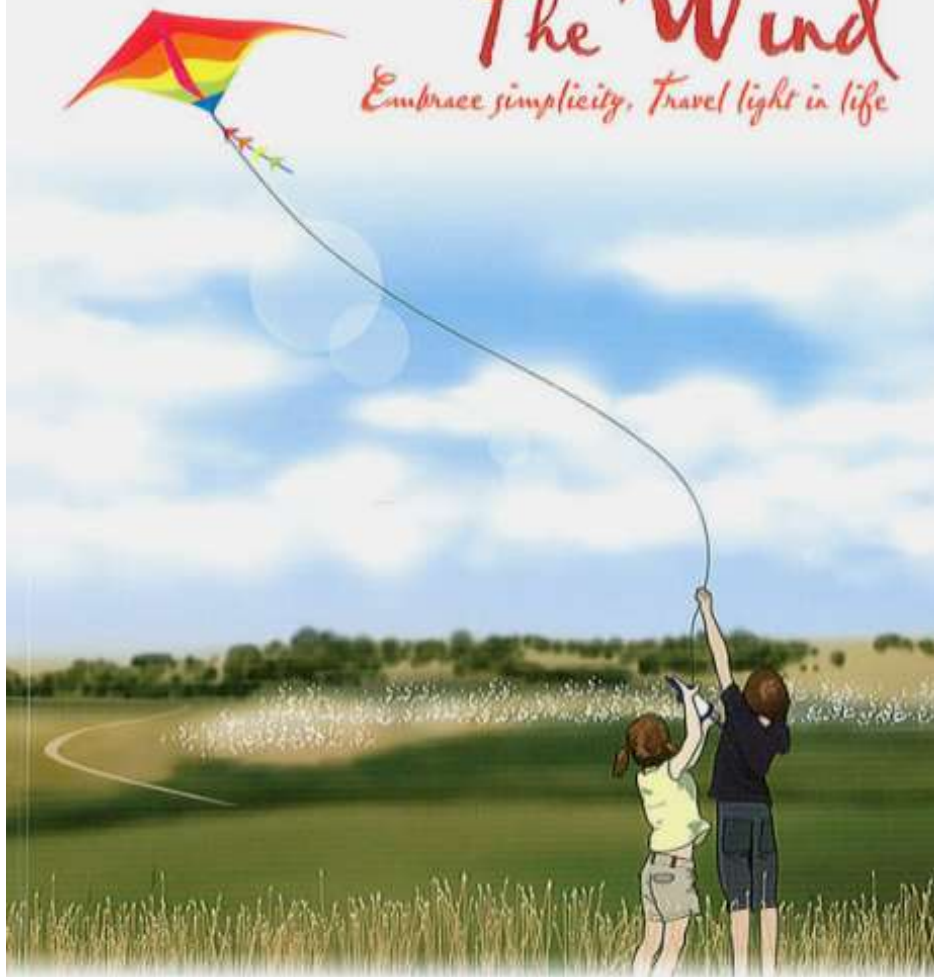


# A Kite In The Wind

*Embrace simplicity. Travel light in life*



Chan Kah Yein, Ph.D.

**This book is a gift from others to you.**

**If you have enjoyed reading it,  
please pass it on.**

**Let it be *your* gift to others.**

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*Seven Little Stories about Kindness to Animals*

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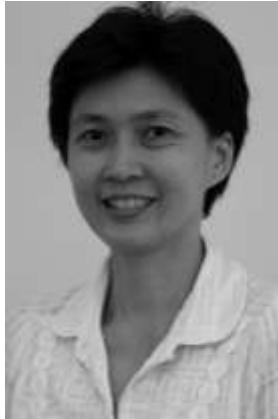
**Creating Heaven in an Imperfect World, 2008**

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*A Treasury of 28 Talks*

**For my children,  
Ming-Yi and Jia-Wen**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Her AnimalCare work is documented in [www.myanimalcare.org](http://www.myanimalcare.org)

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To my family – without your patience and understanding, this book would never have got off the ground. Thank you for giving me time to work on it.

This is a revised version of the original book published in 2008. It contains four brand new chapters and updated tips on “the art of flying a kite”!

With lots of love,  
*kahyein*  
22<sup>nd</sup> April 2011

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## Prologue

*Less is more.*

- Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

I thrive on simplicity in my life.

Having always found sophistication and elegance in all things simple, whether in thought, word or deed, I am a minimalist and a reductionist in life.

The economist, E. F. Schumacher was attributed to have said: *Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius – and a lot of courage – to move in the opposite direction.*

So you see, not that I am a genius, rather, I am learning *not* to be a fool...

Having said that, I must now very quickly end this prologue with a K.I.S.S. (Keep It Short and Simple), and get on with the book...

## 1. When I was Small

*...and Christmas trees were tall, we used to love while others used to play.* Those of you who lived during the era of the Bee Gees would have recognised these lyrics from their song *First of May*, in the movie *Melody*.

I grew up in a middle-class family. My father was a technical assistant with the Public Works Department while my mother was a school teacher. My elder brother and I had a happy childhood. I remember my mother often telling us that she did not have many material luxuries during her childhood as it was marred by the Second World War. Being the eldest in the family, she was tasked with the responsibility of looking after her siblings while my grandparents travelled far to earn a living. So after having become a mother, she ensured that we (her children) would never ever be deprived of material needs and wants.

My father too felt the same way though he had never quite expressed it to us in words, but he certainly showed it in all his actions – how he showered us with toys, games, books, activities, and whatever children needed and wanted as we were growing up. Although my parents were not financially “rich” those days, my brother and I had everything, and I do not ever remember having to ask for anything all my life. In fact, I felt we had too much!!

When I look back now, I am quite convinced that both my parents must have given a great deal to others (not necessarily monetarily, but perhaps in other ways) in their young days. You might remember the lyrics from *The Sound of Music*, “Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good...” The universe is fair – it rewards those who have been generous. My parents were not in the high income group, yet they had everything in abundance. I remember we would have three refrigerators, several television sets, many hi-fi sets, toys in duplicate (because there were two of us, and although we never fought at all, my father still made sure we would never *have* to fight, hence, everything was bought in duplicate!). Our cousins and friends who visited would marvel at just how much we had those days.

So, having grown up with abundance all my life, did I also want to have abundance in my life when I started my own home? Abundance of love and caring – Yes! But, in material things, I wanted to keep things really, really simple.

Just the bare necessities would do.

## **2. First Things First**

Wise people lead simple lives.

Wise people know that in order to be truly happy, they need to let go of many unnecessary things in life.

With materialism and consumerism on the rise, people are led to believe that having more is the key to happiness. Advertisements do that all the time. However, wanting more will actually leave us with more greed and dissatisfaction. It is impossible to satisfy greed. Instead, it may be easier to learn to let go of our many desires and wants, and opt for simplicity and renunciation in life.

Real renunciation is not about compelling ourselves to give up things which we still inwardly cherish, but of changing our perspective on them so that we no longer crave for them. If we realise that our dissatisfaction in life is due to the inability to satisfy our greed, then we would not want to remain in bondage to it anymore.

People sometimes forget that they come into this world empty-handed and they will leave this world empty-handed. Why accumulate and hoard so much while we are here? We cannot possibly bring any of it along when we die! So, doesn't it make sense to simplify our needs and reduce our baggage now so that when it is time to go (sometimes unexpectedly and unannounced), we leave our affairs neat and tidy for our loved ones?

Let's not be a burden to others, dead or alive!!

### 3. Delusion.com

Many of us may be deluded because we do not have the wisdom to really see things as they are. For example, some of us hope that good things would remain permanent, yet change is inevitable in life.

In the practice of simplicity and letting go, it is helpful that we learn to see all things as impermanent, be it good or bad. When goodness comes, we are grateful, and we embrace and enjoy it. When troubles come, we must be graceful and accept them as well, knowing and realising that good times and bad times are merely passing phases in our lives. It is when we attach ourselves to them that we will be miserable. We feel miserable when bad times come, but we also feel miserable when good times fade away. If only we could embrace them momentarily while they are here, and let them go, we would lighten our hearts and go about life more happily.

William Blake expresses this very eloquently in this beautiful poem:

*He who binds himself to joy,  
Doth the winged life destroy.  
But he who kisses the joy as it flies,  
Lives in eternity's sunrise.*

The first two lines tell us that attachment to good times (and bad times!) brings misery. And what makes us attach? It is greed and the inability to let go. This is the cause of our miseries. The next two lines say that if we could just “kiss the joy as it flies”, and this means that when joy comes, we are allowed to embrace it, enjoy it momentarily and let it fly, then we would always be happy (living in eternity’s sunrise). Similarly, when sadness comes, embrace it too. Then, let it fly. It will eventually fly away.

So, living simply and being able to let things go after embracing and enjoying them momentarily, is one of the keys to a happy life. When we are able to let go, we reduce our greed, which is actually bolstered by delusion. By reducing our greed and delusion, we would be more at peace with ourselves.

#### 4. The Golden Rule

In most religious teachings, there is a set of laid-down rules to follow as guidelines towards leading a life of morality and compassion. These rules help and train us to become better people, and to protect us from engaging in harmful deeds and actions. And in many ways, the rules also help us simplify our lives. Some of the rules that are common in many religions include abstaining from killing, stealing, over-indulgence in the senses, lying and intoxicating oneself. Killing is vicious and involves hatred and scheming. Likewise, stealing also involves unwholesome and complicated thoughts. Over-indulging in sense pleasures leaves a bad taste in the mouth, and lying complicates our lives. It was Mark Twain who said: *It is simpler and easier to tell the truth. You don't have to remember anything!* And lastly, an intoxicated mind is a complicated and suffering mind. For that matter, an intoxicated body is also a suffering body!

Some may regard these rules to be a burden ("Can't do this, can't do that!"). But in reality, adherence to rules of morality helps make our lives purer and simpler. When we lead a virtuous life, our mind is at peace because we would not be living in fear of the repercussions from our wrong-doings. Everyone has a conscience. Everyone suffers from guilt and regret when we have done wrong.

Confucius taught the Golden Rule: *Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.* In my opinion, it is really quite sufficient if we could lead our lives based on just this one single Golden Rule.

This Golden Rule is found in twenty-one different religions!

The truth is always universal. That is what makes it so beautiful!

## 5. Let's Start From the Mind

*The mind is the forerunner of all things. If one acts with an impure mind, suffering follows, and if one acts with a pure mind, happiness follows.*

- *The Buddha*

In the practice of simplicity, one must also begin from the mind. Perhaps the first question that we ought to ask ourselves is this: *Do I think too much?* According to many psychologists, most of us do. In fact, some studies found that as much as 80% of our thinking is unnecessary and quite useless! That being the case, instead of thinking too much, or even thinking to solve problems, why don't we return to solitude and silence to find peace and seek the answers that we are looking for.

*A fast mind is sick,  
A slow mind is sound,  
A still mind...is divine.*

- *Meher Baba*

When the mind is still, wisdom arises.

Our mind, in its original nature, is pure, radiant and luminous. It is through years of conditioning and our own delusion that we now have layers of defilements which are clouding the luminosity of our mind. These defilements include greed, hatred, jealousy, anger, worry and stress. What we need to do then is not to battle with these defilements when they come a-visiting, but to calmly return to our breath and take our minds off them. Sit in silence, observe them but do not entertain them. Then, watch them go away. This is a practice of being mindful of our defilements. We observe, but we do not react to them.

Some people find it easier to contemplate on the disadvantages and harmfulness of harbouring such negative emotions. What works for me is to think of these defilements as pieces of burning charcoal. The longer I hold on to them, the more I burn myself. So, why be so foolish? When we are angry, aren't we the ones who are suffering? Drop the burning charcoal. Return to the purity of the silent mind.

