

Listen to music and concentrate on what you can hear in the layers of the music. Really listen to see if you can hear anything you haven't noticed before in songs that you know well. This refocus of your mind will take you out of your thinking. It's a good distraction and might lift your mood a little.

I would suggest singing to make you happy. My voice is banned as a weapon of mass destruction under international treaties. My singing is terrible enough to make me unhappy, let alone anyone else! Don't let that put you off singing!

Dancing is a really good way to get a bit of happiness too. Dance at night clubs, or do a little dance to music at home. I've been known to dance in the living room with the kids. It's difficult not to smile doing it!

Drink less alcohol

A good piece of advice for happiness is, don't drink too much alcohol and "know your limits" as my Dad always used to say to me. I'm definitely the worst person to write this. Alcohol has made me say horrible things and do stupid things. It's only now

I'm older, I realise. Be aware of booze use and use it very cautiously.

Alcohol doesn't just give hangovers. It contributes to worry and anxiety.²⁷⁸ It can make the brain sad. Again, the same can be said for any intoxicant, including illegal drugs, which are probably best avoided.

Take notice. Be aware. See. Hear. Feel. Observe.

“Change how you see and see how you change”²⁷⁹ is a Buddhist proverb (apparently, I found it on the Internet). Just observing nature and people is sometimes enough to take me out of my self for a moment. Try and see things as they are, rather than how you think they are. Sensing the world with concentration and curiosity is a good practice here, to increase your awareness of the here and now.

Seeing things with an artist's eyes and looking for the beauty in everyday things is another practice I like, to take notice and increase awareness of the world around me, rather than concentrating on my own thoughts.

Active listening, really hearing, is a great technique to increase the way you hear what's been said. Concentrate hard and focus on what someone is saying and then try to remember what's been said. It's an excellent way to understand someone's perspective. Also, interpret the mood of the speaker with eye contact and try to ignore or remove distractions.

Reflective listening is a related term and is often used interchangeably with active listening. Reflective listening is the

technique where you reflect or repeat back to the speaker what's been said, paraphrasing the comments, to increase your understanding. It's a great trick to connect with someone. Rather than rush to say what you want, you listen and remember what the other person says. Listen to understand and then talk.

Situational awareness is trained in the military and law enforcement. It's knowing what's going on around you and taking good notice and paying attention, such as "checking your six", knowing who's behind you. It's basic self-defence stuff. Reducing distractions such as headphones, drinking too much and using your phone on the street is an excellent idea, as is thinking ahead about risks, without going too far. Be observant, look for exits and be aware of an atmosphere of a place. These techniques are all about observing people and the world around us and getting ourselves into the here and now.

Awareness while driving and avoiding distractions is a bit useful, I definitely advise that. Crashing won't make you happy. Awareness is useful.

In fact, you can increase your awareness by performing any activity such as cooking, washing up, walking, going to the toilet, you name it!

Try and become more observant. It's amazing what you can see and hear without being caught up in thoughts and mind wandering. Use your watching eyes and listening ears and pay attention, as I say to the kids!

Slow down. Relax. Concentrate on calm breaths.

Slowing down the pace of life generally is a good idea to manage stress. Slow down the speed of walking sometimes. Reduce the rushing around. Take in your surroundings. Do one thing at a time, stop multitasking and try to take things in your stride at a slower pace.

Find time to relax fully, do whatever you need to, whether that's a bath or hobbies. Take regular breaks, stretch muscles when you move away from a desk.

One quick relaxation technique is to breathe slowly. You can breathe in through the nose and then slowly out of the mouth if you want. Try to exhale longer than you do any inhaling. You can count 10 exhaling breaths if you wish to and then keep up the breathing, deeply, slowly and calmly as long as you feel helpful. Concentrate on your surroundings while you do, keep a state of relaxed alert awareness, and try not to fix on any thoughts. Focus on the breathing. When you breathe out concentrate on the point just under your navel as the chest drops, think about keeping your back straight as you breathe, all this helps your concentration, balance and posture. I did this exercise in martial arts years ago, and it can help.

Have patience

Have patience with other people; whether that's slow people in the queue getting on a bus or anything that isn't progressing at a pace you'd like.

Take notice of when you get irritable. For me, it's usually because I don't have patience and I want something to happen yesterday. I have to think to myself, "slow down!!"

When you notice frustration and annoyance at a slow person in the bus queue, challenge the thinking, does it matter? Challenge the ANTS (automatic negative thoughts) as soon as you notice them, apply Stoic acceptance of what you can't control and maybe some Zen calm awareness.

I know it's not easy with some people, but anger and irritation at minor things is habitual, and I've found the energy of anger almost addictive. It doesn't help things go faster. In fact, it makes it worse. It's like scratching an itch and making it itch more. Take a deep breath and focus on something else.

There is the cliché that time is a great healer and certainly awful feelings of hurt and grief do become more manageable over time. Patience can be tough work. Often you don't appreciate your progress with how you feel about an event until a long time after it's gone. There will be several bumps in the road, but it's just worth holding on for that progress, slow as it might be.

Use your attention well, on things that make you happy, not unhappy.

As I've mentioned, your attention is a limited resource. You need to focus on what makes you happy, rather than unhappy and stop doing things that make you or others unhappy. You need to concentrate and focus your attention on the positive, not the negative.

There's plenty I focus on that makes me unhappy. Why do I look

at the news and take such an interest in politics? Politics runs in my blood, and I find it massively interesting, but it doesn't particularly make me happy, often the opposite. I'm not certain what the answer is, apart from reducing my news use. Politics has kept me engaged and aware of the wider world. Perhaps it's a case of a middle way between rational detachment and engaged interest in world events.

We all have a choice. Either you can focus your attention on the ignorance, fear, greed and prejudice in the world or turn your attention to the wisdom, courage, generosity and compassion in others, and in yourself.

Rather than just fight the darkness, we need to focus on increasing the light. Darkness can't thrive in the light.

What we focus on influences how we approach things and influences our actions. We all need to work out what to focus our limited amount of attention on. Our attention needs to be on what makes us happiest. We need to figure out what makes us happy and miserable. We all have to concentrate on things we don't like to do occasionally, but usually, these things have a broader purpose, if not, why do them?

Choose your influences well. Don't focus your time or attention on people or things you find negative or draining. Limit your time with people you don't get on with.

We need to block out the things making us unhappy and stop activities, making us sad. We need to put our attention into positive and happy things that we like to do most, as much as possible.

Limit social media

Social media is often an excellent way to stay in touch with family and friends. However, it's designed to be addictive, and it can cause anxiety when people compare themselves to other users' well-edited photos and posts. It's also an arena for online arguments and bullying. It can help your happiness to debate current affairs, but more often than not, it amplifies our anger. Posting comments about world events on social media may make you feel like you have a voice and some control over things,²⁸⁰ and maybe you think you are trying to change the world positively, but that isn't really the case. Your powerlessness and lack of control are still there. Sorry about that.

Remember the first rule of internet club. If it's on the Internet, it's probably "bullshit."²⁸¹ It's worth approaching online media with a sceptical, questioning mind, without lapsing into cynicism. Things we see on the screen aren't always reality. Online content is sometimes fake and is regularly exaggerated. Even documentaries and reality TV are edited for effect. Do we even know who we are talking to online, or if we are talking to fake accounts or accounts being used by someone else? Social media is awful for untruth and exaggeration. Social media can amplify particular sentiments when the news is shared, whether that's personal news or the international kind.

Having a break from social media is fine, as is using it lots. If it affects your moods, it's worth assessing its usefulness in your life.

Some things I've found helpful with limiting social media:

- Uninstalling social media apps even temporarily means having to visit just the websites.

- Filtering social media sites to only close friendships makes it more manageable.
- Turn off all notifications on devices to reduce repeated visits.
- Try to limit visits to about twice a day.
- Log out of social media each time you leave the site, this makes a subtle mental barrier on a visit back to the site, to try and reduce visits.
- If you have the urge to visit social media have a backup website to visit. The same goes for endlessly scrolling news sites (see below). A backup website distraction is preferable to getting frustrated, irritated, worried and envious on social media or news sites.
- You can also use your device for something else like playing games or reading books.
- Don't forget in not using social media, or endlessly scrolling news or using digital streaming services you can have time to do something else. Like, er, write a book!

Limit news

Having 24-hour news and having more information doesn't mean more control, it makes us feel less in control, which causes more anxiety.²⁸² As Benjamin Hoff writes, “thanks to the Negative News Media, we are over-informed about problems we can do little or nothing about”.²⁸³ There's so much exaggeration, sensationalism, anger and antagonism in both news and social

media it's easy for it to rub off on you. If you get angry and upset at the news it means you care about the world.

I actually think that if you care about the world, you have the potential for true happiness, but it's a matter of focusing on what you care about most and when you want to care. So I'd suggest thinking about what you value most, caring more about what you really value and care a bit less about what you don't value. Don't stop caring, but try to manage any anxiety and look at things from a different perspective.

I have a few suggestions to reduce anxiety from the news, which is to:

- Try to limit news consumption to a maximum of two reads of the news a day.
- Turn off news notifications and social media notifications from the phone.
- Know what your news limits are, a bit like drinking alcohol, you can get drunk on rage about the news. It's news-booze!
- Try not to look at the news first thing in the morning. Unless I want to be angry on the bus on the way to work, I don't look at the news until later.
- Try not to look at the news shortly before bed. Unless I want to disrupt my sleep I don't look at the news an hour or more before bed!

- Remember that our ancestors survived without information overload, they were often well informed with weekly newspapers.

The news is vital for keeping us informed in a democracy and holding the powerful to account. However, being incredibly well informed might not be any better for democracy than being informed enough. It's worth thinking that some news is created from PR press releases from companies or political pressure groups. So being swamped by news increases the chance of being subjected to news not produced in a newsroom but by marketing teams.

I've struggled in the past to stop ruminating, turning political events over in my head. I have to change my focus and reduce my news intake. If it's getting too much, cut down a bit!

It's difficult, though, not to go crazy over politics in the way that news presents things today.

As Ian MacKaye from the band Minor Threat points out, politics is like leaders fighting over the wheel of a ship on a river, where you are a passenger. The passengers vote on who will be captain, but this new skipper can only steer the ship a little against the current of history. That captain might slow things down or not steer you in the direction you want to go, but the river current will move us back on course and has continually moved us towards progress in the past.²⁸⁴

The news description of politics doesn't give us a proper perspective on time, and time will correct many historical mistakes. News has also turned politics into a crude team sport with its tribes and supporters, which doesn't represent the subtleties of real life very well.

The world is so interconnected and complicated, especially in a globalised world, that politicians might have a lot less control and influence over events than they (and us) believe.

Developments in technology could mean that we end up in a world in the future like the Star Trek TV series, with world peace, no poverty and a world government. Or we could end with wars and disaster where we end up like in the Mad Max films with no civilisation and anarchy. None of us has control of the flow of history. We can aim for a Star Trek future, but if we get a Mad Max world we'll all have nifty hairstyles and look great in leather! The thing is, history is likely to end up positively eventually, as it has done so far. Things work out in the end. There are always cycles, and history veers between drama and stability.

There's a lot of scare-mongering in the news. Matt Haig says it best, "Sex isn't what sells. What sells is fear".²⁸⁵ Fear-mongering content will often be clicked most, anything that increases insecurity will be promoted and pushed by the news and then distributed by social media. In a world that cannot meaningfully be controlled, it's worth looking for some *wisdom in insecurity*, which Alan Watts called a book. Sometimes it's better to concentrate on making yourself a better person than worrying about what you can't control.

Comparatively, there is only a tiny amount you can do to affect the world. You can feel powerless looking at the news. Changing yourself is something you can try to do. Changing your own behaviour isn't selfish; it might be just the small change that is needed in this mixed up world.

If you see terrible events on the news, consider that they are rare, don't focus on them, seek the good in your life. You have instant access to all the horrors of the world and all the beauty of your

friends' exciting lives, and these often look far better than yours. Isn't technology great?

However bad the news is, it's worth remembering that, "every social system is an experiment to be revised and renewed by each generation", as Raoul Martinez puts it.²⁸⁶ Of course, the news is going to be full of problems caused by humans!

There are better ways to stay informed than continually checking attention-grabbing headlines. Seeking out long-form articles and well-evidenced analysis is less worrying than checking out sensationalist breaking news alerts. Be informed, but don't obsess is my advice.

Sometimes I wonder. If I deliberately wanted to make myself feel angry or upset, then the best way possible is to take a look at the news. It doesn't have content designed for happiness!

If the news is causing you problems with moods, it's occasionally worth having a week or more away from it. As Matt Haig says, "if you find the news severely exacerbates your state of mind, the thing to do is SWITCH IT OFF"²⁸⁷ If something serious happens in the world someone will say something to you, otherwise, you know what? The world keeps on going, without you knowing about what is happening in it. For someone like me who is news and current affairs obsessed, taking time away from the news is uncomfortable, but sometimes it's pretty liberating.

A holiday is a great time to reduce looking at the news, and social media too. I've spent some holidays avoiding the news altogether and I've felt better for it.

We don't have to drown in the news. We can get out the news pond, dry ourselves off and engage with people without our political biases interfering. We can then take control and choose

when to splash back into the news, but maybe, try and be a bit more emotionally detached from it.

I think it's crucial to be informed and connected, but if you get easily upset by things online as I do, it's easy to get into bad habits with constant revisiting news and social media websites through the day, and these habits can be broken by good habits and a bit of balance. Managing my news use has helped improve my mood a little. If I get the urge to look at the news or social media, I can also decide to read a book on a device. Or I can look out of a window. There's a whole world out there or something!

Limit screen time and device use

Today I've seen someone staring at their device screen on the bus, in a lift, washing his hands, walking in the street. I'm writing this on my phone and have used my phone in the toilet today too. What is wrong with us? Do any of us know how to cope with two seconds of boredom? To be fair mobile phones do help break monotony, but you know there is also too frequent use! Anyway, limiting screen time is probably a good idea, at least to prevent accidents, in the toilet or elsewhere! Being aware of the here and now is a good idea sometimes, without looking at the phone screen.

The thing is, screens are everywhere! Their shiny magnetism drags you in. I'm horribly distracted by screens and I have to sit with them behind me in pubs and cafés. We definitely live in the screen age!

This leads me to the point that we don't want to be over-reliant on technology. When the robots take over, we'll have to rely on

our wits. Wits are good things to rely on anyway before that might happen.

Also setting limits on the time you are on screens enables you to see the world around you and the people around you. It's arguably more natural being in the present moment, facing and talking to “real people” in “real life” rather than on a screen. Social media does often bring out the worst in people. It's harder to SHOUT IN CAPITALS to people in real life. Real life is often more interesting to look at than a screen, even if you love social media and get loads from it.

It isn't wise if you look at a screen while walking, especially if you then walk into doors, people, cars, or buses. Don't forget that using a mobile device while driving could limit your screen use permanently.

I do find solace and fun in activities on entertainment devices with screens. It does need balance, though. I know I often get too distracted by my smart-phone.

You can find happiness by being in the real world. There is also magic in the world. You just have to look up from your smart-phone screen to see it. Screen time shouldn't be at the expense of real life in the real world. Try and reconnect with reality.

Don't forget you own and control your technology; technology doesn't own and control you.

Read. Learn. Write. Be creative.

In a book about having read books to understand happiness, I bet you're surprised that I would advocate reading, learning and

writing about things. I can't say this enough, but reading about a problem, researching it and writing notes has really helped me. It seems pretty much common sense.

My advice is also to take any opportunity to be creative. Reading about good ideas can give you good ideas, and any creative outlet can provide you with purpose, satisfaction and a little bit of happiness. That might be writing, doodling, painting, cooking, making cakes, flower arranging, crafting, find any excuse to make things!

Over-think less. Don't take things too seriously.

"My God you're short," is something that has very occasionally been said to me by rude people, and yes I have had a hang-up about it when I was younger. My thinking used to go, "I can't believe he just said that, everyone must judge me on my size, no woman will ever fancy me, I'll be single forever," and on it goes. A minor molehill comment becomes a mountain. Over-thinking something is a habit I've had all my life. It's easy to ruminate and have circular thoughts. I've found challenging the thoughts, and distractions, break the cycle of unhelpful thinking. Being aware what an unhelpful thought looks like is a starting point, usually I spot one and think, "Oh look, it's a repetitive, over-thinking mind pattern".

