

## Being Human and our Conditioned Response

... Because you are human. And just because of the simple fact that you are human, you find yourself heir to an inherent unsatisfactoriness in life which simply will not go away. You can suppress it from your awareness for a time. You can distract yourself for hours on end, but it always comes back--usually when you least expect it. All of a sudden, seemingly out of the blue, you sit up, take stock, and realize your actual situation in life.

There you are, and you suddenly realize that you are spending your whole life just barely getting by. You keep up a good front. You manage to make ends meet somehow and look OK from the outside. But those periods of desperation, those times when you feel everything caving in on you, you keep those to yourself. You are a mess. And you know it. But you hide it beautifully. Meanwhile, way down under all that you just know there has got to be some other way to live, some better way to look at the world, some way to touch life more fully. You click into it by chance now and then. You get a good job. You fall in love. You win the game, and for a while, things are different. Life takes on a richness and clarity that makes all the bad times and humdrum fade away. The whole texture of your experience changes and you say to yourself, "OK, now I've made it; now I will be happy". But then that fades, too, like smoke in the wind. You are left with just a memory. That and a vague awareness that something is wrong.

But there is really another whole realm of depth and sensitivity available in life, somehow, you are just not seeing it. You wind up feeling cut off. You feel insulated from the sweetness of experience by some sort of sensory cotton. You are not really touching life. You are not making it again. And then even that vague awareness fades away, and you are back to the same old reality. The world looks like the usual foul place, which is boring at best. It is an emotional roller coaster, and you spend a lot of your time down at the bottom of the ramp, yearning for the heights.

So what is wrong with you? Are you a freak? No. You are just human. And you suffer from the same malady that infects every human being. It is a monster inside all of us, and it has many arms: Chronic tension, lack of genuine compassion for others, including the people closest to you, feelings being blocked up, and emotional deadness. Many, many arms. None of us is entirely free from it. We may deny it. We try to suppress it. We build a whole culture around hiding from it, pretending it is not there, and distracting ourselves from it with goals and projects and status. But it never goes away. It is a constant undercurrent in every thought and every perception; a little wordless voice at the back of the head saying, "Not good enough yet. Got to have more. Got to make it better. Got to be better." It is a monster, a monster that manifests everywhere in subtle forms.

Go to a party. Listen to the laughter, that brittle-tongued voice that says fun on the surface and fear underneath. Feel the tension, feel the pressure. Nobody really relaxes. They are faking it. Go to a ball game. Watch the fan in the stand. Watch the irrational fit of anger. Watch the uncontrolled frustration bubbling forth from people that masquerades under the guise of enthusiasm, or team spirit. Booming, cat-calls and unbridled egotism in the name of team loyalty. Drunkenness, fights in the stands. These are the people trying desperately to release tension from within. These are not people who are at peace with themselves. Watch the news on TV. Listen to the lyrics in popular songs. You find the same theme repeated over and over in variations. Jealousy, suffering, discontent and stress.

Life seems to be a perpetual struggle, some enormous effort against staggering odds. And what is our solution to all this dissatisfaction? We get stuck in the 'If only' syndrome. If only I had more money, then I would be happy. If only I can find somebody who really loves me, if only I can lose 20 pounds, if only I had a color TV, Jacuzzi, and curly hair, and on and on forever. **So where does all this junk come from and more important, what can we do about it? It comes from the conditions of our own minds. It is deep, subtle and pervasive set of mental habits, a Gordian knot which we have built up bit by bit and we can unravel just the same way, one piece at a time. We can tune up our awareness, dredge up each separate piece and bring it out into the light. We can make the unconscious conscious, slowly, one piece at a time.**

The essence of our experience is change. Change is incessant. Moment by moment life flows by and it is never the same. Perpetual alteration is the essence of the perceptual universe. A thought springs up in you head and half a second later, it is gone. In comes another one, and that is gone too. A sound strikes your ears and then silence. Open your eyes and the world pours in, blink and it is gone. People come into your life and they leave again. Friends go, relatives die. Your

fortunes go up and they go down. Sometimes you win and just as often you lose. It is incessant: change, change, change. No two moments ever the same.

There is not a thing wrong with this. It is the nature of the universe. But human culture has taught us some odd responses to this endless flowing. We categorize experiences. We try to stick each perception, every mental change in this endless flow into one of three mental pigeon holes. It is good, or it is bad, or it is neutral. Then, according to which box we stick it in, we perceive with a set of fixed habitual mental responses. If a particular perception has been labeled '*good*', then we try to freeze time right there. We grab onto that particular thought, we fondle it, we hold it, we try to keep it from escaping. When that does not work, we go all-out in an effort to repeat the experience which caused that thought. Let us call this mental habit '*grasping*'.

Over on the other side of the mind lies the box labeled 'bad'. When we perceive something '*bad*', we try to push it away. We try to deny it, reject it, get rid of it any way we can. We fight against our own experience. We run from pieces of ourselves. Let us call this mental habit '*rejecting*'. Between these two reactions lies the neutral box. Here we place the experiences which are neither good nor bad. They are tepid, neutral, uninteresting and boring. We pack experience away in the neutral box so that we can ignore it and thus return our attention to where the action is, namely our endless round of desire and aversion. This category of experience gets robbed of its fair share of our attention. Let us call this mental habit '*ignoring*'. **The direct result of all this lunacy is a perpetual treadmill race to nowhere, endlessly pounding after pleasure, endlessly fleeing from pain, endlessly ignoring 90 percent of our experience. Then wondering why life tastes so flat. In the final analysis, it's a system that does not work.**

**No matter how hard you pursue pleasure and success, there are times when you fail. No matter how fast you flee, there are times when pain catches up with you. And in between those times, life is so boring you could scream. Our minds are full of opinions and criticisms. We have built walls all around ourselves and we are trapped with the prison of our own lies and dislikes. We suffer.**

[. . .]

. . . there are plenty of times when we are happy. Aren't there? No, there are not. It just seems that way. Take any moment when you feel really fulfilled and examine it closely. Down under the joy, you will find that subtle, all-pervasive undercurrent of tension, that no matter how great the moment is, it is going to end. No matter how much you just gained, you are either going to lose some of it or spend the rest of your days guarding what you have got and scheming how to get more. And in the end, you are going to die. In the end, you lose everything. It is all transitory.

Sounds pretty bleak, doesn't it? Luckily it's not; not at all. It only sounds bleak when you view it from the level of ordinary mental perspective, the very level at which the treadmill mechanism operates. **Down under that level lies another whole perspective, a completely different way to look at the universe. It is a level of functioning where the mind does not try to freeze time, where we do not grasp onto our experience as it flows by, where we do not try to block things out and ignore them. It is a level of experience beyond good and bad, beyond pleasure and pain. It is a lovely way to perceive the world, and it is a learnable skill. It is not easy, but is learnable. . .**

Passage from eBook: "*Mindfulness In Plain English*" by Ven. Henepola Gunaratana  
[http://www.urbandharma.org/pdf/mindfulness\\_in\\_plain\\_english.pdf](http://www.urbandharma.org/pdf/mindfulness_in_plain_english.pdf)