

Chapter Seventeen

Happiness

When we have good health, eat well, exercise well, have a good job, a fabulous partner, healthy children, a great house, exciting hobbies, and no money worries, you would imagine that our lives would be blissfully content and happy. So why is it that many get this far and remain unhappy? And why is it that many others fall far short of such achievements and status, yet remain permanently happy and content with life?

Part of this is down to genetics, which can predispose some to a life of depression, and others to be happy regardless of circumstance. It is a harsh reality that some of us have a raw deal regarding our inherited happiness set-point. However, genetics is but one factor affecting our happiness and contentment, or there would be no point in me writing this chapter.

The human brain is very dynamic – very neuroplastic – so genetics guide us more than they dictate. You know yourself that your personality has changed since childhood, so you have already experienced nurture overriding nature. But we can affect much deeper changes to ourselves than we might imagine. Rather than allow social forces and random changes to sculpt who we are, we can choose the path we take.

As I studied the books I used for research, I cherry picked a set of concepts that I have adopted ever since in my own life, to change how I behave, and hopefully raise my happiness set point. One of these new concepts was to simply *try* to be happier. This is almost a taboo concept

in the UK, I should add. The very idea of trying to be happier is generally greeted with much scepticism, the pervading belief being that the acquisition of a falsely happy persona is just downright stupid and annoying.

But there are two points here I want to cover. First that it is plain to my eyes that to be happy is a pretty unarguably positive thing to aim for. If achieving it involves a transition through simulated happiness, then so be it. To become athletic when initially weak must surely mean an interim period of small muscles sat atop a weak frame. But that is a sign of progress, not a cause for ridicule or abandonment of the fitness drive. Second, that a fundamental part of our difficulty in making changes in our attitude to life is that we have precious little education on the concept in school. The teaching of mental, emotional, social and spiritual growth, and of the setbacks that accompany them is only occasionally, and sporadically taught in schools. It appears that matters such as the methods of irrigation of land in an alien country, or stories of Kings and Queens from centuries past, are deemed more important than the teaching of ways to live more healthily. This baffles and frustrates me – fundamentals are bypassed in favour of detailed digressions into matters meaningless to most people's lives.

Rick Foster and Greg Higgs wanted to explore the concept of happiness in an empirical manner, and so travelled to various countries in search of the happiest person in each locale they visited. The summary of their findings in "How we choose to be happy"^{HH} is not entirely predictable, and makes an interesting read as a consequence. Indeed, the number one habit of happy people appears to contradict the common consensus that happy people are just happy by nature. Foster and Higgs found that most very happy people actually make a conscious effort to be happy. They do indeed work on their happiness, and intentionally seek to take the happy route through life. Whatever happiness that was innate was seemingly not enough on its own to propel them to the high levels of happiness they have achieved in their lives. They had to keep working at it. Most of us do not even try to be happy in the first place!

They worked out what made them happy, and made that a key focus in their lives. When they did encounter problems and had bad experiences, they did not succumb to these negatives, but worked around them and eked out some positives. They used these undesirable events as teachers. And just as they steered around problems, they allowed life to guide them rather than forcing life to be at their beck and call – they stayed flexible, going with the flow, taking risks and embracing the spontaneous. Accompanying the flow was an awareness of the world around them, and a deeper appreciation of many facets of life that the rest of us take for granted. And from this flowed a natural tendency to give, as a thanks for all that they received. Not on a one for one basis, where a favour by one is returned by another. But a giving of goods or services from the heart, with no expectation of return.

And finally, Foster and Higgs learnt that very happy people tend to be very honest with themselves and others, and disciplined in their lives, taking responsibility for their actions. If they promise to do something, they will make sure it happens. If they make a mistake, they own up, and seek to make up for their failing. Whilst there are a number of social situations where honesty is a dangerous policy, the ongoing consequences of honesty is that you are true to yourself and others and can relax more. You have nothing to hide. This is one of the concepts that I have personally tried to adopt for many months now, and one that I really enjoy working at. Honesty is a key aspect of Taoism, as it works hand in hand in reducing the grip that the ego has on many of us, as you will learn later in the book.

