

Let's Stop Trying so Hard and Start Enjoying Life!

I recently watched a quite shocking TV show called Child Genius in which totally stressed out children were pushed by horribly competitive parents to excel at completely pointless tasks, such as memorising the order of a load of randomly shuffled playing cards. One of the key themes of this show seemed to be the importance of trying really hard to out-do your competitors to become the very best at any number of more or less useless activities.

Watching this show, got me to thinking about how distorted our society's values have become. Of course, trying to be good at something really difficult has its place, or we would not be able to enjoy virtuoso concert pianists or Wimbledon. But in my humble opinion, trying really hard has now got out of hand in our society, and has some dangerous consequences, not the least being the fact that most of us now seem stressed out virtually all the time.

I teach three Infinite Tai Chi classes a week and while I try not to stare at my students as they move, in case I accidentally intimidate them, I cannot help noticing that usually most of them look tense or nervous. Their shoulders are rigid, their brows are furrowed, and they are definitely not smiling as they move.

After the classes, my students usually tell me how much they have enjoyed them, but I am convinced that they would enjoy them more if they stopped trying so hard to get their tai chi moves right. I do tell them that Infinite Tai Chi is almost infinitely complex, and it takes years before we really do it well, so we might as well relax and enjoy the moment. But most of us seem to have lost the ability to do this, or maybe human beings never had it?

I think the worst thing about trying so hard to get everything right is that we miss the infinite grace and beauty that is always available to us in this moment now. We are surrounded by the magic and mystery of life moment to moment. Yet most of the time, we do not even notice it, because we are lost in a train of thoughts about the future or the past. We actually spend virtually all of our lives preoccupied with trying to control the future or re-do the past - and how well does this work? We think that if we try hard enough, we can somehow create a happier, more fulfilling future for ourselves that will be so much better than our present reality, but this is a HUGE mistake.

I still clearly remember revising insanely hard for my 'A' Levels because my teachers had convinced me that if I got into university, I would basically be in heaven. Imagine my disappointment when I found that I was really miserable for most of the time during my three years at Liverpool University. By the way, this wasn't the university's fault – I just took my depressed self with me and no one knew how to un-depress me!

It took me a long time to learn from that one big mistake, but now I really do not try too hard to do anything, and I certainly do not assume that if I sacrifice myself in the present, I will earn myself a better future. I now know without a shadow of a doubt that life just does not work like that. If we are not happy now, we are very unlikely to be happy tomorrow or the next day.

I also now tend only to make a real effort to get better at those activities that I really enjoy, because I have realised that it is so much easier to succeed at something we enjoy, rather than trying to master a skill or subject that does not interest or inspire us. If we love something – a foreign language for example - we will

love making an effort to get better at it. On the other hand, if we do not have a passion for learning something, we will probably never master it, however much we try.

So, one key question to ask ourselves is, 'What really makes me happy in life? What activities really make my heart sing? Then, once we answer ourselves using our heart-centred intuition, rather than reason or logic, we just need to focus most of our time and attention on these activities. Simple!

The next key question is, 'How can I be happy right this minute?'

One key answer is that we need to learn to relax into the present moment, whilst totally trusting that the future will unfold perfectly for our highest good and the highest good of our loved ones. Now, this does not mean that our personality-self will always enjoy what the future brings, but it does mean that we can absolutely trust that in the long run all will be well.

Unfortunately, when faced with a constant bombardment of totally negative and frightening 'news', it is not at all easy to place our faith in some kind of universal wisdom, or higher power, that is always on our side. All I can say is that since I put my faith in a totally benevolent, all-loving, higher power, I have become much less stressed and much more open to living my life in the infinite beauty of each passing moment.

I also think it really helps us to stop trying and start enjoying life if we contemplate from time to time on the fact that everything in our world is incredibly impermanent, and that our own little life is extremely fragile and brief. When the playwright Dennis Potter knew he was about to die, he stated that when you know that you are near death:

The only thing you can know for sure is the present tense and the newness becomes so vivid that- almost in a perverse sort of way - I'm almost serene ... I can celebrate life .. The newness of everything is absolutely wondrous!

I find that so inspiring. But I also know from my own struggles with anxiety about my own future, that just surrendering into the beauty of life moment to moment is quite some life-skill to master. Never mind! I also know that the more I practise taking very short breaks from constantly thinking or worrying about life, to just pause, breathe, and really appreciate the moment, the easier my life seems to become.

I really do not want to come across as a paragon of living in the 'Power of Now'. For example, I still keep noticing, virtually every time I meditate, that my mind still has an incredibly strong tendency to wander off to rehearse the future. But I also now notice that when I do remember to just stop and 'smell the roses', life is beautiful beyond measure.

So this September - as autumn begins to cast a gorgeous red and golden glow over the natural world - please take plenty of mini breaks from trying to control every aspect of your life. Stop trying so hard to get everything right, breathe deeply for a moment or two, and then really enjoy the incredibly fragile, but awe inspiring, natural beauty of our ever-changing universe. Or, if the weather is frightful, stop everything you are trying to do for 10 minutes and slowly enjoy a comforting cup of tea or coffee with a delicious slice of something 'naughty but nice'.

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