Eckhart Tolle writes in his book, *The Power of Now*, that at a higher level of consciousness, there is a vast realm of wisdom beyond intellectual thinking. He says, "You will realise that things that truly matter - beauty, joy, creativity and inner peace, arise from beyond thinking." When we tap into this higher level of consciousness, we begin to awaken.

Enlightenment is within us.

Enlightenment arises when the mind is still.

## 6. De-clutter!

We have talked about de-cluttering the mind by keeping it pure, simple and silent. Let us look at de-cluttering our material needs. I love spring cleaning. The first thing I do every semester break where I get some time off teaching is to look around my house and see what I can give away. I always tell my friends, "I need to de-clutter, I need space to breathe!!" My dream house is a Zen house – one that has almost nothing except space to breathe!

Shortly after my Ph.D., I sent all my books and materials (except for my thesis, of course – attachment?) for recycling. I looked at my whole collection of materials, and yes, they had seen me through the academic pinnacle of my life, and yes, they did hold very fond memories, but I figured they had served their purpose, and for the past four years, they had just been gathering dust in the cupboard.

When I decided to devote my life to more spiritual endeavours, I had to give up something because I cannot possibly cope with so many ambitions in my life. And I decided that my academic ambitions had been fulfilled and that phase of my life was now over (let go, do not attach!). It was time to move on to the spiritual dimension and serve others (humans *and* animals!).

So, I packed all my Ph.D. materials, said a final goodbye to them, stopped the first *paper lama* (old newspaper) van that passed my house, and quite joyfully, gave all the materials to the delighted driver. I said to him, "No, you don't have to pay me, I'm giving them to you." I cannot sell my Ph.D. materials for few *ringgit*. They are priceless, but because research is such that one must keep oneself updated, these books were of no use to anyone now. Might as well do the practical thing and get the paper recycled, *and* save some trees!

By having cleared out some of my books and other unused things, I emptied a whole cupboard, and later had the privilege of giving it away to a construction worker who came to do some renovation work in my house. Now, that was total bliss - to be able to save some trees and give a useful item to someone who welcomed it. And to top it all, I made more breathing space in my room!

Let's look around our house, is there anything usable that we do not need anymore? If there is, why not consider giving it away to someone who needs it more than us? After all, I heard that de-cluttering creates good *feng shui*, because the bad *qi* lodges itself into cluttered and untidy spaces!

My friend, Jas, told me recently, that after the tsunami in 2004, many of the victims came to a realisation, and were reported to have said, "We realise now that we only need so little, but we have accumulated so, so much..."

Edwin Way Teale writes: *Reduce the complexity of life by eliminating the needless wants of life, and the labours of life reduce themselves.*

Simplicity is making the journey of this life with just enough baggage.



## 7. A Roof Over My Head

I am (still) living in the same house (our first house) we bought twenty years ago. It is a small house, which was what we could afford at that time, and we have raised two children, and now, one dog and six rescued cats live with us.

I see that it is the trend amongst many middle-class families to “upgrade” to a bigger house after a few years. I have never seen the need or had the desire to “upgrade”. After all, there are only the four of us humans, and the pets don’t take up too much space. I sleep with my dog and two cats – it’s cozier in a small house, isn’t it? And everywhere in the house, I am never alone because my dog follows me like a bodyguard and there would always be one or two cats on top of a cupboard and snuggled up in a basket for a snooze. Talking about *feng shui* again, I read that it is good *qi* that there is the “breath of life” in every part of the room. It makes your house “alive”.

My husband had often wanted to buy a bigger house, but I have been stopping him for as long as I can. I tell him that we do not need one. I feel safer in an intermediate-linked house because I can see the whole house when I drive in and am sure that there are no unwelcome visitors lurking at the sides.

I am sure you have read the email about how the American billionaire Warren Buffet practises simplicity in his life. He has been staying in the same three-bedroom house he bought fifty years ago!

However, much as I did not want to move, I finally saw the wisdom of my husband’s suggestion so I have now agreed to move to an ever-so-slightly bigger house. The silver lining is that my cats would have their own private cat-space at the back where it is much safer than my present house and my parents will be coming to stay in my house, so everything works out just fine!

## 8. Wheel Deals

I only drive small cars. I love small cars because they are so nippy and it is easy to squeeze through traffic and into parking bays. Having grown up with my mother's Mini Cooper, I too have opted for small cars all my life, and they usually last me at least seven to ten years before wear and tear compels me to trade them in for...*another* small car! "Why don't you upgrade to a bigger car?", the salesperson asks. I don't need a bigger car, I only have two children and a dog who loves joy rides. Give me the same car, same model, just a newer one (in the days when I was driving the *Daihatsu Charade*). Then the *Charade* got phased out, so I opted for an even smaller car – the *Kelisa*!

My husband has been coaxing me to trade in my *Kelisa* for a bigger car, citing safety as the reason. But I tell him the advantages of driving a small car. People always give way to smaller cars. I don't get bullied on the road when I drive my car. In fact, I get bullied when I drive *his* (bigger) car!! Ahh...the benefits of being small...

With the recent hike (and impending subsequent hikes) in the price of petrol, it really makes sense to drive a smaller car, especially when I do not travel far. I only need the car to take me to work and back, buy groceries and to the various centres to give talks. At the rate I go, I spend, on average, RM80 on petrol per month, and my road tax is only RM20 per year.

And I also only drive manual cars. This is because automatic cars make me lazy. And when I am lazy, I have a tendency to fall asleep (yes, *even* when driving!). So for my own safety, I go for simple cars – the simpler, the better. I do not even use the remote control to lock my car doors. I prefer the keys. It is so much simpler when it's back to basics, isn't it?

And when the weather is fine and the destination not too far away, use the trusty old two-wheeler!

## 9. Shop...But Not Till You Drop!

One of the favourite pastimes of Malaysians is...shopping! And it is not just window shopping but *really* buying a whole lot of stuff, especially at the ubiquitous “Grand Sales” which, like genetically-modified crops, seem to be in season all year round nowadays.

Thank goodness that despite having lived in urban Klang Valley for so long, I have not developed the love for shopping. I shun “Grand Sales” simply because I dread crowds and I am never good at picking up good discounts, anyway. So I usually only shop for groceries, and even then, I go with a shopping list. Once all the items are ticked off, I head for the check-out counter and...run for my life! If I stay and browse, I might be a little tempted to buy things which I have not needed in the first place (because they are not on my list), so I always go with a list, and then, run for my life...back home. It works. This way, I do not clutter my house with unnecessary things.

## 10. Food, Glorious Food!

If you are as crazy as I am over musicals, you would be familiar with the words *Food, Glorious Food!* taken from the lyrics of the song from *Oliver!* when the boys at the workhouse queued up for their daily gruel.

Fortunately, I am *not* crazy about food. I have always thought of food as being a necessity simply to sustain our lives, and not for enjoyment.

I live by the principle of eating as close to Nature as possible, so my diet comprises mostly fruit and vegetables. Because I do not eat meat, I save a whole lot of money and can indulge in local “organic” vegetables (actually, it is only pesticide-free, strictly speaking). By patronising pesticide-free produce, we are indirectly saving lives – not only the insects’, but ours too!

*The China Study* is a book by T. Colin Campbell of Cornell University. It examines the relationship between meat-eating and twelve different types of cancers and other related diseases. In this extensive scientific research, the conclusion is for people to adopt a plant-based diet with adequate amounts of sunshine! That doesn’t sound too difficult, does it?

I eat a hearty breakfast (that’s my fuel for the day because I do walk quite a lot at work), a moderate lunch, a very light dinner (or I sometimes skip it entirely) and no supper. This resonates with what the Buddha recommended for His monks and nuns – no food after mid-day. But as laypeople, we still need to eat dinner because we lead a lay-life, but I make sure my dinner is very light. And even modern nutritionists tell us not to stuff ourselves up at night so that the stomach has a chance to rest when we sleep.

When I cook my meals at home, I do so very simply. Preferring to taste the natural sweetness of the food itself, I either boil, steam or stir-fry, and I do not use flavourings. But in all fairness, let me also admit that I am a hopeless cook. Having what I would call “kindergarten” culinary skills, my repertoire of recipes is absolutely nothing to shout about, but I am very contented (and actually prefer it too) eating my vegetables boiled, steamed or raw. And I love fruit! I am very easy to please when it comes to food.

Sometimes my time-table at work is such that I teach back-to-back from 10am to 2pm, and only manage to squeeze in ten minutes for a quick lunch. On such days, I go bananas! Yes, this wonderful yellow-coloured fruit, as you probably know, besides being a source of instant energy, is packed with nutrients like vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, phytochemicals and the entire spectrum of healthy nutrients. I was told that Tiger Woods sustains himself with bananas on the golf course in his world-class tournaments. Well, what is good enough for Tiger Woods is certainly good enough for me!

Modern nutritionists now tell us to stop eating when we feel we are three-quarters full. The reason is that it takes time for the stomach to inform the brain how full we feel. So, when our brain tells us that we are three-quarters full, we are actually already completely *full*. If we continue eating when we feel three-quarters full, we will eventually end up over-stuffing ourselves. Unlike the petrol tank, our stomach will continue accepting whatever food we put in (because it has no choice!). That is why many people suffer from the discomforts (and diseases!) related to over-eating.

World statistics show that Okinawa has the world's largest number of healthy centenarians. One of the contributing factors to the Okinawans' longevity is their diet that is high in fruit and vegetables, and low in calories. Another is their principle of *hara hachi bu* which means "eat until you are 80% full".

In an article entitled *Eating Right*, there is an interesting quote supposedly found in an ancient Egyptian tomb that says: *One-quarter of what you eat keeps you alive. The other three-quarters keeps your doctor alive.*

All things in moderation.

Less is more.

*Hara Hachi Bu!*

## **11. Let Food Be Thy Medicine...**

*...and medicine shall be thy food*, so says Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine. I live by this principle as well, so in my quest to reduce the chances of getting sick, I do my best to eat as healthily as I can, relying more on natural foods than supplements.

I am not a pharmacist or nutritionist and may not have any authority to say this, but I figured, in my simplistic reasoning that if quality supplements claim to use “all natural products”, wouldn’t it make more sense to just eat the “natural products” in its natural state rather than wait for it to be extracted and put into pills?

Furthermore, again, from my simplistic reasoning and what little bit of uninformed knowledge that I have, I learnt that most nutrients have to be consumed in their natural state together with other supporting nutrients as no particular nutrient can work alone. Every nutrient works synergistically with its many counterparts.

So I choose to eat simply, and eat closer to Nature.

## 12. Work Those Muscles!

Physical fitness is catching on fast these days, and rightly so too, because a healthy mind is closely dependent on a healthy body and vice versa. For exercise, I choose not to join a gym or play sports, but that's only because of a personal preference for the outdoors to an air-conditioned gymnasium.

I cannot play sports because I get breathless due to a heart condition called mitral valve regurgitation where my mitral valve (the one between the left auricle and ventricle) is floppy, a condition which I have lived with since my teens. So, you'd seldom see me running. I have often joked (but actually, I am quite serious) that even if a tiger chases me, all I can do is to radiate loving thoughts to it and hope that the tiger would have enough compassion not to eat this wretched, imperfect body of mine.

Since I have this "handicap", so to speak, I choose yoga. I used to do yoga daily without fail, starting with the *Sun Salutation* and followed by a host of other poses which I had put together for my bodily needs, and ending with *The Plough*, *The Shoulder Stand* and *Breathing Meditation*. I was surprised but very pleased that after decades of having an extremely low blood pressure (a pathetic reading of 90/50), after a year of yoga, for the first time in my entire life, my blood pressure normalised at 120/80. Ever since then, I have sworn by yoga, but now that public speaking has taken over my life, I sometimes shelve my daily yoga when I am too caught up doing research for my talks. I must make the effort to return to my daily yoga practice again before my health takes a tumble.

