

When The Next Moment Matters More: 'The Special One' - Part 3

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Introduction

I caught up with an old friend, after many years, on a muggy afternoon in Camden. Outwardly, he seemed the same wonderfully ebullient character he had always been - I got the usual bear hug and bristly smacker on the cheek. But as we talked, it became clear something had changed.

He told me about a fierce anxiety and depression that had gripped him four years earlier. The crisis had begun when he came agonisingly close to a major breakthrough in his music career but just missed out. This would have been hard enough to take, but it was an almost exact repeat of an earlier near-miss that, as I knew only too well, had haunted him over the previous decade. He had told me then how, in that business, you only got one chance. He assumed he'd never get another.

After the second disappointment, he began obsessing, day and night, about mistakes he felt he'd made, life-changing opportunities he felt he'd thrown away. Unable to stop the endless repetition of thoughts, he was unable to sleep, to relax, to feel comfortable in his own skin. Tormented by a kind of looped mental tape, he became utterly exhausted. Out of energy and confidence, one of the most gregarious people I've ever known had been unable to leave his apartment for several weeks.

As we walked around Camden, my friend described how his thoughts were once again spiralling out of control, how despair was looming a second time. Listening to him talk, I was reminded of how I had cycled down steep hills with friends as a kid. We used to lift our feet and watch the pedals fly round in a blur. You didn't dare try to put your feet back on them. It felt like my friend's thoughts were racing in exactly the same way. His conversation

was rapid, rambling, breathless. Over the years, we had often talked about our problems and supported each other. But what could I possibly say or do to help him now? Anything I might say, any advice, would be lost in a torrent of uncontrolled thinking.

A month later, an email arrived from my friend's address but from someone I didn't know asking me to phone urgently. I called and was told my friend had taken his own life a few weeks after we had met.

Charles Darwin Regrets

Rational thought can of course be deeply humanising. But *compulsive* thinking can devastate our psychological and physical health.

When we believe we are a 'success', a 'failure', 'special' or 'worthless', we merge our self-worth, our very identity, with a mental label derived from comparing ourselves to others. Our happiness comes to depend on this label, an idea, that is continuously being reinforced and roughed up by our encounters with the outside world. Inevitably, a huge amount of mental energy is expended on assessing these encounters, planning future 'successes', interpreting past 'failures', and so on.

In other words, even at the best of times, identification of self with a mental label – the belief that this label truly represents reality - plunges us into an endless roller-coaster of compulsive thinking and emotional turmoil.

Relentlessly focused on ideas *about* the world and our standing within it, we overlook what actually *is*, here and now, in the present moment. As a result, compulsive thinking can have a dehumanising effect, cutting us off from the people and world around us, and from our own emotions.

The renowned English naturalist Charles Darwin wrote in his autobiography:

'My mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years... Now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry... I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music... My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts...

'If I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some

poetry and listen to some music at least once every week... The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.' (The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882, public domain e-book, pp.138-139)

Music might have helped, but the mind is quite capable of talking over it. Darwin would have been better advised to spend an hour a day quietly observing his emotions, physical feelings and thoughts. We cannot suppress compulsive thinking, but we can learn to be aware of it and direct our attention elsewhere.

Darwin might also have benefited from reflecting on the ambition to be 'special' and the associated flood of mental activity. He commented:

'I think that I am superior to the common run of men in noticing things which easily escape attention, and in observing them carefully.'

He also recognised that his 'pure love of natural science' was 'much aided by the ambition to be esteemed by my fellow naturalists'. (pp.145-146)

These are real issues, the cause of real suffering, but you will not see them discussed by political progressives 'grinding general laws out of large collections of facts'. Most write about politics, economics and the media as though they were brains in a jar. Mere 'personal' issues are viewed as an 'indulgence', 'navel-gazing'.

Activists can conceive of no political significance in the bliss that surges in their chests when they watch a toddler lost in play. Or when they notice a breeze entering a room tentatively, like someone else's cat, they detect no political relevance in the cooling effect on their souls.