Absent in these key findings was any mention of 'pleasure'. Most people readily confuse pleasure with happiness. And do so repeatedly, failing to heed the lessons of the past – that the fabulous new gadget in the post now will make them happy. Pleasure is transient. It is like the icing on the cake. The novelty of the gadget will wear off within a few days, and a restlessness will kick in until the next pleasure 'fix'. Happiness is, in a sense, an ongoing contentment with life. To be happy is much less a focus on things and events than it is an attitude that allows us to go with the flow, and enjoy anything and everything that might happen. We are

not caught up in expectation. Happiness is in effect a by-product of the right attitude. The more we seek happiness, like sleep, it will elude us. Happiness is the 'glow' that comes from an ability to cope with whatever life brings, seeing beauty and fun wherever it might manifest. You only have to look at children to see this in action – they do not rely on pre-conceived ideas of what will make them happy to guide their behaviours, and so find happiness in many things.

I remember on one particularly wet Saturday afternoon that only seven of us turned up for our informal game of soccer in the local park. We were lucky enough to be challenged to a game by a group of children, all in their early teens. Until, that is, we realised how much more skilled they were than us. But what stuck in my memory most was the stark contrast in attitudes of the two teams. The children simply laughed more – finding late tackles and trick plays funny, whereas we adults had seen it all before and could no longer laugh. These children found exquisite pleasure in belly flopping into puddles. True, they would not be the ones to clean their muddy clothes, but they demonstrated spontaneous happiness. They were living in the moment, and were happy doing whatever, going with the flow. Imagine actually planning to go to the park to dive into puddles. Even children would not do it. And if they did plan to do so, they would not have enjoyed it as much. It was not so much that the puddle diving was pleasurable, but that the capacity to be spontaneous demonstrated a happy state of mind. A liberated mindset.

If you embark on an activity, and invest your future pleasure in that event, you are focusing on pleasure, and are not keeping a happy mindset. Seeking and expecting pleasure in a meal will fail to make you happy if the meal is not up to standard. And if the meal is great, then how do you sustain the pleasure when it is finished? A happy mindset is one that does indeed enjoy a good meal, and appreciate it more deeply also, but that does not cling to that pleasure.

As I mentioned earlier, a successful career and family life does not guarantee happiness. Success is not readily correlated with happiness. The right attitude, as you have seen, is correlated with happiness. Even those with lives impoverished by most standards can be happy by virtue

of their attitude to life, making the most of their circumstances. But success coupled with the right attitude can indeed make for a really rich and fulfilling life. Just do not expect attainments themselves to make you happy.

Nor should you get caught up in material things. The British popular science journal, 'The New Scientist' explored the effect of phones, the Internet and computers on our lives (Issue 2739, Dec 2009). Daniel Goleman reported that our investment in these 'vital' components of modern life is taking us away from face-to-face contact and actually depressing us. These electronic devices are in effect enslaving us. You can get a sense of this when you observe exactly how often you check your email. Psychologist Tim Kasser of Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, has shown that a focus on material things makes us less happy. It also lowers our self-esteem, and tends to make us seek material comparisons with others, investing our happiness in the superiority of the things we own to what others around us own. Indeed, any form of comparison is doomed to destabilise our health.

Addiction to these modern technologies, and especially to games consoles, damages our sense of autonomy and self competence. We are bound by the rules of a machine, and removed from interactions with humans. However, if we seek out just the *experiences* of modern technology, and do not allow ourselves to be *controlled* by these devices, then we are relatively free from their harms. And this leads to a key concept. Research has shown that we are much more likely to be happy by choosing experiences instead of material things. Much better to rent a few DVDs rather than 'own' one.

There is a neat mechanism you can employ to minimise the chance that material things will enslave you. Whilst the title of his inspiring book, "Infinite self – 33 Steps to reclaiming your inner power" is a bit suspect in my view, Stuart Wilde has a massive amount of wisdom to offer the reader.¹⁵ He says that it is best to see the material things in your life, including your house and car, as being *on loan* to you. This kind of thinking is very liberating, and you have seen that a key to happiness is a liberation

from attachment. If your computer is seen as on loan by the world to you, as long as you respect this entitlement, then its grip on you is neutralised. To reinforce this 'loan' concept, just remember that you take no material things with you when you die.

