

THE BIG IDEAS

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Buddha, Jesus &

Your consciousness.

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In the world.

"Why is it that, despite having achieved previously undreamed-of miracles of progress, we seem more helpless in facing life than our less privileged ancestors were? The answer seems clear: while humankind collectively has increased its material powers a thousandfold, it has not advanced very far in terms of improving the content of experience."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Flow

The Psychology of Optimal Experience

BY MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI · HARPER PERENNIAL MODERN CLASSICS © 2008 · 336 PAGES

"We have called this state the flow experience, because this is the term many of the people we interviewed had used in their descriptions of how it felt to be in top form: 'It was like floating,' 'I was carried on by the flow.' It is the opposite of psychic entropy... and those who attain it develop a stronger, more confident self, because more of their psychic energy has been invested successfully in goals they themselves had chosen to pursue."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi from *Flow*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Let's start by learning how to pronounce his name. According to Martin Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness* ([see Notes](#)), it's "mee-high" "cheeks-SENT-me-high."

Schew. Now that we've got *that* out of the way, time to get to work! :)

Csikszentmihalyi and Martin Seligman are kinda the Godfathers of the Positive Psychology movement. Did you know that, in the 20th century, for every one hundred articles written on "negative" stuff like depression, schizophrenia, etc, there was only ONE article written on the "positive" stuff like gratitude, goal setting, etc.? Yepperz. It's awesome to see those stats changing with more and more brilliant psychologists studying the science behind living a wonderful life and we have Csikszentmihalyi and Seligman to thank for playing such significant roles.

Now on to *Flow*.

It's an *incredible* book that powerfully articulates the science behind how to control our consciousness to more consistently get ourselves into the optimal state of experience known as flow, and, as a result, enjoy our lives more.

The book is packed with Big Ideas and I'm excited to share some of my favorites. If you're feelin' it and like going deep into Positive Psychology, it's definitely worth reading cover to cover.

For now? Let's get our flow on. :)

CONTENTS OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS

"A person can make himself happy, or miserable, regardless of what is actually happening 'outside,' just by changing the contents of consciousness. We all know individuals who can transform hopeless situations into challenges to be overcome, just through the force of their personalities. This ability to persevere despite obstacles and setbacks is the quality people most admire in others, and justly so; it is probably the most important trait not only for succeeding in life, but for enjoying it as well."

To develop this trait, one must find ways to order consciousness so as to be in control of feelings and thoughts. It is best not to expect shortcuts will do the trick."

As we discuss in nearly every one of these Notes, our situations DO NOT determine our state

"The insights of the Gospels, of Martin Luther, of the framers of the Constitution, of Marx and Freud—just to mention a very few of those attempts that have been made in the West to increase happiness by enhancing freedom—will always be valid and useful, even though some of them have been perverted in their application. But they certainly do not exhaust either the problems or the solutions."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

of well-being. In Csikszentmihalyi's words, it's all about how we organize the "contents of our consciousness." And, if we intend to develop this trait, it's best if we don't expect shortcuts to do the trick. :)

The book is all about how we can organize the contents of our consciousness to be in a state of "flow" consistently. More on that in a moment.

For now, let's take a peek at the importance of taking personal responsibility for the control of our consciousness and the danger of trying to institutionalize it:

BUDDHA, JESUS & YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS

"The knowledge of how to control consciousness must be reformulated every time the cultural context changes. The wisdom of the mystics, of the Sufi, of the great yogis, or of the Zen masters might have been excellent in their own time—and might still be the best, if we lived in those times and in those cultures. But when transplanted to contemporary California those systems lose quite a bit of their original power. They contain elements that are specific to their original contexts, and when these accidental components are not distinguished from what is essential, the path to freedom gets overgrown by brambles of meaningless mumbo jumbo. Ritual form wins over substance, and the seeker is back where he started.

Control over consciousness cannot be institutionalized. As soon as it becomes part of a set of social rules and norms, it ceases to be effective in the way it was originally intended to be."

How beautifully said!

As much as we wanna open a rule book with all the perfect answers to our problems, it's not gonna happen. Control over our consciousness cannot be institutionalized or captured in a convenient recipe.

And, isn't it funny that we tend to want to open up rule books that were written a couple thousand years ago?! I find that particularly odd for a number of reasons.

First, these books were written THOUSANDS (!!!) of years ago—at a time when everyone was certain the sun revolved around the earth and the world was flat and no one could even imagine sending a man to the moon, watching a box with moving people in it or talking into a piece of plastic and communicating with someone on the other side of the planet. Yet, we take their wisdom as perfectly applicable to our era? Huh?

* scratches head *

Second, and much more importantly, even the people whose "rule books" we're studying were rebelling against *their* generation's rule book—Jesus was rebelling against the fact Jews were, in his opinion, mindlessly following the Laws and Buddha was challenging the laws of a Hindu culture from which Buddhism arose. Now, we unquestioningly follow the rules their followers have laid out. It seems pretty obvious that if either of them were alive today they'd be rebelling against their own supposed doctrines, no?