And do you know something? If someone says something rude to me, trying not to take it too seriously is a help. Laughing and shrugging things off is bloody hard, really hard, but anything can be practised. It's taken me decades, and I still struggle, but I surprise myself when I do it.

In the previous example, I jumped up and down yelling, "Oh my God I'm short, how the hell did that happen?! Someone's obviously replaced my legs!" Building humour and confidence are very useful life skills, both take practice, and both are more attractive qualities than height. Well, probably.

Following that, have a bit of child-like joy in something you do every day. No really, find time to play with something, being a grown-up is pretty dull at times.

Things won't ever get simpler or easier, things will always be complicated, but you can choose your attitude to the way things are. You can learn to be happier at this moment with a bit less of a serious attitude. Lighten up. Yes I know, it's easy for me to say, but you can react with a shrug rather than a growl with a bit of practice and knowing that you can change. Look for the funny side. Use gallows humour. Be defiant but light-hearted. Be playful. Try to be a little more open-minded to a situation. This isn't easy advice I know, I go wrong and get grumpy, but when you get a bit of fun in, it's worth it.

Concentrate on one job or thing at a time.

Break a large task down into much smaller steps. A journey of a 1000 miles starts with a single step²⁸⁸ said another Internet quote, from Lao Tzu. My advice here is, try not to worry about what comes next. Take it as it comes.

It can be stressful seeing the whole project or task, start it one step at a time, don't think of the deluge of work ahead, and focus on being here now. Celebrate and move on quickly from the past progress you might have made and try to forget the future workload you fear.

Concentrate on the step you are on and not the whole staircase. Do tasks one step at a time and forget the rest. First step: Do the task, forget the future. Step two: Forget step one happened, do the task and forget that step three exists. Go to step three, do the task and ignore steps two and four exist. It's all about being here now. This is a real stress buster. Doing things little and often, also gets things done. I got this book written by this method.

Planning well helps, but when tasks are started, only look at a project plan when absolutely necessary to prevent feeling daunted and overwhelmed by the number of tasks. Concentrate fully on the task at hand if possible and avoid distractions as much as possible. Try to avoid procrastination and faffing (which is British slang to “spend time in ineffectual activity”,²⁸⁹ it is the best word ever).

Most of all, avoid multi-tasking. Juggling too many proverbial balls in the air at once often means dropping balls. Dropped balls aren't fun! Handle only one ball at a time! Ball advice there.

Seek Positives

One simple trick to seek positives is to find three good things a day that has happened to you, towards the end of the day.²⁹⁰ It's good to write these positives down sometimes, but I just think about this occasionally on the bus home. It builds a certain level of gratitude and adds a small amount of happiness to the closing of the day, even if the day has been on the whole a bit crap. Sometimes I struggle with this. It fosters optimism and gratitude after just two weeks of practice, or it should, I found it a nice thing to do anyway.

If something bad happens, look for some way to make it good, look for some way to learn, or accept it might have something

good that sprouts from the crap in the end. Think a bit like a Taoist, who knows what's bad? As the Stoics put it, only thinking makes something bad. A “bad” event might eventually turn into something good.

In some martial arts, you can turn a “negative into a positive”,²⁹¹ so you use an opponent's strength against them. I think this is a real life lesson. When a blow hits you in life, roll with the impact, grab the issue and swing it around. A negative may turn out to be a positive. Give it time.

As Cara Stein suggests in *How to be Happy*, try this thought experiment; assume the Universe and fate might be working for your benefit, rather than against you. It's as realistic as being pessimistic or negative.²⁹² That isn't a suggestion that you should believe in a higher power. It's just to get a different perspective. You can equally seek positives as negatives in any situation.

Also, look for the clichéd silver linings and chinks of hope, there will be a little light in any darkness.

Things could be worse

“Things could be worse” is one thing that can be used to seek positives by thinking how things could be worse, weirdly enough. However, this can be dangerous because it can diminish real pain when things have gone awfully wrong. For instance, if there's a war and you lose all your family and friends, and some bright spark comes up to you saying, “Well things could be worse,” it really won't help make you happy.

With some everyday annoyances, thinking, “things could be worse” is a platitude and maxim that can work. When I lost my

job, things could have been worse, and that actually put it into perspective. I wasn't in a war, for instance.

Trust the process of life. Trust the future. Go with the flow.

Trusting the process of life is the equivalent of Amor Fati that I mentioned in the Stoicism section earlier, having faith that things will work out OK in the end, and that “what will be, will be”. After all, usually good or bad things happening to us are just perspectives and beliefs. Even if the future doesn't exist as in Zen, we can go with the flow like the Taoists, understanding what we can and can't control, changing what we can and accepting what we can't control. I've always loved the concept of “going with the flow”. How can anyone know where the river of life will take you? There will be a bouncy ride, but you can have a bit of trust you'll probably get through it.

Going with the flow requires having confidence and trust in your abilities to deal with things in the future. It also needs a bit of faith in the skills and wisdom of other people, within realistic limits, because they will impact your life. Trusting people is often tricky. At the end of the day by trusting a person either you will have a friend or a life lesson.

Trusting the future means living for today because tomorrow really will take care of itself. This idea requires some faith, hope and optimism about the future. But always balance any faith with doubt and be realistic about your hope and optimism, because too high expectations will often lead to disappointment and unhappiness.

Be a realistic optimist. Plan to cope. You can handle anything.

Optimism has the dictionary definition of, "Hopefulness and confidence about the future or the success of something".²⁹³ Hope is, "a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen."²⁹⁴

So hope is part of optimism. From the philosophies I've read, I think building confidence is a more constructive thing than having expectations and desires, certainly from a Zen perspective, so this might be a more useful aspect of optimism than hope. Optimism is a belief, like the Stoics would suggest. It's a belief that your future will be generally good, but this can be taken too far, and disappointment can make things worse when things go wrong.

We've already seen some cautions on optimism and "positive thinking". Both hope and optimism could offer a false sense of confidence about the future, and that could get in the way of accepting what we can't control and moving on. It could also get in the way of concentrating on the here and now.

That said optimism is different from hope. Taken too far, hope can have a rose-tinted view of what the future entails, but as we know, the future doesn't exist, other than in our mind. In contrast, what optimism can provide us with is a "glass half full" view on what we have now and whatever we get in the future. Optimism is "looking on the bright side" of circumstances and life generally.²⁹⁵ We can choose to be a cautious optimist. We can choose to believe that we can handle anything that the future can throw at us.

Although I've said "plan to cope before you hope" if applied in a

limited, strategic and thoughtful way hope can help our happiness. We can plan for the worst and then hope a little for a decent outcome, even if it doesn't turn out to be the best. If we have optimism and hope they have to be based on realism and not wishful thinking. Not having any optimism and hope sounds a bit bleak to me, too much is going to be horrible when expectations aren't met. Maybe a middle way is better. We can certainly look for little rays of hope in things. Things are regularly not as bad as I think they will be.

Optimism should also be a motivator for your positive action. Otherwise there's the danger it becomes just an idle wish for things to get better.

If you face adversity and challenges, see it as an opportunity to learn and grow as a person, which is not always easy, I know. We can challenge unhelpful thinking about situations and look at things in different ways. Look for positives or anything that could benefit you in a situation you see as bad.

Martinez, Raoul, quotes Howard Zinn here:

“To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage and kindness.

What we choose to emphasise in this complex history will determine our lives... If we remember those times and places... where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us energy to act...

The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvellous victory”.²⁹⁶

I mean, I survived the height of the cold war in the 70s and 80s without getting blown up. Chances are history will be kind to us in the future. Have a bit of room for some realistic hope and optimism. It can help your mental and general well being. Be realistic about what you can't control. Be realistic about the changeable, uncertain and chaotic world. Be realistic that life isn't fair. But also be realistic that you can adapt and survive. Try realistic optimism.

Chapter 9 – Understanding, empathy and compassion

Understanding is one of the significant factors of wisdom, as is compassion. What I mean by understanding here is, “an individual's perception or judgement of a situation” and “sympathetic awareness or tolerance,” which is from the Oxford dictionary definition.²⁹⁷ Understanding and empathy allow us to be in someone else's shoes, metaphorically speaking obviously. Understanding also enables us to see other peoples' points of view, even those we disagree with. I think it's vital to understand different perspectives and different ways of thinking about the world, which are outside my own biases and beliefs. I can keep my beliefs, but must have a good grounding in other points of view, whether that's politics, religion or opinions on TV shows and film.

Having empathy is, “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another”²⁹⁸ and is well linked to compassion which is, “sympathetic pity and concern for the sufferings or misfortunes of others”,²⁹⁹ again both these definitions from the Oxford dictionary.

Compassion is related to ethics. If we treat people and living creatures ethically, it's usually compassionately.³⁰⁰

Compassion can make you happier by:

- Increasing your bond with other people.
- Reducing annoyance and stress with other people.
- Giving to others makes you feel good.
- Caring about people can increase you happiness.³⁰¹

- Increasing concern for others can distract from your problems.^{302 303}

Being compassionate is another example of enlightened self-interest. As the Stoics say, we can choose our attitude to people and events, and compassion is best for us and others.

There are a few arguments against empathy and compassion. Firstly that compassion and empathy can lead to fatigue and emotional burnout. Nurses and doctors often see so much human suffering they have to be aloof, take a "view from above", and a different perspective to act rationally. If I watch horrific events on the news, it's easy to find that empathy has limits and that it's overwhelming to a point where it's tiring, unhelpful and I have to switch the news off.

I've heard reports of charity drives that have been so deluged with well-meaning but useless gifts, because of empathy, that they've had to work extra hard to sort them all out, leading to more costs and work for the charity.

Empathy, feeling other's pain, could be unhealthy if it becomes too imaginative and intensely dwelled on.

One of the most damning arguments against empathy and compassion is that it's naive and that people could take advantage of the kindness of other people. I'll firstly counter-argue that this is a negative view of human nature. In my experience, only a small minority of people take advantage of others to worry about this. There are a tiny few who do take advantage of kindness, but not enough to stop wanting understanding, empathy and compassion being our first reaction.

You can increase your understanding, empathy and compassion by putting yourself in other people's shoes. Try this when reading

news, articles and books. We all need to listen to and understand other points of view, but that does have limits and doesn't mean tolerating bigotry and intolerance though.

We can be compassionate to ignorant, mean and selfish people. That doesn't mean blind tolerance. We can all politely ask people to not behave in a certain way. It means understanding that some people are just unwise, and they may have a past that explains why that is.

Absorbing other peoples' views outside our own filter bubbles and echo chambers can make us more relaxed and happy. It also makes us better at debating our own viewpoints in a rational and better-informed way. My opinion is that all views should start by being compassionate. What beliefs are expressed on top of that compassion doesn't matter too much as long as it's what underpins them all. Being kinder to each other is good for us. Letting go of negative feelings towards people increases your happiness.

I'd argue that understanding, empathy and compassion should always be a base starting point every time, none of the above arguments are good enough to stop that.

The other abbreviations of my really conveniently named BUS route; be here now and shrinking desires should combat some of these arguments against empathy and compassion. Desiring fewer outcomes and letting go of attachments helps prevent compassion fatigue and keeps me a little detached. But not detached enough not to be kind and compassionate. Being here now means I don't dwell too much on any awful events that have happened in the past. As Felicity Morse puts it, "If you want to care, you'll have to keep returning to the present moment, because focusing on the future all the time will blow your head off".³⁰⁴

Being in the present moment also ensures my actions now are positive, and most of all, rational. Being thoughtful and rational can help our empathy and compassion become a central part of a solution to just about any problem.

“Never stop trying to see the world through the eyes of others”³⁰⁵ as Raoul Martinez puts it. Dōgen goes further, “a fool sees himself as another, but a wise man sees others as himself.”³⁰⁶

So with that in mind, let’s look at the practical advice included in understanding empathy and compassion.

Friendliness and kindness for others.

Accept others.

Be kind. It’s worth being kind and caring for its own sake without wanting anything in return. It can just make you happy³⁰⁷. It makes others happy.

All of us need to think before we speak. Here’s a great quote:

“Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates:

At the first gate, ask yourself, “Is it true?”

At the second gate ask, “Is it necessary?”

At the third gate ask, “Is it kind?”³⁰⁸

One of the best forms of kindness is to give compliments while trying not to criticise. Being critical does put a dent into goodwill, it’s worth biting your lip before criticising. But saying thank you, giving credit and compliments makes other people and you happy.

Try to be generous. Share your stuff and share your time, where you can. Even if you share just a smile to a stranger or a kind micro happy moment, it's something. Being friendly is being open, honest and welcoming. You don't have to be a massive gregarious extrovert to be friendly. Even if you are shy, a few kind words can go a long way.

Having patience with others with how they behave and act is another form of kindness. We need to accept other people for who they are. Look, we all have some bloody annoying habits. Getting some awareness of what those are is a good idea. I have loads. Sorry about that. Accepting other peoples' weird and wonderful ways is a difficult step in being happy. Just let go of the annoyance. Let go of the want for the person to be the way you want them to be. It'll transform relationships.

You can't force people to change. As we've seen, we have to know what we can and can't change, and most things we can't change. However, everything around us changes eventually anyway, whether we like it or not, as Zen types point out. That's an awful lot of acceptance we have to have. Most of all we have to tolerate and accept other people. They have backgrounds, inbuilt neurology, conditioning, behaviours and habits from their past that they won't be aware of and it will take them a lot of practice to change. You need to forgive them, accept them and give them the space to be them. Being irritable with people is as much a choice of beliefs as is being kind.

Respect other people as much as you can. Respect is to have, "Due regard for the feelings, wishes, or rights of others."³⁰⁹ Respect is using empathy and showing concern and care for others as well considering people important to you. This also means being polite!

Being kind to others ideally shouldn't be at the expense of your own self-respect, happiness dignity, values, safety or health, however.

Try to do things to make your future or current kids proud (if you want kids or have kids), or to make your friends and family proud. Try to care about other people. We are all in need of some care and help from time to time.

A strange thing happens when you're kind to others. They're often kind to you in return. But you have to make the brave first step to be kind sometimes. It's enlightened self-interest.

One important thing I would advise is, don't make enemies. The best way to defeat an enemy is to make them a friend.

All this being kind, caring and friendly to other people can help make you happier, either with your kindness being returned to you, or you'll feel a bit happier brightening somebody's day a teeny tiny bit. As the characters Bill and Ted said famously in the film, Bill and Ted's excellent adventure, "Be excellent to each other."³¹⁰

Be kind to yourself: Accept yourself.

Many of us dislike our looks, our characters and our bodies. Try to accept you, your looks and your body as much as you can.

Remember the radical acceptance of yourself and the present moment from Zen earlier? Can we control how we look? Accept what we can't control and try to solve what we can like the Stoics. Unless something is causing major health issues, your body is not "good" or "bad" it's just fine as it is. Sometimes there's not a

massive amount you can do about it. One thing you can control is your beliefs. Ask who profits from you hating yourself and who is asking you to buy products to make you thinner, healthier or more beautiful?³¹¹

Reject the marketing messages, saying there's something wrong with you, as consumerist crap. Also reject the marketing around sugary, junk and fatty foods, and stop buying them. Then you're freeing yourself and making yourself healthier!

Reject other people's negative opinions about you, try to rise above any ignorant comments you might get and try not to be worried about what other people might think.

Challenge any negative thinking and ask where it comes from. Be kind to yourself. Try to love yourself a bit more. I'm not encouraging everyone to take this too far and become a narcissist personality and love yourself too much. I'm advising that everyone is worth the same as everyone else.

I'm a huge critic of myself, and I'm not alone in that. There are a lot of people who are too hard on themselves and too self-critical. Everyone needs to be kind and compassionate to themselves. Being kind to yourself is difficult, but everyone is deserving of kindness to themselves, because everyone is equally flawed and broken and imperfect, often in different ways. "It's not selfish to care about yourself" as Felicity Morse writes, to combat negative beliefs about herself. She advocates a type of "self-care" that says to yourself that you "deserve to be here" as everyone does.³¹²

We've all evolved to have certain traits, such as fear and anger. None of the emotions are well adjusted to modern life when they were designed for the natural world. It's worth being kind to ourselves just on the basis that we are all animals living in the alien environment of the modern world.