Wallace Stevens wrote:

'Among twenty snowy mountains
The only moving thing
Was the eye
of the blackbird.'
(The Little Zen Companion, Workman, 1994, p.137)

The point being that the observer's mind had *also* stopped moving. Suddenly, for just this moment, attention focused solely on the present. As the stifling fog of mental chatter fell away, peace and bliss shone through.

No-one has communicated a more radical, indeed revolutionary, observation than this.

Uninhabited Present, Uninhabitable Planet

Our problem is that the mind is obsessively focused on the *next* moment, viewed as much more important than *this* moment. We ride the present like a tawdry taxi to some exalted future 'now'. Even if we somehow managed to arrive in this utopia, our attention would continue to be fixed far, far ahead. Likewise, when we reflect on our 'golden youth', we conveniently forget that, as children, we were dreaming of a golden *future* released from the limitations of childhood.

Why do we have this compulsion to be somewhere else? Why isn't the present moment good enough for us? Because desire depends on distance.

We tend to think that desire simply arises in response to objects that we happen to find attractive. In reality, desire arises in dependence on an object *plus* separation.

When we obtain the object of desire, remove the distance, desire disappears. Separation is the sugar in the chewing gum of desire. Take away the sugar and the gum has the appeal of soggy cardboard.

What we *have*, everything that exists in the present moment, is uninteresting. What we *haven't* got is wonderful. The tanned legs strolling past on the other side of the street radiate wonder and desire. The legs of the person holding our hand - although of the exact same colour and shape - are mere common-or-garden limbs for walking with.

Desire is thus revealed as a kind of auto-hypnotic fantasy; self-created and yet mysteriously beyond our control. Billions of people are driven mad with guilt and confusion by this phenomenon, but it is simply the operation of the human mind, the logic of distance-dependent desire. Whatever we have is tasteless, chewed-out. Everything everyone else has got is bursting with fresh fruit flavours. Until we get it!

Quite outrageously, then, the present - the moment in which we actually live - is dismissed as uninteresting, worthless, by the desire-driven mind. In rare moments when we detach from our Twitter twaddle, pods and pads to

mentally inhabit 'now', we seem to have arrived in a present moment positively radioactive with boredom. Our mind and limbs immediately start twitching with a hundred things we 'must do', that 'would be fun', all urging us to get up and away from this morgue-like present. Real life is cold turkey to the thought-addicted mind.

And how amazing, we treat the planet exactly as we treat the present moment: as an intrinsically worthless resource to be ridden, used, exploited on the way to 'better' and 'more'. Our world is being made a hell by the pursuit of seven billion personal utopias, rendered uninhabitable by people who never inhabit the present.

We are always somewhere else, never 'here', and so we don't even notice that 'here' is dying.

Leftists and greens rage at corporate executives and billionaires, who do of course exacerbate and exploit this phenomenon. But even as they rage, they inhabit the dream of a better world for themselves and others. How can they permit themselves to relax and enjoy a present moment so rotten with injustice and suffering? How can they love what is when what should be is so much more ethical? Their progressive gaze is directed up ahead, fixedly. They, also, have abandoned the present moment. They, also, are absent.

The world as it is has few friends indeed.

Spiritual Gossip

As we gain awareness of its destructive impact on our lives, we naturally feel inclined to wage war on the ego's future-obsessed craving for 'special' and 'more'.

This, indeed, is the theme of almost all organised religion: that we should fight desire, control anger, reject hate, abandon pride, craving, 'sin!' 'Say no to racism!' Just say no and make it so!

If greed makes us unhappy, doesn't it make sense that we should fight it? Can't we just rely on willpower and decide to choose the smallest piece of cake? Can it be all *that* hard? Can't we choose to create habits opposed to our reflexive greed?

The problem is that we are here attempting to fight the ego with an ego-possessed mind. So, naturally, the very effort will be commandeered by the ego.

