

## Being Human is not at All Easy!

Many years ago, I was feeling really sorry for myself because a load of anxiety provoking thoughts were going round and round in my head. I then went for a walk in the countryside and came across some cows peacefully grazing in a sunny meadow. As I watched them, I thought to myself, 'I wish I were a cow!' I then laughed at this absurd wish and started to cheer up. But in some ways, it is true that human beings have an even tougher time than most animals because our sophisticated brains tend to hang on tightly to all past resentments and to all our imaginary fears about the future.

We have a fight with our loved one and the tension between us can last for days, weeks, months or even longer. Two ducks in a pond have a similar squabble and one minute later they both shake their feathers and go back to swimming around serenely as though nothing had happened.

Of course, I am not denying that animals have feelings or that they can feel extremely frightened or distressed as well as feeling great affection and concern for their offspring. I love watching elephants because they so clearly show such similar feelings to us - such as affection, grief and joy.

Animals are also far more intelligent than we used to give them credit for. But humans have a unique and unfortunate ability to use sophisticated thinking and language to fuel the flames of our distress. In one sense, our sophisticated thinking has enabled us to become top dogs on a dangerous planet where all living creatures are constantly eating one another just to stay alive. But on the other hand, our sophisticated brains get us into all kind of serious trouble.

I don't know about you, but recently as this endless lockdown shows no sign of ending, I have found myself shouting very rude words at a politician or expert explaining on TV why we will not be allowed out any time soon. Getting loudly angry like this definitely enables me to let off some steam, but I also know that too much angry energy is toxic and that blaming others for my suffering just keeps me in stuck in helpless, miserable victimhood.

So now, whenever I notice that I am winding myself up about something, I try to remember to pause, take a deep breath and deliberately shift myself out of what Rick Hanson calls 'the Red Zone' and into 'the Green Zone'. The Red Zone represents our state of being when we are poised to fight or flight. This zone is useful for fleeing from an imminent physical danger, but not so useful when we wind ourselves up day in and day out about how awful the world is, despite the fact that we are in no immediate danger whatsoever.

If we spend most of the time in the Red Zone, we can end up weakening our body with too many stress hormones. We are also in danger of acting aggressively toward others when we are in fight mode – hence my shouting so angrily at the TV screen the other day!

When we are in the Green Zone, which is our natural resting place, we will tend to feel safe and relaxed and therefore genuinely benevolent toward ourselves and others. To get from the Red Zone to the Green Zone, all we have to do is to pause and take a few deep relaxing breaths during which we exhale for a little longer than we inhale. Then, we can soothe ourselves by saying something like, 'This too will pass!' We can also give ourselves some kind of comforting touch as we make a conscious effort to release any tension in our physical body.

Sometimes, doing all this will seem to make little difference to our extremely agitated state. But if we keep practising moving from Red Zone to Green Zone on a regular basis, we should eventually notice that we are generally calmer, or find it much easier to return to a calm state, despite the fact that the world around us is still in total chaos.

Learning to move from the Red Zone to the Green Zone whenever we notice that we are getting stressed is a wonderful way to reduce our reactivity to what is going on in the world around us. Once we become less reactive, we can then respond far more effectively to any real threat to our well-being. We can also relate to others in a much calmer and more benevolent way.

When I am in the Red Zone, I really do not wish others well. In truth, when I am upset I sometimes secretly wish that my 'enemies' would just curl up and die. But holding onto aggressive thoughts such as this definitely does me more harm than my 'enemy'. The other day, Vin Harris - a long-term Buddhist practitioner - said something really helpful about relating to others whilst he was leading a Zoom meditation session. Vin reminded us that although we are all unique, we human beings have a lot in common. Above all, each and every one of us, including our enemies, wishes to avoid suffering and to find happiness.

The problem is that most human beings are still looking for happiness in all the wrong places - such as acquiring great wealth or fame or finding a perfect soul-mate. Moreover, a small minority of human beings search for happiness in really dangerous and damaging ways, such as killing those who get in their way as they desperately try to climb to the very top of their chosen tree.

Of course, we should not sit back and passively accept the behaviour of any individual who is acting aggressively and dangerously. However, for our own peace of mind and ultimately for our own liberation from endless suffering, we do need to hold genuine compassion in our hearts for all suffering human beings without a single exception.

Are hate figures such as Donald Trump really so different from world icons such as Barak Obama? If they are stabbed do they both not bleed? If an individual has had any kind of toxic, traumatic or loveless childhood, they may well grow up to be a dangerous happiness seeker who thinks that if they can wield tremendous power over others, even by using extremely violent means, they will somehow attain safety and satisfaction with life. This does not make them 'evil personified'. It just makes them *totally* and dangerously deluded.

Once we get ourselves into the Green Zone, it is usually so much easier to extend genuine compassion to deluded individuals who cause so much pain and suffering in our world. We start by being compassionate toward ourselves – even when we make mistakes that may inadvertently hurt others. Next we extend loving kindness or compassion out to our friends and loved ones. Then we simply keep widening our circles of compassion until we include all sentient beings without exception.

So this month, shall we all agree to move to the Green Zone and stay there for as long as possible? Once safely in the Green Zone, we can not only bless ourselves with inner serenity, we can also extend a sincere wish that all human beings will eventually join us in our beautiful evergreen garden of unconditional love - Yes, even our so-called enemies who will be miraculously transformed into welcome guests!

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