Also be aware, there's a dark side to everyone. We need to acknowledge that and be kind to ourselves, without acting on the dark side. We don't want to end up like Darth Vader!

Being kind to yourself is not overly poisoning your body with junk food, snacks, drugs and drink. Although sometimes having treats is also being kind to yourself, we have to have a middle way as we saw in the Zen section. Not smoking is a damned good idea if you want to be kind to yourself, though. Heart and lung disease won't make you happy, apparently.

Forgive yourself. If there's unhelpful guilt, ruminations and negativity in looking at the past, understand that the past doesn't exist as Zen suggests. Destroy the past. Keep the beauty, fun and positivity of the past, but understand that's gone too. Everything moves on. Let it go and forgive yourself. It's the best act of kindness you can give to yourself.

Be tolerant and open-minded.

Tolerance is not laziness or being a walk over. It's best for our happiness to accept others, as I mentioned. I've occasionally looked down at other people because, in reality, I've felt insecure, and it makes me feel better about myself. It's probably common. It's negative and silly, I know. It's really not a good strategy for happiness. All people are mostly OK really, just a bit messy and mixed up, stuck on this metaphorical bus route of life together.

I suppose I've even got to tolerate people talking loudly on the bus on their phones. It's always worth finding a way not to get annoyed or angry and finding a solution to an annoyance. I have music on my phone and headphones. I even have to tolerate grumpy bus drivers; driving a bus isn't an easy job, really is it? If

someone is snappy or unpleasant it's worth assuming they're having a bad day, rather than assuming they're a terrible person.

Tolerance is part of the art of disagreement, it is, "the ability or willingness to tolerate the existence of opinions or behaviour that one dislikes or disagrees with."³¹³ You might not agree with them, or like the way they act, but you can be respectful of the person. That isn't surrendering, think of it as, "civility always; servility never"³¹⁴. Tolerance means putting aside any automatic and instantaneous thoughts about someone or a group of people. It's about questioning your assumptions.

Being open-minded means putting your own views temporarily on hold, allowing people to express their beliefs and being open to listening to other perspectives.³¹⁵ You can use critical thinking to analyse the facts of the other person's views to come to a conclusion. Being open-minded means being receptive to new ideas, being flexible to change and adaptable to new influences in your life. That also means choosing your influences well, that could be friends, family or the media. If the influences are trying to increase your negative emotions, challenge them and choose more positive ones.

Life is messy and needs to have lots of uncomfortable compromises. If you're not willing to negotiate and compromise, life could be full of frustration and disappointment.

Be flexible in your beliefs and not so rigid; introduce some doubt about how right your opinions are all the time. Sometimes you can find a small amount of truth in other points of view.³¹⁶

Forgive

Everyone can change, reform and at least partly redeem themselves. Forgive people that wrong you. Holding onto anger, resentment and bad feeling only hurts you in the end

Forgive others, because we all can learn from our mistakes. If someone “wrongs” us, do we really know what circumstances they endure that they can’t control, that has led them to act against you? Life is too short not to move on quickly from where people have angered or upset you. There are lots of instances where victims or their families have forgiven even the worst criminals.

Forgiveness is a difficult path. It’s a challenge to forgive, but I think it’s one to take up for our happiness. After all the opposite of forgiveness, revenge, leads to an “eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” mentality, an escalation of attack and counter-attack to even the score. As Mahatma Gandhi may have said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth would lead to a world of the blind and toothless."³¹⁷ Reprisals based on anger leads to more pain and suffering.

The parents of a victim of the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017 showed an enormous amount of compassion when they forgave the suicide bomber after killing their son.³¹⁸ They let go of their anger and hate. If people, under those circumstances, have the capacity for forgiveness, then we can when faced with far less devastating events in our lives. Forgiving and moving on without anger and hate is a difficult but really positive approach.

We're much more the same than different. Focus on our similarities rather than our differences.

The Yorkshire Member of Parliament Jo Cox famously said in her maiden speech, before she was killed, “We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.”³¹⁹ Soon after she died her friend said, “For optimism. Always. Even when it's hard. Especially when it's hard.”³²⁰ The two are related. Emphasising our similarities is a positive action and a way to try to be optimistic.

It's in our nature to see differences between people, and if we do see a difference, we need to connect with it, embrace it, respect it, tolerate it and celebrate it. But as the Stoics described, we do have control of our beliefs, and it is in our power to change our perspectives and see things from a different angle. I believe we need to, “focus on our similarities rather than our differences.”³²¹

Here come some facts about human similarities:

- Humans are genetically about 99% the same.^{322 323}
- I've counted only about 5 organs out of around 80 organs that are different between men and women!
- We share 98% of our DNA with great apes, 90% of our DNA is the same as mice.³²⁴ All humans have that genetic similarity with other animals.

We're all not just incredibly alike on the inside. Every human is very much related. As Alasdair Wilkins writes,

"All humans can trace their family tree back to a surprisingly small group of common ancestors. Every person on Earth's most recent common ancestor might have died less than 2000 years ago."³²⁵

Evolutionary biologist Yan Wong asks,

"How far do we have to go back to find the most recent common ancestor of all humans alive today? Again, estimates are remarkably short. Even taking account of distant isolation and local inbreeding, the quoted figures are 100 or so generations in the past: a mere 3,000 years ago."³²⁶

Without sounding any more of a hippie, we really are all brothers and sisters and if you look at our common ancestry, "There is no us and them. There's only us".³²⁷ We're all quite equal, based on our common ancestry.

The human species all started out with black skin. When we migrated northwards from Africa, our skin colour adapted to the environment where we moved to. This colour change was due to the natural processes of mutation, evolution and natural selection.³²⁸ Scientists currently think that white skin only evolved due to it being better adapted to absorbing vitamin D from sunlight in the cloudy environment of Northern Europe, where there's less sun. Discrimination based on skin colour is that senseless. There's no superiority in coming from somewhere cloudy and gloomy! Our skin colour changing naturally through the generations is something all humans share.

In the book *The Warrior Within*, John Little writes about Bruce Lee and his philosophies.³²⁹ Lee was asked in an American interview if

he thought of himself as Chinese or American. He answered, “Neither. I think of myself as a human being”. I think this is a fantastic perspective to use every day. Especially on the bus!

Labelling and categorising people is pointless, so much of our language is inaccurate in the way we try to define things. Adjectives and descriptions are meaningless. We're all one noun, “human” and all of us deserve the same dignity and respect.

Some people think less of other people because of their ethnicity, sex, gender or sexuality. Others think less of other people based on their cultural, class, wealth (or lack of) or political identity. Some people discriminate against others based on the clothes they wear, as if a type of material surrounding someone makes any difference. Discrimination doesn't make a lot of sense, considering how similar we are. We're all human beings.

There's a lot in the news, articles and online about identity politics on the left that defends minority sexuality, ethnic and gender identities, and “Identitarians” on the right that supports majority heterosexual, white male identities. Despite there being a big moral and power difference between the two beliefs, both emphasise difference. Celebrating difference is something I believe we should do, but entirely with compassion, tolerance and respect. Don't forget you're unique, just like everyone else.

However, I think it's crucial to prioritise celebrating our similarities and I would always hope I'd keep in mind what is shared (or even the same) about everyone first, before picking up on differences. It's a powerful and positive perspective that I think can help moods on a personal level. Rather than think the worst of people opposing my beliefs and views, I can look at things from a different angle and think how similar we are. It takes away some of the stress and anger.

If I look at someone on the bus or anyone anywhere on the planet, and I was magically transported back in time and born into their body, I'd live precisely the same life and behave the same as them. Maybe this is pointing out the bleeding obvious, but it's incredible how people are dehumanized for doing things we would do the same if we lived their lives. Raoul Martinez makes the point, “the evidence suggests that what separates us from those whose actions we deplore is not innate moral superiority but circumstances...”³³⁰

It's amazing any of us were born in the first place if you think of how many circumstances could have conspired against it. So when I think about where and when I'm born, I have to be grateful. If I was born into a family of neglect, abuse, crime and poverty, how would my life and perspective be affected? What about a family that didn't value education? Or a family desperate to leave a country in economic collapse or at war, for somewhere better? OK, you get the idea! I would react and behave the same as them.

Is there anything innately different about us? We are all the same in that life deals us a hand of cards, and we've got to live with it either good or bad. We're all equal in being victims of fate. Perhaps we have the gift of genes from our parents or the gift of the environment we're born into. We all share that. None of us can control who we are born to, what colour of skin, sex, or where we are born.

You can't control if you were born to a rich family that will give you a huge future financial advantage in life. Celebrating our success just on our own hard work or our own talents, although they play a part, is also misguided. Being in the right place in the right time and having the right advantage is as important.

Blaming the unjust ills of the world on people being rich, poor, liberal, conservative (and on it goes) is oversimplifying things and can lead to dehumanising groups. It's highly likely that

circumstances beyond those people's control gave them their situation and values. We all share not being able to control our backgrounds. That is much more important than nationality, identity or culture.

All of us are flawed in some way. Our minds are flawed. We've seen how cognitive biases and our unconscious cause incorrect perspectives on the world (including mine). Our bodies are imperfect; they regularly go wrong or pick up disease. Everyone is the same in that way. We're all a little broken in some way.

There is a view that I first need to fix myself then fix the world. Sadly I think nothing in the world would get fixed if we all took that view. We're all works in progress. Self-help and helping others can go hand in hand.

We're all just animals if we strip ourselves down to basics. We certainly all share being born with a relatively well developed lower animal brain, with its fear, hunger, anger, fight and flight instinctive responses. Wow, just watching my two children has taught me that. That part of the brain does the job well!

Why be prejudiced or subject people to unfortunate stereotypes? Much of our cultures are created from stories and narratives. All of our languages are inaccurate representations of reality. There's so much similarity between cultures. They all share inherent imperfections, contradictions and myths. It's fine to be proud of our cultural, tribal and group identity, but where we feel we belong to an in-group, it shouldn't be defined by how we think about people not in it, to those in an out group.

Maybe we should also think bigger and prioritise taking pride in our common humanity and the best we can achieve, rather than dwell on our differences, and our negative traits. I know we need to address humanity's negativity, especially wars and environmental

damage, but negativity itself won't see us through these crises on its own, that might just lead to fatalism and apathy. We need to address our problems by arguing more for positive benefits, and less for negative consequences. If I focus on our best, common human traits, I can start to be optimistic about the future. Let's build a bit of unity, based on our common humanity, because that will make a lot of people happy, including you.

We all adapt to our world, pick up influences and are different and diverse. Difference should be celebrated, or at least tolerated, as I've said. But I've found if I observe passengers on the bus (without making anyone feel uncomfortable, in a weird starey way); everyone is much more the same as me than different. After all, we all enter the bus of life the same way, and one day we'll all exit the same way too. Why not make as many passengers' lives a pleasant one in the meantime?

I might be overworking the bus metaphor!

We're all interconnected, interrelated, interdependent and made of the same stuff.

All countries and the people in them are all interdependent with everyone across the globe, that's been the case now for several thousand years. Even 2500 years ago, trade routes propagated ideas between Greece and India as we saw earlier. As in Zen beliefs, it's a total fiction that any one person can stand alone and has a totally independent, individual identity. The same goes for countries. No one country can ever stand alone, even the most isolated of countries like North Korea depends massively on China, which in turn is massively connected to the wider world. Acknowledging our interconnectedness, I believe, is a critical part

of what I defined as wisdom earlier, and it can help our happiness.

With the internet, we're globally connected like never before. Trade and travel connect us globally. Our energy networks and financial systems are entirely global. Much of our 21st-century life is so globally interconnected it is totally borderless.

It's worth mentioning that astronauts can't see borders on Earth from space. Being in space often profoundly affects astronauts; they can become more open-minded and even spiritual about humanity's place on Earth. Borders only exist where people put their fences, and in lines that we draw on maps. Borders and countries aren't permanent. They're regularly redrawn. The physical border of the sea around an island also matter little. People have crossed oceans for millennia, with the same determination as crossing the land. In the future, cross border projects and jobs will only increase with new technologies, better travel and in solving global challenges. Borders may make us feel safer, but this is often illusionary and doesn't solve our many global problems, which require global solutions.

Human history is the history of migration, we're a migratory species,³³¹ and it's in our nature to move around the planet. We all have common ancestors that moved from Africa 100,000 years ago. We're not that much different to other animals that migrate if we take a long view of human history. Our movement is instinctive to us as a species and is integral to our shared history; it is something common to all humans on this planet.

Importantly then I think we should take a more global view, and go beyond national and cultural antagonisms. We should have pride in our planet and the natural world around us, before being proud of nations with their entirely artificial borders. In fact, in *Utopia for realists*, Rutger Bergman argues we would all be financially richer

and benefit in so many ways without borders in the future.³³² The modern form of borders might not always be the same, with our barriers and passports, because we have lived without these before and they're relatively modern phenomena. Change will happen, as Zen teaches us.

Countries are interdependent, so are companies, cities, towns, villages, our families and you. All humans are incredibly interconnected, interrelated and dependent on each other and the natural world around us.

We're so interrelated that all humans are made of the same stuff. Every human and most animals have the same ingredients. The human body is made up of 99% oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus.³³³ There are also other elements that make the human body, including the element of surprise in some cases! These elements make all humans around 53% water. We also exist with an awful lot of bacterial life inside us. Yay! We're also all made up of matter that originated from the same Big Bang. We're all literally made of the same stuff. We're all children of that Universe thingy! In fact, all of us were kids once, and none of us has really grown up.

Think about all that the next time you sit next to someone on the bus!

What has being made of the same stuff and being on a hyper-connected planet mean for happiness? Well, no one is really any better or worse than you. You're a link in the chain of human history. You're part of a branch of the growing tree of the common global human family. You're a part of the whole, which makes you significant in itself, even if you don't realise it. If you can think a little like this, it might help your happiness. It will give you a little bit of a different perspective of people in the world. Having all this knowledge opens up a wider, more empathetic

perspective that can hopefully improve your temperament towards yourself and other people.

As the band Pop Will Eat Itself sang:

“I am you, you are me
X, Y, Zee to A, B, Cee
You, me, us
We are one”³³⁴

It’s sometimes worth seeing humanity as one organism. There are so many required functioning parts to our societies, economies and cultures across the globe and we’re all organically related.

In the Buddhist concept of emptiness, they have the idea that seeing ourselves as unique individuals isn't the right view. Our definition of the self is wrong, because really we’re the Universe. The primary thing to take away is that we often need to reduce our egos. We literally need to be a bit more selfless to be happy. That means being a bit more aware of external experiences, of people and the world around us, rather than being focused on me, me, me. Dropping the self and seeing everyone as part of the wider whole should mean we can be a bit more generous and compassionate; these two things can make us happier too. Helping others is helping our selves.

Love Nature

I'm not necessarily saying go out, hug a tree, become an eco-warrior and dedicate your life to saving the planet. Good for you if you do. What I'm arguing for is just an appreciation for and admiration for our natural world. It's beautiful and amazing, and thinking that and looking at it every day has had an impact on my

moods for the better. Concentrating on a sunrise, little birds flying around, shapes of clouds in the sky, the colour of flowers and the changing leaves on the trees can lift my mood ever so slightly. Looking at landscapes and views in our world with an artist's eye and using real concentration to look at colours and shapes in the countryside around me can take me out of my chaotic mind. Looking is a skill that can be developed, and so is building an appreciation for nature.

A love for our natural world is a belief and view that can be chosen. It's helped me put things into perspective. Fostering more positive outlooks and ways of seeing the world around us can help change the opinions of ourselves.

It's also worth keeping in mind a bit of Zen in how we view the natural world. We are interconnected and interdependent on other species and other living things on this world, often in minuscule ways, but that connection is there. Loving our natural world isn't just loved up hippie stuff; it's a basic understanding that we are not entirely masters of the natural world, despite our incredible advances in medicine, food manufacture and product creation. We are pretty much animals, like all the rest, that are dependent on the natural world and loving that world is enlightened self-interest.

It's definitely worth finding the beauty in everyday things. It's worth keeping an eye open and noticing them. There are little miracles in the mundane.