Alas, modern life has indoctrinated many into the wrong kind of thinking. The focus on material things, and the inherent short-termism that this entails is no better illustrated than with the motor car. We are almost universally caught up in the 'need' to own a car, but fail to see the global and long term consequences. Until recently, that is, when the polluting effects of cars has become a hot topic. But this obsession with cars has caught up with us in many other ways, and this form of material possession has been hugely damaging to the quality of modern life. It is worth detailing precisely how far cars have damaged our lifestyles.

It was not long before cars caused the scarring of the landscape, as more and more roads and motorways were built. The ability to drive became almost a mandate to drive. Home and work could now be separated not just by miles, but by tens of miles, making foot and cycle travel unfeasible, adding to the pollution, tiring out the commuter before they have started work, and effectively extending the length of the working day. The exhausted traveller is then less likely to have the time and energy for quality home life. Life balance is damaged. And the excessive travel can create farcical situations where someone living in Cardiff can be travelling to Bristol to work in the same type of job that sees a Bristol man travel to Cardiff. Likewise, shops are spread more thinly, with many large shops sited out of town, mostly inaccessible to those without transport.

The status of the car is also elevated ahead of that of the pedestrian. That a human in a polluting car so often has right of way over a non-polluting human crossing the road is madness if you are to really think about it. But when we get behind the wheel of a car, the car changes our behaviour. It corrupts us. Pedestrians are humans like us, but they move much more slowly and are relegated in importance in our eyes. So much so that most drivers will not indicate at a roundabout to inform a pedestrian of their intent. The pedestrian has to blindly wait before

crossing, or guess by the angle of the wheels whether the car will exit the roundabout or not. The failure to indicate is actually a social failure on the part of the driver, but he is blinded to this by the empowering effect of the car. It is technically also a driving failure, although very few motorists know that the need to signal intent extends to *all* road users. When a pedestrian is trying to cross the road, he is indeed a road user. But we fail to embrace such concepts because we allow the power of the car, this material thing, to corrupt our humanity.

Children rarely walk or cycle to school now, and the roads get clogged with the morning and evening transport of these children to and from school. This has the additional effect of removing some vital exercise from their lives. And a brisk walk, as we have already seen, is likely to sharpen their minds at the start of the school day. There is an additional, much more pervasive and damaging impact of the car on children. The sheer volume of street bound cars, both parked and mobile, means that the majority of streets have become no-go areas for most children, at least here in the UK. This problem is exacerbated by a media driven neurotic level of concern about child abduction and abuse that pushes children indoors, where they are apt to engage in the services of electronic devices. They not only become couch potatoes, but fail to engage with neighbours. A barrier of misunderstanding and alienation has grown between children and adults, in part because of our obsession with cars. And this has a long term damaging effect, as childhood is left behind and the reality of the real world is thrust that much harder upon children as they become young adults.

The loss of social bonding between adults that the car has also damaged is part of an additional set of problems with modern life. Big Industry has indoctrinated us to be consumers, and to focus on material things ahead of people. Traditions and traditional values have been swamped into misuse by the influence of capitalist society. Traditional recipes and herbal treatments have been marginalised and disqualified by Big Food, Big Medicine and Big Pharma. The intensity of modern life, with its heavy pressures to “keep up with the Jones’s”, and to work long hours has driven us away from the subtle things in life. We no longer have

the time nor inclination to stop, look and listen to the world around us. We are racing on, seeking ever bigger fixes in the form of things or events, forgetting even to properly rest.

The default focus of governments in the UK, US and beyond is the economy, with the long held view that the wealth of the nation is key to their happiness. Part of the reason for the selection of this criteria is very simple. It is easy to measure and thereby relatively easy to control. It is quantifiable. By contrast, even though ultimately more important than money, the happiness of the people is a matter of quality and therefore considerably harder to measure, and enormously hard to control or influence.