I also walk as much as I can. My office used to be situated on the eighth floor of our city campus, and I used to make it a point to walk *up* (yes, eight floors!) at least once a day from Mondays to Fridays. The first time I did so, in spite of years of hiking up Gasing Hill, I panted upon reaching the sixth and almost gave up, but I persevered and made it to the top. It became easier after that. Walking *down* eight floors is a piece of cake, but I was told not to indulge in that because it causes much damage to the knees. So, up, it is then! While I was proudly telling all my friends that I walk up eight floors every day, I was told that a certain eighty-seven-year-old man walks up twenty-eight floors every day to his office. Gee...I am humbled. But I am even more motivated now to keep up with the eight floors per day!

Prior to that, my office was situated three shophot blocks away from the main campus where classes were held, so I used to have to walk to and fro a few times a day, each trip about 500 metres in distance. I walk extremely fast, and this served as wonderful exercise for me. We have since moved to our new 10-storey campus and all classes are held within the same premises, but I still choose to park my car 500 metres away so that I get to walk.

I walk up escalators too, and I avoid the lifts as much as I can. Instead of taking the car, I either walk or cycle to the nearby shops when it does not rain. These are little opportunities for us to exercise and work those muscles, and since it is free, why not?

### 13. Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall...

Indeed, *who* is the fairest of 'em all? Coming from a female perspective, don't we all want to look nice and pretty? But, beauty is only skin-deep. Real beauty shines from within. I have often believed that if one's heart is kind and filled with goodness, one *will* look beautiful, even if one is not bountifully endowed with exquisite physical features. Look into the eyes, as they say, the eyes are the windows to the soul. The eyes speak volumes of what is in the heart.

All said, as far back as the times of the Egyptians, women have wanted to look beautiful. And for this purpose, they used natural concoctions to decorate their faces, and these have now evolved into cosmetics that come in sophisticated jars and bottles with exotic-sounding names. In the past, the Native American braves used them too, but that was for a different purpose, of course. But for some reason, my husband sees no difference between what the ancient Egyptians, the Native Americans or the modern women use, so he calls them all "war paint".

When I was in my teens, I read all about animal testing in the manufacture of cosmetics and skin-care products. I saw pictures of little rabbits being trapped in stereotaxic devices to have chemicals pumped into their eyes, and to suffer intense pain, then left to die slowly and painfully. From that time onwards, I vowed never to use cosmetics all my life. I still don't.

The only things I use are shampoo, soap and toothpaste (all herbal and not tested on animals), so that makes traveling *really* light and easy. Granted, if you'd still like to use cosmetics (and again, there is nothing wrong with wanting to look beautiful), go for the products that are not tested on animals. At least you can use them with a clear conscience knowing that those poor little animals have not suffered needlessly to produce that lipstick, eye-shadow or moisturizer.

Recently I read from a health website that many chemicals used in cosmetics are toxic, and ingesting them through the skin is more dangerous than ingesting them by eating because when these chemicals go through our digestive system, the harmful chemicals are partially filtered by our liver whereas the skin has no ability to do this, so chemicals that we apply onto our skin goes directly into our body.

Furthermore, I totally subscribe to the adage that beauty comes from within. When the mind is at peace, when one is contented with life, does not harbour ill thoughts of others or suffer from guilt and a bad conscience but instead is filled with loving thoughts of others, one would naturally look radiant. This natural radiance cannot be bought by money – it comes from our practice of living a moral and virtuous life. When we constantly cultivate and maintain kind and loving thoughts in our minds, surely our hearts will always be filled with goodness, and this beauty and serenity that shine from within will be manifested on our face.



Besides this, living in the here and now and not being unduly regretful of the past or unduly worried about the future also helps maintain a serene mind. If I may quote the translation of an ancient Sanskrit poem:

*Yesterday is but a dream,  
Tomorrow is but a vision.  
But today well-lived  
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.*

## 14. Silver Streaks & Highlights

These days you might have noticed that sporting fashionable hairstyles is the “in thing”. In the past, men did not bother much about their hair, but nowadays, they too do not want to lose out to the ladies in this area of grooming their crowning glory with sprays, gels, colour and highlights.

I sport an extremely low-maintenance hair-cut and have had this style for as long as I remember. From the time I was born until my late teens, my mother had always cut my hair. When I was in university, I cut my own hair (yes, with the help of a mirror for the back). After I was married, I made my husband cut my hair! But now he is a little tired of doing it, so lately, for the first time in my life, I started going to the salon to get it done. Even then, it is just for cutting. I would go home and wash it myself.

The advantage of having such a simple short hairstyle is that it is cheap to maintain, you do not need any chemicals for it *and* you can wash it every day. I remember many years ago, a biology teacher asked me if I ever wondered why even young people have white hair nowadays. Could it, he hypothesised, be due to all the chemicals that they use on their hair? I don't know...maybe, coupled with a stressful lifestyle as well. My hair is still black...for now, and I do not intend to dye it even if it turns white. Let the white strands be the “highlights” then.

Grow old gracefully, the best is yet to be!

## 15. White Dresses & Blue Satin Sashes

Those of you who grew up with *The Sound of Music* would have recognised the title of this chapter from the lyrics of *My Favourite Things*. One of the favourite things of many women is none other than clothes and accessories. We are female, we love beautiful things, and that's perfectly okay.

An honest look into my cupboard reveals that I have enough clothes and accessories for three lifetimes! After all, do I need so much? Not being one who patronises departmental stores at year-round grand sales nor one who falls prey to discounted things, I *still* think I have accumulated enough beautiful "loot" for three lifetimes.

So, some years back, I decided that I should use a guideline to prevent overcrowding in my wardrobe: If I did not wear that piece of clothing for six consecutive months, it meant that I did not like it, so I would give it away. Nowadays, with so many on-going charity drives, there is always a need for usable clothing. My other guideline is that when I buy something new, I must give away something old. It has to be on a one-to-one replacement basis. That way, overpopulation in the wardrobe will not arise. I have since then given away many nice (and even new) clothes to people who welcome them.

While we are allowed to indulge in something new (and nice!) once in a while, it is wiser to choose simple, classic styles that are timeless and will not go out of fashion too quickly. That way, you do not need new clothes when the fashion scene changes. After all, it was the great artist who painted *Mona Lisa*, Leonardo da Vinci, who said: *Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication*. Rather than buying exotic styles that thrill the senses for a short time (but later becomes a little boring), I prefer simple, timeless pieces. Ahh...this is my way of not indulging in the senses.

For work, I wear blouses that never go out of fashion. I am proud to say that some of my clothes are at least twenty-years old! My students have often remarked, "Ma'am, why do you wear the same clothes all the time?" Why, I love these clothes, that's why. And these are all I have too!

As one who places comfort before beauty, I love t-shirts. I often quip that just as monks only have three robes, I too only have three favourite combed cotton t-shirts from Sukhi Hotu which I rotate throughout the week. Why do I need more when three are enough?

*Simplicity, carried to an extreme, becomes elegance – Jon Franklin*

## 16. All that Glitters

Being one who has fewer clothes (and shoes!) than the average female, I allow myself the occasional luxury of acquiring ear-studs and ear-rings. But I would always remember what my Fifth Form English teacher, Mrs Wong, taught us. Now, Mrs Wong was the epitome of sophistication when it came to grooming. She had an impeccable taste for all things beautiful. She used to remind us, "Girls, dress appropriately and in good taste. Never put on too many accessories until you look like a Christmas tree!" I remember your advice well, Mrs Wong. I am far from being a Christmas tree. I'm more like a palm tree, perhaps. Save for the ear-studs or ear-rings, I'm as simple and as natural as they come.

Believe it or not, a few years ago, I wore ear-studs and ear-rings for a practical purpose – so that no one would mistake me for a man! This is because I do not use cosmetics and dress very simply, hence I tend to stick out like a sore thumb, especially at official functions. So, rather than have people stare at me and wonder, "Why is she so under-dressed? Is she male or female...or both?", I figured I shall decorate myself with ear-studs to make myself look more female. But these days, that doesn't work anymore because boys and men wear ear-studs too! And some of theirs are prettier than ours.

Oh well, for what it is worth, all that glitters is not gold. W. Somerset Maugham, the great English author writes: *Simplicity and naturalness are the truest marks of distinction.*

## 17. For the Love of Teaching

I had wanted to become a teacher ever since I was in Sixth Form. Inspired by Mrs Wong, who had been a top scorer herself but chose to become a teacher for the sheer love of it, and impressed by my Sixth Form Pure Mathematics teacher, Miss Kwok, who taught mathematics with fervour, and showed me that mathematics is so aesthetically beautiful, I made up my mind I wanted to follow in their footsteps.

My friends and relatives were aghast. “What??? You want to be *only* a teacher? But you are a top student, why must you waste all your talents by becoming a teacher??” Those days, these comments were expected, because the teaching profession was already losing its glory, and many people were known to choose teaching only as a last resort when they failed to qualify for other “better professions”. So here I was, a straight-A student putting down my first and second choices as “teaching” in my application form for university.

I have been teaching for twenty-four years now. Every semester, I meet new students, and with it comes a fresh new challenge to deliver the same mathematical concepts using more effective and creative means. “Won’t you get bored teaching the same subjects over and over again?”, I am asked. How could I be bored? The subject matter may be the same, but the people are all new. That makes the entire process and experience new for me too.

I have found that in teaching, I learn a lot about myself, especially my weaknesses. Hence, I use this opportunity to cultivate virtues such as patience, tolerance and empathy, and my job is part of my practice in cultivating values. This is especially true when it comes to engaging in right speech. Much as it is easier to keep noble silence, teaching is a job where noble silence just doesn’t work. So as I speak and address the many students I face every day, I am mindful of filtering my thoughts before they manifest into words. I am mindful of my actions too. Am I responding to and addressing my students with patience, empathy and loving-kindness? Am I doing my duty as a teacher to bring out the potential in them, and build confidence in them?

There is a lovely little story called *The Emperor’s Three Questions*. The story goes that an emperor asked a monk these questions:

Emperor: *What is the most important time?*

Monk: **Now.**

Emperor: *Who is the most important person?*

Monk: **The one you are with.**

Emperor: *What is the most important thing to do?*

Monk: **To care for the one you are with.**

In my daily associations with my students, I am fortunate because I get the opportunity to practise present-moment awareness with them. Giving them undivided attention is a

form of caring. It is also “simpler” to do so because my mind only needs to focus on one thing at a time.

As a teacher, I am guided by the advice of Professor Nel Noddings, feminist educationist and advocate of the caring ethics in education. She says:

*I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively present to the student – to each student – as he addresses me. The time interval may be brief but the encounter is total.*

## 18. Mathematics, the Art of Simplifying Problems

I chose to teach mathematics because in mathematics, what is required is essentially to *simplify* all problems. I find that the skills required in doing mathematics can be transferred to real-life. If one can see beyond the numbers and procedures involved, then one sees the intrinsic value of learning mathematics. Furthermore, while teaching mathematics, I also impart and train the students in many values that may help them in life later on. Here's how I do it:

- (1) Generosity – teach a friend, share what you know.
- (2) Honesty – one can never cheat his or her way in mathematics, all working must be shown.
- (3) Simplicity – mathematics is all about simplifying problems and expressions.
- (4) Wisdom – one needs to “see things as they really are” before a mathematical problem can be correctly solved.
- (5) Energy – mathematics definitely requires mental energy.
- (6) Patience – work at it, don't give up!
- (7) Determination – if at first you don't succeed, try and try again.
- (8) Kindness – please be kind to your teacher, do your homework.
- (9) Coming to terms with life – sometimes mathematics is easy, sometimes it's difficult. But hey, that's life, isn't it?