Lastly, don't forget, "we do not inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children"³³⁵ Leave the place in a decent state for the next generation, please.

Live naturally

Living naturally can mean doing what comes most natural to you, doing what you enjoy doing most, and understanding your talents and capabilities. Do the things that come easy to you and that you get the most contentment and satisfaction from. As long as these activities are kind to yourself and others, you need to maximise what feels most natural for you.

Also eat as naturally as possible, avoid artificial high sugar, fatty foods, this will make your mind and body happy.

Living naturally also means that we're all part of nature. We're still animals living in the natural world, whether we like it, or realise it. That doesn't excuse behaving wildly, chaotically or untamed. As we saw with the Stoics, our reason is part of our nature; it's been part of our natural evolution, so living in accordance with nature means using our reason and intuition wisely. That can be extended to living in harmony and balance with the natural world as much as we can.

What we think of as animalistic in nature is often wrong. Rather than a dog eat dog world, animals are as likely to be co-operative, social, compassionate and peaceful as they are wild and vicious. The pecking order of chimps, for instance, doesn't always have the strongest, alpha males on top, but often leaders are assisted by others to the top spot, to support the pack, protect the weak, arbitrate, and keep peace and harmony.³³⁶ There's a lot of wisdom in the animal world.

Our emotions are very similar to other mammals. Having lived with dogs, I can certainly believe that. People, like other animals, are social animals, and we've evolved to get along. I'd argue that caring and living in peace is more natural than not.

Animals also go with the flow and find the paths of least resistance to achieve what they want. They don't expend unnecessary energy. They are also true to their own nature. In the same way, it's worth knowing what you can and can't change about yourself and accept the part of your character and nature that you struggle changing, unless it's causing pain and harm. It's also worth mentioning that we are the only animals that clog up our lives with bullshit. Just cut out any meaningless stuff in your life, if you can.

We're part of nature, and we are meant to adapt to our environment to survive and adjust to change. Accept ageing and decay. Go with the flow with it. You can't do much about it. Grow old gracefully, or at least a little disgracefully, and be kind to yourself about it. Also go with the flow of where nature, the world and events take you.

Watching nature, seeing how animals play, fly, and run, without a care in the world is really inspiring. Seeing our part in nature connects with what I've read about Taoism and Zen. It helps put your problems into perspective. I think it's worth studying and really looking at animals and how they perceive the world. If they see a threat, they react and then almost immediately move on. They don't dwell. Fear and anger don't continue beyond a single moment, and they calm down very quickly. Why worry, because animals don't.

Live easy. Don't work too hard. Do work you enjoy.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell argues in his essay, *in praise of idleness* that work is seen as a virtue and laziness isn't, but there isn't a logical reason to see work as virtuous in itself. The less we

work, the happier we often are. He argues that we should work only enough to pay to live and this will maximise our happiness because we will have less weariness and less “frayed nerves” and therefore be kinder to others.³³⁷

I think we can apply Taoist ideas like Wu Wei (the principle of acting without exertion) to the world of work and going with the flow, or going with the path of least resistance. We can keep things simple, be efficient and minimal in our working life. I think it's best to reduce work where ever possible. That might be to introduce streamlined processes, thinking smarter and not working harder and applying the Keep It Simple Stupid (KISS) abbreviation in mind. Find simple solutions to your work problems. Find the simplest, easiest and fun job that you can make a living from.

Knowing what you are good at and bad at is a real help in focusing your time on your strong skills rather than feeling pressure to work on tasks you're not good at. I always focus on jobs that play to my strong skills, it sounds obvious, but why struggle in an overly challenging job? It helps reduce stress to work in a job that can be done easily, with a manageable level of challenge. I obviously don't mean for you to create self limiting beliefs here. Don't constrain yourself with what you believe you aren't capable of. We can all learn new skills with the right training, even the things we believe we are rubbish at. The focus here is on trying to avoid work and activities that you dislike and give you stress.

Let me introduce you to a magic word. “No”. Saying no to too much work, or work that I don't yet have the skills for has reduced my stress levels enormously. Never fear saying no. Yes, it sounds like a negative phrase; it isn't if it's used for a positive reason. It takes some training in confidence to say no. I'm aware you may be concerned about what someone will think if you say

no to something at work, but a decent explanation should follow it. In a worst case scenario, being sacked if you said no for a good reason, like overwork and not being able to do the job, is a blessing. I've been in job loss situations, and no matter how horrible they've been, I've survived. I've always tried to get skills that are marketable to protect me from job problems.

Pushing back and saying no is a powerful tool, feeling threatened by job loss or pressure should never be the case. In many cases, I would advocate joining a union and collaborating with colleagues to improve a job environment, but the individual has some power and control. Try and get into a position where you can say no to reduce work stress. Get useful skills in the job market, if possible, and practise the power of no, so you don't have to work too hard.

As I mentioned, it's also worth going for the easiest and most enjoyable job you can afford to live on. There's nothing wrong with cruising in a career. Ignore the constant social pressure to achieve and to succeed, and go for an easy life. Climbing the career ladder often leads to more work, more responsibility and more stress. Fight the rat race. Don't work too hard. Who is really benefiting most from our work? Bosses? Shareholders? Us? All of them? Who knows?

As Albert Schweitzer said, "Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful."³³⁸

Yes I am aware of the irony of someone who has massively overworked in the past saying don't work too hard, but it hasn't made me feel good, let's put it that way. A work-life balance is utterly essential for your mental health from my experience. There are a lot of benefits from an undemanding job.

Oh, and don't work when ill. Again I make this mistake; it's a silly thing to do.

None of this means not to work hard when you need to and do a damned good quality job, its knowing when you are working too long and hard, that is the real skill to learn. This isn't easy if you are on low pay and have huge necessary expenses. But so often we're not in that position and work ourselves into the ground, just to buy crap we don't need.

Why the hell work somewhere you hate and do things you don't like doing? It's happened to me a few times. So many people are in jobs because they think they ought to be in them, this is because they're in cool jobs that have prestige or that brings in lots of money. It might also be because the job gives an esteem and confidence boost when talking about what they do, but really, they don't enjoy the work.³³⁹

If possible look for “Gratifying work”³⁴⁰ that plays to your skills and strengths, that you can enter a flow state performing the tasks. This sort of job isn't too hard to be stressful, but not too easy to be boring. It can bring an awful lot of satisfaction and contentment. Doing a job that has meaning for you is all the better, if it isn't meaningful then doing something meaningful outside of work can help your happiness, whether that's volunteering or having a fun hobby.

Look for a work-life balance between your job and then your family, health, relationships, friendships, hobbies and all the household type jobs. Take an undemanding job to afford the time to pursue other interests and activities.

The lack of time for other things in your life because of too much work is a real problem. If I pay employees a decent wage, and they don't work too hard, don't burn out and are happy, they will usually be more productive. Working less hard is good for business.

It's worth considering that being skilled in a job isn't the only thing for happiness. Not everyone can be in a privileged position to have good skills. Unskilled work can make people happy too, if you can find what you enjoy. Being skilled and being good at a job is not the only measurement of a person's worth.

Even if it pays less, find enjoyable work. We all have to do bits of work we don't enjoy, but work should mostly be enjoyable, and the bits we don't enjoy should serve a purpose. Putting life before money and people before profit definitely adds to happiness.

On a related note commuting on a bus serves a purpose, but isn't fun. If a commute is too long, it's worth rethinking the job. Long commutes do contribute to misery.

Manage fear

"Fear is the mind killer," said a character in the sci-fi film *Dune*, based on Frank Herbert's book.³⁴¹

We can *feel the fear and do it anyway* which is the title of the book by Susan Jeffers with quite a good message in it.

"Fear stifles empathy and elevates hate",³⁴² as Raoul Martinez writes, "Refusal to succumb to fear and hate is extremely liberating and empowering."³⁴³

Be aware of the acronym AWARE when struck by worry, anxiety and fear:

- Accept anxiety, don't fight it.

- Watch the anxiety and breathe calmly.
- Act normally, if you can.
- Repeat the above steps.
- Expect the best outcome if possible, to challenge the negative thoughts around the worry.

Here's some advice to help reduce and manage fear from the theories covered:

- Concentrate on one step at a time to solve a problem and try to be in the here and now.
- Forget the future exists is a helpful trick to manage fear.
- Use a calm breathing exercise.
- Be Stoic and get a new perspective (or a view from above).
- Plan and contemplate how you could cope if the worst happens.
- Think of the Zen understanding that our self doesn't exist, other than in relation to the whole. What you fear for yourself and others doesn't affect selves that don't really exist. Yeah, this might be a bit too abstract to help, but I've thrown it in!
- Challenge fearful thoughts. Ask if there is evidence for your thinking. Ask if there's certainty about these

thoughts (often unlikely) and if not look from another perspective.

- “Face your fears.”³⁴⁴
- Talk through your fears with others.
- Use distractions such as daydreams or visualisations of being in a "happy place" or focus on something in the here and now.
- Accept that life is imperfect and you don't have control over most of it. Try and relax about that and you have a lot of fears beaten.
- Remember the small things like sleep, eating and drinking enough fluid; it better enables you to put things into perspective.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs, these fuel fear and anxiety.
- It's almost always never as bad as it seems.
- Try to have a mantra that you can say to yourself like, "I'm calm. I'm superhuman I can cope with this", you might not be superhuman so skip that bit.

Don't let accepting a comfortable status quo and a fear of change or uncertainty prevent you from pushing for change that may make you and others happier.

Worry is a real symptom of fear; there is no practical use worrying about things that you can't control. The outcome is not improved by worrying. It's best to have faith in your abilities to cope with

adversity and have faith in your skills and judgment. Have faith in a common humanity and people with conscience and wisdom to make the future OK for you. Have faith for an ultimately good outcome. “Faith is the antidote to fear” as Timber Hawkeye puts it.³⁴⁵

Fear has to be managed for the most happiness in the most people. Sometimes collective fear of others can increase happiness in a dominant group when an outside marginalised group is demonised, but this to me isn't real happiness. Managing fear in your social group can help how we deal with people; it can help make our everyday interactions happier.

Try and build courage for yourself and others.

Manage anger

I know I rant a lot about politics, and I'm aware my spirit and passion can come across as unrestrained anger. Occasionally it is, but sometimes I don't feel that I come across as strong as others do. Your interpretation of the anger of other people is often subjective. It's also challenging to know how your expressions of emotions are interpreted. Managing how you express anger is a difficult but necessary journey.

Anger is often related to stress. Life's pressures lead to irritability. Ask yourself if getting angry about the issue is worth your energy. Ask if it will help the situation. Ask if it's worth getting ill over, because anger can cause higher blood pressure, heart attacks and lead to your head exploding. The head exploding bit wasn't entirely accurate, but anger doesn't help your health. Ask, will you be bothered about this in a week, month, year? Probably not. Ask

these things then look for coping strategies and solutions to manage your behaviour caused by anger.

When I see something on the news and I know the issue is motivated by fear, ignorance and prejudice I often get angry. In many ways, anger is a negative emotion. It eats at you and produces a damaging response. A negative emotion against negative emotions isn't likely to be helpful. Anger is a habit, especially any outbursts. Vocalising anger is definitely habitual, and like any bad habit, you can be trained to quit. Acting on anger can be reduced with practice, even if the feelings don't go away. Anger drains me. It doesn't make me happy, feeding it by swearing and making a fuss makes it worse.

Anger has an addictive quality, I've got quite high on the adrenaline before, but it's not healthy. I can't turn anger on and off, suppressing it doesn't help. Leaving it alone, letting it run its course and letting it pass by itself is usually a good strategy, as is a bit of distraction. All emotional states seem to go eventually. Anger has got to be turned to positive action otherwise it's wasted energy. I've joined campaign groups as a result of anger. Fear is the same; it has to be turned to a positive.

Let's have some quotes on anger.

"Anger is the punishment we give to ourselves for someone else's mistakes."³⁴⁶

"Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."³⁴⁷

Both of these quotes are from Buddha (apparently). I found them online, so be sceptical, but they are nice quotes. Here's another quote, "You will not be punished for your anger; you will be

punished by your anger”.³⁴⁸ Buddha didn’t like anger. However, letting go of your anger is really good advice. I really don’t like being angry, anger isn’t good for anyone’s happiness.

Here’s some advice to manage anger, to change your relationship with it, to stop any actions you’ll regret and to reduce the initial flare-up of anger:

- Avoid the things that make you angry.
- Defuse arguments with statements starting with, "I feel" or "I think", rather than using accusing comments beginning with "you".
- Breathe slowly, taking deep breaths.
- “Bite your tongue” and wait until the anger passes before speaking and acting.
- Count to ten to let the anger reduce before acting.
- Remove yourself from a situation if you think you’ll say something you’ll regret.
- Challenge angry thoughts as the Stoics do, and as we saw in CBT.
- Use mindfulness techniques; see the anger as dark clouds separate from yourself. These clouds don’t need to be grasped or for you to get caught up in them, let the storm pass on its own.
- Avoid drink and drugs,³⁴⁹ they reduce inhibitions and can reduce control of anger and moods.

- Reduce caffeine as it can put you on edge.
- Exercise to burn off anger.
- Anger is usually rooted in another emotion, fear, hurt, shame, and disappointment. Identify those emotions rather than the anger. “EXPLAIN your anger, don’t express it”.³⁵⁰ Get to know your fears.
- Try to understand what is behind your moods, anger and irritations.
- Try not to blame others. Peoples’ motives are damned complicated.
- Try not to mind read, and don't second guess people's thoughts and motives.
- Try not to take things personally.³⁵¹
- Try and find the funny side, or find something fun or funny to focus on instead.
- Don't be angry about being angry.
- Wow, there are a lot of bullet points here. Don't get angry about it!
- Have realistic expectations.
- Respect how people do things differently to you.

- Challenge the inner critic.
- Try and be aware when you overreact.
- Take responsibility for your anger.
- Acknowledge anger is part of you, don't deny it, it'll never go away, but you can practise expressing it better and not acting on it.
- Imagine that any display of anger that you show is anti-social, like pooing on the carpet or something. In some cultures, anger is really not valued. We can be furious and not have to say or act.³⁵²
- Try not to shout at your kids. It teaches them that random displays of anger are acceptable. Let them sort themselves out if necessary. This is not an easy piece of advice, having kids is hard work.
- Channel the anger into something positive.
- Try to learn to listen to any beliefs without getting angry. There's a challenge for you!
- Accept that other people's ideas are valid and you could be wrong. Their "truth" is as valid and real to them as yours.³⁵³
- Find distractions for irritations.
- Focus on gratitude as well as letting go of your anger.³⁵⁴ You can't have gratitude, or even feelings of love, at the

same time as anger. Change your focus onto what you're thankful for.

As David Woolfson, an anger management specialist says:

“Changing your relationship with anger is a journey to your soul. Making anger your friend is a profound and life-changing process. Many clients tell me they want to be a better person, to which I reply: ‘You don’t need to be a better person – but you can be better at being the person you are.’”³⁵⁵

Anger beyond a reasonable length of time is damaging. Anger over trivial and inappropriate things is also not great. Flying off the handle explosively for minor things needs sorting out! Get help from your doctor.

Anger can be a positive emotion in recognising something is wrong, and looking at what can and can't be changed. It can provide you with useful and helpful information about who you are, what you value and how you see life around you. It could, perhaps, be a catalyst for change, and if you can do something about what you're angry about, do it, and then let the anger pass. If you can't change something, try and moderate how you express the anger. However, let go of the anger as soon as you can.

Don't hate. Rise above it. Judge less.

“Don’t hate” sounds a bit like a rule. As I’ve said, these headings are just advice and maxims, and very much only guidelines. But hate is a dark, twisted emotion that can inspire malice and a wish for harm to befall people. It really isn’t a wise or positive use of brain power.

As Confucius says (I've waited the entire book to use that phrase), "If you hate a person, then you're defeated by them".³⁵⁶

Hate is, "to dislike someone or something very much", "an extremely strong dislike".³⁵⁷

There's a strong connection between hate and the emotion of disgust which is, "a strong feeling of disapproval and dislike at a situation, person's behaviour".³⁵⁸

I find liquorice disgusting. I could say I hate it. If I approached people the way I think of liquorice it wouldn't be kind and I wouldn't make others happy. Reducing your focus on dislikes and hates in life will make you happier. I just don't think about my feelings for liquorice, apart from now. Yuk!