However, according to Michael Baum, the Professor Emeritus of Surgery at University College London, there are very good measures of happiness. oncology departments regularly use psychometric instruments to determine well being. This is of particular value when determining if the impact of a cancer treatment programme is likely to be too damaging to well being, and hence should be avoided. Treatment may extend the life of a sufferer a little, but the quality of the extended life may be too low to justify that treatment. And the difficulty of measurement did not stop the remote Himalayan country of Bhutan from making the happiness of the people its number one priority. Yes, Bhutan put happiness ahead of the economy. Ahead of money matters.

They are somehow able to measure 'Gross National Happiness', and use it to make decisions. Not only have they banned street advertising as a consequence, believing its influence to be too manipulative, but they also stopped smoking in public places, on the grounds that this would have a net positive effect on overall health and happiness. But my favourite story from this small country concerns the introduction of the first set of traffic lights at a roundabout previously controlled by a human who directed the traffic with hand signals. There was such an outcry that the higher cost human was reinstated. Quality of life usurped cost. Happiness took priority over money.

Bhutan has one of the lowest ratios of earnings between the rich and poor, this being a key indicator of the health of a population.⁵¹ In those

countries with very high ratios, most people are patently aware that they are well down the income ladder, with many frequently falling into the dangerous game of making comparisons. And those at the top are rarely helped by their excess wealth, such high incomes making them defensive as they look down the income ladder to those below who are after their jobs. The greater the income equality, the fiercer they have to defend their status.

Sadly, in economy-driven countries, the focus often eventually becomes one of cost-cutting. It is like cutting off your nose to spite your face. Rarely are traffic wardens seen wandering the streets, their hours drastically reduced, so that cars are frequently parked in ways that obstruct pedestrians and blindsight other drivers. Local council budgets are cut so much that roads become degraded with potholes, damaging cars, which result in law suits against the councils that deplete their tight budgets further still.

Returning to more direct impacts on happiness, there is one form of pleasure that does appear to enhance happiness. Laughter. And the rib bruising variety is wonderfully invigorating for both the soul and the immune system. Laughter follows the cue to not take life too seriously. If we laugh enough, the body moves away from a defensive posture to a life embracing one. My theory is that if you can laugh, then this tells your body that the environment is safe, so it can activate the parasympathetic nervous system to put us into a state of rest and repair.

If you choose to adopt any of the happiness-promoting ideas presented here, such as a happiness focused attitude, then it is crucial that you remember the pitfalls that can blight such an adoption. You must persevere, and be happy! And one final word on happiness. A happy, fun, enthusiastic outlook on life has been shown to result in a reduced chance of heart-attack or stroke (2010 European Heart Journal).

Chapter Eighteen

Force of habit

F. M. Alexander was an actor, and the sore throats he periodically suffered from badly affected his acting. ^{US} His doctor was at a loss as to the cause, so suggested periods of rest. When these failed to effect a cure, Alexander did some thinking. He noticed that lengthy periods of chatting to friends never resulted in sore throats, so he wondered exactly what he was doing differently when acting. Alexander was subsequently able to determine that his posture was causing his sore throats, using mirrors to diligently observe how he held himself differently when acting and when chatting. Now here is a matter that bemuses and amazes me – he observed his posture not for minutes, but for months. This demonstrates a fantastic and fanatical degree of patience.

These sustained observations appeared necessary because of the subtle nature of what he was investigating. Early on, he determined that his posture differed markedly when acting to that when casually chatting. He saw that his acting posture caused a compression of his larynx, that ultimately caused his throat to become sore. It was when he tried to correct it, however, that he had the greatest difficulties. As soon as he tried to change his posture *and* also to act, his posture reverted back to the faulty position. But he was, as I have said, a very patient man, eventually able to develop a technique for making the required postural change. He would repeatedly start acting, and each time simply *think* about the new posture, without adopting it. This would then bring the new posture into clear focus. Eventually, after repeated visualisations, he

would apply the new posture, and start the change process, his mind now familiar with the new concept and therefore more accepting of it.