I am awed and humbled by the words of Conrad Hilton, founder of the Hilton Hotel chain, who attributes his phenomenal success to his mathematics lessons in school:

*I am not out to convince anyone that calculus, or even algebra or geometry, are necessities in the hotel business. But I will argue long and loud that they are not useless ornaments pinned onto an average man's education. For me, at any rate, the ability to formulate quickly, to resolve any problem into its **simplest**, clearest form has been exceedingly useful. It is true that you don't use algebra formulae but...I found higher mathematics the best possible exercise for developing the mental muscles necessary to this process... (Conrad Hilton (1957), *Be My Guest*)*

After having taught for twenty-four years now, I am lucky that I am still very happy doing what I do. Sometimes my students ask me, “Will I ever be using all these formulae in my job next time?” I tell them, “Probably not, but you will definitely be using the mathematical skill of simplifying your problems in life. Mathematics is your training ground to cope with life later on. Remember what Conrad Hilton says...”

And what my students sometimes may not realise is that I am teaching them values in life *through* mathematics. This is mathematics in real life. Isn't this wonderful?

## **19. When School's Out**

In my college, one semester lasts for fifteen weeks, and after that, we get a (very welcome) two-week break. Many of my colleagues would be heading off somewhere exotic for a holiday. For me, I prefer to spend my holidays at home. I have always been a home-loving person, and I am happiest at home.

When my husband was working in the airlines, we used to get free tickets for the family every year – first class, to any destination that we wanted. My husband had always felt that while he got to travel in his work, we never got to see places, so he coaxed us to travel once a year. However, wherever we went, exotic or temperate, I would find myself yearning to come home. I would miss my dogs (who would be sent down to Ipoh for baby-sitting at my parents'). I would miss my house and all my things. Talk about having attachment (!), this is probably it!

But all said, I'm happiest at home, and my idea of a good holiday is resting at home, maybe spring cleaning the house, and just enjoying life at a more relaxed pace.



## 20. Small is Beautiful

In this day and age, many people work for the money, and as expected, with more money, their needs somehow increase. So for many, no matter how much they earn, it just never seems to be enough.

The great Indian sage, Mahatma Gandhi says: *The Earth provides enough for every man's needs, but not even one man's greed.*

It pays for us to sit back and examine the things that we acquire – do we really need them, or are we just satisfying our greed? Remember that two of the causes of our misery are greed and our inability to let go.

Greek philosophers also remind us about the futility of harbouring desires. Epicurus says: *If you want to make a man happy, add not to his riches but take away his desires.* And Socrates says: *By desiring little, a poor man makes himself rich. A state of being where one wishes for nothing is the greatest of all bliss. To be able to approach this greatest happiness, one must get used to being satisfied with little.*

So, how does one gets satisfied with little? One must learn to simplify one's needs.

E. F. Schumacher, an economist, writes in his series of books: *Man is small, and therefore, small is beautiful.* He points out that materialism cannot sustain our present-day economy, and blasts out at the notions of “growth is good” or “bigger is better”.

*An attitude to life which seeks fulfillment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth – in short, materialism – does not fit into this world, because it contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited.*

*It is clear, that Buddhist economics must be very different from the economics of modern materialism, since the Buddhist sees the essence of civilisation not in a multiplication of wants but in the purification of human character.*

*Character, at the same time, is formed primarily by a man's work. And work, properly conducted in conditions of human dignity and freedom, blesses those who do it and equally their products.* (E. F. Schumacher (1973), *Buddhist Economics*)

## 21. Can Money Buy Happiness?

In a recent article from Newsweek (October 2007), Sharon Begley writes that contrary to common belief, money does *not* buy happiness. She quotes Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert in his best-seller, *Stumbling on Happiness*, where psychologists generally agree that wealth increases human happiness when it lifts people out of abject poverty and into the middle class, but it does little to increase happiness thereafter.

Wealth may increase one's *pleasure* (as in acquiring more material wants that satisfy the senses), but would this actually make us *happier*? Happiness is permanent, pleasure is fleeting, and therefore the latter is a source of unsatisfactoriness.

Consider these statistics, as revealed in Sharon Begley's article:

*In a typical survey people are asked to rank their sense of well-being or happiness on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 means "not at all satisfied with my life" and 7 means "completely satisfied". Of the American multimillionaires who responded, the average happiness score was 5.8. Homeless people in Calcutta came in at 2.9. But before you assume that money does buy happiness after all, consider who else rated themselves around 5.8: the Inuit of northern Greenland, who do not exactly lead a life of luxury, and the cattle-herding Masai of Kenya, whose dung huts have no electricity or running water. And proving Gilbert's point about money buying happiness only when it lifts you out of abject poverty, slum dwellers in Calcutta—one economic rung above the homeless—rate themselves at 4.6.*

So while money does not buy happiness, the converse is true. Happiness buys money! Yes, when one is happy, one is more productive in one's job. One will take the initiative to do more and in the process, becomes a valuable asset to one's employer or company. When your boss likes you, good things follow. So, happiness buys money... I am sometimes asked why I chose not to seek higher positions after I obtained my Ph.D. "Why do you continue working in this place? Don't you want a better job elsewhere?", I am asked. Better? Better in what sense? I am very happy in my present job – isn't that good enough? Although my job is far from being the perfect job that anybody can ask for, but I am happy because I make myself happy. As unglamorous as it may seem, I am very contented being "just a teacher". I derive joy and satisfaction from what I do. I am rewarded knowing that I have made a difference to the hearts and minds of the young people whose lives I am privileged to have touched.

Lao Tzu, the great Chinese philosopher, was reputed to have said: *He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.*

I have enough.

I am happy.

## 22. Look for the Bare Necessities

Compared to “those good old days”, one of the things that modernisation and technology have done for us these days is to give us many options in life. And I’m not sure if that's a good thing, actually.

For example, when we buy things, whether it's food, household products, cars, computers or handphones, we are confronted by an expanding array of brands, flavours and options. Take milk, for example. If we only had just plain *milk* in the past, now we have low-fat, calcium-enriched, vitamin-enhanced, high-protein, et cetera. We even have sugar-free sweets and cholesterol-free butter! What would come next? Fat-free oil?

Similarly, we have more options in our choice of careers and lifestyles, and this can make our lives more complicated than before. I don't deny that choice can be a good thing. However, more often than not, it doesn't seem to make life any simpler, does it? Sometimes, too many options become a source of distraction *and* frustration, and we lose our priorities and maybe even forget what our original objectives are.

Take for example, the person who intended to just buy some new coat-hangers but ended up with a new ironing board (on special discount), a steam iron (which he doesn't actually need, but it was 50% off!) and a set of ironing paraphernalia thrown in as freebies. "Why don't you take the package, sir, you get *more* for less money," the salesperson chirped happily. Yes, indeed, *more* clutter for less money!

So how do I combat this malady of modernity? I don't get caught by discounts so that I will not end up with things that I do not need. Also, I limit my choices. For example, when I need a new pair of shoes, I go to a shop that has enough choices, and I make sure I get what I want there. At the most, I allow myself to visit maybe just one more other shop if this one absolutely does not have the thing I want. This resonates well with my preference not to browse and window-shop. Get to the shop, choose from what they have, buy it and go home.

Consider the wise words of Baloo the Bear in *The Jungle Book*, when he taught Mowgli how to survive in the jungle:

*Look for the bare necessities,  
The simple bare necessities,  
Forget about your worries and your strife;  
I mean the bare necessities,  
That's why a bear can rest at ease,  
With just the bare necessities of life.*

*Don't spend your time looking around,  
For something you want that can't be found,*

*When you find out you can live without it,  
And go along not thinking about it,  
I'll tell you something true,  
The bare necessities of life will come to you,  
They'll come to you.*

On this score, I am very certain that Baloo the Bear would heartily shake paws and hands with Lao Tzu if he hears the great sage saying this:

*Be content with what you have,  
Rejoice in the way things are;  
When you realise there is nothing lacking,  
The whole world belongs to you.*

## 23. Technology for Dummies

Talking about modernisation and this highly technology-dependent world today, modern equipments now come with a host of gadgets that are supposedly designed to make life “easier” for us. Take the television set as an example. In “my days”, it was so easy to go to the television set, press a button, and turn it on. Then, for variety, we turned a dial which would switch it to the next (and only other) channel. Now? Now I do not even know *how* to turn on the television set in my house! I know there are three remote controls lying on the table, but I can never remember which one does what. So what do I do?

I don't watch television anymore.

By now, you would probably be thinking that I must be some anti-technology diehard out to discredit all things modern! Well, not quite. I don't watch television because more often than not, it dulls my mind, and that is why I have never bothered to learn how those three remote controls work. But I do watch certain good programmes, and I also de-stress by laughing over sitcoms, together with my children.

While I may be a television-dummy, I definitely know how to use the computer, and the Internet is one technological amenity that I definitely appreciate! Emailing has given me the freedom to interact socially without having to leave the house. To me, emailing is the best form of social interaction because it is the least intrusive. The recipient can choose *when* to read my mail, or even *not* to read my mail (if he finds me a pain!). This is unlike the telephone which may ring at the wrong time, or worse, the unannounced house visit when the inside of my house looks like it has just been ravaged by a tornado.

The point I am trying to make here is that it would do well to use what we need and not get sucked into the entire complexity of life which has resulted from technological (over)advancement. For example, I do not need the latest alarm system in my car and I do not even need automatic gears, so I opt for a small manual car which comes with old-fashioned keys. This is enough for me. And I am happy.

I also tell my students not to depend too much on the calculator. I remember way back in my time, we were only allowed to use the calculator in Sixth Form. My friends and I were so excited and started depending on the calculator even for simple arithmetic. After a while, I noticed a stark decline in my own speed in doing Mathematics. That's when I stopped myself from becoming a slave to that little gadget with numbers on it and went back to using my brain!

This way, we will not become slaves to technology. We remain in control. And we still get to simplify our lives, by choosing what works for us.

As Baloo the Bear says it so eloquently: *When you find out you can live without it, then go along not thinking about it.*

Less is more, and small is still beautiful.

And this techie dummy is happy the way she is!

## 24. Speak Softly Love

Humans are bestowed with the gift of speech, but often, it is this very “gift” that causes a lot of trouble and suffering for others, and ourselves too!

In ancient Greece, Socrates was reputed to have stopped anyone from speaking to him unless what they were going to say passes the *Triple Filter Test*:

*Is it true? Is it good? Is it useful?*

In fact, good speech has to be truthful, beneficial to the listener, spoken at the right time, gentle and compassionate. In my talks, I use the simile of a coffee strainer. Let us strain our words through the *Triple Filter Test* before they escape our lips. Or if you prefer an easier way, then just talk less!

Good speech also includes abstaining from lying, divisive speech, harsh speech and idle chatter. Interestingly, the *Pali* word for idle chatter is *samphappalapa*. Now, doesn't this remind you of *sampah* (the Malay word for “rubbish”) and blah, blah, blah?!!

I often share with the audience in my talks that though the pen is mightier than the sword, the tongue is mightier than the pen! Words, once spoken, can hurt and cause much pain, and retracting them is sometimes too late. The same goes for the written word too. My teacher, Uncle Vijaya, shared with me this poem by Omar Khayyam, the 11<sup>th</sup> century poet, mathematician and astronomer from Persia:

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.*

But words come from the mind, so we must be able to catch the thought and hold the tongue (or finger!). A harmful and vicious tongue is like an axe. It is a weapon of mass destruction!

On the subject of speaking, let us be mindful of our words, but let us also embrace simplicity and brevity so as not to subject our listeners to the mental and physical anguish of having to listen to us blabber on and on. I remember the best advice ever given to me when I was undergoing a speakers training course. And this was from Uncle Vijaya: *The golden rule of public speaking is this – Stand up, Speak up, and Shut up!*

Another important feature of good speech is not what we say, but *how* we say it.

But let's not talk so much now...

Shh...

