

## 2016 U3A Course based on

### Dancing With the Unknown

A Book about FEELINGS and the Everyday Experience of MIND and SOUL

Session 14 – October 10, 2016

At the end of last Term we had been talking about suffering – conditions such as depression and anxiety attacks and the inevitable pain of grief and loneliness that is part of our experience of mind. We also suffer from more insidious states of mind such as shame, which I have highlighted as a widespread and underestimated problem. Some of what our mind does is very unpleasant and can seem almost unbearable at times. This Course on our everyday experience of mind and soul would be incomplete, of course, and unrealistic if it did not acknowledge that. I mentioned hope, which, like love, is one of those mysterious forces that we don't really understand, but which seems to come to our aid in difficult times. The natural flow of being alive means that everything changes over time and it can be helpful to remind ourselves that this, too, will pass. I also mentioned the phenomenon of 'capture' whereby we seem to get stuck with a certain mindset and focus of attention – we can't let go of it, we keep coming back to it – and that can be very distressing.

Today I want to talk about change – how it is that significant changes do occur in the way we use our minds. If you recall that was the point about my recovery from a lonely life trapped in debilitating habits in my early years towards a much happier and more fulfilling life today. Not that I know all about how this happens – there is so much I don't know and there are many mysteries acknowledged in the scientific literature too – but there are some interesting ideas about change that I want to share with you today and see what you think. It is something that affects us all as we go through life, in small ways as well as the big ones. We all have to change from time to time and as we get older there is loss and grief to deal with, which is one of the most difficult transitions. Chapter 16 in my book is called *Courage to Change*.

To look at how our mind might change we need to consider what it is about it that might become established in some way – fixed in place rather than flowing. I have implied that the mind reconnects us in each moment so in that sense it is always changing, never still, but there is also more to it than that. As our mind reconnects us, with emotions, feelings and thoughts, it is also accumulating a history. Perhaps everything that ever happened has made its mark somewhere in our mind. We know at least that some past happenings had significant emotional effects or were noted in our story as being important. They are the two basic records that we keep of our mind's activity – our history is written in our *affect* and our *story*.

The accumulation in our emotions and feelings is not written in language so it has to be interpreted and we will never be able to explain it completely. The fact that our story is composed of language is very significant because the words we use frame the operation of our mind far more than we realise. They arise from what we are attending to now and they will influence what we will attend to next and into the future. Delving into what is stored in our subconscious is the difficult business of psychoanalysis. Opinions vary about how useful this is, but nobody claims it works perfectly. So, when we look for ways to change the way our mind is working we mostly look towards the story part of our mind and the language with which it is constructed. Many therapies are built around the principles of CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy) – changing your thinking in order to change how you feel – and some of these try to include the emotional part of our mind as well.

Sarah Edelman's book *Change Your Thinking* is a good example of this approach. It may not work perfectly either because getting your mind to change the way it does things is a very difficult thing to do.

First of all, why would we want to change? Because we are suffering is the most likely reason, but perhaps we should just accept our suffering and not be trying to change it. This is a tricky business for our mind to negotiate. It took me quite a few years to change the habitual way I was living my life even though that was clearly an unhappy state of affairs. We often put up with things rather than change them. We also try to change, but it doesn't seem to happen so we slip back into the same old habits.

Let's face it – we are creatures of habit. Aristotle wondered in his *Nicomachean Ethics* whether we do what we do primarily because of our nature, our instruction or our habits and concluded that habit is the strongest of the three. William James, one of the founding fathers of psychology, apparently described his own life as a 'mass of habits.' When I ask myself how many of my actions are fresh decisions that I make on the spot and how many are comfortable habits I find the answer a bit disturbing. The habits that I developed during the early part of my life became so debilitating that I dearly *wanted* to change at least some of them.

This was significant because the chief characteristic of comfortable habits is that we don't want to change them even if we suspect they are a bit troublesome. In part this stems from the hidden mind that I mentioned earlier. Like the fictional character, Henry Higgins, we prefer our own version of our persona and behaviour and may be surprised to learn that someone else sees us differently. The more comfortable our habits become the less we notice their effect. It took a crisis, or a series of crises, to jolt my mind into a different approach.