Most of all, don't hate people. It leads to unkindness and isn't a route to lasting happiness for anyone. Fear of particular groups of people can lead to hate. Don't get caught up in hysterical news and online groups that stereotype and judge people.

Everyone has their own stories and the way people act shouldn't be judged, unless you've somehow literally lived their lives. There's the saying that you have to walk a mile in someone else's shoes to really understand them. I don't think that's enough, really. It's tough to have assumptions about people without having a very detailed understanding of a massive picture of their lives. Judging people even when understanding the complexities of their lives and how all life is entwined and interrelated isn't helpful or wise. Anyway, judging less can relax you. People and events are neither "good" nor "bad", remember. It's my beliefs that make them good or bad. There's positive and negative in pretty much everything. Judging situations and people less, as good or bad, or disgusting or frustrating, can make us calmer and

a little happier. Let go of the thinking that your opinion about the world will somehow have an impact on the reality of a situation.

Reducing hateful, fearful and angry thoughts about other people will also make you calmer and happier, it has for me. When something happens, or someone upsets you, which creates intense feelings, try and let the emotions pass and rise above the situation. Think something like, “I’m better than this feeling. I’ll rise above this situation”. Challenge the negative thoughts and let the dark feelings pass on their own.

It’s best to feel sympathy and pity for anyone that holds onto negative emotions like hate and anger, and who spread fear, discord and bad feelings because they probably won’t be happy individuals. Becoming negative about negative people won’t magically make things positive.

One suggestion to defuse hateful thoughts comes from Buddhism (yet again). Let me introduce the *Mettā* or “Loving Kindness” Meditation. It sounds a bit Saccharin sweet and a little nauseatingly nice.

If there is a person that has wronged you or you hate, it’s incredibly disarming of that hate and anger. It’s the same as any meditation and takes a couple of minutes. You think the phrase:

1. “May I be happy, healthy and without pain,” and then you think...
2. “May you be happy, healthy and without pain” directed at your family, then friends and then finally the person you “hate” or are angry at.

You do this repeatedly for as long as you can stand. What’s surprising about this practice is that it has dissolved my dark mood with someone that has angered me a lot of the time. It has

a bizarre psychological effect. It's a humanising practice, even if I haven't felt like doing it.

Honestly, let go of hate.

Love

I'm not a fan of the later Star Wars films that weren't written by George Lucas, but to quote the character Rose in Star Wars The Last Jedi, "That's how we're gonna win. Not fighting what we hate. Saving what we love". It's a good approach, although there have been extreme exceptions like in World War Two, fighting Fascism and the Nazis, that was a way of saving loved ones. There are exceptions to every rule. But love is the thing to focus on. Ask, what is it that I love? What is it that I really want to protect? These are the questions I think we all need to focus on. Don't ask, what do I hate? What is making me furious today? No, Love is the thing to focus on.

Let's look at what Bishop Michael B Curry has to say on love:

“There's power in love.” “...if humanity ever captures the energy of love – it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire.” “It's the best expression of the positive in emotions. Yes, yes I know love can lead to obsession, lust, jealousy and negative emotions, but let's focus on the positives and assume we can use our natural reason in taming the fire.”³⁵⁹

Martin Luther King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."³⁶⁰ Buddha said something almost identical.

We can all act childishly or childlike at times. We can all be selfish and make silly mistakes. It's difficult to judge people in their behaviour when we often do the same. Without sounding like Spock from Star Trek, that's why being kind is pretty much the only logical way of behaving. Having a bit of love for your fellow humanity, despite all of our imperfections is a fantastic ambition to have. As Robert Anton Wilson said, "You are precisely as big as what you love and precisely as small as what you allow to annoy you."³⁶¹

I've read that you can't love and fear at the same time. If you are worried or scared, take time to be grateful for someone or something you love, it disarms the fear.³⁶²

Lastly, say "I love you" regularly to those you love. I might be sounding morbid, but anything could happen tomorrow. The internet could go down or anything!

Use imagination well

There's nothing wrong with daydreams, they can be great, but they need to be positive, probably short-lived and not at the exclusion of important stuff in the here and now. They are often good distractions if you need them and they don't do harm.

Imagination can pretty much spin out of control. I know I can daydream some pretty dark scenarios in my head. If possible, daydreams and the use of imagination for creative problem solving should be positive, not dwelling on a negative past or a negative potential outcome. If what you are imagining is becoming unhelpful, focus your awareness elsewhere, disrupt the thinking, focus in the here and now and challenge the negative

imagining. Don't judge yourself for the dark thoughts and let them pass.

Mind wandering and imagination can come up with some great ideas; it can be used to visualise positive outcomes and to work through strategies for success. Imagination can also be destructive when you catastrophise. So have the habit of checking into your moods when using your imagination, and become aware of your patterns of thinking. Worry is a waste of imagination, so make sure your imagination is used well.

Imagination is related to instincts, both have an inner sense of possibilities and both feed each other. It's worth listening to your instincts for your happiness, but weigh them up with other evidence.

Be honest

Dishonesty, to be honest, doesn't make people happy. Being happy isn't all about you. Often if you upset people, it comes back on you. Now obviously if you're too honest and tell people exactly what you think of them, then that doesn't make anyone happy either. What I'm suggesting as a guideline, is not to lie, cheat and deceive. It's in your enlightened self-interest to be as realistically honest as you can be.

Smile. Laugh. Use humour. Have fun.

Life is messy and difficult, but I think we all need to look for ways to laugh and smile. Watch a comedy, read jokes, spread jokes, meet friends and have a laugh. When things go wrong try

hard to see the funny side and use humour, although that's not always achievable, I know. Maybe a few times a week at least, be a bit more childlike in your enthusiasm, have some joy and play. Play video games with friends, be silly with the kids or kick a ball around.

As the Chinese philosopher Meng-tse said, "Great man retains child's mind".³⁶³ Retain a bit of child-like glee.

Also, smile at strangers and be friendly, even to bus drivers and maybe, just maybe, to other passengers as well.

Persevere

Don't give up. You never know how close you are to achieving your goal or seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

Be stubborn is good advice. There are times, with jobs and relationships that you do have to know when to quit, but it's learning when that is the skill. Perseverance is gritting your teeth through frustration. Some help can be found here by using Stoic challenging of negative thoughts and Zen taking one step at a time in the here and now. It's about learning resilience and confidence. Planning to cope is a strategy for getting through these troubles so that you can be a bit happier.

If you have a setback, defeat or don't get what you want, chalk it up to experience. See it as a lesson and an opportunity to learn. Brush yourself down, pick yourself up and try again.

Perseverance is also not minding the slow progress and enjoying the journey. Being on a bus is an excellent way to practise perseverance!

Learn to problem solve

"There are three solutions to every problem: accept it, change it, or leave it. If you can't accept it, change it. If you can't change it, leave it."³⁶⁴

So assuming you want to change something and can, then this is the section to solve the problem.

Sometimes problems come along that shake our happiness. With any problem, it's good advice to share the problem with others and to co-operate, collaborate and "brainstorm" ideas.

Think about how to approach your problems, and here are some suggestions:

1. List your problems.
2. List them in order of seriousness.
3. Decide what problem needs to be dealt with first.
4. Break any particular problem into bite-sized chunks and write it down.
5. Decide which chunk is most important, and start with that.

These might sound bloody obvious, but when I'm stressed, I've

found my logical thinking shuts down in the fight and flight adrenaline-addled brain, so having some methods that can be practised, which are available to think through problems, is very helpful. Have a deep breath and write down your problems and potential solutions down in an ideas book.

It could be useful to apply a bit of design project management thinking. In my job as a web designer, we sometimes use a four-step problem-solving routine with four “D’s”, discovery, define, develop and deliver. To demonstrate this I have here an example bus company that has a problem attracting passengers and what's probably needed is a poster advert designing.

1. The Discovery phase, that researches the problem, so for instance why passengers aren't using the buses. Researching your problem could be asking people their opinions, researching what other people do or researching topics online.
2. The Define phase, where the research is limited down to the area you need to focus on most, what problems the customers are facing or what they don't like, so the design of the advert will concentrate on the most important issues.
3. The Develop phase, where lots of possible options are then brainstormed for an advert. Brainstorming is the process of coming up with as many ideas as possible, no matter how daft, this can be done by one person or with others. You then choose the best ideas. We then come to,
4. The Delivery phase, where the potential advert design solutions are mocked up and assessed. One final design is eventually decided on and this is where the design problem is solved, and the poster advert design gets

printed.

So what has this example got to do with happiness? Well in planning to cope with adversity it's useful to have a method ready. A problem happens; you research it, focus on the most important issues and then you brainstorm possible solutions. You then refine your ideas to a few that can be realistically developed until a final and useful solution to the problem is worked on and delivered.

One way of brainstorming is to use spider-like diagrams, also called mind maps. Write the problem or ideas for a solution in the middle as a cloud or a circle and then create line branches to other ideas. Each of these ideas can then branch out. A great way of refining and solving any problem that gets thrown at you is to write down your thoughts in a visual form.

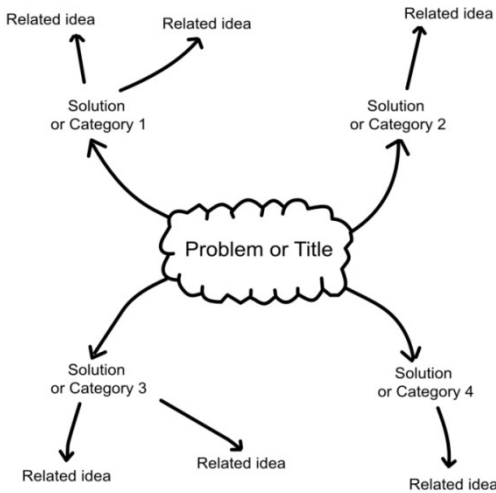


Figure 7 - A mind map

Here are some more suggestions for solving your problems:

- Don't look for a perfect solution. There's never a perfect solution to any problem. Look for a solution that will probably work best and plan to adapt it.
- Research and read about the problem.
- Don't fear to make decisions at any stage in problem-solving. As we saw an excellent problem-solving method goes a bit like this: Identify the issues, list possible options for solutions then evaluate alternatives, select an option to solve the problem. Practise solutions to reduce your fear at each stage.
- If you are worrying about a problem, set yourself a time later when you can think hard about a solution or even a temporary fix, in the same way as leaving a worry to a worry time. If a concern about a problem pops into your head, think, "I'll leave this to a time later when I can come up with a temporary fix", and you can write ideas about a fix down in your ideas book at that time.
- Try to know the difference between thinking about a solution to a problem and the unhelpful circular thinking of ruminating.
- Ask, do I really care that much about this problem? Is it something I value? If I do, does it need prioritising?
- Ask, what are the consequences of not solving the problem? Does it need fixing? This sounds obvious, but some problems given time do actually solve themselves.

- Talk to others about your problems, and get advice. Just talking through the issues can help you feel better.
- During your planning to solve a problem, think what plans you can put in place in case things go wrong.
- Sometimes putting a problem to the back of the mind and doing something else helps. Maybe have a break. The unconscious can process it, and sometimes solutions can appear automatically.
- Learn time management: Use short to do lists, plan your projects in manageable chunks in a calendar, do the most important tasks first, ditch unimportant things, do tasks imperfectly then improve on them later, take regular breaks and learn to avoid distractions.

Try to have an action plan from your brainstorming. Any plan has to have positive objectives. For instance, just leaving a job is a negative objective. A positive objective is having a plan to get a new job first. Having goals and plans is great, but moderate any expectations and be ready to adapt to inevitable change.

Another way of distancing a problem and getting a different perspective is to imagine someone wise maybe Yoda, maybe a friend or someone who inspires you, or a made up sage-like figure in your imagination. What advice would they give to you in these circumstances? What does wisdom look like to you for this problem? Whatever the shape of the advice, it needs to be kind to you.

Connect with others. Talk to others about your problems and listen to others about their problems. Help improve conditions for others and yourself.

This section is about solving our problems and communication, cooperation, compromise, collaboration. These four words beginning with “C” are the opposite of competition, criticism and inward-looking selfishness. There’s a lot of individualism in the world today. I’m all for individual identities and helping yourself, but not all problems can be solved on your own.

Talking to others about your problems and listening to others about their problems is a mutual way of helping each other. It’s about being available to help others and not being afraid to ask for help.

Never be afraid or too proud to reach out and ask other people for advice. I feel so much better talking through my problems, it helps massively. Please talk to others about your problems.

If you ever have a problem and don’t immediately have someone to talk to, you can ask yourself, “what advice would I give a friend about the same problem?”

Always reach out for help if needed. Always. Most people like to help others.

Whenever anyone asks you for help with their problems, apply active listening techniques. As I’ve said, listen with the aim of paraphrasing the other person’s words back to them. You can do this to show understanding and clarify meaning. Active listening can help the other person with defining their problems. Bounce

ideas about and brainstorm about possible solutions to the issues with other people.

We're social animals we need to collaborate and co-operate to solve our problems. I think it's more of a "you scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" world, rather than a "dog eat dog world". Anyone who says that individuals can solve all their problems on their own is probably selling something. Mutual help and support is something we've evolved to be brilliant at. So if I have a problem, I share it. If some else has a problem I want them to share it with me. Coping alone is horrible and unnecessary. Reach out if you need help. Reach out if others need help, encourage people to share their problems.

All relationships take work, no relationship will ever be perfect, and that goes for friends as well as partners. We have to accept people for who they are. People change, people are changeable, we have to remember impermanence and imperfection in relationships and accept the possibility of loss too.

You should always look for opportunities to help improve conditions for others and yourself. Think about what you can control at work or in your immediate life situation. It takes confidence, communication skills, assertiveness and courage to fight for things to get better in your life and for others. We can develop these skills. Do a few Internet searches in these areas and look for ways to solve problems. But where you can, please fight for improvements, even the tiniest things can make a difference.

So my advice is to negotiate well. Cooperate, collaborate and find consensus and compromise. Find win-win situations, which is where you gain and the other person gains too. Foster goodwill with people around you, you never know when any one of you will need help to solve a problem.

Chapter 10 – Shrink desires

We want and desire all sorts of things. Food, water, housing and health care aren't just desires and wants, they're rights and everyone deserves them. Love and human company is an essential need too. But often our wants, needs and desires are for pretty trivial things. As we saw with the section on Zen Buddhism, the leading cause of our suffering and dissatisfaction is our desire for things. Either these are material things, or we want things in our lives to be a certain way.

We can search for a good enough life, with enough money, with enough stuff by setting limits and deciding what makes us happy. Rarely will more money or things or better jobs/partners/houses make us happy for very long. The aim in life, I believe, is to be happy with what we have and only have what we're happy with. De-cluttering and living with a bit less stuff or at least enough stuff is a good start to shrinking desires, none of us really need more stuff. It helps the environment too.

I've always struggled with cravings and wants. I've always wanted to get a bit better at certain things. I've wanted to reduce selfishness, increase my listening skills, reduce letting my opinions get in the way, reduce workload, manage my emotions and drink less booze. The list goes on. However, wanting to improve yourself is a desire. Wanting to reduce my wants is actually a want. I'm about to get myself into a right tangle here!

The desires you need to shrink are the ones that are making you stressed and unhappy. Only you can say what those are. Don't forget that trying too hard to "unwant" and be too strict won't be sustainable. My below advice are guidelines, that if broken can be forgiven and tried again next time.

What I'll discuss here is being a bit more conscious, and to reduce our wants for and attachments to material property, ideals and expectations. We can become a little less attached to the concept of "me" and our egos and all the things that our individual identity apparently wants to possess. We can reduce the cravings that get in the way of our contentment.

So here we go...

Less Attachment

Less attachment to property, work, money, alcohol, sex, hopes, ambitions, success, plans, opinions, beliefs, time, places, emotions, thoughts, my self and my ego. This list is the things I've identified that I want to reduce my attachment to, in terms of practising a bit of Zen in my life.