## 25. Seek More to Love Than to Be Loved

A few weeks back, I came across a beautiful saying by St Francis of Assisi. It said: *Lord, Grant that I may not so much seek to be loved than to love.*

This saying reminds me of the practice of unconditional love. Unconditional love is the boundless and non-discriminatory love that we radiate to all beings. Unconditional love is “simple love” because we love without attaching conditions, and without expecting anything in return. It is when we attach conditions and have expectations that love becomes complicated. And inevitably, we will suffer.

The celebrated Thai meditation teacher, Ajahn Chah, explains that in our relationships with others, having expectations is the cause of many of our miseries and suffering. To me, nothing is truer than this. Love for the sake of simply loving. It does not matter if that love is not reciprocated. Let our satisfaction come from knowing that we can rise above the ordinary I-love-you-so-you-must-love-me-back expectation and reach out to the loftier ideals of altruistic love.

One of the greatest writers of the twentieth century, Wystan Hugh Auden writes: *We are here on earth to do good for others. What the others are here for, I don't know.* When people hurt me, St Francis and W.H. Auden’s words shall be my *mantras* and they remind me that unconditional love is indeed a far greater love than any kinds of mundane love that I know of.

Whenever I think of unconditional love, I think of my parents. Despite the many times I may have hurt them all my life, I know that they still love me unconditionally. I know that they will always forgive me. Complete parental love is the greatest and most beautiful unconditional love. It is non-discriminatory, boundless and unblemished.

So let us keep love simple. Love others simply for the sake of loving them. There is no other reason for it. Unconditional and boundless love is the basis of all human goodness.

Embrace unconditional love and spread it across boundaries. Let it reach our furry, feathery and scaly friends as well. And remember to love the green forests and the ocean too.

Unconditional love is the greatest love of all.

The survival of our planet depends upon it.



## **26. Learning the Art of Unconditional Loving from Animals**

Those of you who have grown up or lived with pets, I am sure you will agree that animals are one of the greatest teachers of unconditional loving. I was fortunate to have grown up having dogs, rabbits, chickens, ducklings and geese as my companions. My two childhood dogs, Puffin and Remirth, were practically like brother and sister to me.

When my own children were young, we decided it would be good for them to have pets as well, so we brought two puppies home. Mac lived till a ripe old age of thirteen, and now Bobby is going on fifteen.

About five years ago, I started rescuing abandoned kittens from the roadside and rubbish heaps. What amazes me most of all is how Bobby (who is male) helped look after every single kitten that I have brought back home to nurse. I have lost count now, but I think Bobby has helped nurse more than twenty kittens, many of whom were newborns. He would carry them by the scruff of their necks back into their box should they wander far and alert me if he thought they were in trouble. Newborn kittens would snuggle up to Bobby for warmth, thinking that he was their mother.

But here's the most amazing thing of all. Now that Bobby is old and blind, the four male cats in my house take turns to look after Bobby. Cow, the alpha, guides him to his food bowl and accompanies him while he eats. Bunny, the second-alpha, guides him around the house, making sure he gets around safely without bumping himself into the furniture. The other two, Indy and Tiger, take the "outside shift" and make sure Bobby does not venture out of the gate. I call them Bobby's "guide-cats". While humans have seeing dogs, Bobby has "seeing cats"! And the best thing of all is, I did not train them. I wouldn't know how! It all came naturally from them.

One good turn deserves another. Even animals know and practice this. Isn't this wonderful?

## 27. A Reason, a Season and a Lifetime

Those of you who read the emails in circulation would have probably read this beautiful article many times before. And those of you, who, like me, have people come and go from your life, would probably have found some comfort from this article. I cannot possibly say it any better, so I'm going to reproduce the whole article here:

*People come into your life for **a reason, a season or a lifetime.***

*When you know which one it is, you will know what to do for that person.*

*When someone is in your life for a **reason**, it is usually to meet a need you have expressed.*

*They have come to assist you through a difficulty, to provide you with guidance and support, to aid you physically, emotionally or spiritually. They may seem like a godsend and they are.*

*They are there for the reason you need them to be.*

*Then, without any wrongdoing on your part or at an inconvenient time, this person will say or do something to bring the relationship to an end.*

*Sometimes they die. Sometimes they walk away.*

*Sometimes they act up and force you to take a stand.*

*What we must realize is that our need has been met, our desire fulfilled, their work is done.*

*The prayer you sent up has been answered and now it is time to move on.*

*Some people come into your life for a **season**, because your turn has come to share, grow or learn.*

*They bring you an experience of peace or make you laugh.*

*They may teach you something you have never done.*

*They usually give you an unbelievable amount of joy.*

*Believe it, it is real. But only for a season.*

*Lifetime relationships teach you **lifetime** lessons, things you must build upon in order to have a solid emotional foundation.*

*Your job is to accept the lesson, love the person and put what you have learned to use in all other relationships and areas of your life. It is said that love is blind but friendship is clairvoyant.*

Granted, people come to us for a reason, a season or a lifetime, but we will never know which it is until...they leave, especially the "seasonal" friend. We can identify the "reasonable" friend – that's the one who comes to help us out when we needed it most, or to give us a lesson in life. And we can only hope that our good friends are lifetime friends, but will we ever know for sure? If we cling to them, and they turn out to be just "reasonable" or "seasonal", we suffer, don't we?

The "simple" thing to do with friendships (and even family), then, would be to take each moment as being precious and valuable. Do not look back at the past (especially the quarrels!). Do not have expectations of everlasting friendship for the future. Just

cherish the present moment, just as we cherish our breath, and make the encounter a pleasant and memorable one.

Take comfort to know that when people come into our lives, we are destined to meet them due to some sort of “link” and they have probably come into our lives at that point in time for a good reason. Share wholesome values with them and give them love and care. I find it useful to treat each encounter with my friends as my last meeting with them. Bearing this possibility in mind, I make the best of the encounter and leave pleasant feelings behind. If indeed it *is* the last meeting, the pleasant experience will leave beautiful memories for both parties to last a lifetime.

It would also do well for loved ones to “kiss and make up” before they go to bed, especially if there had been a misunderstanding or a quarrel. Never bring a quarrel to bed – we won’t be able to sleep peacefully. And what if we died in our sleep? We would never get a chance to make things right and if we meet up again in our next life, the unpleasant feelings might continue.

So, each time you meet your friend or loved one, think of it as the last meeting in this lifetime. Make it a memorable and happy one. Are they here for a reason, a season or a lifetime? We will never know. Be the best that you can to everyone. Shower love and kindness to all whom you meet.

Let us keep our relationships simple. Give lots of love.

## 28. Zen & the Teacup

Long ago, a professor visited the monk Nanyin to ask him about Zen.

*“Teach me all about Zen. I want to learn everything.”* said the professor.

Nanyin offered some tea to his guest, but he continued pouring even after the cup was full. After a short while, the professor could not stand it any longer, so he said,

*“The cup is already full! Stop pouring!”*

*“Like this cup,”* Nanyin said, *“you are so full of your views and opinions. If you do not empty your cup first, how can I tell you about Zen?”*

I love Zen. I have loved Zen since I was very young. I saw elegance in simplicity. Zen was so beautiful to me.

The simile of the teacup conveys a very important guideline for our practice. It tells us that in order to learn and progress higher on the spiritual path (or any path, for that matter), we must be humble enough to “empty our cup” regularly.

To “empty our cup” means we should not cling to our ideas and think that what we know is *the* truth. There are many layers and levels of truths. What I understood as a twelve-year-old child has changed and matured tremendously over the years. But this happened only because I keep telling myself to seek further, and deeper. And I keep reminding myself that I still have a lot to learn. One of my favourite quotes comes from Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese poet and philosopher. He says: *Say not I have found **the** truth, but rather, I have found **a** truth.*

Furthermore, “emptying our cup” also means we cannot cling to even what is good. Think of all teachings as a raft. A raft is a very useful device for crossing the river, but after doing so, we should not carry the raft with us, but leave it behind for others to use. If we carry the raft, we would only be creating a burden for ourselves.

Hence, Zen masters, especially, always advise us to keep ourselves open to new understanding and never hold on to anything. Whatever beliefs we have, keep them in an open hand and not a tight fist.

Here are some insightful quotes from a great meditation teacher, Ajahn Chah, from the book, *No Ajahn Chah*:

*Of course there are many meditation techniques, but it all comes down to this – just letting it all be.*

*We practise to learn letting go, not to increase our holding on. Enlightenment appears when you stop wanting anything.*

Remember again, that the causes of our miseries are greed and the inability to let go.

So, just practise, and let go. Travel light, and travel bright.

*The finger pointing at the moon is not the moon.*

## 29. Burning Charcoals & the Violet's Fragrance

Being unenlightened worldlings, many of us may still suffer from the occasional angry outbursts, or perhaps in the milder form of getting hurt and offended, but these are all still different forms of anger. I love the *Simile of the Burning Charcoal* – when we are angry, we are holding on to pieces of burning charcoal, waiting to hurl them at others, but in the process of doing so, we burn ourselves first.

So we know that we must let anger go, but isn't that easier said than done? Oh yes...but try, we must, if we wish to maintain calm and peace in our minds for our own happiness. Master Cheng Yen, founder of Tzu Chi, says: *Anger is a punishment we inflict upon ourselves due to the mistakes of others.* Indeed, how true and how wise... When I first heard these words, I felt so foolish for the times that I had been angry. Why am I punishing myself due to the mistakes of others?

Charles Moore, a scholar and historian, writes: *When we forgive, the offender ceases to have power over us; we are no longer condemned to a life-sentence of pain.* When we forgive, perhaps we gain more than the one who has hurt us. It is quite interesting that a survey conducted by *USA Today* on what makes people happy reveals that the top three things that make people happy are:

- (1) Having good friends,
- (2) Not competing,
- (3) Being able to forgive others.

Forgiveness is a virtue. Mark Twain puts it beautifully when he says: *Forgiveness is the fragrance the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.* This is altruism at its finest – the ability to love even when one has been...crushed, so to speak. Remember also that it takes a bigger and nobler person to say he or she is sorry. It takes a bigger person to initiate peace and reconciliation. On the lighter side, Oscar Wilde quips: *Forgive your enemies. Nothing annoys them so much.*

Furthermore, when we are angry, more often than not, the issue gets blown out of proportion. Richard Carlson writes in his book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, that if we can be mindful of our anger, it helps to ask ourselves: *Would this matter one year from now?* Reflect upon the past, how many times have we got angry before, and indeed, did the issue matter after one year or even one month? This too, shall pass. Let patience prevail. Let it pass. Let it go.

One of the most effective antidotes to anger is unconditional love. If our cultivation of unconditional love is strong enough, it will help us cope better with anger as it arises.

*Hatred never ceases by hatred, only by love is it conquered. This is an Eternal Law.*  
- The Buddha

Getting angry is certainly far more complicated than letting go. When we get angry, we have to think of many reasons to do so, to maintain those feelings of hatred, and we would constantly be replaying that unpleasant incident in our minds. Then, as we think more and more, the hatred grows deeper and this generates more unwholesome thoughts, and with it, a more disturbed mind. The charcoal continues to burn in our hands. What we need to do then is to simply let go. Knowing how harmful it is to harbour anger, a wise person reflects using wise consideration, and lets it go as it arises.

So let anger go, lighten the load off your shoulders. Try smiling. Remember that our intrinsic nature is that of goodness, anger is just a visiting defilement.

This reminds me of a Zen story where a young monk consulted his master to help him cope with his anger.

*Young monk: Master, I get angry so often. Anger is a part of me. Help me get rid of it, please.*

*Master: If anger is a part of you, get angry for me now. Show me your anger, and I will help you get rid of it.*

*Young monk: How can I simply get angry for nothing? I'm not angry now.*

*Master: Well then, can you smile for me instead?*

*Young monk: Of course I can. (And he smiles.)*

*Master: You see, you cannot even get angry for me, so how can you say that anger is a part of you? But you can smile...*

Our intrinsic nature is one of goodness.