Per Csikszentmihalyi: "And as Dostoevsky among many others observed, if Christ had returned to preach his message of liberation in the Middle Ages, he would have been crucified again and again by the leaders of that very church whose worldly power was built on his name."

Alas, we could discuss this for an entire (wonderfully entertaining and enlightening!) weekend but let's just drive the Big Idea home: Learning to control our consciousness is an inside job.

KNOWING + DOING

"It is not enough to *know* how to do it; one must *do* it, consistently, in the same way as athletes or musicians must keep practicing what they know in theory."

"We may call intentions the force that keeps information in consciousness ordered... They act as magnetic fields, moving attention toward some objects and away from others, keeping our mind focused on some stimuli in preference to others."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

This is another *huge* theme of these Notes. It's NOT about "knowing" how to do something or who said what when. We must DO what we know.

Reverend [Michael Bernard Beckwith](#) (one of the cool doods from *The Secret*) says this in his great book *Spiritual Liberation* ([see Notes](#)): "To agree with the keys described here is one thing, to practice them is another. To read and study and have conversations about spiritual practices is good, but unless you incorporate them into your life, you won't embody or integrate them—which means you aren't receiving their benefits. Ask yourself, 'How can I now move from theory into practice?' If you merely collect spiritual information without practicing it, all you will develop is a case of spiritual indigestion and constipation."

Well, there ya go.

You got spiritual indigestion/constipation? Consuming all kinds of amazing wisdom but not APPLYING it to your life?

Remember that we've gotta keep everything moving and make sure we're practicing the stuff we're learning, eh?!? :)

Question time: What ONE thing do you KNOW to be true that you *aren't* currently rockin' in your life?

(Is now a good time to start practicing it? :)

ATTENTION AS PSYCHIC ENERGY

"The mark of a person who is in control of consciousness is the ability to focus attention at will, to be oblivious to distractions, to concentrate as long as it takes to achieve a goal, and not longer. And the person who can do this usually enjoys the normal course of everyday life."

Csikszentmihalyi describes our attention as "psychic energy" and articulates the fact that a) those of us who can control it tend to enjoy life more; and, b) we have a limited amount of stimuli we can attend to in any given moment/minute/hour/day and, therefore, lifetime.

For those curious souls, over a seventy year lifetime, assuming sixteen hours of waking time per day, this amounts to 185 billion bits of information over the course of our lives.

That may sound like a lot, but it goes quickly, and the quality of your attention and where you choose to put it essentially dictates the quality of your life.

So, where are *you* choosing to invest those precious units of psychic energy?

BOREDOM, ANXIETY AND FLOW

"In all the activities people in our study reported engaging in, enjoyment comes at a very specific point: whenever the opportunities for action perceived by the individual are equal to his or her capabilities. Playing tennis, for instance, is not enjoyable if the two opponents are mismatched. The less skilled player will feel anxious, and the better player will feel bored. The same is true for every other activity... Enjoyment appears at the boundary between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act."

This is the heart of flow: We've gotta create activities where our skills match our challenges!

To recap: If our skills are far greater than the challenge, we're gonna get bored. If the challenge is far greater than our skills, we're gonna get anxious.

When our skills match the challenge? Enter flow!

"We need to know how to control consciousness—a skill that most people have not learned to cultivate."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Csikszentmihalyi continues: "The optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is order in consciousness. This happens when psychic energy—or attention—is invested in realistic goals, and when skills match the opportunities for action. The pursuit of a goal brings order in awareness because a person must concentrate attention on the task at hand and momentarily forget everything else. These periods of struggling to overcome challenges are what people find to be the most enjoyable of their lives. A person who has achieved control over psychic energy and has invested it in consciously chosen goals cannot help but grow into a more complex being. By stretching skills, by reaching toward higher challenges, such a person becomes an increasingly extraordinary individual."

Brilliant.

Notice the importance of setting realistic goals that, again, match our skills with our challenge. By doing so, we focus our psychic energy/attention in a way that creates flow. Powerful stuff.

You'll want to get the book for an in-depth discussion on the hows and whys. For now, check in and see where you might be experiencing some boredom or anxiety in your life. Can you see that your skills and challenges don't quite line up in either situation?

If you're anxious, what can you do to get into flow?

Either bring the challenge down by setting more realistic goals based on your current skills and/or develop your skills to match the challenge over time.

If you're bored, how you can add more of a challenge?

If you're doing a repetitive task, for example, can you see how flawlessly you can do it? Or how quickly? Or maybe both? That'd bring up the challenge closer to your skill and focus your energy opening the door for flow.

CULTURE BUILDING FLOW

"Another good example of how a culture can build flow into its life-style is given by the Canadian ethnographer Richard Kool, describing one of the Indian tribes of British Columbia:

The Shushwap region was and is considered by the Indian people to be a rich place: rich in salmon and game, rich in below-ground food resources such as tubers and roots—a plentiful land. In this region, the people would live in permanent village sites and exploit the environs for needed resources. They had elaborate technologies for very effectively using the resources of the environment, and perceived their lives as being good and rich. Yet, the elders said, at times the world became too predictable and the challenge began to go out of life. Without challenge, life had no meaning.