What is it that needs to be changed? It is our actions and our attitudes – what we are doing and what we feel like doing. But our mind is not really controllable in that way – you can't just tell it what to do – so it comes down once again to how we manage our feelings. We are all born with the same primary emotions, but each of us will experience these in different ways because our genes and our environment are not the same. Some people are much more prone to fear and anxiety than others and that is probably true of every emotion. It is through social engagement that we learn the more subtle emotions and everyone has a different mix of these, too, depending on his or her temperament and life experience. As the learned emotions become habitual ways of reacting to what happens we lose the desire to change them. We usually come to believe they could not be changed anyway because they are just part of who we are.

I spoke earlier about embracing our feelings whatever they are – accepting them as they come along, knowing that they will change again as we live them. The poem by Rumi I brought in before called *The Guest House* speaks about that. I also said earlier that stress is a normal and necessary component of our lives and our mind is designed to use it to our advantage, unless it reaches a point that overwhelms us and causes trauma. Life is a struggle, by definition, because we are working to preserve our identity as an individual – our being – and to do this we have to maintain good relationships with what is happening around us, especially with other people. We have to work at it.

When our experience of stress is unpleasant we naturally try to avoid it, but if we are to understand our mind we have to come to terms with the fact that to turn away from all stress would be to turn away from life itself. Aliveness is an engagement with the world that prompts us to keep on connecting wholeheartedly, which means dealing with issues as they come up and utilising loving social relationships wherever possible to help us deal with stress. We can avoid external physical threats by moving away, but what is happening internally can't be avoided or dismissed without there being some harmful consequences. That is how stress builds up over time and starts to cause damage in our body and mind. The same principle applies to suffering – it is made worse by denying it or turning completely away from it.

Suffering, like stress, is universal – as we all know. That is the Buddhist’s First Noble Truth, of course, but you don’t have to be an expert on that to know that everybody suffers. So to try to deny that is not going to be helpful. Even harder to face is the fact that we hurt most where we care most. The practice of love is the most painful aspect of mind – as well as the most satisfying. To never hurt would be to never love (or live for that matter). What hurts and what we care about occupy the same place in our mind – they are bound together.

Because we do not enjoy an experience of suffering we naturally tend to turn away from it, try to stop thinking about it or deny that it is a problem. The other thing we do is make judgments about it and try to control it – which are the two complications of mind I have been warning against. The alternative of acceptance and ‘turning towards’ instead of turning away is a huge challenge and a matter of great significance for our mind.

Even though we can’t deliberately eliminate suffering, people say we can learn to stop making it worse. Part of this is realising that pain and suffering are not quite the same thing. The suffering is another layer that is added as a reaction to the pain. Sometimes we experience pain in a way that acknowledges the feeling of pain without taking on the role of a sufferer. Accepting the reality of pain is actually a step towards relieving suffering, but this is not easy to do.

Throughout history many people have used their suffering as a catalyst for change – even as the trigger for a major turning point or transformation in their lives – and they have changed in ways they may not have achieved if they hadn’t been suffering in the first place. I used the example of Eckhart Tolle way back near the start of our Course. He was suicidal until he started to develop a different kind of relationship with his mind and then he became a teacher about mind.

First up today I want to use the life work of Steven Hayes from the University of Nevada as another example. He had a crippling anxiety disorder as a young man and he used this experience to develop some principles that he calls ‘psychological flexibility,’ which became known as Acceptance-Commitment-Therapy or ACT. One of many books about this is called *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* by Steven Hayes and Spenser Smith. An Australian therapist, Russ Harris, outlines the same principles in his popular book, *The Happiness Trap*.

I have not experienced this program of therapy myself – I don’t even know any ACT practitioners – so I am not speaking about ACT for you to use as a therapy – that is not my field of expertise. The things I have read and heard about ACT from online videos and talks seem to me to be very sound principles about how change occurs and why it is difficult to change. So I want to speak about the principles of ACT as I understand them and as they fit into this Course, not the therapy itself.