Smile...it only takes thirteen muscles to smile, but fifty to frown.

Smile...it's simpler than getting angry!

### 30. Look for the Silver Lining

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote the much-loved and oft-quoted *Serenity Prayer*:  
*Grant us the grace to accept with serenity the things that we cannot change, the courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

When we look at the things and the people around us, we see numerous flaws, and don't we wish we had a magic wand that could just make things "right"? But, "right" in whose eyes? Before we criticise others, we would do well to ask ourselves if we are flawless in our own speech and actions.

Some of us may insist that others change and not us, because we see ourselves as being right all the time. So we keep doing what we do, and expect to see different results or response from others. And on this, Albert Einstein says: *Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results.* It's not going to happen, folks. If we continue nagging our children in the same way, using the same words, they will continue ignoring us in the same manner. Similarly, if we continue to perceive that rude cashier as being rude, she will always be "rude", and even if she is not, we will find reasons to justify that she is.

So what should we do? Well, if we think it is absolutely necessary to change others, let us first be sure that it is for *their* benefit. Then, be creative, and more importantly, be fair. But here's an easier way – Instead of trying to change others, *change yourself*. Look at the situation differently...and positively.

Andrew Matthews writes in his book, *Follow your Heart: Our mission in life is not to change the world – Our mission is to change ourselves. There are no "outside" solutions. Only "inside" solutions.*

So, instead of insisting that others change, why don't we change our *perception* of the situation or the people who irritate and annoy us so that we can be more at peace? It is definitely easier to change ourselves than to change others. Ask any modern-day parent, and she will vouch for that!

Here's how we can change the way we look at things: An irritating person can be viewed as a "teacher" of patience and tolerance. A difficult situation can be viewed as an opportunity to practise acceptance and develop inner strength in overcoming adversities.

Eknath Easwaran, professor of English Literature and teacher of *Passage Meditation*, explains that we have a tendency to create "caricatures" of people in our minds. When we do not like someone, she will always be perceived as mean and unkind in our minds. As long as we do not attempt to change this perception, this caricature will continue to disturb, annoy and even torment us.



You'd find that those who choose to view others in a positive light seldom meet up with "difficult people". It is all a matter of perception. *Our* perception. See the good in others, and they *will* be good. Granted, some people are just plain nasty, but by placing them in the most positive light that you can, you have a far greater chance of influencing them to be good, *and* creating peace in your own mind. What is there to lose by seeing the good in others?

Charles Schwab, now philanthropist and one of the richest men in the United States, was employed to run Andrew Carnegie's Empire of Steel which became a phenomenal success way back in the fifties. Did Charles Schwab know anything at all about steel? No, he did not. But he knew *how* to bring out the best in people. When asked for the secret of his successful management of people, Charles Schwab only had this to say: *I am lavish in my praise and hearty in my approbation.* Instead of seeing the unfavourable in the workers, Charles Schwab chose to see the good in them, and told them so.

Now, in our modern-day human resource management, I hear that before an employee is reprimanded for a mistake, the employer should comment on some good that she has done first...to lessen the blow! But more importantly, it serves as a consolation and reminder that we all make mistakes once in a while, so let's not be too judgmental. No matter how grave our mistake, we still have the potential to be good.

It is wise if we strive to always find some good in others. And if perchance, the person whom we encounter displays totally unwholesome characteristics, have compassion for her. Compassion will do her more good than harsh judgment.

Everything happens for a reason, and everyone crosses your path for a reason, as they say. In every situation, look for the learning opportunity, and learn the lesson as positively as we can.

*Look for the silver lining,  
Whenever a cloud appears in the blue;  
Remember somewhere the sun is shining,  
And so the right thing to do,  
Is make it shine for you.*

*A heart, full of joy and gladness,  
Will always banish sadness and strife;  
So always look for the silver lining,  
And try to find the sunny side of life.*

## 31. You are Not My Problem

In the animal charity work that I do, I deal with all kinds of people, many of whom are total strangers. In an effort to work together for the sake of the animals, we need tremendous patience, understanding and give-and-take. In this area, I find it very useful to remember that we must not expect others to respond or behave as we do. Having expectations is often the cause of our suffering, especially when these expectations are not met.

I have learnt that no matter how well-intentioned we are, there will sometimes be people who would choose to find fault with whatever we do. This is a reality of life. We cannot please everyone. While we rejoice in the bouquets; we also have to contend with the brickbats; they come in a package.

My friend, Meiji, a dog rescuer, tells me that animals are never her problem; it is usually the humans. I guess she is right. Animals are grateful, faithful and ever loyal; they do not give us problems.

But perhaps I would like to bring this thought to yet another level, that is, even other humans are not our problem.

*We are our own problem.*

Byron Katie, a world-renowned happiness guru (who still humbly considers herself a student!), has this to say, "If I think you are my problem, I'm insane."

So much wisdom in that saying, I must say. I have been insane many times in my life whenever I blame others for making me miserable. I have come to realise that how we feel often depends on how we react to any situation. It may do us some good if we explore why we feel a certain way about certain situations or people whom we find unpleasant. There has to be an underlying cause.

I am told that it is our wrong understanding that causes us to suffer. That being the case, perhaps we need to look at our own perceptions and views of reality and seek a better and more correct understanding of it.

So, I'd say to everyone whom I think I have a problem with: You are not my problem. I am my own problem. Let me work out my problem and I'll get back to you.

Let's learn to take responsibility for our own miseries *and* happiness.

Let's not point an accusing finger at others. Remember, if we do, the other three fingers are pointing back at us!

## 32. Let's Go Fly a Kite!

*Let's go fly a kite,  
Up to the highest height,  
Let's go fly a kite,  
And send it soaring....  
Up to the atmosphere,  
Up where the air is clear,  
Oh, let's go...fly a kite!*

Remember this song from *Mary Poppins*? In our practice of simplicity, we should go “fly a kite” all the time! By this, I mean that we must let go of our anxieties, worries, anger, jealousy and the many other defilements that we have, and “soar up to the atmosphere where the air is clear”. The more we are able to let go, the higher we will rise on the spiritual ladder to enlightenment. Granted, sometimes we get hurt and angered, but the faster we let go, the less we will suffer.

We would do well also to remember that we must not cling to even the good feelings and so-called “correct” views. Do not hold on to opinions and concepts, or we get trapped in dualism. Bhante Aggacitta, in his booklet, *Coping with a Handful of Leaves*, tells of a discussion he had with a brother forest monk who was one of the most exceptional yogis Bhante had ever encountered. This venerable monk was very well-versed in several meditation techniques, and was still very enthusiastic to learn new methods. “How do you cope with so many methods?”, Bhante Aggacitta asked him. The venerable monk answered, “Whenever I start to learn a new method I make sure I completely let go of any other techniques that I have learnt before.”

Seng T'san, the third patriarch of Zen, writes, most eloquently, in one of the earliest and most influential Zen writings called *Hsin Hsin Ming* (Trust Mind Inscription). Here are two of the stanzas:

*Outside, don't get tangled in things.  
Inside, don't get lost in emptiness.  
Be still and become One  
And all opposites disappear.*

*Emptiness changing into things  
Is only our deluded view.  
Do not seek the truth.  
Only put down your opinions.*

Remember that greed is one of the main causes of or misery. Besides being greedy for material things, sometimes we also greed to be right. “I am right. You are wrong.” is a form of greed that afflicts many people these days. It does not do us any good to adopt this superiority complex because it would only hinder our own growth and the opportunity to discover and learn new ideas. Hence, we should always keep letting go as we learn new things.

*Let go of our views,  
Let go of our greed,  
Let's go fly a kite, folks,  
And send it soaring...!*

### 33. Act Well Your Part

The emphasis on filial piety and respect is very deeply ingrained in the Chinese culture, and the credit for this is duly given to the teachings of Confucius. I was once asked for my opinion on respect in a forum, and I said that while the elderly often expect respect to be bestowed upon them by virtue of their age or deeds, I felt very simply that respect ought to be earned.

Later, an elderly member of the audience who agreed with my views, shared with me this beautiful saying by Alexander Pope:

*Honour and Shame,  
From no condition rise.  
Act well your part  
There all the honour lies.*

As we all age, let us remember that it is our duty and responsibility to continue leading and educating our young by example. It was the renowned physicist and Nobel Prize winner, Albert Einstein who said: *Example isn't another way to teach. It is the **only** way.*

So if we want our young to behave and cultivate virtues, let us first embrace and practise these virtues ourselves. Our young watch us all the time, and they learn by emulating us.

When my children were young, I chose not to drum virtues into them through the typical classroom way (“You should do this, you shouldn’t do that...because it says so in the books!”). Instead I opted for a more indirect approach. Let them see for themselves how I treat animals. Let them see for themselves how I give way to others on the road when I drive, or how I always thank waiters, waitresses and cashiers when I am served. Let them see how I would keep litter in my pocket until I find a litter bin. And can I stop doing these things now that my children have learnt from example? Absolutely not, and I cannot, even if I wanted to, because these ways of behaviour are what I am. These values have become me.

The results of this mode of indirect teaching by example may not be immediate, but they are definitely longer-lasting. And in many ways, it is really so much simpler too – you just have to practise what you profess.

Actions speak louder than words.

So, act your part well.

### 34. Chopping Wood & Filling Marker Pens

It was Albert Einstein who said that people loved to chop wood because they can immediately see the results. We sometimes mistake the journey towards enlightenment as something that is difficult, complicated, and perhaps, even requiring deep analysis and reflection. However, you would have noticed that great meditation masters like Ajahn Chah had always stressed on simple mindfulness and just letting things be: *If you have time to be mindful, you have time to meditate.*

Many meditation teachers place a great emphasis on practising mindfulness in the quest to gain enlightenment, I had never quite really understood why this is so. Although I had no doubt whatsoever that these teachers know best, I did not know why or how being mindful could lead us to greater happiness, or enlightenment for that matter....until one day...

In my teaching, I use marker pens on the whiteboard and being an environmental-friendly person, I choose to refill the marker pens instead of discarding them for new ones. So unscrewing the tops of the pens, and filling them with ink has been a daily habit on Mondays through Fridays for me. I have been using the same two marker pens for eleven years now, and every working day, you would find me at the ink counter, dutifully filling my pens with ink before heading off to class.

When it came to filling up my marker pens, I must confess that I am a maximalist in that I would try to fill as much ink as I can so that the ink supply can last longer. More often than not, I would end up filling too much, up to the brim and when I screw back the top, the ink often spills out and causes a mess on my hands, the sides of the pen and sometimes, even splatters on my clothes!

And I never seemed to learn...sigh.

One day, a few months ago, I was at the counter as usual, filling my pens. But this time, something happened. As the ink level was reaching almost to the top, a voice inside me said, very decisively, "Stop. This is Greed."

STOP. THIS IS GREED.

I stopped.

At that very moment, I felt a huge burden lifted from my shoulders, an indescribable joy, happiness so deep that my heart and entire body experienced a "lightness" as though I had been transported elsewhere to a very blissful place. It was sheer *bliss*, and I had never ever experienced this feeling all my life.

I remember slowly putting down the bottle of ink and screwing the top back onto the pen. Then, I went back to my table and sat down. The blissful feeling lasted for quite some time after that. I felt like being in a world where everything felt light and wonderful.

A few weeks later, I had the opportunity to meet up with one of my teachers, Bhante Kumara. I described the whole experience to him, and Bhante smiled. He then explained to me that what I had experienced was something beyond mere intellectual understanding. At that precise moment when that voice inside me said, “Stop. This is greed”, that moment, I *realised* what greed was, and I completely dropped that defilement. The dropping of the defilement brought the feeling of lightness and bliss within me.