Don't grasp at things. Try to have a bit of detachment from the stuff you want to have, or wish to remain the same, because as we know, things change or vanish in our lives. If we shrink our desires for things and circumstances to be a particular way, we can reduce our dissatisfaction and frustrations.

Money and property do not lead to happiness as we've seen. Calmness and the cheesy thing called "inner peace" aren't from striving or trying to acquire anything, it's by being in the here and now. Happiness isn't in the future when you've bought a new car; as soon as you buy it you'll just move onto a new thing that you'll want. Contentment is appreciating what we have. It's also advantageous sometimes to have detachment from your beliefs and opinions which are linked to your expectations about how the world should be. Again the wants and desires for reality to be

different from what it is, and that we can't control, will lead to a certain amount of annoyance.

It's worth pointing out that our opinions that we desperately cling onto are often transient. They change over time and anger over an issue gradually fades. Also, our identity, emotions and thinking are temporary, and this can be empowering. Don't be too precious about things like your fashion sense either as this will change. Which I'm thankful for, looking back!

Your moods will also change, and this is more important. But like the clothes you wear, your brain and thinking changes as you get older. Always think about that! My thinking is different when I was five, and I no longer wear tartan flared trousers as I did then! There's little point in being overly attached to your beliefs that make up such a changeable identity.

Wanting a better job, better relationship and all the things that you may feel are signs of success are again just a route to frustration. Ambition and the rat race can lead to stress and unhappiness. Search for good "enough" in a job or a relationship. Search for "enough" in material property. Search for "enough" financially. Look for contentment and satisfaction in life. When it comes to your hopes, be realistic and again hope for "enough".

Give sex less value and priority compared to relationships and friendships if possible. It's not easy with a highly sexualised media, and it's easy to become too preoccupied with sex. Having sex is not an indicator of anyone's worth, value or status. Don't get obsessed with sex. Relationships, friendships and respect are much more valuable. Try not to let the contents of your pants rule you!

Having attachment to property isn't great for happiness. There's a Buddhist thinking exercise to imagine your favourite things

already broken. They will be one day. If things get lost or broken, it's not the end of the world.³⁶⁵ Don't be so precious about material things.

Let go of time, of clock watching and timekeeping, try and increase your patience.

Also, don't be too precious of jobs, these can change, and you can leave with courage, assertiveness and confidence. Don't be precious of any plans you've made. You need to prepare for things to change.

Time is very much a concept of our mind, as Zen tells us, have patience and change your relationship with time. Thinking things are a "waste of time" or that you're "losing time" is just a belief. Detach yourself from being so attached to your time. It will reduce stress. Related to time are space and our places around us. These change all the time. Buildings get knocked down; new things appear in the environment around us. It's amazing how sadness can come on us as we see things change in our local environment and move on around us out of our control. Don't get too attached to these places around you.

Try to embrace change in all things and let go of wanting things to be how you want.

Mark Manson points out that even pursuing happiness and being attached to it can backfire, "the desire for a more positive experience is itself a negative experience. And paradoxically, the acceptance of one's negative experience is a positive experience".³⁶⁶ If you continuously want things, the more dissatisfied you'll be with what you have. Don't try too hard, have fewer attachments to goals and accept where you are.

Let go of "what ifs", "shoulds", ideals, wants, expectations, ruminations and what I fear to lose.

Albert Ellis used the phrase “Musturbation” a compulsive insistence that things “must” be a certain way.³⁶⁷ Well, stop Musturbating everyone! “Oughtism” is another handy catchphrase, where you do things that you think you ought to. “Shoulditis” is where everything should live up to your expectations.³⁶⁸

Things won’t live up to how you think they should be. Politics is unwise and cruel. The world is regularly barbaric. You can’t do anything about the vast majority of it. You have to let it go, or get upset.

That doesn’t mean not trying to do anything about the injustices of the world, far from it. I’m proposing a helpful perspective to help regulate your emotions, and make your actions more effective.

Anything that you believe to be an ideal situation needs to be questioned. We are regularly attached to the way we think things should be and cling to them.³⁶⁹

Expectations that life should be fair aren’t helpful. Life isn’t fair. As Timber Hawkeye puts it:

“To reduce the amount of stress in our lives (as well as anger, fear, disappointment, anxiety and intolerance), we start by reducing our expectations.”³⁷⁰

Letting go is, again, a Zen approach that I’ve felt is very helpful. Letting go of the things that I fear to lose is a difficult one, but one to contemplate. Those I love most could die. It’s not one to dwell

on. I don't recommend detachment or aloofness from our nearest and dearest to cope with worries and stress. But accepting change and misfortune is a pretty important thing to grasp and understand fully and this is a very Stoic approach.

Losing is sometimes winning. I've lost a job only to start freelancing with a new business. I've lost that business, which enabled me to see that my career path was in design, not in other areas. In politics when someone becomes a leader that has policies I don't like, I know, like the Chinese Taoist farmer proverb, that it might not be good or bad. Maybe it's an opportunity for a new political movement or a new avenue for political progress. Losing is awful, but give it time, it might well be the start of a road towards a huge win. Letting go of what I fear to lose is an acknowledgement that what I hold precious will change and the new reality might just be OK.

The idea of letting go here isn't surrendering something precious; it is thinking about things like these:

- Ask what is really precious and really important to you and lessen the importance of what isn't essential.
- Fully understanding how changeable everything is, including yourself and your view on the world.
- Know that uncertainty will always be there.
- Understand your lack of control, embrace it and focus just on your beliefs, actions and anything else you can change.
- Try not to focus on what you can't control. Let it go, try not to be bothered by it. Maybe try to ignore it for a

while and don't react. Move quickly onto something else.

- Your desire for things to be a certain way makes little difference to reality.

Practise letting go of anger, annoyance, and irritation as fast as you can. It's not easy but give it a try, it might help you become less grumpy. Let go of resentment at your treatment from people, don't bottle up feelings, find a positive outlet and let the mood pass as best you can.

Let go of ruminations, of that circular thinking that some people have. There is often a worry spiral where worries get out of control.³⁷¹ I created my own disease related to “Shoulditis” above called “Coulditis,” where you worry about things that could happen.

Ask how likely is the thing worried about likely to happen? Ask what a better or more helpful way of thinking is? What's realistically the worst that could happen, and can you plan to cope? Change your focus onto other things either in the here and now or challenge the thoughts and let them blow away. Worrying and over-thinking doesn't help, and I am terrible at this. Much of this is down to my expectations that things should be better and thinking “what if” something bad happens. But have some realistic optimism, plan to cope and look for the positives in situations.

Live by values that matter

Your values are, "principles or standards of behaviour; one's judgement of what is important in life."³⁷² These are the things most important in a job, in your personal life and what you want to do and get most out of life.

I've found that writing down my values and then numbering them in order is helpful. It focuses on what really matters in life, and what I really care about. To decide on your values, think what has made you happiest in life, what were the best, most satisfied and proudest moments? When were you most content?³⁷³

So your values might be: family time, personal time, happiness, health, creativity, time with friends, the natural world, freedom, compassion, peace, love, wisdom, honesty, unity... anyway, a list might go on, these are just some of my examples.

In deciding on your core values, think of any truths you hold dear. My truths are below. They might help. They might not:

- Keep in mind that life is precious and regularly not fair (but that doesn't mean not valuing or striving for fairness).
- Keep disappointments in perspective. It's the way we deal with things that are important and need to be worked on.
- Make the most of what you have.
- Try not to worry. Everything comes and goes. Go with the flow.

Think what is most true for your values.³⁷⁴

It's worth thinking through your values with other aspects of your life. Do you value family time more than time in your job? Then if the job eats into your family time, you'll be stressed, so family time will be a value that needs to be listed and prioritised.³⁷⁵ See if any values conflict either in opposition to each other or in demands on your time, and think how to resolve these.

Try to concentrate on personal values rather than political values, for instance. Try to “care less” about what isn't of real personal value to you. Don't reduce your caring generally, but focus it most on what you value, and ensure that these values are what matters most to you.

Food, sleep, drink, shelter and human contact all matter and should be valued too. The most basic needs are those should get priority above all else.

Values that matter to you can be listed and prioritised then, and it's worth remembering them in decision making and revisiting them in the future, maybe in a year's time.

What is important in life may also be the same as opinions, ideals and beliefs; these will undoubtedly help you decide on your values. Like values you can list and prioritise your beliefs and opinions, it might show some that conflict, or might not help in your happiness.

There are often seen to be two opposing extremes to beliefs and ideals. Firstly idealism, “the belief that your ideals can be achieved, often when this does not seem likely to others”,³⁷⁶ this is not to be confused with idealism in philosophy that I discussed earlier. The idealism I'm now talking about is the search for the perfect achievement of your aims, without compromise. Then, secondly, there is pragmatism, “the quality of dealing with a problem in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following fixed theories, ideas, or rules”.³⁷⁷ Idealists are almost seen as extremists in political, religious or other views and pragmatists are often seen as moderates, although this is a bit of an oversimplification.

There is a middle way, that of having a small handful of your core opinions, beliefs and values, those that you are idealistic about and protect, and then there's everything else that can be compromised and negotiated, where you are pragmatic. It's a case of choosing your battles wisely on the things that matter most. If it ever comes to someone arguing against values that are very important to you, I would back off if possible if it gets too heated.

Keep in mind that your values often change as you get older. As an example you may be into the rave scene when you're younger and have the values of peace, love, unity and respect³⁷⁸ and then change your values years later. Although I haven't in my case, I think there's a lot of wisdom in those values.

Having some core values means choosing the job you do and what you prioritise in life. Create a life that reflects your values, and that you can be content with. In life, you need to invent your own meaning.

Think independently. Be questioning.

Thinking independently and being a free thinker is almost a value in itself. My advice here is don't feel the pressure to conform to any standards, trends or practices. Choose your influences well and don't mindlessly copy the herd. It is important to be accepted in a social group, but sometimes we need to stay strong and do what we need and want to do instead. We all need to think outside of our backgrounds and come up with our own ideas, and that takes confidence, which we can learn to build.

Try to identify and avoid marketing and political manipulation on social media. There's an awful lot of content online and in the media that will try and persuade you to think the way an

organisation wants you to think. No, I don't mean brainwashing in a weird conspiracy theory sort of way. Public relations, marketing and all types of spin selectively choose facts, statistics and add in ways to elicit an emotional response. If you see something that makes you feel fear, envy, uncertainty or anger, ask yourself why has the article, video, advert or media item done that, and what have they got to gain from making you feel that way?

Avoid negative influences, question if the friends you choose and media you subscribe to are increasing your negative emotions, such as fear, anger and hatred. If they are, question them, have the confidence to think more independently and choose better influencers. It will make you happier, in the long run, to remove negative influences from your life.

Ask questions of people you disagree with. Why do they think that? Ask questions about why a person believes what they believe, as this both questions their assumptions and beliefs, and yours. You can increase your understanding of other points of view as well as disarm badly thought out opinions.

I think it's a matter of questioning everything, which I know sounds exhausting. From what we've seen so far, you need to question your own thinking, expectations and the stories you tell yourself if you want to be happier. You need to question society's norms and expectations and pressures from friends and social media. Question everything to make yourself and others happier.

Let go of the small stuff. Focus on what matters. Look for a different perspective. Look at the big picture.

We've mentioned not sweating the small stuff, and almost everything is pretty insignificant if we look at the big picture, or even get a universal overview. We can always ask, will this problem upset me or will this adversity matter to me in a year, or even five years? Will it matter in 100 years when a new generation roams the Earth? No, probably not. Try to get some perspective.

Don't focus on minor irritations, but focus on the things that matter, on items that match your values.

Try and look for a different perspective on your problem or on what is worrying you. Look at things from a different angle. You can also try to view issues as other people do. Mainly work on getting a more sensibly positive spin, or realistically optimistic focus on the problems that you face. Ensure you keep your perspective compassionate to yourself and others as well.

There is sometimes more good than bad in a situation that is bothering you, you just don't know it yet. If you look very hard and take a wider view there may be fewer faults or problems than you think. Get a perspective of the issue across a wider time or space and across the world. There's a lot to be thankful for.

Big picture thinking isn't just a view from above. It's thinking ethically for a common good and maximising happiness for as many people as possible. Having a global view, understanding our common humanity and our interconnected nature is also having a big picture perspective.

Remember, all situations change and may not turn out to be as bad as you think. A solution may be just around the corner. A bad situation may turn out to be good one later on. What may be needed is patience and time. Try to have a bit of realistic hope and optimism. I understand that it isn't easy at times.

Don't compare yourself to others

Envy, insecurity, low self opinions often comes from comparing yourself to others.

I'm terrible at comparing my skills, my job, my looks and any number of things I have, to other people. My advice is to try not to. It saps energy. Social media doesn't help, and I ration its use, especially if I'm in a bad mood. People usually don't mean to brag and boast, but they do often post only a rose-tinted view of their lives online, I know I have. No one's life experiences are the same, and as we've seen, no one has had much control over where they are now. Comparing yourself to others is pretty unhelpful, and it's impossible to compare so many varied experiences and circumstances to yours. You are doing the best you can with the hand life has dealt to you. Concentrate on your life here and now and in making yourself and others happy.

Everyone has different skills, abilities and talents. There's the old saying that there's always someone better at something than you, but has anyone got the same unique combination of skills and experience as you? In a society that values skills and abilities in the workplace and in entertainment, I think you have to be careful not to devalue people who don't have the skills and abilities you might value. You shouldn't worry about perceived weaknesses in abilities when evaluating people on a personal level. We're all the same in trying to make a living and getting by in the world.

Much of our success in life is just luck that we can't control. Focus on being compassionate to yourself and others.

The same goes for looks. They're mostly out of our control. Don't think other people are more beautiful than you. Cheesy cliché here, but beauty only runs skin deep. Underneath they have the same icky guts you have, in fact probably far more disgusting! Anyway, focus on other values you have and on being grateful for things in your life today. Don't focus on things you feel you lack by comparing yourself to others.

**Everything changes. Accept
impermanence. This too shall pass.
Accept imperfection.**

I first heard the phrase, "this too shall pass," from our friend Rosie when talking about the pressures of having a baby. It's an amazing and ancient phrase. Every situation passes in time; it all changes, nothing is permanent. Most dark clouds pass. Alan Watts discussed a Chinese Taoist attitude to invaders, and perhaps even dictators, "we've seen the likes of you many times before, and you too will go away".³⁷⁹

That attitude shouldn't diminish any pain or loss, but understanding impermanence is a powerful thing. The temporary nature of all things is at the heart of Zen. No thing or situation is perfect and passes eventually. Accepting that nothing is going to meet your expectations of perfection is liberating. Imperfection and impermanence are very powerful things to think about regularly.

Think about the Buddhist idea of imagining your favourite glass (or cup, or favourite item) already broken. When something inevitably breaks you can say, "Oh well that was going to happen one day". Everything in the Universe breaks eventually.

Haemin Sunim quotes the Zen master Sengchan, "True freedom is being without anxiety about imperfection".³⁸⁰ No circumstance will ever meet our expectations, so be very careful to be as open-minded about what you expect to happen as possible to avoid disappointments. Don't worry when things don't turn out as the best outcome for you, and this too will also be a passing experience. Make the most of it, make the best of it and move on.

Seeking perfection is often the enemy of a calm, fair and happy life. "Perfect is the enemy of good" as the French writer Voltaire put it.³⁸¹ "Good" here means a decent enough solution. There's never a perfect solution to any problem, anyway. We can apply the middle way here, aim for not too rubbish and not too great, so we get things done and accept "good" enough. Try to aim for things that are satisfactory and will suffice. Aim for "Satisficing".³⁸²

Change what you can. Accept what you can't change then move on. If you can't change it, change the way you think about it.

"If you can't change it, change the way you think about it"³⁸³ comes from the *Action for Happiness* book and website. It brilliantly sums up the Stoic beliefs on control.

According to the Stoics all we can control are our thoughts (our beliefs and opinions mainly) and our actions. As Darren Brown says, if something is frustrating or bothering you, do the below two things:

1. Think about whether the situation is in your thoughts or within your actions, which you can control.
2. Think about whether the situation is outside of you, which you can't control.