Key to his observations was that the intellectual value in a new way of doing something initially holds little sway against existing habits, *even when those existing habits have not served us well*. We repeatedly underestimate the control our habits have over us. One of the obvious reasons that a new habit struggles to replace an existing one is that the old and new behaviours exist and operate in different parts of the brain. The existing habit is run on autopilot by the subconscious, and the new behaviour that we want to become a habit, labours away in the slow conscious mind. Remember when you were learning to drive a manual car – how long it took to find the biting point, and to change gears smoothly. Yet given enough experience, if the instructor could distract you long enough for your subconscious to take over, you would carry out the gear changes without even knowing you were doing so. In light of this, it is worth contemplating the degree to which your subconscious does the driving for you the next time you cannot remember large portions of your journey, so engrossed were you in other matters.

By trying to move a new habit from the conscious mind to subconscious autonomy, you also confront an additional problem. In spite of not serving you well, the existing habit is inside your comfort zone, and the new way normally feels alien and uncomfortable. Your subconscious wants to reject it, since it does not want to move out of the comfort zone. For example, when trying to correct poor technique on your tennis backhand, the new method will tax your muscles in a different way. A better way, but something that initially feels alien. Despite being a well established correct technique, the new way will initially feel awkward, and your mind will urge you to resist and revert back to the comfort of your existing 'dodgy', but ever so familiar, sliced backhand.

And here comes another problem with our natural resistance to change – when we perform badly using the new method, we rapidly reject it as unworthy of further effort. We must remain diligent, repeating the new method, overriding the instinct to reject it. If we apply it often enough, it will bed in, and bear the fruits of its correctness. The

subconscious will eventually start rejecting the old habit in favour of the new way when it can see tangible benefits. But until then, you must be stubborn in order to avoid regression. Also, if you do regress, there is a common inclination to treat such a regression as a sign of failure. But you must see it as merely a temporary setback, and get back on track in order to eventually succeed.

There is another pitfall to be wary of. If we start making progress with the new habit, we may plateau, and then fail to sense any progress at all. This may dishearten us and cause us to lose interest. We may actually not even see that we have made any progress at all. If we perform the same this week as last, we simply forget that the week before that we were less effective. Our memory can play tricks on us and jeopardise our efforts.

The concepts here are very pertinent to the rest of the book. If you are anything like me, many of your innate and acquired habits really do not serve you well, so you would need to work with the points raised above in order to successfully change. Just as the changing of a physical matter such as a tennis stroke will initially make you feel awkward, changing a mental behaviour will also make you feel awkward. During the transition from a bad mental habit to a better one, you will operate in a way that feels alien. You will literally not 'be yourself'. This simple matter alone creates a large failure rate in the adoption of new ways of approaching life. I laugh a lot more than I used to, often at things that are, in hindsight, actually not so funny. And it often does *feel* a bit contrived. But first of all, it does not matter if laughter is contrived – any form of laughter is beneficial. But the feeling I have is more that I would not normally have laughed rather than that the laugh is fabricated. I now realise that I simply find more things funny – adopting some of the ideas in the latter part of the book has had this delightful, and unexpected side effect.

But even such an overtly positive experience of laughing when you would have not have done so in the past can trigger a reversion back to past non-laughing habits because we may feel that we are not being true to ourselves. Personally, being true to myself simply with regard to

laughter does not serve me well – it is much better for me to be able to laugh more. So I change in order that laughing *becomes* my true self. But in the transition period, diligence and determination is required.

Note that the Alexander technique that resulted from his work is profound in its impact. Whilst it has subsequently been vindicated by research, many decades after its discovery, its very name labels it as “alternative health” rather than a matter of prime health. It is in fact a fundamental technique that needs a much higher status. Whilst the product of his detailed observations was a set of guidelines for improving posture, he also made it clear quite how much our habits stay entrenched. As I elucidated earlier, even habits that serve us poorly take an iron grip on us, stubbornly rejecting any replacement until it shows unequivocal advantages over the existing habit.

By habit here, I am of course moving beyond matters of posture, to matters of attitudes also. Genetically predicated habits are also not beyond the scope of change. Try to remember repeatedly that the human brain is a highly adaptive device. It grows, shrinks, and evolves in response to your life experiences, and your attitude towards them. Your genes in effect give it a starting path, but genes can be switched on and off by mere thought alone, allowing you much greater control over your destiny than you might imagine. In his interesting book “How your mind can heal your body”, David Hamilton explores the extent of mind-body influence in great detail, along with the influence of your mind on your genetic expression. ^{HM}

For those who have read many self-help books, two matters about them should be fairly familiar. First, that the mere act of reading a self help book is itself very beneficial to health, in large part due to the general upbeat nature of its messages and anecdotes. Second, that this effect fades fairly quickly after finishing each book. The messages are rarely reinforced, and old habits swiftly reinstate themselves.

