

The madness in our method

If Nelson Mandela had spent five years in prison instead of twenty five, would he have become the icon of peace and reconciliation that he did? If Hitler had been six inches taller, would he have become a dentist rather than the leader of Nazi Germany?

Nature or nurture? What makes us the people we are? Are you how you are because of your genes or because of your life experiences?

Of course, the simple answer is, both.

The way we look, our anatomy and physiology, is strongly influenced by the genes we receive from our parents. Humans have known this since long before the scientific explanations provided by the likes of Charles Darwin, Crick and Watson and Richard Dawkins.

Yet as the decades roll by since the human genome project was completed in 2003, it is increasingly clear that genetic code does not influence us like some doomsday book of fate. We are far more than 'gene-machines'. Instead, many genes seem to create tendencies which are then activated to greater or lesser degrees by influences and interactions with our environment.

The new scientific fields of epigenetics and genomics have emerged which look, individually and collectively, at how lifestyle and environmental factors affect the expression of genetic tendencies. It is revealing that even at the level of physiology, genetic expression is not without the influence of nurture, which is considered to be the sum of our experiences and learning.

As for how we think, feel, and express ourselves. The things we like, love and hate. The skills and talents we possess, our beliefs and worldview, our posture and the way we move. All these are learnt over the course of our lifetime. The way we love, get angry, or depressed, are cheerful, hopeful, critical, trusting or deeply suspicious. The vast majority of what makes up what we refer to as our 'personality' is a function of our experience and/or the lessons we take from those experiences.

There is a growing body of research that suggests that this process starts at conception and ends at death. But in a way even these obvious bookmarks in time are false. The influences that shape us include cultural histories that extend back into the lives of our ancestors. And similarly, our thoughts and deeds, both individually and collectively reach forward in time into the lives of those who came after us. This is a process beyond the bounds of genetics and epigenetics, although it encompasses both.

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Consider for a moment how you came to be as you are right now, with all your physical, psychological and emotional characteristics.

When I look closely, almost everything I do, think or say is based on, or heavily influenced by, my previous experiences and learning.

I learned to walk upright as an infant. Many of my social graces and behaviour patterns were established during childhood. While simple reflexes and physiological responses are 'hardwired' into my body, most of what I consider to be my physical, mental and social self, the things that make me 'me', have evolved or been learned from life experiences. I still encounter new things, have fresh ideas and change my body or behaviour but can I really do any of these 'new' things without reference in some way to my previous experience?

My first tentative steps as an infant were informed by my crawling experience and the resulting cross body neural development. I was cheered on by my parents and staggered to my feet, perhaps in imitation of them, perhaps in search of approval, perhaps driven by some innate urge. Once my wobbling stabilised, parental encouragement and celebration moved on to other matters. I too lost interest in the novelty of walking. The refinement of this fundamental life skill took place over the coming years sub-consciously, patterns building on patterns and probably influenced only by imitation of some kind. Wanting sub-consciously to walk like Dad perhaps? Ida Rolf documented examples of children learning to walk and stand in really awkward patterns through imitation of a parent with some kind of injury or impairment that affected gait or posture.

By the time my knees and hips started to give me pain in my forties, I'd been standing on my own two feet since I was under two and had never given a thought to whether I did it well (ie efficiently in gravity) or not.

In such cases we often blame our genes – someone else in my family had bad knees too. But it seems just as likely that I have 'inherited' the pattern of walking and standing that made me liable to bad knees in later life. That is, I 'learnt' it from my parents. However, that too is oversimplifying the matter. I became a marathon runner with a 'no pain, no gain' attitude. I got injured in a big race and kept going anyway, setting up all sorts of compensatory patterns in my body. My parents were both squash players and never distance runners. So while we might share walking patterns that predispose us to knee strain and wear and tear, our individual life stories had a major influence too.

In some cases, it's less about parental mimicry and more about cultural norms and peer pressure. Consider the fashion for low slung, baggy trousers and the bow-legged walking pattern required to stop them falling down

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completely. Or the wearing of high heels and the resultant back line tightness that is the inevitable result. In both cases, fashion choices dictate a pattern of standing and walking that, if done often enough for long enough becomes our 'default setting'.

As these examples illustrate, much of our learning occurs, and remains, well below the level of consciousness. In addition to posture and movement patterns, our imitation of accents or mannerisms are common examples.