Then you draw a line between the two. You can then say that anything out of your control is “fine”. All of the circumstances that you can't control will be fine and you'll be fine.³⁸⁴

The easiest things to change are your beliefs, thoughts and actions, based on any situation. Most things, otherwise, are outside of your control and are almost impossible to change. There may be little personal actions that you can do to indirectly influence a situation outside of you, however. Sometimes, though, all you can do is work on your own thoughts and actions, with an aim to being a kinder, calmer and more content person.

Solutions to help us cope with our lack of control for Stoics and Buddhists range from emotional detachment, radical acceptance of yourself and of the present moment, reducing the ego and understanding we're interconnected with everything. This wisdom shouldn't inspire apathy, lack of interest, disengagement, fatalism or a belief that everything is already decided, and we can't change anything. Acceptance of the present moment and personal acceptance doesn't inevitably lead blindly to accepting the status quo. Being kind to yourself gives you the strength to challenge the status quo and can bring an understanding of what you can and can't change.

Being in the present moment can remove the obstacle of fear, anxiety and stress and you can focus on tasks that you can control.

When using our imaginations, there might be things we can do. We have to use our imagination well and think hard about whether there is something in an event or adversity that we can change. Think hard about how your actions can influence things. Knowing what we can and can't change is really important for our happiness, so it's worth thinking deeply, "can I change this, or not?" If not move on, think of other ways to act, or adapt the way you think about a problem or a situation.

There are structural problems that we can't solve alone. Politics, the environment, job market, social media, housing all put pressures on us, all cause worries and fears. We can join together and campaign, which might also make us feel better, but we also need to keep calm and level headed in the process. My view is that ancient and modern wisdom should be a help to tackle our common problems, not just our own. We can affect our society by being kinder to people around us and practising certain positive behaviours.

Getting involved in community activities or campaign groups gives us some control to do something positive. If we use our imagination, we can make a small positive impact, even if it's tiny, cheerful interactions with other people. Doing something meaningful, helpful, and feeling that you have a small amount of influence on life immediately around you can help reduce feelings of powerlessness and improve your happiness.

If there really isn't something you can change, then it's a time for personal acceptance, and deep Zen and Stoic acceptance makes a lot of sense at this point, so does the use of CBT, ABC and other methods from psychology.

Acceptance means moving on from what you can't control in as much of a positive way that you can. Acceptance means being resilient and bouncing back from adversity as fast as possible, it also means being patient with yourself.

It's our reactions and actions to adversity that define us, but if we fail to react well accept it as a learning exercise. You need to be kind to yourself when messing up on any of the methods you try to practise to make you calmer and happier.

Challenge negative thoughts, seek out other perspectives to the situation, and think that a bad situation may eventually turn out well. Keep yourself in the present moment and trust that you can adapt to cope with whatever fate brings.

Build resilience, adaptability and flexibility.

Everything changes, nothing is permanent. I sound a bit like a broken record repeating it all. The only thing we can cling to is our ability to cope with change; to be flexible and adaptable. Both of these are skills, and so is resilience. We've covered resilience before so to summarise the best advice: Plan to cope, have coping strategies, look after your health, learn problem-solving techniques, know your strengths, live by your values, try to be open-minded, manage your magic crap bucket.

There's always the possibility that a bus won't turn up, and something will crop up to screw up your plans, so be prepared to be flexible and adaptable almost instantly! It's always worth having a backup plan. Plan to have another bus to catch and try not to be too upset if you get somewhere late. Life is a bit like that.

As my Dad regularly has said, “don’t let the bastards grind you down.” I’m aware this might not be very compassionate towards the person or people that are grinding you down. However, this maxim can be a short frustration release. Try not to let anything grind you down. If it does, know you can bounce back from it.

Build confidence

Confidence is having trust, faith and belief in yourself and your abilities. So, confidence is mainly made up of:

- Self-confidence which is your trust and belief in yourself and in your general qualities; it is your self-assuredness.
- Self-efficacy which is your confidence in your abilities.

Both of these vary in different situations, are often connected and together make your general level of confidence.

Learning to build your general confidence is one of my biggest pieces of advice; it is a learnt skill. Honestly, anyone who says you are either born with confidence or not doesn’t understand Neuroplasticity. What you and I call the “self” changes a massive amount across a lifetime and from year to year, so the brain can be trained to change.

Confidence is not being afraid to make mistakes; it's related to managing fear. In some ways you can “fake it ‘til you make it” with confidence: You can project calm, improve your posture by lifting your head and straightening your shoulders and back. You can fake talking confidently with practice. You can be the outward change you want to be. Focusing on outward change first can help inward change.

Confidence can help happiness by improving your ability to deal with specific situations. It can also benefit your self-belief and self-opinion. Try to aim for a realistic level of confidence and not arrogance or overconfidence.

Self-esteem is related to self-confidence and is the “opinion we have of ourselves”³⁸⁵ as the NHS website puts it, it is your feeling of self worth and several of the ways I’ve seen to improve self esteem are the same as improving self-confidence. For instance the NHS recommends to, “recognise what you’re good at”, “build positive relationships” (seek positive people), “be kind to yourself”, “learn to be assertive”, “Start saying no”, “give yourself a challenge”³⁸⁶. Working on areas of self acceptance, challenging negative self beliefs, building resilience and accepting imperfections are all things I’ve already mentioned that can help self-esteem.

I was incredibly shy up until the age of 25, and then I changed rapidly. I learnt to be an outgoing extrovert, after being a reserved introvert all my life up until that point. The main thing that helped me was starting as a small DJ. Yes as in short too, at my mighty 5 foot 2, but what I mean is not very big. Hold on. I mean DJing to less than 100 people at a time. Then I suddenly had to fill a 1200 capacity venue once a month when a big event fell into our laps.

I DJed at an event called The Wendy House at Leeds University’s 1200 capacity concert venue running from 1998 to 2014. I daftly took on the role of a promoter, and I had to work very hard to sell the event, to talk to many different people, from different walks of life. And yes, to some awkward people along the way, although almost everyone was utterly lovely.

My advice to gain confidence is to throw yourself into something that you love, which exposes you (no not nakedly) to talking to

lots of people. Find something, anything to build rapport, to be positive with people and learn how interaction, negotiation and friendliness work to benefit you and others. Going drinking in pubs and clubs and socialising with people isn't the same as having a purpose and passion that forces you to work with many different types of people, which can build your confidence far more.

I read some statistics somewhere that have stuck in my head. No matter how much searching on the internet, I can't find the evidence to support them. So here are two probably made up facts to illustrate a point.

The first fact is that one in five people will probably not like or get on with you, you can't control that, so it's worth having the confidence to accept that. Confidence often goes hand in hand with how well you might think of yourself, even if others don't agree. Four out of five people will get on with you, however.

The second fact is this. On a one to ten scale of attractiveness, other people will usually score you two more attractiveness points than you will score yourself. If you give yourself five out of ten other people will score you seven out of ten, on average. If you are a narcissist, however, you will probably score yourself 25 out of ten. Yes, I know all of this is a very shallow and demeaning scale, but bear with me.

The point of both of those unsupported facts is that most people will actually like you, and they will have a better opinion of you than sometimes you'll have of yourself. That should give you an extra five percent confidence. Fact.

With confidence comes the ability to say no, to think independently, and to shrink desires that aren't at all useful. Why follow the herd, to own the latest things, when you can have the

confidence to live your own life, doing your own thing. Have a rubbish phone, a small TV, use the bus, do what you really want to do as a job, don't worry about what others think.

Also, travel builds confidence and it opens the minds. You have to plan, and problem solve, which is a great confidence boost.

Other things that can help confidence and assertiveness:

- Challenge negative thoughts as much as you can.
- Mentally change your self-image into something more positive, like you would airbrush a photo in Photoshop.³⁸⁷ Obviously without going too far and being a bit deluded. Just add a nice filter.
- Prepare for the things you lack confidence in.
- Practise your skills to gain confidence in that area. You can get confidence through success, so practice on the task you want to succeed at. Several successes will reinforce confidence.
- Set goals, even small ones. Achieving them will give a little bit of a confidence boost.
- Look to make small amounts of progress, not leaps, in any area you lack confidence in.
- Aim for clear and open communication.
- Learn to maintain eye contact when talking to someone and use active listening.

- Learn to stand up for yourself, especially in an assertive, confident *and* kind way.
- Focus more on the things that can go right, rather than on the things that can go wrong. Realistic hope and optimism go hand in hand with confidence.
- Rather than saying sorry so often, say thank you instead. I often find myself apologising for really minor things, which I've found lacks assertiveness in some cases. The "sorry" could easily be replaced by a grateful comment. Obviously say sorry when needed!
- Be prepared to disagree with people, but do it kindly and respectfully.
- Think of the "spotlight effect", this applies anytime you feel self-conscious and you think that people are noticing you. Realistically they probably aren't. The spotlight effect is where you think you are so noticeable that you are under a spotlight, which isn't helpful thinking. No one is particularly observant; they are stuck in their own thinking worlds as much as you are. Chances are they won't notice what you have about yourself.
- Everyone deserves confidence; you owe it to yourself to be confident. Be kind to yourself when your confidence is low, however.
- Generally you get more confident as you get older, but be aware that confidence changes in different areas at different times in your life.

- Confidence is a learnt skill. Practise chatting to as many people as possible, even random strangers. Obviously in a friendly, non-threatening and non-weird way!

Manage desires

Buddhists say that if we shrink our desires, or at least manage them, then we'll reduce our suffering and be a little happier. So how do we stop desiring shiny things, junk food, attractive people, outcomes, money, oh the list goes on. In some ways, it could be a case of learning to build will power. However, will power is a limited resource, just like our attention. We are absolutely bombarded by marketing and advertising that tries to increase our desires. We need to be kind to ourselves when we desperately want random stuff. So we need to manage our limited willpower and attention well.

So what do we do to boost willpower to manage our temptations and desires?

- Managing habits, such as smoking, eating and drinking too much, is mostly an understanding of what triggers the habit.
- Avoid tempting situations that trigger your temptation (e.g. if you want to cut down on drinking, avoid going to the pub, meet at a non-alcoholic venue).
- Will power is like a muscle, don't over exercise depleted will power.

- Use imagination well to visualise putting off a desire, and use your imagination as a distraction.
- Be kind to yourself if you give in to your desires. Resolve to do better next time.
- “Surf the urge”, visualise urges as waves that crash and pass.³⁸⁸ Ride out the urges where possible, have a positive mind-set about being able to manage the habit.
- Tell people you’re trying to manage your desire for something to get support.³⁸⁹

Getting into good habits also manages our desires, this could be anything from regular tidying and de-cluttering to living with fewer things, or trying to spend less money on random things and putting it into savings. Part of this is not being annoyed at yourself when you lapse, don’t be afraid to fail and try not to get distracted when you need to practise the good habit. Also start small.

The *Zen Habits* blog by Leo Babauta is an excellent resource <https://zenhabits.net/archives/>, I recommend his e-books too.

Obsess less

I’m not referring to the medical condition Obsessive Disorder here. I mean the common term, the colloquial use. It’s easy to ruminate and turn thoughts over in our heads on any number of subjects. What I’m suggesting here is to let thoughts go and dwell less on them.

I find it very easy to get caught up and distracted by something

on my mind if I'm really into something, it often takes over to the exclusion of all else, including the here and now. I'm obsessed with this book and the subject of happiness, for instance. I could do with doing other things, but here I am typing again!

One of the first steps is by observing thought patterns and being aware of them, this might be with a type of meditation or mindfulness, or just by saying, "I'm going to get into the habit of observing my thoughts". Don't judge the thoughts and be kind to yourself. Don't forget we are all made up physically in a very similar way; your thought patterns and thinking habits will also be shared with millions of people. No one is alone in the way they think.

When you recognise circular thoughts and that you are obsessing on a subject, whether good or bad recognise it by saying, "I'm going round in circles here", that's what I say to myself, without being annoyed at myself. That might be enough to stop the rumination. If the thoughts are negative, challenge them, is there evidence for the thoughts, or are there any other ways of looking at things? Can any of your beliefs be changed, as the Stoics suggest?

If someone has wronged you, or you are angry at the news, try the "loving kindness" meditation method earlier to let go and break ruminations.

Thinking of something else and changing focus from being caught up in your thinking might be enough. That might be concentrating on your breath, although I find that often this isn't enough. I've found a useful strategy is imagining the dark thoughts as dark clouds, and seeing them blow past me, or letting go of the dark clouds. Think of things you're grateful for or have gone well in the previous day. I've found refocusing on things around me with concentration and looking for beauty in everyday

things can drag my thinking away from my latest subject I'm obsessing about. Doing a task that gets me into a flow state can also help, as can daydreaming positively, or changing my thinking onto a positive interest.

A combination of all of the above usually gets me out of the obsessing mind habits. My biggest advice is not beating yourself up when you realise it's happening and that you didn't let the thoughts go. These thinking patterns are a part of many of us and are very common. With every practice, sometimes we don't get it right, even the best sportsperson drops the ball, but they persevere and practise.

Resist consumerism

Too much choice is crippling. I have hundreds of channels on my digital TV, hundreds of computer games, Netflix streaming thousands of movies, Spotify with 10 millions tracks of music. I end up listening to digital radio stations because I can't make up my mind what to listen to and they'll choose tunes for me!!

All of consumerism is like this. It's a deluge of choice. I'm not advocating less choice here, but pointing out that too much is a challenge. In fact in some respects there's an illusion of choice, if you think through some of the products available. How many different features do all the latest mobile phones really have? Consumer choice is designed to cause some level of dissatisfaction eventually; otherwise we wouldn't be repeat customers.

We live in an attention economy in the digital realm which has the cost of our time. There's pressure on us from marketing for our retail cash but also pressure on us from our fear of missing

out (FOMO), which is a key pressure on us to put more of our precious attention into social media or digital subscriptions. Consumerism today pressurises us to buy, or to use (or lose) our time.

Advertising is absolutely everywhere; look out for how much there is. Adverts are like a plague of attempted brainwashing, and much of it pushes negative emotions, like fear (especially FOMO) or insecurity. Adverts also try to push artificial positivity such as sexiness, cheerfulness or aspiration. Look carefully at what emotion adverts are trying to cause. We can reject the sales pressure with practice. We can avoid adverts. They're often designed to make you unhappy about a part of your life to sell you something that will then make you happy. Well, for a little while. Use of ad blockers, fast forwarding through adverts and approaching them with a very critical mind can reduce our dissatisfaction in life.

There are several benefits in spending less time and money on digital subscription or reducing our spending on material things we don't need. Consider how much natural resources are used in making the trinkets, clothes, cars, and general consumer goods we buy. It's not a bad idea to cut back.

I feel that often material things we buy are to reinforce an identity that you didn't create, or to massage an ego that doesn't matter (remember Zen no mind and emptiness), or to impress other people whose opinion you shouldn't care about. None of this is a wise or positive use of our time.

As Raoul Matinez writes, “the idea at the heart of consumerism – that happiness and self-worth increase in line with material possessions – is a lie.”³⁹⁰

Collecting property is only a temporary activity with often doubtful benefits while we are alive. Material things have no benefit to us after we die and an uncertain benefit to our children or to any relatives being left our stuff. As the famous physicist Stephen Hawkins put it, "Can we truly own anything, or are we just transient custodians?"³⁹¹

A good suggestion is to spend money on experiences rather than things. But even then these can be overly sold to us.

Having children changed me politically and my perspective of the world, especially about consumerism. For instance, my daughter was registered on a marketing list for baby products while she was in hospital barely a day old. Screw that. Resist consumerism.

Consumerism is all about the latest thing. It's always an increasing cycle of upgrades, better and more. It's difficult and time-consuming to keep up with it all. It's all about the novelty of the new; the latest film, the latest fashion, the latest gizmo, the latest phone, the latest episode of the latest series. Resist the hype machine. It's easy to get very caught up in the marketing hype for the most recent films, TV series and games. Does it matter if you miss out, or if you see the newest thing months later? Reject the pressure to keep up. I catch up when I can, see what I want when convenient and buy what is most suitable. It's cheaper and easier.

You don't have to buy into the consumer culture of brand loyalty, buying luxurious items, upgrading your gizmos, buying accessories for your favourite brands, and buying matching pieces of furniture.

Maybe we need to move from wanting more stuff to having enough. When I see something new and shiny, I try to say to myself, "nah, I have enough", especially computer games. Why I

keep buying them I don't know? I can't play them all. Push back against the pressure to conform and the pressure for more.