This is a huge shame, but it is avoidable with determination and persistence. You have to want to change, and have to persist with the change. And much as with the pursuance of a dream, you have to expect setbacks and not concede to them. When trying to change habits of

attitude, this appears to be a hard nut to crack, but I have to repeat that the benefits are immense, much greater than you might imagine. One meta-benefit is that any one successful change can make your mind much receptive to subsequent changes.

When we start to adopt a new habit, Alexander discovered that we must not fight the old one. As Susan Jeffers says in "Feel the fear and do it anyway" ^{FF} :

"What we resist persists"

One of the ways in which old habits grip us is that they lie within our comfort zone, as mentioned before. Even a poorly executed tennis stroke, one that is less comfortable for the body, is comfortable to our mind by its very familiarity. That its awkwardness will eventually tire us prematurely is not recognised by the subconscious.

There is an additional benefit to be gained from moving outside of our comfort zones. They affect many areas of our lives, such as an avoidance of certain foreign foods, and even to the need to take the same route to work each day. By embracing new ways of living your life – by moving out of our comfort zones – we actually extend them. Sometimes, that can backfire, but often we grow as a result.

By way of example, one of my favourite hobbies is to talk with strangers. The more I can do so without discriminating, the more I accept people from all walks of life for what they are, and the more I start to see life from their perspectives. There is an undeniable risk in this exercise, for I may easily overstep the mark. Certainly, some cultures have very demanding social etiquette rules, and my occasional tendency to act tactlessly can readily expose me to the occasional social faux pas. But in general, the more I try to open myself up to others, the more I able to do it, and the more the new habit draws me in. I have never been very shy, but now I am more sociably capable through exercising this social skill, expanding beyond my comfort zone to include more and more people into my life.

The overriding method here is the intellect – your conscious intent to change. This capability was probably active in your youth, where you would choose to revise for exams at school, overriding the instinct to play instead. The long term goal is enforced by the intellect to override the fickleness of our emotions. Joe Dispenza devoted 500 pages to this concept in his excellent, but overly long book “Evolve your brain”.^{EB} I’ll try in my own small way to pick out some key points he makes, and hope that I do justice to his concepts.

Joe explains that we start out in life with a largely blank slate, and are like sponges, soaking up experiences, and learning how to live life. We are necessarily highly influenced by family, friends and educational systems, and often blunder our ways through many situations. The net effect is that for the majority of us, many of the habits that we lay down in the pathways of the brain to help us cope are often not very effective, and sometimes counter effective. If our parents repeatedly told us we were useless, we would likely develop coping mechanisms that would essentially scar us for years or decades ahead.

The neocortex tends to handle new behaviours. As we develop and learn, these learned behaviours are gradually moved out of the neocortex to the subconscious parts of the brain where they can be handled automatically. Just picture how you learnt to ride a bicycle – you now do so without conscious thought. This is partly because the conscious mind is focused on dealing with novelty, but also because it is slow and lumbering, and the subconscious fast and efficient.

But the subconscious is also unquestioning. And this is the crux of a lot of our problems. We bury into our subconscious habits that do not serve us well because the subconscious does what it is told, and habits can get buried so deep that we are no longer aware of them, nor of their negative influence on our lives. Many such habits are behavioural responses to emotional situations – if your parents repeatedly told you that you would never amount to anything, you would be likely to under-perform, and build habits that confirmed your parental labels, often unknowingly.