This experience made me understand and realise why meditation teachers say that being mindful is very important towards our quest for happiness and enlightenment. I had been mindfully filling my pens for more than a decade now, and this practice of mindfulness had finally paid off in this one beautiful moment where I realised that I must stop being greedy and I completely dropped the defilement from my mind. Now I know what it feels like when a defilement has been completely eradicated, at least for those few moments on that day.

Was that a glimpse of *satori*? I don't know. But it was bliss alright. And what wonderful bliss, too!

Now, I tell my friends never to underestimate the simple practice of mindfulness in daily life. You'll never know...one day you may be *mindfully* washing the dishes, or repairing the car, and *voila!*...You are enlightened.

*Before enlightenment, sweep the floor. After enlightenment, sweep the floor.*  
– Zen proverb

### 35. Indra's Net & the Butterflies in China

Shortly after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, they issued a report which said that if we want to help brake global warming, there are three essential things which we must embrace in our daily lives:

- (1) Don't eat meat,
- (2) Ride a bike,
- (3) Be a frugal shopper.

Not that difficult to do, is it? We could gradually reduce our meat intake for a start (and gain better health), cycle to nearby places (and gain better health too), and buy only essential things (and save money!). Isn't that a win-win situation for us and the environment?

Dr Rajendra Pachauri, one of the two recipients of the coveted Nobel Peace Prize, in his acceptance speech in Oslo, Norway, attributes his life-long philosophy to the Hindu philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, which means "the whole universe is one family", and hence, global efforts must be garnered to protect global commons.

Reducing our meat intake, the use of motorized vehicles and by buying only what we really need (and not what we want) *can* significantly reduce the emission of greenhouse gases that come from the animal-farming and meat industry, the use of vehicles and the manufacture of goods.

In one of the Buddhist scriptures, there is this beautiful concept of *Indra's Net*. In it, we are asked to imagine this earth as a cosmos that is covered by a net. On every knot in this net is a jewel, and every living being is a jewel on this net. This is a powerful simile, which in my personal opinion, reveals three important lessons.

First, all beings are equally precious. We are all jewels. Be it the lizard in your house, the rhinoceros in the jungle or the peddler on the street, we are all precious jewels. Second, when we look at one jewel, we see the reflections of all other jewels. Hence, we are all interconnected and interdependent. Third, when one jewel is touched, its reflection will bounce off the jewels around it, and this in turn creates a ripple effect without an end and it spreads throughout the entire net covering the cosmos.

When we realise how interconnected and interdependent we are, then we can understand that all our actions have consequences that can travel far and wide. In Mathematics, there is a similar metaphor called the *Butterfly Effect*. It is postulated that "if a butterfly flaps its wings in China, it can cause a tornado to break out in downtown New York". Based on the work of Edward Lorenz, the *Butterfly Effect* explains the sensitive dependence on initial conditions in meteorology, economics, and many other real-life situations.



Sometimes we do not realise the impact of our actions, even though they may appear to be trivial. Consider this possibility: The plastic bag that we carelessly throw into the river will eventually find its way to the ocean. It may choke a dolphin to death. And we would never know that perhaps it could have been this very dolphin that can save us one day when we are stranded in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by sharks.

The bottom line is this: If we understand that we all have a duty to this Earth, and that all our actions can help save *or* destroy the Earth, then we ought to do the best we can to ensure that our actions bring positive effects to preserve and safeguard Earth. After all, this is the only home we will ever have...at least for this lifetime.

Start with simple things like recycling and re-using whatever we can. During the Buddha's time, He advised the monks to re-use their robes too. Old robes would be converted to blankets, bedsheets, floormats, rags and finally, shredded into strips, mixed with clay and used to mend the cracks in the walls and floor of their huts. The Buddha was an advocate of recycling, even in those ancient times!

So, please support the *paper lama* man (collector of old newspapers), folks! Separate your garbage, *Reduce, Re-use, Recycle...*and most importantly, *Respect*.

Remember the words of wisdom from Chief Seattle: *Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.*

## 36. Dewdrops of Emptiness

Ven Thich Nhat Hanh writes in his book, *The Heart of Understanding*, that we are all very deeply interconnected with each other as well as with the environment. He coined the term “interbeing” to describe this relationship.

One of my favourite topics in the talks that I give is “Dewdrops of Emptiness”. In this talk, I share with the audience the beautiful concept of emptiness where it is said that we are empty of a separate self, but full of everything else. I show the audience an orange, and invite them to look deeply into it. We see the connection of the orange with its tree, the nutrients in the soil, the sun, the rain, the air, the micro-organisms that fertilise the soil, the farmer who planted the tree, the workers who harvested the fruits, the lorry driver who brought the fruits to the shop and a host of other beings who are all intricately connected to this orange.

In this way, we are all very deeply connected to each other. Realising this, let us put less emphasis on “I” and more on “us”. Let us discard self-centred emotions such as selfishness, anger, jealousy, envy, hatred and greed (that breed from the “I”). In its place, we cultivate positive and wholesome feelings like love, generosity, altruistic joy and compassion. Life would indeed be much simpler if we lived by these wholesome feelings rather than get embroiled and entangled with destructive emotions which lead to complicated relationships, bitterness, heartache and stress.

Let us live simply so that others can simply live.

After all, we are so deeply interconnected.

My little poem on Emptiness:

*The dewdrops,  
The flowers, the leaves and the trees,  
All synthesized as one.  
Experience unity.  
Let us inter-be.*

## 37. All Kinds of Everything

Ahh...this song brings back fond memories of my childhood. *All kinds of everything remind me of you...*so the love song goes.

You'd have noticed that besides citing quotes from certain religious texts, I have also used many quotes from Western thinkers and philosophers, as well as lyrics of popular songs that I know. To me, the truths are universal and timeless, and being universal, many wise and inspired people would be able to see the same beauty through their own experiences in life. As the cliché goes: *Wise men think alike*.

There are many ways of learning the truths. If we can "see" the truths in the inspirational writings of wise people, then we begin to appreciate how universal these truths are, and we ought to be happy to know that many religions teach the same truths, perhaps described in different ways. I have always subscribed to the "one goal, many paths" concept. I feel this is important in forging inter-religious harmony and respect.

Karen Armstrong is a religious scholar and one of the most provocative thinkers in the role of religion in the modern world. A former Catholic nun, she asserts that "All the great traditions are saying the same thing in much the same way, despite their surface differences." Sri Ramakrishna was a devout Hindu sage who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through the encouragement of friends of other faiths, he lived and practised as a Muslim and later, as a Christian, just for the purpose of gaining experiential understanding of these religions. What he found out was that there was no difference in the ultimate aim of these religions – they all led to the same goal!

Within the world Buddhist community, there are three major traditions, the *Theravada*, the *Mahayana* and the *Vajrayana*. Although some of the devotional practices may differ slightly, the basic doctrine of the *Four Noble Truths* and the *Noble Eightfold Path* are the same in all the traditions, and there is absolutely no conflict among the three traditions. In fact, Buddhists are moving towards a non-sectarian unity now. Ajahn Brahm, the ever-popular and well-loved Buddhist teacher from Australia, calls his tradition, "Hahayana"!

The three traditions arose because when the Buddha instructed His monks to go forth and teach for the good of the many, He told them specifically to allow His teachings to blend in with the local cultures of the people. Hence, we can see for ourselves that the teachings of the Buddha have indeed blended in beautifully and harmoniously with the various cultures of the world today. For example, there is no need for a Buddhist to change his or her name, and Buddhists everywhere still observe and celebrate the many festivals in their respective cultures, as long as the practices do not bring harm to themselves and others.

When the Bengali Buddhist teacher, Atisha Dipankara Shrijnana, first went to Tibet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, he was asked how one should practise since there were many schools of Buddhism. Atisha replied, “You should find the essential point common to all the teachings and practice that way”.

Great thinkers and spiritually-developed people will always choose to see the similarities rather than the differences in the various religious teachings. One goal, many paths. All religions teach us to do good and be good. The emphasis may be on different aspects – the devotional, the ritualistic or basic day-to-day practice, but the ultimate objective is to train and guide us to be as good as we possibly can.

More so, in a world that is torn by differences, political, cultural or religious, there is a greater need for us to see and appreciate our similarities. Why should we waste our time splitting hairs trying to prove who is “better” or more right? Ultimately, every sentient being has that pure and brilliant mind that can be developed to a state of perfection. Buddhists call it *Nibbana*, Hindus call it *Moksha*, and the Christians call it *The Kingdom of Heaven*.

*There is one Truth, not many; Distinctions arise from the needs of the ignorant.*  
– Seng T’san

*All mystics speak the same language, for they come from the same country.*  
– Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin

*Who is wise? One who learns from all.*  
– The Talmud

See the truths in all things that are good and beautiful. And never underestimate the simplest ideas, because sometimes, the simplest can be the most profound and accurate.

So, whether it is from Socrates, William Blake, Mary Poppins or Baloo the Bear, I see the truths in everything that is simple and beautiful.

All kinds of everything remind me of the universal truths.

### 38. Life is Short

We are often reminded that “life is uncertain and death is certain”, and we have to do as much good as we can before our lives are unexpectedly taken away by some freak accident or illness.

I embrace this saying and live by it because I have unexplained epileptic seizures that can come on any time, without warning. So far, I have had five episodes of such seizures and it must have been sheer luck (or divine intervention?) that they did not happen while I was driving. In one episode, I had a seizure, and fell onto the sharp corner of the concrete slab which jabbed right under my eye. I remember getting up, going to the mirror and seeing half my face covered in blood. When the doctor stitched up my wound, I told him there was no need to use any local anaesthesia. The pain had already numbed my nerves by then.

It was this particular seizure that resulted in my getting a brain scan done as the doctor suspected there may have been something growing in my brain. The CT-Scan showed the image of a “large tumour” at the pons. However, the doctor assured me that it could be just an “artifact”. This means that the image could have been caused by the reflection of some bones in the skull. This was especially since I could still function normally. If indeed I had such a “large tumour” in my brain, I would not have been able to even walk in a straight line. But, my epileptic seizures were a concern, so the radiologist insisted that an MRI be done to confirm the results.

During those days, MRIs were not freely available, so I had to take my turn on the waiting list at the General Hospital. It took four months for my turn to come, and during those four months, I lived with the possibility that I could die any time. While waiting for the MRI, a second opinion confirmed that IF indeed it were really such a large tumour, there would be no hope of recovery, and I remember what the doctor said to me. “Go home and pray”, she advised.

Not wanting to get people all worried for nothing, I chose not to tell anyone. Only my husband knew. My children were too young to understand what was going on. So every day, I went to sleep wondering if I would wake up the next day. And every morning when I woke up, I was thankful to see another new day.

Being the practical person that I was, the first thing I did was to write my will. I sought solace in Jack Kornfield’s *A Path with Heart*, especially from the chapter where he describes his sessions with terminally-ill patients, helping them cope better with their impending death, and helping them accept the inevitable with serenity.

Having loved music all my life, one song helped me cope as well, and this was Louis Armstrong’s *It’s a Wonderful World*. I even wanted this song (and only this one song) to be played at my funeral if I were to die. The lyrics helped me appreciate life more, that we have so much to be thankful for. So as I thanked the *trees of green, red roses too*,

*skies of blue and clouds of white* every day that I was still alive, the day finally came and I was called up for my MRI. The results came about a week later. My husband went to collect them after work and I was waiting at home. As he stepped out of his car with that big brown envelope, I looked at his face and searched for clues. There were none.

As he handed me the brown envelope, and I reached in nervously to take the report out, a look of relief appeared over his face, and he told me, "It's normal", and he smiled. I remember the look of relief on his face till this day, as though a huge burden had been lifted off his shoulders.