Thus, we humbly allow someone else to choose the biggest piece of cake, which is admirable enough. But in so doing our egos may be grasping a far creamier cake, the one that feeds our sense that we are kinder, more compassionate, 'special'.

The spiritually-inclined may, once again, be investing their thoughts and energy in another kind of 'progress' towards a 'better' future. Buddhists who contemplate 'steps on the path to Enlightenment' may indeed view the present moment as a mere 'step' on that 'path'. 'Now' may again be reduced to a vehicle transporting them to a time when they will be compassionate, Enlightened, present. Other religions emphasise charitable acts as an investment towards reaching Heaven.

Unfortunately, the ego that is the root cause of suffering is often inflated, not diminished, by the willed determination to be kind. This inflation is sure to lead to destructive consequences.

Fighting 'negative' emotion also triggers an internal civil war in which our egotistical reality locks horns with our altruistic ideals. We become torn between what we 'should do', on the one hand, and what we want to do and always have done, on the other. And while our selfishness is rooted in deep-seated habits of thought and emotion, our ideals are rooted in ideas we have heard or read about how greed and anger are 'bad'; how replacing them with generosity will bring us bliss, nirvana. As Osho wryly observed, this is 'spiritual gossip', stuff we 'believe' but don't actually know to be true.

The problem is that we often don't understand what it is we are trying to change or why. For example, we might decide that anger is 'bad'. But why? Do we really believe it is *always* bad? Have we ever experienced anger deeply? If this sounds like an absurd question, consider the ordinary course of events.

When someone triggers anger, we respond with a firestorm of thinking centred around that person: what he said and did, why he did it, how we are going to respond, how we are going to neutralise the insult, and so on. We are in pain, and certainly we may have a background awareness that

we are in pain, but we believe the cause, the source of the problem, lies outside us. So we direct all of our attention to that external source.

Naturally, we are happy to focus away from the scalding pain of anger - chain thinking assists by creating a layer of mental insulation between awareness and emotion. Shouting, insulting, fighting are also attempts to escape the pain of anger by ejecting it through words and actions.

We also turn away from an emotion that has been condemned as 'sinful' by religion and as 'toxic' by medical science. For many spiritual practitioners getting angry is like failing that day's spiritual driving test. If our ego is tied up with the idea that we are unusually good and kindly people, we will be very unwilling to examine our 'failure' closely.

The remarkable result is that, over years and decades, people committed to renouncing anger periodically erupt with volcanic rage that instantly incinerates their 'firmly-held beliefs'. It is really no contest because their understanding is based on 'spiritual gossip', not on deep awareness and understanding of anger, on the experienced fact that it is pure poison. Osho put it well:

'You say anger is bad and you don't want to do it, but then somebody insults and you become angry and you say, "What to do? In spite of me I became angry. I know very well that anger is bad, poisonous, destructive. I know it, but what to do? – I became angry."

'If you come to me, I will say, "*You don't know* that anger is poisonous. You have heard about it. Deep down you know that anger is necessary; deep down you know that without anger you will lose your standing, everybody will be bullying you. Without anger, you will not have any spine; your pride will be shattered. Without anger, how can you exist in this world of continuous struggle for survival?" This is what you know, but you say, "I know anger is poisonous."

'Buddha knows anger is poisonous. You have heard Buddha, you have listened to Buddha, you have learned something from him – but that is *his* knowledge.' (Osho, *The Buddha Said...* Watkins Publishing, 2007, p.123)

Putting Attention On The Pain

So what sets Buddha apart? How do we gain his understanding of anger,

love, compassion, sadness, fear?

By turning inwards and experiencing our emotions, paying attention to them, watching them, feeling them. This is meditation. The word suggests we're doing something, but actually we're choosing neither to repress nor express what we feel. We're trying to observe and understand whatever arises.

The irony, of course, is that the world is awash with gadgets, gizmos, pills and thrills to help us *escape* from our emotions.