As we move from our twenties into our thirties, we move from a learning mindset into a 'doing' mindset. We can switch the autopilot on in an increasing number of situations, and this suits the body's need for economy of resources. If we had to consciously think about gear changes as we did when learning to drive, we would be exhausted each day simply driving to work. This is true for many interactions in our daily lives. The more that can be passed to the subconscious the better. When we are on subconscious autopilot, we are running efficiently, economically. We are in a comfort zone. And we get to like that feeling. So much so that it draws us in more and more as we age. Rather than live in awe and with openness to life as youngsters, we live more on autopilot, and effectively become less conscious. When on autopilot, we are only partially conscious. We tend to live along a stream of autopilot driven responses to life and the world around us.

Each time we reuse a tried and tested (but not necessarily beneficial) habit on autopilot, we reinforce the associated neural networks. The path becomes a rut, and we can struggle immensely to move away from it. If we try to consciously step along a new path, the brain will often resist, complaining that it prefers the tried and tested path, thank you very much. The brain and body can go so far onto the defensive that we start to release adrenaline and cortisone. And this uneasy, agitated state can get associated with the attempt to change our habits, and we often withdraw back to our comfort zone.

We can thus readily become victims of our own efficiencies, hugely coerced to stay within our comfort zones, even when they do us or the people around us no good. The vital point here is that we end up living according to how the environment feels to us, and to how we feel internally. We live in a kind of unconscious fog from hour to hour, and from day to day. To change the habits that serve us badly, we need to live more in our conscious mind. Only the wilful, determined and highly disciplined desire to change can effect that change. We have to gradually beat out a new neural path to encode a new habit, leaving the comfort of the well trodden path. We will frequently step back into the old rut, but discipline and will can move us back along the new route.

By repeatedly adhering to the new route, for example, by reasoning against the need for anger and thereby diffusing it rather than succumbing to it, the new way of being becomes established as a habit, and the old way dies off. The brain operates much like the muscles – use it or lose it. By no longer using the old anger habit, it fades in potency, replaced by the new calm response. And eventually, the new way becomes so habitual, the diligence required to establish and sustain it is no longer needed. We have literally changed our brain.

Before I finish here, it is worth pointing out that the new neural networks we have created in support of our new habit also act as attractants to other, positive and supportive ways of being. And the world will respond more positively to us as well, which will serve to reinforce your new personality even more. Very much a win-win situation.

That habits, and hence the brain, can be changed are also delightfully documented in “The brain that changes itself”. A lady with severe balance difficulties was given an electronic device that fitted onto her tongue, sending electrical impulses in response to the spatial position of her limbs. Not only did her brain learn to use these signals in place of her body’s missing proprioception signals, but the improved balance persisted for a few minutes *after* the device was removed. After many repeated trials, the effect of the device was extended to weeks and months following removal.^{BR}

One of the ways, and indeed possibly the principle way in which the unfortunately named condition dyslexia arises is as a result of infant hearing difficulties, rather than shortcomings of intellect or effort. It appears that the auditory cortex fails to differentiate between closely spaced sounds, and thereby fails to recognise both the individual sounds, and, more crucially, their sequencing. This problem manifests in word learning and related difficulties. The ‘Fast Forward’ program^{BR} sought to retrain these dyslexics by sounding words with large gaps between the phonemes (sound parts), so that they could identify the words, and then to gradually shorten these gaps. The effect was to retrain the brains of dyslexics, and their results were nothing short of spectacular.

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) due to anxiety can equally be arrested by training. The method that appears to be most effective is to acquire an almost meditative, non judgemental observation of the compulsive urges to repeat behaviour, *without* conceding to these urges. Such impartial observations should be extended through to an observation of the *reaction* of your mind and body to not following the urge, again in a non-judgemental way.^{PM} It takes great effort and time to calm down the OCD impulses, but it appears that a permanent change can be made to the OCD influence on your life. The brain demonstrates again its neuroplasticity.

I offer one final thought on habits before I turn towards the attitude you have towards yourself. A really neat way of stopping the negative trains of thoughts that can blight most of us is to carry around a click counter for a week or so, clicking at each instance of a negative thought. Initially, the click rate would be high, but the mere act of counting gives attention to these negative thoughts, and an innate desire to curb them develops. The daily counts normally reduce significantly within a week, leaving the clicker much happier as a result. This may appear to be a rare example of a focus on negativity that has a positive consequence, but in fact, the focus actually is on the *reduction* of clicks, rather than on the negative thoughts themselves.