Steven Hayes says that ACT is based on a version of *mindfulness*, a certain kind of *acceptance* and what he calls *values-based living*. When our attention is captured by suffering we have lost our psychological flexibility – we do not have the ability to be flexible in the present moment so we can’t shift our attention to a better place. Hayes studied the way that the language in which our thoughts are constructed contributes to this problem. You don’t realise that there is a more comfortable place with a sense of meaning and value within reach – it is much closer at hand than your thoughts are telling you it is. Instead of looking in that direction you try to turn away from the problem, which he refers to as the ‘pull of experiential avoidance.’ He calls this relatively fixed state of mind ‘cognitive fusion’ and advocates a process of ‘defusion’ in order to reframe one’s meaning-making process – from a field of research that is his specialty known as Relational Frame Theory (RFT).

Defusion is necessary because we mistake the thought we have for the reality of what we are describing. This applies to every aspect of the thinking part of our mind. I remember in my earlier book using a quote from Alan Watts who wrote *The Wisdom of Insecurity* amongst other books. It said: ‘we suffer from the delusion that the entire universe is held in order by the categories of

human thought . . .’ Our story and the language we use are only commentaries on reality, not the experience itself – they are more like what is written on the menu compared to the meal itself. That is why Hayes studied Relational Frame Theory.

The meaning we make at any time is a pattern or a frame of mutual relationships between one thing and another, one time and another, and so on. It’s a connectivity map. I often think of meaning as being like a dot picture that makes sense to you once you have joined up the dots and can see the pattern you have made. Our thoughts are framed in language with the logical consistency that comes from our left brain and they prove themselves to be correct in such a convincing way that we get stuck in them and can’t see the bigger picture or see that the language may have actually distorted the reality of our situation. This is where it is always helpful to be talking with another person about it because they may see the reality more clearly than your language has portrayed it.

Cognitive defusion is a process of separating your thoughts from their referents and in this regard it is the same as CBT. Steven Hayes saw the necessity to add some form of mindfulness to it so that we engage the whole of our mind, not just our thinking. Because we take thoughts (expressed as language) so seriously and tend to de-emphasise our feelings we spend a lot of our time using only part of our mind. Mindfulness is a way to engage more fully – not be stuck in thinking about something, somebody or yourself. As I said before your self is not what your thoughts tell you it is – your real self is much closer to what you are feeling at the time because your feelings are a less precise and more complete form of meaning that you make. Language not only helps us to create meaning, it can distort meaning as well, but this is a difficult thing for our left brain to accept. It is this deeper meaning that brings about the mental state we call acceptance. And acceptance of the present situation is the first thing we need to bring about change. Without acceptance of the present situation useful change will not occur.

The roots of acceptance lie in what we refer to as willingness. Acceptance means to take what is being offered to you, which we can only do if we have a sense of willingness and that seems to stem more from our heart than our head. Willingness to change is not the same as wanting something specific, it is not conditional or manipulative, it is not even trying – it is more like being prepared to jump in the deep end of a pool you’ve never been in before. It includes trust in the unknown so it involves our subconscious as well as our conscious mind and is most evident in the in-between part of our mind that is our feelings.

The preoccupation with self that I have been speaking about is addressed by the kind of mindfulness that Steven Hayes is describing. He speaks about the self as it is conceptualised in our story, the self as in our present-moment awareness and a third kind of self that is simply an observer and stands apart from the actual experience. In mindfulness you are letting this observer take the lead, which is easier to do than you might expect. If our experience is like a game of chess and we have been sensing the heat of battle between the pieces – defending and attacking – this is like being the chessboard rather than the individual pieces. You think: isn’t that interesting to see where those pieces have moved.

Earlier I described basic differences between our subconscious and our conscious mind. The latter is generally more positive and flexible whereas the subconscious is primed to be the first response to danger and is more negative and automatic. Our thinking can take on this rigid negativity when we become too absorbed in our own pain and suffering. Mindfulness is not possible because our left-brain thinking lacks humility and tends to forget that there is always more to be considered such as intuition from the unknown. The meaning we make with our whole mind is not simplistically judgmental and controlling. Our thoughts that are judgments do not have the same quality of meaning as we get from mindfulness that includes love and the soul. Steven Hayes uses the word ‘love’ in everything he writes or says and his catchphrase is ‘love is not everything, it’s the only thing.’