But what happens if we don't try to escape? What happens if we don't reject our sadness as 'horrible' and 'bad', as 'self-pitying indulgence', as something to be blasted with fun, music and Mogadon? What if we just sit and feel our sadness as deeply as possible? Does the world end?

Where do we notice sadness in our bodies? How does it feel? Does it have a texture, colour, shape? What happens if we sit quietly watching this heavy darkness, this interesting phenomenon? In *The Power Of Now*, Eckhart Tolle writes:

'There are many pseudo escapes - work, drink, drugs, anger, projection, suppression, and so on - but they don't free you from the pain. Suffering does not diminish in intensity when you make it unconscious...

'So don't turn away from the pain. Face it. Feel it fully. *Feel it* - don't think about it! Express it if necessary, but don't create a script in your mind around it. Give all your attention to the feeling, not to the person, event, or situation that seems to have caused it...

'So give your complete attention to what you feel, and refrain from mentally labelling it. As you go into the feeling, be intensely alert. At first, it may seem like a dark and terrifying place, and when the urge to turn away from it comes, observe it but don't act on it. Keep putting your attention on the pain, keep feeling the grief, the fear, the dread, the loneliness, whatever it is.' (Tolle, *The Power Of Now*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2001, p.185)

Osho described the results:

'And you will be surprised: the deeper you go into it, the more it starts dispersing. If a person can go into his sorrow deeply he will find all sorrow has evaporated. And in that evaporation of sorrow is joy, is bliss.

'Bliss has not to be found outside, against sorrow. Bliss has to be found deep, hidden behind the sorrow itself. You have to dig into your sorrowful states and you will find a wellspring of joy.'

This is true of every emotional pain. We can try to escape dread feelings of 'failure' by launching ourselves up career ladders, banishing our minds from the present. Or we can sit and observe the raw energy of feeling 'unknown', 'ignored', of craving 'specialness'. We can turn these into objects of attention rather than unconquerable, dismal 'facts of life'.

Focusing awareness on any aspect of the present moment – a child playing, the light in a blackbird's eye, emotional upheaval – cuts off the babbling mind, allowing bliss and peace to arise. This does not involve *trying* to achieve bliss; it involves trying to observe whatever exists in the present moment.

This is also not a fight with emotion. It is not that willpower is conquering anger, sadness, jealousy and so on, so the ego is not inflated by 'virtue' gas. It is not a matter of being a goody-goody. We learn early that putting our hand in boiling water hurts. That awareness does not make us feel at all 'special'.

And what about love, compassion, generosity, kindness? Should we not be striving with all our might to enhance these qualities in ourselves in this benighted world?

Instead of relying on willpower, we can pay attention to how we feel when we are friendly, kind and generous as opposed to hostile, cruel and selfish. Our endlessly chattering minds make it difficult for us to perceive that kindness in fact generates enormous happiness in our lives. We fail to notice because we are not paying attention, and because this subtle experience runs counter to our corporate culture's loud faith in getting rather than giving.

Simple awareness that kindness is blissful and unkindness painful naturally strengthens our tendency to be kind. But only if we are paying

attention to how we feel in the present moment, only if we are not lost in mental chatter. Osho said:

'When you are feeling happy, loving, floating – these are the right moments when the door is very close. Just a knock will be enough... Just a few minutes of meditation will be more than a few days of meditation when you are miserable... Just sit for five minutes; don't waste that moment. If a certain harmony is there – use that, ride on it, and that wave will take you far away, farther than you can go on your own. So learn how to use these blissful moments.'

The door is very close – the door in the wall of a mind-trapped life. On the other side, beyond intellectual ideals and ethical codes, our own felt experience of happiness, peace and compassion awaits.

Suggested Reading And Watching

Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001) is tremendous.

Subscribe to Tolle TV, a [monthly magazine](#) in which Tolle discusses these and related issues.

You can also watch an excellent series of ten long [interviews](#) with Tolle.

Osho's books *The Ultimate Alchemy*, [Volumes 1 and 2](#), and many others, are available free online.