

What are you waiting for?

We keep doing this for that without ever being clear what that is and then we don't enjoy the this in its own right. Vin Harris

What are you waiting for? What future orientated goal do you think you need to attain before you can start to live your current life with ease and joy?

Last week, I went up to Edinburgh to attend a fabulous 5 day retreat run by The Mindfulness Association UK. In one of his many insightful short talks, Vin Harris warned us not to do 'this for that.' In other words, we should not miss out on enjoying the present moment by spending the present striving hard to attain our next goals in life.

I don't know about you, but I spent a lot of the first half of my life doing just that. I worked really hard to pass the 11 plus so that I could go to a good school and work even harder to get loads of good 'O' levels so that I could work even harder to get really good 'A' levels so that I could go to university and work hard to get a good degree so that I could go out into the world to get a career that I would then have to work so hard at in order to climb the career ladder. Even just typing that steamroller of a sentence has tired me out!

To be totally honest, I actually never did the climbing the career ladder bit. I decided very early on that stressing out trying to climb any career ladder simply wasn't worth the effort so I spent over 20 years as a lecturer at Manchester University without making the slightest effort to go any further, whilst my colleagues totally stressed themselves out by working far too hard in order to get promoted to the professor rung on the academic career ladder.

However, although I had no career ambitions whatsoever, I did still spend a lot of my time at work trying to rush through one thing that I was doing so that I could then quickly move onto doing something else. For example, I would try to rush through marking exam scripts every June so that I could get that rather onerous task over with as quickly as possible so I could move on to another goal orientated activity of some kind or another - such as writing yet another pointless paper for an academic journal. (Even I could not avoid some work-based pressures).

I have a lot of nervous energy in my system, and so I still have a tendency to rush around like a headless chicken at times, even though I am now semi-retired with nothing much to do each day. For example, I will rush as I wash dishes. I will rush to the post office to post a letter, or I will dash round Sainsbury's doing our weekly shop because Gloria is waiting for me in the car.

But after many, many years of practising mindfulness, I am finally learning to pause from time to time so that I can fully enjoy the moment. For example, sometimes, instead of rushing to finish brushing my teeth before bedtime, I will deliberately slow down to enjoy the feeling of cleaning my teeth and the warm glow of being kind to myself by looking after my teeth properly. I also now sometimes enjoy giving my head a gentle massage as I slowly wash my hair, although most of the time, I still forget and rush through hair washing without really enjoying it at all.

As I slow my body movements down, I also do my best to take a pause from constantly thinking, because I have noticed that I am only 100 percent present in the here and now when my mind expands into a still, calm thought-less state for a moment or two. I still find it difficult to get into that still, expanded mind, but at least I now know how wonderful it feels.

The strange fact of life is that virtually any activity can become enjoyable if we slow right down to savour the moment as we commit to doing 'this for this' rather than 'this for that.' Thich Nhat Hanh for example famously advised his students to wash the dishes primarily for the sake of enjoying the sensations of dish washing, such as the feeling of warm soapy water running through their fingers, rather than washing the dishes primarily to get the dishes clean. In other words, we all need to focus on enjoying every minute of the journey we call life instead of foolishly insisting that we need to rush as fast as possible to our next destination. At that rate, we will keep rushing until we have reached our final destination - our grave - without ever once having stopped to be fully present in our own life.

There are at least two key problems with what Vin Harris calls 'doing this for that' and Robert Holden calls our 'destination addiction'. First of all, when we keep doing this for that, we are only half present in our own life. Our body is in one place, but our mind is somewhere else, and so we day-dream our way through life without ever fully living it. Second, we become fixated trying to attain a perfect future for ourselves, only to discover that this imagined perfect future never arrives and so we tend to find life depressingly disappointing.

For example, when I was in the 6th form of my girl's grammar school, I became fixated with getting good enough 'A' levels to get into university because I had somehow got it into my head that going to university was a bit like going to heaven. Well imagine my extreme disappointment when Liverpool University turned out to be nothing like the nirvana I had imagined it to be. Instead of spending our evenings sitting around discussing Sartre or Socrates as I had pretentiously imagined, we actually spent many nights in some grotty pub or other watching the boys getting drunk and then arguing for ages about football.

So to sum up the problem of doing this for that: not only do we miss the present by focussing all our attention on attaining some future fantasy, but that fantasy never, ever lives up to our expectations – double whammy!

What to do? Well it certainly is not that easy to overturn the habit of a lifetime. So if you are a serious 'destination addict' please be kind, gentle and infinitely patient with yourself if you do choose to begin to conquer this highly destructive addiction. Maybe you could start by choosing just one or two daily activities, or daily 'chores' and then simply remember to slow right down to enjoy them for their own sake? Or perhaps you could begin to motivate yourself to do more of 'this for this' by looking back on your own life and contemplating just how often you have sacrificed the joy of the present moment for some future goal that never materialised. Or even if it did come to fruition, it still did not give you the lasting joy or satisfaction that you hoped for.

So there we are. It is August already, and I bet that just like me, a lot of the first part of your year has gone by in a bit of a blur because of your destination addiction which led you into doing this for that all the time. No big deal! But shall we see if we can commit to spending at least some of the rest of this precious year simply slowing down and doing 'this for this'? I am certainly willing to give it a go because I now know without a shadow of a doubt that giving up my destination addiction this month will be one of the best things that I could do for myself and indeed for those around me, as I practise becoming much more fully present in other people's' precious company.

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