In ACT he wants people to see the difference between the appearance of psychological problems – what they seem like to our thinking mind – and their true substance so we can give up fighting against something or trying to overcome something and just concentrate on living. The aim of ACT is not necessarily to relieve the pain at all, but to move from a mind state of suffering to an engagement with life – in other words, to live now with what you’ve got now. As with stress, your uncomfortable and painful feelings are not really an enemy – they may restrict you, but they are also there to help you. Trying to control them or turn away from them is not the answer. Hayes says we need to turn towards them with passionate curiosity. You can physically escape an external force, but the internal forces, once initiated, can’t be ignored in this way. Whatever you move away from or try to avoid hangs around within your mind and in your experience no matter how hard you try to suppress it or kill it off.

This the approach I was advocating with regard to stress. You don’t have to overdo it, but you can’t escape it altogether and you might as well use it to your advantage if you can. Hayes says with ACT that our mind wants to work to soften and accept our suffering, but be with it because it needs the suffering to be there even as it brings about relief. A Buddhist monk apparently said to Thomas Merton: ‘there is suffering that you run away from and it follows you everywhere and there is suffering that you face directly and in doing so find a sense of freedom.’

What we are aiming for is a change in behaviour and in our experience of living, which is not the province of our thinking – it is our doing. The old routine of solving your problem by thinking about it is replaced by a new approach when we have disentangled ourselves from our thinking using the defusion and techniques of Steven Hayes. These include saying your fears and issues out loud in a silly voice – imitating the chipmunks or the voice of your least favourite politician – singing them in a song. This changes your feelings. Then the mindfulness and acceptance process of being here and now occupies brings in your whole mind – the emotions as well as the thinking. What happens then is that you can start doing some things differently.

This is where the ‘values-based living’ comes in. Values are chosen life directions or ways of living your life. They are not goals or outcomes and not situated somewhere in the future – they are how you want to be today. We can work out how we want to live today by asking ourselves what value or principle is it that my life will serve today. We are all living to serve something or someone. We will be looking more closely at how we use our values in the next session. You could imagine the person giving the eulogy after you’ve died and saying that you lived to support your family, were loyal to your friends or loved telling stories, growing things, helping people, whatever.

These are not specific outcomes that can be measured or ticked off and we are all imperfect so we fail as often as we succeed in living according to our values. Nevertheless they are the kind of commitment that I think probably serves us best for obtaining satisfaction and experiencing wellness. If we get up each morning and instead of saying I must achieve these goals today, say to ourselves, I want to live by my values today and whatever happens will be the right result, this will probably result in a lot less outcome-based, manipulative thinking and a more reflective way of being.

As I said I haven’t experienced ACT and I’m not recommending any particular therapy, but I thought the principles it espouses seemed to be helpful for understanding how we can bring about change in troublesome habits and free ourselves from the restrictions they impose on our lives. It is not a simple process and change is always going to be incremental – a kind of evolution.

There is a different way of explaining this in a book by Charles Duhigg called *The Power of Habit* which I only have as an e-book. I think the same principles are involved although he presents it in a more simplistic way. The idea is that same process by which the learned emotional responses became habitual in the first place can be used to bring about the change. If we think of it in an operational way, each habit is a behavioural routine that is triggered by one or more cues and delivers some kind of reward; both the cues and the reward manifest as feelings. When the reward

feeling is strong enough to set up a craving, even a mild one, the habit has been formed. It follows from this that if you can identify the specific cues and attach them to a different behaviour that delivers the same or similar feelings of reward your habit will be changed.

