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Buddhist monks really are happier

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Sunshine touched the early Bank Holiday for once; life eased and slowed. Parents watched their children play and paddle, lovers walked hand in hand, people fiddled harmlessly with bikes and cars and boats and plants. More smiling, more sleeping. Not everyone gets the benefit, of course; for some the job goes on, and for others anxiety or grief cannot be broken by a mere holiday. But by and large, if scientists had been given access to our national brain this weekend, they would have found increased electrical activity in the left frontal cortices, and less than usual going on in the right ones — which house anger and anxiety — and in the forebrain amygdala, where fear and fretting make their home.

We seem to know a lot now about the physical seats of happiness, and last week unveiled two American scientific studies on the subject. On scanning the brains of Buddhist monks and others who practise religious meditation, two groups of researchers separately confirmed that it is visibly, biologically, provable that such people are happier than the norm.

Those who follow the Four Noble Truths and cultivate detachment, acceptance, the control of desires and the contemplation of the moment's beauty are not only serene but strong — “the gymnasts of the mind,” said one scientist, admiringly. Even when not enwrapped in formal meditation, they are less likely to be shocked, flustered, angry or even surprised. You can, experimenters found, fire a gun near them and they barely jump; yet at the same time they are unusually sensitive to tiny signs of emotion in other human faces. “We can now hypothesise with some confidence,” said Professor Flanagan of Duke University, North Carolina, “that those apparently happy, calm Buddhist souls one regularly comes across in places such as Dharmasala, India, really are happy”.

Granted, there is something faintly comic in the idea of scientists fiddling and scanning and taking notes to prove to their suspicious minds that smiling lamas are as jolly as they seem. And one might point out that it is all very well to curb restlessness and contemplate the rainbow Truth with your left-brain cortex, but we wouldn't know anything about the inside of our bodies at all if it were not for the questing, stressful, whirring, sparking, midnight-oil burning restlessness of the right cortex in generations of scientists: not to mention a lot of ferocious “negative emotions” in their amygdala as these squashy folds of tissue plot arguments about research funding and challenge one another's accuracy on the lab bench. Human progress needs a bit of stress and unrestfulness, getting-and-spending. There is a reason we were given the right-hand side of our brains. Not everyone can do serenity full-time.

Nonetheless, urbanised Western societies needed this reminder. Christianity too often arrives choked by anxious irrelevant cultural complexities, and seems to fail or to repel us. The basic tenets of Buddhism are easier to turn towards — live every moment and every act fully, accept that all things pass, control your desires without starving them, do not kill or quarrel, hatred cannot be ended by more hatred, forgive others and yourself, be kind, contemplate the beautiful. Many of its sayings are superb: I am particularly fond of the maxim that “churning water, for however long a time, does not produce butter”. There are government ministries that would do well to put that up on the wall.

One of the strengths of Buddhism lies in its inwardness: you need not take to orange robes, vegetarianism, economic inactivity or a belief in literal reincarnation. You can carry on being a judge or a rock star or a banker, or indeed a churchgoer, while assimilating a great many of the practices and attitudes of Buddhism. One of its weaknesses, therefore, is that it can be taken up as a mere pose: we have all had our teeth set on edge by ostentatiously serene downshifters who reject acquisitive materialism only after making very sure that they have bombproof investments and a

house in Cornwall. From Nancy Mitford's novel *Don't Tell Alfred* to *Absolutely Fabulous*, sending up pretentious New Agery has been a national sport.

But the time for mockery, is probably over. Despite its Glastonbury fringes, most of our society has tipped so far away from the happy simplicities of contemplation that we need to be reminded of what we really are and where our true contentment lies. The pursuit of "happiness" has turned into a blaring, jostling, flashing, shouting, grabbing, and desperate headlong competition from infancy to the grave. Even little children have less and less time to sit and rejoice in the progress of an ant up a blade of grass. Slow pleasurable appreciation is trampled by a speeded-up race for more money, more objects, more kudos, more praise, more sex and — the ultimate irony — more lifestyle coaches and happiness gurus, followed by yet more money to pay them by the hour.

It does not make us happy. With nice timing, we also hear this week that the Government has at last agreed to hold a serious, properly independent, assessment of the hugely prescribed group of anti-depressants known as SSRIs — selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, such as Prozac and Seroxat. Bowing to concern from groups including Mind, the inquiry, for the first time, will take in evidence the individual reports of patients and their families who believe that they have fallen foul of these medicines. Now, these are useful drugs, without the deadening, slowing effect of most earlier antidepressants: I should declare an interest, since almost a decade ago I had six months of Prozac and it did me just fine. However, there are persistent reports of a few users displaying — especially near the start of a course — the most alarming of behaviours.

As it happens, I have also seen close-up examples of this: one successful suicide after two weeks on the drug produced wholly untypical behaviour, and one teenage patient who — previously just depressed — broke out into unprecedented and inexplicable self-harm until the treatment was hastily withdrawn, a behaviour never paralleled before or since. A sad and simple explanation is offered by psychiatrists: the lethargy of depression is a safeguard because you might not feel like living, but you lack the energy and determination to do anything about dying. A medication that lifts the lethargy before the misery may have calamitous results. But whatever the truth, it should always be (and is not) automatic for GPs to insist that in the first weeks of an antidepressant, especially an SSRI, the taker is watched closely and daily by someone who knows and loves him or her. If nobody does, the job falls to the medical profession. For the fact is that nobody really knows, for sure, what the new drugs do to brain chemistry.

I wish the investigation all speed and rigour, but we come back again to those facts about our brains that were confirmed by the studies on contemplatives. We should not need so many of these happiness pills. There are safer routes to calm. The conduct of consciousness is private to each of us, and you can't pass laws compelling meditation: but there are aspects of public policy that help or hinder these intimate, private roots of happiness. Local authorities who tend green quiet spaces in the midst of noisy cities, and spend effort on holding back noise and vandalism, may find it hard to justify the cost financially, but they are probably helping as much as if they built another hospital. Primary schools which hold a meditation period, or install a chill-out room with soft music and colours, report extraordinary improvements in the behaviour and learning of stressed, hyperactive children.

Churches and cathedrals are vital oases of stillness in the racketies of cities, and should not have to struggle for survival and charge at the door. Music and art are necessities, not luxuries or moneyspinners. It was depressing to see Tony Blair, responding to a campaigner's letter about school music lessons, write that music has a contribution to make "both to education and to the health of the economy". It shouldn't have been necessary to add those last seven words. We do not live by bread

alone. Music, nature, beauty and quiet places promote contemplation, acceptance and joy. Drugless, they keep us sane. And now, at least, we can point to sparkles on a brain-scan and prove it.