Other learning begins at the conscious level and then drops down into the subconscious. Driving a car for example, requires enormous concentration and conscious effort initially, but gradually becomes almost sub-conscious.

Still other learning remains visible (although not necessarily attended to) throughout its evolution from some form of lesson, into repeated patterns of action or explanation, and finally into fully formed narratives or stories that guide our behaviour or explain the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Perhaps you were frightened by an aggressive dog as a child. Thereafter, you avoid proximity to dogs and are nervous whenever circumstances bring you near to one. Your nervousness is read by many dogs as either an aggressive or a submissive state. As a consequence you have multiple further encounters where dogs behave aggressively towards you. By the time you reach your late teens, you dislike all dogs on principle. Moreover, you have adopted an explanatory narrative that you tell yourself and others to explain this. "Dogs don't like me". Or 'dogs are untrustworthy and aggressive'. You've created a life story, a worldview, a perspective that colours all your experiences directly or indirectly with dogs.

This process applies to almost everything directly or indirectly in our experience. As we have suggested, it starts at the moment of conception and may not even end at our death. The ripples of our patterns may rumble on, in the people we influenced when we were alive, the subtle marks we made on the lives around us. Maybe, for example, you have coached your own children to be wary or even fearful of dogs.

This development of experience, into reaction, into habitual pattern, and often into narrative based preference is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the human talent for learning and explaining the world. This talent is undoubtedly highly adaptive (ie useful) in evolutionary terms. Identifying the signs of predators, food sources, potential mates and enemies is a vital skill. Our minds excel at trying to 'identify and attach to patterns' in order to 'make sense of our circumstances', to 'explain our world', to 'have an answer, a strategy for particular circumstances'. This tendency influences the way we inhabit our bodies, the way we think and feel, and ultimately shapes the societies that we live in.

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This very natural process is what guides our development. We spend our lives refining our knowledge, skills and preferences in accordance with socially accepted standards. In our early years society even sends us to school to speed up and standardise the process. The process is critical to cooperative living as society itself depends on shared stories in the form of rules, standards and myths.

Examples of how my learning talents work 'for me' include such things as my ability to safely drive a car along a busy road, to walk, talk and count; less obvious examples include my ability to read and interpret body language and verbal inference, engage in a socially acceptable manner, adopt shared beliefs and values and generally be an acceptable member of my community.

Unfortunately, examples also abound of the same learning process giving rise to less useful outcomes. My posture as an adult, which has evolved over my lifetime, may literally give me a pain in the neck, back or knee. My attitude to work or financial security (both learnt) may deeply affect my sense of well-being and ease. My early childhood history of strict parental discipline and standards may make me rigid in thinking and emotionally withdrawn as an adult. This can affect my ability to trust easily, love deeply and in my own turn be anything other than a controlling parent to my children.

Alternatively, of course, I may learn that doing the opposite of my upbringing makes me feel independent and ok about myself. I may end up being equally rigid in my determination to always do the opposite of my parents.

All these examples are driven by our inherent tendency to assess, classify, adopt a narrative strategy and then short-cut the process by using it again in any apparently similar circumstances.

Back at the level of collective human stories, such tendencies / abilities have led to the elimination of diseases and the protection of people, whales and pandas. They have also given rise to genocide and the greatest rate of species extinction the planet has ever seen.

In short, our talent for learning and then developing the stories upon which we build our lives, is both one of our greatest assets and a source of considerable inefficiency, misdirection and even misery, both individually and collectively.

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We can be surrounded by others in a cooperative society yet feel deeply lonely. We can be physically and financially secure yet feel deeply anxious. We can be safe and well, and yet be depressed.

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For most of us, these paradoxes may be felt as a low level desire for things to be different in some way. This is what the Dalai Lama called 'seeking something better in life'.

"I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we are all seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness..."

For some of us this seeking is expressed in more extreme ways and emerges in the form of phobias, addictions or other life dominating fears and/or attachments. Some of these are socially acceptable (compulsive busy-ness is a good example). Some are not (alcohol or drug addiction for example). But socially acceptable or not, they represent a reaction to a sense of lack, what in yoga terms is referred to as 'suffering'.