This sounds mechanistic, but I also know that it does work, under certain circumstances. It will only work – based on my experience anyway – if you can pro-actively manage your feelings, trust in the unknown and you don't try to figure it out – you just do it. At first you don't feel like substituting the new behaviour for the old one because you doubt that it will work as well and it feels uncomfortable. The force of habit in your mind will tell you to go back to the old behaviour, but if you persevere, your feelings may give you a glimmer of hope that the reward is reachable in this new way. Much depends on recognising clearly the feelings that are the cues and rewards, which entails knowing your own mind better than Henry Higgins did. Then the crucial part is *doing, not thinking*. I was unable to think my way into a better way of life, but as I started to trust something larger than myself I became prepared to do things differently – even though I doubted at first that it would work – and thankfully, I kept this up until some new habits were formed. The most important aid for keeping in touch with your feelings and developing this trust is to have other people to talk with about it, especially if they are going through a similar experience.

When this doesn't happen Duhigg suggests that there is something lacking that he calls *belief*, which is an interesting and mysterious concept. He gives examples of how two sporting teams practice the plays that will win their games, but when they are evenly matched, the result seems to depend on the strength of the subconscious belief the players have in themselves and in what they are doing, which means they don't have to think about it – they just feel it and do it. Whether it is in a team sport or a self-help community the emotional bond between the participants strengthens their belief.

Belief is a function of our imagination and includes respect for the unknown. Perhaps the reason we don't believe we can change is that we fear to let ourselves go to a place where we are worthy enough to deserve that change – where we are truly loved. This is the insidious effect of shame. Several people including Marianne Williamson (but apparently not Nelson Mandela as is often quoted) have speculated that what we fear most is success. Erich Fromm wrote about *The Fear of Freedom* that has arisen because the restrictions on individual freedom have lessened and yet we seem to miss having some kind of larger-than-self authority in our lives. This is a strange kind of fear, perhaps best known to our soul because it comes when we are unable to develop faith.

Whatever the reasons that some people believe they can change and others don't, I think that our subconscious shame and the false pride that goes along with it – in short the consequences of not knowing that you are loved – are probably the most insidious and harmful things that can happen to our mind. In order to change we must feel that we are loved in one way or another. This is far more important than willpower. My own experience of change convinced me that it is nothing like that highly overrated ability we call willpower because it is essentially an acceptance of reality and a surrender of the mind to unknown influences.

This Course is about getting to know one's own mind more accurately and completely so as to harness more of its tremendous potential for both personal and community wellbeing. This includes finding the courage to change and experiencing the freedom that goes with that; it is nice to feel free, but the feeling of becoming free is even sweeter.

BREAK

To change something in our mind will involve both our affect – our emotions – and our story. The last thing I want to talk about today is our story and the way we can actually rewrite our stories.

The stories that our mind makes to hold our meaning together are being updated all the time, but their basic structure becomes so reassuring and comfortable that we don't find it easy to change the story even if lots of things are going badly in our lives. This is particularly true when we are suffering because our imagination has fewer degrees of freedom, less room to move, when the defensive emotions we have learned are closing down some of the options. This saps confidence and makes it difficult to be in the present moment to the point where the story our mind has created is doing more harm than good. A good book about our ability to re-write our stories is called *Redirect: The Surprising New Science of Psychological Change* by Timothy Wilson whose earlier book (*Strangers to Ourselves*) introduced us to the 'adaptive unconscious.'

Psychotherapy is the business of helping people to re-write their stories and we try to help one another to do this in daily life as well, hence the great importance of conversation. Wilson makes it clear that profound psychological change does result from re-writing our stories, but he found that the most obvious ways of achieving this do not necessarily have the best effects; in fact his research showed that some current therapies actually had little benefit and could even make the problem worse.

There is a procedure commonly used by the military, police and ambulance services for people exposed to severe psychological trauma called Critical Incident Debriefing that is intended to reduce post-traumatic stress. When this was compared with no debriefing or an alternative treatment it was found to be ineffective at preventing subsequent PTSD and in some cases it increased the likelihood of psychological illness. Those affected were required to talk about all the details of their experience as soon as possible after the event. Unfortunately this seemed to reinforce in their minds the worst aspects of their stories and make them more resistant to change.