Marketing teams push services and material stuff to enrich their shareholders and management first and us consumers second. Why give them the satisfaction?

Market forces also push prices down to compete; this, however, can impact quality. We are ending up living in a disposable economy, with wear once outfits, single-use plastics and addictively tasty consumer food products full of sugar and fat, and worst of all it's often marketed to children. It takes effort and practice to resist for our kids and us, but I think it's worth it for our health and sanity.

Repair stuff, rather than throw things away and then replace them. Don't buy into the world of in-built obsolescence; stretch the life of your stuff as long as you can. As they say, "if it isn't broke don't fix it", there's no need to continually upgrade devices or get new things if the old things are working.

Send old stuff you don't need to a charity shop. Empty the shopping web site wish list. Live a bit more frugally, humbly, minimally and try to practise buying less. I do spend on the occasional thing, obviously, but I've found it really liberating cutting out spending on crap!

Resisting consumerism benefits us by not being wasteful, by reusing, repairing, recycling and not ditching something only to get a new thing a few months later. Resist inbuilt obsolescence, trends, fashions and pressures to be up to date. It's freeing and takes away the nagging wants and adds to your satisfaction with life.

Live simply. Give more. Expect less.

I love this phrase, and it has an ancient and unknown source. I found it on my in-law's kitchen wall. I can't find who originally came up with the quote, but the full saying is...

There are five ways to happiness:

Don't Hate
Don't Worry
Live Simply
Give more
Expect Less.

I've covered the first two elsewhere, although saying "don't worry" to someone like me is like saying "don't breathe".

Living simply is part of Taoist and Zen philosophy, and it's the core of many parts of the perennial philosophy. Stripping away complexities and preconditions is one part, living minimally, with less stuff and less desires is another part of it. It's all about doing whatever we can to simplify aspects in our lives and chipping away everything that isn't necessary and doesn't make us happy. Living simply is a real benefit to our well being. There's the maxim we've seen previously of keep it simple stupid (KISS) which means just keep it all simple, funnily enough.

Giving more is about generosity. It goes hand in hand with living simply. It is a charitable and also kind mind-set. Helping people can boost your happiness.

Expecting less isn't the taking away of what you have or having a pessimistically low expectation. It's accepting enough, accepting if there isn't more, accepting when things don't turn out well. It's

the Stoic idea of planning to cope with adversity. It's also a rejection of ambition. Ambition isn't necessarily wise as I've said. It puts pressure on our time and tips the work-life balance away from life.

Managing and lowering your expectations of how things should be is a great way to help our happiness. It means being open-minded about what is going to happen, having fewer expectations about how things will pan out. You can support this by going with the flow of life, rather than being upset when it flows the way you didn't expect.

Be humble

The dictionary definition of humble is "not proud or arrogant; modest", "low in rank, importance, status", being "courteously respectful."³⁹² Being humble is, "not believing that you are important" and "ordinary; not special or very important."³⁹³ Being humble is a state of mind; removing arrogance, pretention and feeling superior to others, and it is also a lowly status in society and at work.

You don't need more prestige, power, privilege, property and responsibility than anyone else, especially to make you happy. Fame and recognition are also hollow pursuits. Try not to be too proud or boast about your achievements; keep your ego to a minimum. Try not to show off, especially your intelligence. No one likes a show off!

We need wise leaders so if you can demonstrate that you fit into the wise category then go for it, but I'd caution about becoming a leader, or chasing power and responsibility, as it isn't a good path to personal happiness. The personal benefits of leadership are

questionable. To run things well you need real dedication and commitment, you also need to sacrifice a lot for other people. Leadership is also frustrating as control can be limited. A lot of success is down to luck as well as wisdom.

Control of people or events is often impossible as we heard from the Stoics. The most powerful leaders can't necessarily control things like the economy, world events and changes in technology. Ambition for more responsibility and power has to be realistic. Thinking about the limits in control, all the sacrifices to be a good leader and the additional stress, you have to ask, is leadership or even ambition worth it? Maybe the only thing you should want to control is yourself.

Power in jobs and politics is often best avoided, in my opinion. Don't forget that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. 1000 cliché points go to me! Why would anyone want to feel superior or better than anyone else? Why would anyone want to control others in any way? In the way we structure our societies, we need people to become wise leaders, and as Lao Tzu said, a leader should be very light touch, and the people under them should barely know the leader even exists. You have to question leadership when that isn't the case.

Sometimes the "little people" can wield surprising influence, especially working together. Gaining authority, power and responsibility isn't always the route to making a mark on the world. Even the powerless are important. Everyone is so interconnected and interdependent that the smallest kindness can have a positive ripple amongst a lot more people.

Having fewer responsibilities keeps life simple and is very liberating. Being humble, being satisfied, not bragging and being low key all takes the pressure off you, and is a more authentic and honest life.

Be grateful and satisfied with what you have.

As Ruby Wax points out, "Happiness is wanting what you have, not having what you want."³⁹⁴ Gill Hasson quotes a Tibetan saying, "the moment we are content, we have enough. The problem is that we think the other way round; that we will be content only when we have enough".³⁹⁵

Rather than have more, aim for enough. Enough property, enough things, enough stuff, enough money. The desire and striving for more damages us and our environment in producing things we don't need. Be satisfied with what you have, rather than wanting more stuff you don't really need.

It's also worth considering that often the grass isn't greener on the other side; what you have may be good enough. Don't let that put you off looking at change if it's really needed and possible, just look for satisfaction where you are first.

Having satisfaction in what we have, whatever that might be, is partly achieved by learning gratitude. Being thankful for things in your life is a really positive thing. It's worth stopping and thinking about it at least once a day. I've already mentioned this, but at the end of the day you can think of three things that have gone well, or you are grateful for, especially in bed, before sleep. It can be a positive aid to sleep.

Building satisfaction with how things are is positive for our happiness. However, like the Stoics, if there is something in our power to change, which makes something in our lives better for us and others, then do it. Don't let being satisfied in your life stop you from helping others where there's an opportunity to do so.

Aim for satisfaction, contentment and enough in your life, rather than continual states of joy. Don't over think happiness or try too hard to find it. I know that's a little ironic in a book about happiness. But don't have too many expectations about the level of happiness that you need to have a great life. Enough happiness is enough.

As Lao Tzu puts it, “to know when you have enough is to be truly rich”.

Chapter 11 – Find your own route to being happier

We've looked at the ideas and theories of Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Stoicism and some psychology as ways to help our happiness. I then gave practical advice, taking themes from the philosophies. Be here now, understanding, empathy and compassion, and shrink desires are my very conveniently arranged headings for the advice, making the acronym BUS.

We do have some control to reduce some suffering in our lives and make ourselves happier. We can do this by adopting different beliefs, by living a bit more in the present moment, being kinder to ourselves and others, and reducing our wants and desires. Being calmer, happier and kinder has been the aim of this book.

There is no “one size fits all” solution to being happier and wiser. You have to find the things that work for you.

If something doesn't make you happier, ditch it, move on, don't despair or give up. You never know what's around the corner. I know that was another cliché, but keep looking and use what you know works to cope, as long as it doesn't harm yourself or others.

Self-help is fine, but we need mental health services to be taken as seriously as the other health services. Mental health services need to be properly funded and available, much of that is down to government policy, and as individuals we have little control over that. Our happiness is as important, if not more so than our health. I've felt stressed and anxious enough to use local mental health services. Please go to your doctor if you're suffering. Do it as much as you need to regardless of their resources and push to get the help.

Find your own advice for yourself. Look for helpful ideas and philosophies. Find out what works for you.

Look things up online, keep your ears and eyes open for ideas that sound like they could help you. Read books and articles from lots of different sources if possible.

As my friend Linda posted on Facebook, “Self-exploration and self-improvement can be so rewarding if done at a steady pace that suits the individual.”

If it's marketed and sold and is a quick fix, the therapy probably is rubbish. Use critical sense to decide what will work for you. Use what works for you and discard the rest.

"There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path," as the character Morpheus says to Neo in the sci-fi film *The Matrix*.³⁹⁶ We have to put our philosophy into practice. Practise, practise, practise anything that you think might help your happiness. Keep at it. If it doesn't work, try something else. Keep going and persevere, because you never know how close you are to achieving your goal. Just as an example of an activity that makes me happy, I nearly gave up learning to swim just weeks before a major breakthrough. You might be about to find something that brightens things just a little and works really well to make you happier, so don't give up!

There are good ways out there to get better at being calm, kind and wise, philosophies like Taoism, Zen, Stoicism and ideas in psychology teach us a lot and can help us. But there are other sources out there that might be more suitable for you. Please use the advice in this book as inspiration, but please do research other things further.

Also, remember that sometimes the journey is more interesting than the destination in life. Even on buses!

Have an ideas book and regularly write any helpful ideas down.

I have a small blank sheet sketchbook to doodle in and write notes from any books, articles or anything I see or hear on TV and radio. Wisdom and ideas for happiness can literally be found anywhere. Keep an eye open. You can use mind maps, doodles or anything to help make the ideas memorable. Keep coming back to the ideas books. Always aim to write many more solutions to the problems than actual problems down in the ideas book. Aim to write ideas to help create positive change to improve your happiness and the happiness of others.

You can write down some notes and lists in the ideas book:

- Write down what makes you happy.
- Write ideas for things that help your mental health and raises your mood.
- List the thoughts and beliefs that make you unhappy and list alternate viewpoints.
- Write down things you've read or have seen that can help your happiness.

- Write down three things that you are grateful for or have gone well each day for two weeks.
- Write down your values and what really matters to you. Put these in priority order and revisit them.
- Write down what you enjoy and what you're good at.
- List what you can and can't control.
- Plan for an awful mood and list what would help improve it.
- Create mind maps to brainstorm and refine solutions to solve your problems.
- List quotes that you see online or read in books.
- Write down maxims, sayings, mottos or clever philosophical thoughts.

Write a help sheet or poster of maxims, helpful ideas, mottos and phrases. Make it memorable.

Create a poster or A4 sheet of the best ideas and advice to yourself from your ideas book.

You could effectively make your own BUS route here. Take all your values, what makes you happy, all the ideas you've gathered and now create a list of maxims, helpful ideas, mottos and phrases. These could be some from this book, feel free to borrow them. Try

and group the advice to yourself as best you can, and then create about three headings and see if you can make a memorable abbreviation out of it.

Keep the number of words that make up all your maxims to fewer than 500 words to be able to type up and fit on one sheet.

Once you've ordered things, print out a copy and stick it up somewhere, store it online and try and remember and learn the things that help make you happy.

Try practising the things that help you from this book.

Don't be hard on yourself when anything you practise doesn't work. I've said that loads, but it helps. Find what does work, use it and keep looking for other sources of help for your happiness if necessary. Don't expect to ever find massive amounts of happiness from any single self-help book or any single source. You'll need to look for several sources of advice. You'll find that the little bits of help will add up. If something like mindfulness helps then keep it up, but don't put pressure on yourself to succeed.

See if any of the below is helpful from the BUS route:

Be here now:

1. Practise awareness and concentrating on the present moment. Be here now.
2. Change your relationship with time. Destroy the past and future where it doesn't interfere with learning from your mistakes or essential plans for the future.

Remember, every situation is temporary.

3. Try to look at things more holistically, that you're not alone but are a valued part of a whole. Try to look at the big picture and try to look at a longer view on time.

Taoism, Zen and Stoicism teach this.

4. Look at how your beliefs about a situation may not be accurate.

5. Don't believe your thoughts. Diminish the power of your thoughts. You are more than your thinking.

Challenge negative thoughts.

6. Limit the things that increase your worries, unease, anger and insecurity, these might be the news, social media or screen time distractions generally. Try and reconnect with reality.

7. With any adversity in your life, try to think a bit more philosophically, or even try to think a little “spiritually” (in the modern sense of the term spiritually).

Understanding, empathy and compassion:

8. Practise understanding, empathy and compassion. Especially practise self-kindness as well as kindness to others.

9. Remember how interconnected, interdependent and similar we all are. It can reduce frustration with situations and other people if you recognise we're all similarly flawed.

10. Help those around you to be happy; your family, friends, neighbours and local community, it'll help your happiness too.

11. Choose your influences well. What you choose to focus your attention on often defines your thinking and impacts on your happiness. If you spend too much time absorbed in negative, hateful and fear-mongering media and people it could rub off on you.

12. Focus more on positive thoughts, emotions, actions and motivations than negative ones. Focus more on positive benefits rather than negative consequences. Focus more on activities you find positive and fulfilling.

13. You owe it to yourself and others to aim to be calm and kind. Manage your fear and anger, where possible.

Shrink desires:

14. Reduce your wants and desires for property, money, people and stuff.

15. Reduce expectations about what you want to happen.

16. Accept what you can't control and move on, but take responsibility for your beliefs, thinking and actions which you can often control.

17. Limit or try to avoid things that mess with your head or make you miserable: Alcohol, drugs, caffeine, negative people, the news, social media, porn, junk foods. Only you'll know what those things are.

18. Try to look from a different perspective at the issues

worrying you. You can change how you want things to be by looking at things from different angles. Try to build some realistic optimism.

19. Don't chase happiness too much. Aim for contentment, satisfaction and "enough".

20. As I've said, don't beat yourself up if you try and improve yourself and you go wrong from time to time.

Try and be “wiser”

Think what wisdom looks like and what wise advice a wise friend or relative would give in any difficult situation that you might find yourself in. It's helpful to get a different perspective, to depersonalise an issue that might be causing you upset. Trying to be wise is also an ethical choice; this is trying to resolve things for the common good. Try and “be the change you want to see”.³⁹⁷ Wisdom is applying our knowledge well. Being wise can make you and others happy with compassionate, well thought through and fair decision making.

Happiness shouldn't be a selfish endeavour. Sometimes the only way to make a better world is to be a better you.

- Try to give kind advice to others. Pass on anything you learn.
- Be there for others and be a good friend and try to give advice you'd like to receive.
- Make as many other people happy as you can, without neglecting yourself or burning yourself out.

- Practise helpful ideas that you learn, when you can.

Conclusion

Use lots of different sources of wisdom to find happiness, not just one source, or wisdom from one "guru" or writer. Always think critically and ask questions, write stuff down and think, "What has relieved misery for people in the past, and what can make me happy now"?

Please don't give up on it. A tiny bit more happiness for everyone can be found, and we can all try to be a bit more calm and kind.

Having compassion and caring about yourself and others might help improve your happiness. Caring can be aided by an awareness of the present moment and by managing your desires. By using material in this book, my hope is that you can turn caring from a possible source of anxiety to a source of strength, especially by caring about the things that you truly value.

In the words of Dr Seuss, from the book *The Lorax*:

“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
Nothing is going to get better. It's not.”³⁹⁸

Thank You

No, really, thanks for reading. I hope it helps you find a little bit extra happiness on the bus or anywhere else. Yay!

Resources

Some downloads and handouts can be found here:

www.glennspace.com/bus-route/

Recommended reading

If you want to get a good overview of some of the ideas in this book, take a look at the below:

Taoism

Tao the Watercourse Way, Alan Watts, Arkana, 1975

The Tao of Pooh and the Te of Piglet, Benjamin Hoff, Egmont, 2002

Understanding Eastern Philosophy, Mel Thompson, Hodder Education, 2012

Zen Buddhism

The Way of Zen, Alan Watts, Pantheon Books, 1957

Zen Mind, Beginners Mind, Shunryu Suzuki, Shambhala, 1970

Hardcore Zen, Punk Rock, Monster Movies and the Truth about Reality, Brad Warner, Wisdom Publications, 2003

Stoicism

Philosophies for Life and other Dangerous Situations, Jules Evans, Rider, 2012

Stoicism and the Art of Happiness, Donald Robertson, Teach Yourself, Hodder & Stroughton, 2017

Psychology

10 Keys to Happier Living, Vanessa King, Headline, 2016

A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled, Ruby Wax, Penguin Life, 2016

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff and it's all small stuff, Richard Carlson,
Hyperion, 1997

Mindfulness, Be mindful, Live in the moment, Gill Hasson, Capstone,
2013

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Front cover photo by Pau Casals on Unsplash.

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