Yet as a well fed, affluent westerner living in a quiet community in a safe country with social welfare systems to catch me if I fall, it might be reasonable to ask – what reason have I got to be unhappy? Sure, I may have an achy knee or a boss that seems unnecessarily pedantic but in the great scheme of things there are a lot of people worse off than me.

Framing our relationship to happiness in this way can make yoga practice seem indulgent or self-obsessed. Yet it misses the point, if not entirely, then in large part. The suffering (dukkha) referred to in so many ancient texts and modern teachings, is not confined to major traumatic events, social inequalities or the most significant experiences of pain and difficulty that we all encounter in some form or other throughout life. It also includes the suffering experienced as a result of our reactions to the less notable ebbs and flows of daily life.

Seen in this way, the middle-aged London stockbroker experiencing body image difficulties or struggling with relationships or his own sense of self-worth is 'suffering'. His problems may seem insignificant compared to the Sudanese woman faced with starvation, rape or murder, but each may sense their suffering or fear as life dominating. And this is not simply a matter of perspective and mental angst. The stress response playing out in their bodies may be identical regardless of the nature of their difficulties.

The same applies to varying degrees in many everyday experiences. An angry reaction to a careless driver. An intense dislike of a politician of opposing views. A dismissive judgement of the person in the street that dresses a particular way. Even the most trivial experience if it triggers an automatic 'closing down', 'pushing away' or 'grasping after' response, creates a degree of discomfort that yoga calls dukkha (suffering). A characteristic theme is that, in all cases, the responses triggered have no

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immediate 'function'. They do, however, colour our perspective in some way.

For example, my anger at the driver of the car that cut me up on my way to work serves no function in keeping me safe. The initial adrenaline surge speeded up my reaction times and readied me to take any necessary evasive action. But the bad driver's car had already missed me by that point. And the anger at the driver came a moment later still. I suppose we might posit that the anger is a way of 'shaking off' the sympathetic nervous system activation (the fight or flight surge that occurs automatically). But in practice, directing the anger at the driver just seems to keep me activated. I snap at the person in the car with me. I arrive at work, still somewhat activated and remain low level grumpy for hours. None of this helps deal with the problem that originally triggered the response, namely - there's a car cutting in right in front of me at sixty miles an hour!

As Mark Twain put it –

"I've suffered a great many catastrophes in my life. Most of them never happened."

If it is true that we have an inherent desire to avoid difficulty and seek happiness, then perhaps it is not surprising that the desire for things to be different is so common. However, what is meant by happiness in yogic terms is not limited to exuberant enjoyment. The deepest form of happiness is a kind of deep seated ok-ness with the world that gradually emerges when we stay present with our experience and suspend judgement and the clamouring energies of grasping and aversion.

This view of the self-generated and polarising experiences of 'suffering' and 'happiness' is fundamental to understanding the yoga goal of 'liberation' and its practice as something more than an Indian themed exercise regime.

Yoga, in its traditional and broader sense, is a tool for learning to live well and be happy. It offers a method for engaging with the human characteristics that shape our lives and personalities. It opens the possibility of letting go of patterns and narratives that lead to suffering. It does so at a number of levels, but in all cases, it involves the cultivation of awareness and the creeping sense of possibility that accompanies the slowing down of our conditioned responses.

It can help us find more ease and efficiency in our bodies. It can help us become more balanced in our moods, judgements and relationships. It can help us find life paths that are rewarding and meaningful.

Life with all its joys and sorrows will still happen. But how we meet it, how we experience it, may be fundamentally changed. Our built in 'sense of

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lack', of unwillingness to engage with 'how things are' may be transcended by a new feeling of enough, of ok-ness. This 'sense of enough' is the happiness that yoga promises.

It is not a state of fatalism, or 'if god wills it' or 'everything happens for a reason' or even 'everything is just as it should be'. In many ways, liberation is the antithesis of these disempowering positions. It is the willingness to see things as they really are. Including our limitations, biases, reaction patterns, judgements, prejudices, preferences and extraordinary potential. Such openness enables us to see more clearly what is currently happening and why we feel or think a particular way in response. This enables us to react more skilfully. This may mean choosing to initiate radical change in our circumstances. Or it may mean choosing to make no change at all, beyond the equally radical shift in our reaction to the present moment.

This is 'awakening'. It is 'liberation'.