An alternative procedure that was more effective involved a gentler reflection made in writing some weeks later about the meaning of that experience in one's life as a whole. The one they used is called the Pennebaker Writing Technique that was really the foundation of what is called Journal Therapy or Journaling today. The meaning that is formed in our subconscious is sensitive and precious and can't necessarily be verbalised under pressure. Referring back to the metaphor I used about the rider and the elephant, we could say that getting to know how your elephant is feeling is a delicate process. Earlier I contrasted our experiencing self with our remembering self; the latter is the story the rider puts into words, but much of it was in fact written by the elephant. Some of this becomes clearer as you write about it reflectively. This seems to work better for some people than others, which is not surprising because we all have different ways of verbalising our feelings.

Wilson's book contains other interesting examples of what works and what doesn't work when it comes to changing our stories. Sometimes you can see how the faulty stories that other people have created are adversely affecting their lives, but you know that simply telling them to change will not work. Your teenage children, for example, may not respond to your advice because they are developing their own personal stories to be different from yours. The stories of some of your much older friends may have become so entrenched that they aren't likely to change just because you suggest it. Wilson compared our stories to an oil painting that has been laid down in many layers that can't be scraped away cleanly.

He describes research with new University students who had received much lower marks than they expected at their first exam. Some students used this to reinforce their story that they probably weren't cut out for University anyway and subsequently their work rate fell away, their results deteriorated and they dropped out. Other students came up with a more positive and confident story that they must not have worked hard enough for that exam and it seemed that University was going to require more effort than they had expected. That story did not include the expectation of failure.

It doesn't work to tell the negative students that their story could be wrong and they should change it. However, when some groups in Wilson's research were supplied, quite unobtrusively, with

information showing that it was normal to get low marks at first and describing the usual rate of improvement as the course progresses, those groups had significantly fewer drop-outs than matched control groups. They weren't told to think differently yet they did.

When anything happens that is unexpected, especially if it is a major trauma, we find it difficult to accommodate that into our story so its meaning is not clear. We need to accept that it takes time to 'unearth implicit values' that are the framework for a more satisfying and coherent story. Given time and patience this will reshape our meaning so that we experience different feelings about the whole thing. This is something we need to try to explain to our children.

Wilson also showed that, just as large rewards are not very effective, severe punishments don't work either, because they draw more attention to the meaning of avoiding the punishment, thus weakening the more important story about one's autonomy and ability to make good choices. Mildly annoying threats were more effective and easier to implement. He advocates a principle of 'minimal sufficiency' for disciplining children. What is most useful, of course, is the positive verbal acknowledgment of the person's responsible behaviour. When complimenting your child it is more effective to say that you can see how their hard work has paid off than to simply say that he or she must be naturally brilliant.

The most powerful story editing process of all is what Wilson calls the 'do good to feel good' principle. What we do shapes our minds and our narratives immediately and sustainably so when we do something esteemable our self-esteem is enhanced. This is not simply positive thinking; it's a way of improving self-worth and connectability that really does create more hopeful meanings and more purpose in life. He also recommends that we enjoy the 'pleasure of uncertainty' because it's actually not very interesting if you know exactly what is going to happen, so there is always value in trying something new.

Wilson gives examples of reductions in delinquency, teenage pregnancy and drug and alcohol abuse when young people were set up with opportunities for doing a small amount of volunteer work that was chosen to suit their individual temperaments. In contrast a typical scare program of taking disadvantaged children around the jails and hospitals and showing them horrible consequences of bad behaviour actually seemed to reinforce their story that delinquency may be a feasible option.

For changing racial or cultural prejudice he found that nothing worked better than regular contact with people who are different from yourself. Education programs achieved very little; those intense workshops (such as 'Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes') designed to make you feel what it's like to be discriminated against could even reinforce the divisiveness. But simply spending time together with people from different cultures had an immediate and lasting effect by creating new stories that replaced the old. The connections that occur at an emotional level – between the elephants as well as their riders, referring back to an earlier metaphor – are largely responsible for this effect.

This is consistent with what we have been talking about all day today – that we change by doing things differently, not by thinking about doing them.

When we meet again I will be talking about values and the role they play in our mind.