So the elders, in their wisdom, would decide that the entire village should move, those moves occurring every 25 to 30 years. The entire population would move to a different part of the Shushwap land and there, they found challenge. There were new streams to figure out, new game trails to learn, new areas where the balsamroot would be plentiful. Now life would regain its meaning and be worth living. Everyone would feel rejuvenated and healthy. Incidentally, it also allowed exploited resources in one area to recover after years of harvesting."

Isn't that awesome!??

There's one way to create a culture of flow, eh!?

Kinda reminds you of our current culture, huh?

Um... not so much. :)

So, begs the question: How can YOU create optimal challenges in your family/life?!?

*"Subjective experience is not just one of the dimensions of life, it *is* life itself."*

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

"Health, money, and other material advantages may or may not improve life. Unless a person has learned to control psychic energy, chances are such advantages will be useless."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

"Being in control of the mind means that literally anything that happens can be a source of joy."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

"It is one thing to recognize that life is, by itself, meaningless. It is another thing entirely to accept this with resignation. The first fact does not entail the second any more than the fact that we lack wings prevents us from flying."

~ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

FLOW AT WORK AND IN LEISURE

"Thus we have a paradoxical situation: On the job people feel skillful and challenged, and therefore feel more happy, strong, creative, and satisfied. In their free time people feel that there is generally not much to do and their skills are not being used, and therefore they tend to feel more sad, weak, dull, and dissatisfied. Yet they would like to work less and spend more time in leisure."

That's funny.

We've got such a poor idea of what actually makes us feel good. And, work has a really bad rap for some weird reason. Put the two together and you've got, well, our modern society. :)

The key here: Let's remember what brings us into flow (goal directed activities that match our skills with the challenge!) and enjoy the opportunities we naturally have at work to get into flow while consciously creating more opportunities to do so in our leisure time!

And, let's not forget: "Because work is so universal, yet so varied, it makes a tremendous difference to one's overall contentment whether what one does for a living is enjoyable or not. Thomas Carlyle was not far wrong when he wrote, 'Blessed is he who has found his work; let him ask no other blessings.' Sigmund Freud amplified somewhat on this simple advice. When asked his recipe for happiness, he gave a very short but sensible answer: 'Work and love.'"

TRANSFORMING ADVERSITY

"When adversity threatens to paralyze us, we need to reassert control by finding a new direction in which to invest psychic energy, a direction that lies outside the reach of external forces. When every aspiration is frustrated, a person must seek a meaningful goal around which to organize the self."

Csikszentmihalyi tells the remarkable stories of how prisoners of war endured solitary confinement by creating elaborate goals in their heads (from memorizing poetry to playing virtual golf in their minds) to reassert control of their consciousness in the face of incredible adversity.

As he says, the more stressful the external circumstances, the more important it is we put our attention on goals we can move toward.

How about you? Are situations in your outside world a bit out of your control?

What goals can you create to align your psychic energy in a positive direction? Time to get in shape to run a 10k or a marathon or a triathlon? Or maybe write the book or the business plan or take the art class or read the books on your shelf?

Whatever it is, let's remember: "Of all the virtues we can learn no trait is more useful, more essential for survival, and more likely to improve the quality of life than the ability to transform adversity into an enjoyable challenge."

ACHIEVING INNER HARMONY

"Someone who knows his desires and works with purpose to achieve them is a person whose feelings, thoughts, and actions are congruent with one another, and is therefore a person who has achieved inner harmony."

How about you?

Are your feelings, thoughts, and actions congruent with one another?

Let's get integrated.

And not "dis-integrate," eh? :)

ONE LESS RASCAL IN THE WORLD

“But no social change can come about until the consciousness of individuals is changed first. When a young man asked Carlyle how he should go about reforming the world, Carlyle answered, ‘Reform yourself. That way there will be one less rascal in the world.’ The advice is still valid. Those who try to make life better for everyone without having learned to control their own lives first usually end up making things worse all around.”

That’s pretty good math.

If we want to reform the world, let’s start with ourselves and reduce the number of rascals in the world by at least one, eh? :)

Of course, Gandhi tells us we must be the change we want to see in the world and I love the way Ervin Seale describes it in his great little book *Take Off from Within* ([see Notes](#)): “Overconcern for a suffering world is often a projection of one’s own need. And many a needy one has helped himself by helping others. Some have become ineffectual nuisances because they did not realize that the main business of living is individual growth, the seeking of the kingdom of heaven which is within. Let one take care of what has been given him—his thoughts, sensations, faculties, and he will be the best of all help to his fellow men. Of all the people I know who are serving society, those who are making the greatest contributions in alleviating human ills and wants are those who have themselves in hand.”

An enlightened society will only come about when the individuals are enlightened.

And, there’s clearly no better place to start than with ourselves, eh?

So... How ‘bout reducing the focus on changing the “world” as we turn up the dial on transforming ourselves and living more and more in flow?!? :)

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He’s spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.