Throughout the four months of waiting, we chose not to talk about the eventuality, the "if"s and the "what if"s. I chose to keep silent because I did not want to worry him. I had to be brave for him. I remember we only said, "It's probably nothing" and that was that. I had not known that he too had been so worried all these months (because my husband is an extremely calm and very strong person) until I saw that look of relief on his face that evening when he came home with the report.

So, dying is a reality for me. While each of us knows that we have to die one day, dying is a *very* real thing for me. Some of my friends do not understand why I do things so fast. "Why are you so eager? Why are you so anxious to get things done? Can't you wait a bit?", they ask in exasperation. They do not understand that I *live* with the possibility of dying at any time. I have been through a very real possibility of dying, and with my (still) unexplained epileptic seizures, I *can* throw a fit, collapse, and die at any time if my head hits a wrong place.

That is why when I have things to do, you can be sure I would do them as soon as I can. *Life is uncertain, death is certain.* I have lived through this, I embrace and wholeheartedly realise the truth of this statement. It has given me a new meaning of life. It gives me a sense of urgency to do all the good that I can do while I still can. It gives me a reason to fulfil my dreams, while I still can.

Some people think that only the sick and suffering deserve special care, but I beg to differ. To me, *everyone* deserves special care. *Everyone* is precious. Anyone *can* die at any time. So while we have the opportunity, let us love everyone with all our heart, and let us use whatever time we have to make them feel loved because we would never know when it is too late.

Talking about death, one inevitably comes to the subject of funerals. It is said that of all the species in the animal kingdom, only humans and whales organise funerals. Buddhists are "lucky" in the sense that *authentic* Buddhist funerals are simple, elegant and therefore, relatively *cheap*. But one can still choose to have it done elaborately if one chooses to, but whatever for, right? Let's not be a burden to others, *dead or alive!*

How would I like my funeral to be like? Well, I am a registered organ donor, so when I am confirmed dead, I would like my organs to be donated, then my remains cremated in

the cheapest possible manner, and my ashes can be brought home to be buried in a flower pot to fertilise the soil. I would rather not have a memorial tablet because that would only create a burden on my loved ones. Embrace simplicity, travel light in life....and in death too.

Uncle Vijaya shared with me this lovely and very profound saying by George Elliot in her novel, Middlemarch:

*For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistorical acts: and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.*

Knowing that all things are transient, and that eventually our tombs would be unvisited and unremembered, why even have one in the first place? Why not do as much as we can while we are alive, and touch the hearts of people with kindness and share all the good that we can?

Many years ago, I had an Egyptian student who told me that he was taught since young to “live each day as his last.” He said every day he would think he might die the next day, and hence, he had to do as much good as he could. I thought that was a very meaningful life motto to embrace. This young man had been through hard times in his life, having had to work before coming back to study. Because of his life motto, when I was teaching him, I noticed a drive in him which I seldom saw in my other students – to do his utmost in his studies every single day by clarifying his doubts so that he understood the day’s lesson. I shared his life motto with my other students. They laughed out loud and said, “If it were my last day, I’d enjoy myself to the fullest, and I certainly won’t study at all!!” Oh well, it’s true what they say. Those who have been through adversities will look at life differently.

Some of you may know that I wrote my first three books in a space of barely two months in 2008. “Why are you in such a hurry?”, my friends ask me. Well, because I am writing about the passions of my life. I have stories and experiences to share from my life. Let me humbly share them with others with the hope that my writings may inspire others to live their passions too, and let my stories live on even after I am gone.

And what has this issue about the uncertainty of life got to do with simplicity and letting go? Well, I make my life simple in the sense that when I have things to do, I do them as soon as possible. I am one who would never procrastinate or put off till tomorrow what can be done today. Get it done, and let it go. And let another new day come...if it comes. Live in the present. Do all you can, while you still can.

A beautiful reminder, attributed to both William Penn and Etienne de Grellet:

*I expect to pass through this world but once;  
Any good thing therefore that I can do,*

*Or any kindness that I can show to any fellow creature,  
Let me do it now;  
Let me not defer or neglect it,  
For I shall not pass this way again.*



### 39. Little Things Matter

One of the most-quoted sayings of Mother Theresa is this: *We cannot do great things on this Earth, only little things with great love.*

We all know that when it is time for us to die, we cannot bring our family and friends nor all our material belongings with us. While we may leave behind our property for our next of kin, the best thing to leave behind would be our good deeds and how we have touched other people's lives. So while we are alive, let us do as much good as we can. As Mother Theresa reminds us, we do not have to wait for opportunities to do big things. Another one of my favourite quotations comes from the highly-celebrated English poet, William Wordsworth:

*The best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.*

There are beautiful random acts of kindness that we can do every day. All it takes is to have some consideration for others, and to look for opportunities to make the day a little happier and brighter for someone else.

Have you ever come to a toll station and paid for the toll of the car behind you? Try it, you'd be surprised how good the driver at the back *and* you feel after doing it. This is indeed a little, nameless act of kindness because the driver doesn't even know who you are. But I am sure the driver at the back will remember the act of kindness for a long time even though you may have forgotten about it yourself! Since she does not know who you are, that makes the deed even more special, because you are not out to gain recognition or even acknowledgement from her.

Have you given your left-over food to a stray dog or cat in your neighbourhood? Or have you tried to approach them only to have them move further away because they are afraid of you? But if you leave the food there, and stand at a distance, they will come back (because they are hungry *and* because they sense the genuine kindness in you), and they will eat the food, then look at you and wag their tails. Yes, even cats wag their tails!

Do you smile at the stranger who passes you by every day when you walk to work? Do you greet him "Good Morning!" even though you do not know him? I know you may be a little wary of doing so for fear of being labelled "what a crazy guy!" But try it, and sometimes, you'll find that the stranger will respond in kind, and *voila!* – you've made a new friend! I used to have a lecturer who did this, and he had a host of "strangers" who later became his friends.

Little things matter. Never underestimate even the simplest acts of kindness and love. The author of *Dilbert*, Scott Adams, says: *Remember there's no such thing as a small act of kindness. Every act creates a ripple with no logical end.*

I'm sure you'd recall this lovely little poem by Mrs J. A. Carney that you would have probably learnt as a child. Though these words have the innocence of childhood in them, they are, nevertheless, timeless and very profound.

*Little drops of water,  
Little grains of sand,  
Make the mighty ocean,  
And the beautiful land.*

*Little deeds of kindness,  
Little words of love,  
Make our earth an Eden,  
Like the heaven above.*

*And the little moments,  
Humble though they be,  
Make the mighty ages,  
Of eternity.*

## 40. Just do it!

If you have a passion to do something good for the community, I'd borrow Nike's motto and say this: *Just do it!*

I've always wanted to do something useful for the community and as I looked around, I saw there were already many existing charities for humans, but not enough for animals. As one person, what could I do? I did not have the financial resources nor the knowledge and expertise to run an animal sanctuary. But I did know that there were many animal rescuers around who needed financial help for their rescued animals, especially to pay for their spaying-neutering and medical fees. Vet's fees can sometimes cost a bomb.

So, together with some friends, we decided to pool our resources and start a small fund to help rescuers and their animals. My initial plan was to raise enough money to help ten animals per year. Spaying and neutering is the most compassionate way to help control the population of stray animals on the street. I figured if we could help get ten animals spayed and neutered per year, this would already help prevent hundreds of unwanted births. This translates into preventing unnecessary deaths as well. We'll just do it, I said. Let's start with just helping out with the cost of spaying and neutering and we'll see where we can go from there.

So we did it. From just spaying and neutering, we ended up helping with the medical fees for surgeries as well. We also did some rescue work and helped with adoptions. By the end of the first year, we had extended our help to 660 animals! And this was all thanks to friends and well-wishers who chipped in to help. Every little bit counts and is greatly appreciated.

The greatest lesson I learnt from this experience is to K.I.S.S (keep it small and simple) and do everything within my means. It is also remembering that nothing is permanent so that if our project does not last, it does not matter. What matters is that we have tried and done our best. Some benefit would have already come out of that.

So, just do it. You may be just one person with a dream, but if your dream is worthy of help and support and if your intention is to benefit others, the universe will provide the answers.

If it's meant to happen, it will. If it's not, never mind.

## 41. It is the Intentions that Matters

In whatever we do, what matters most of all is our intention. Sometimes our intentions are good, but the action or the results are not what we had hoped for. That's okay. I believe the universe is fair, and we are judged solely by our intentions.

Take for example a person who donates a lot of money to charity. The action and the results are good (people benefit from it), but who would know the donor's real intention except herself? A man helps a blind person to cross the road. Again, what was the man's intention? Was it done to show off, or was it done to help the blind person? We won't know. Only *he* would know. As such, it would do well to remember that we should not judge other people's actions because we will never know what their intentions are.

Instead, we can, and we *should* judge our own intentions. Are our actions done from a charitable and generous heart?

I learnt from my spiritual teacher, Bhante Kumara, that true charity is the type that is done solely to benefit the recipient and not the giver. That is generosity in the real sense of the word. And remember that charity is not about giving money alone. It is about giving any form of service that will benefit others.

So, ask not, what would happen to me if I give? But ask, what would happen to him, if I don't give?

Then, if you feel like giving...please give!

## 42. Leaving a Bit of Ourselves Behind

A year ago, I read a newspaper article where four ladies were interviewed. It was about life past fifty, and these ladies were asked what they did to find meaning in their lives. I was greatly inspired by what one of these ladies said. She said, "Every day, I leave a little bit of myself behind." What she meant was that every day, we touch people's lives, and when doing so, let us touch people with kindness and love. Let us make the load a little lighter for others. By doing little acts of kindness, we are "leaving a bit of ourselves behind" because what we have done for others would remain in their hearts for a long time to come.

So let us touch lives, and leave a bit of ourselves behind. And when it is time for us to go, we will go peacefully, knowing that we continue to live on in others. Let go, and die peacefully. Let there be no unfinished business because we have already left bits of ourselves behind.

And after we are gone, people might not remember our names or who we are. But they would remember that when they needed kindness, we were there, to lend a hand, to give a smile, a shoulder to lean on, a listening ear. And we made a difference to their lives, in their moment of need, because we cared. We made their lives more beautiful and meaningful and more humane. And that is a beautiful thing to do, an act of kindness and a beautiful legacy to leave behind. The great Greek philosopher Pericles says: *What we leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.*

All it takes are simple acts of kindness and of love, from a sincere and willing heart. In our quest to rise higher on the spiritual path to enlightenment, we should not carry so much baggage with us. Perform simple acts of kindness, and leave them behind.

### **43. My Simple Religion**

His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has often said:

*This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. My brain, my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness.*

Learning from such great masters, what then is my religion and how do I practise?

My simple religion is kindness, and I practise from my heart.

## Epilogue

Just as I've kept the prologue simple, I would do the same here.  
So, I shall now end this book with another K.I.S.S....(Keep It Short and Simple!)

Embrace simplicity,  
Sprinkle it with lots of love and kindness for all beings,  
Travel bright in life.  
Travel light in life.

May you be well and happy always.

Emptying my teacup,  
with love and joy,  
*kahyein*

*True eloquence consists of saying all that should be said, and that only.*  
- Francois de La Rochefoucauld

Manifest plainness  
Embrace simplicity  
Reduce selfishness  
Have few desires

**- Lao Tzu**

Fear less, hope more,  
Eat less, chew more,  
Whine less, breathe more,  
Talk less, say more,  
Hate less, love more,  
And all good things will be yours.

**- Swedish Proverb**



## Instants

If I could live again my life,  
In the next - I'll try,  
- to make more mistakes,  
I won't try to be so perfect,  
I'll be more relaxed,  
I'll be more full - than I am now,  
In fact, I'll take fewer things seriously,  
I'll be less hygienic,  
I'll take more risks,  
I'll take more trips,  
I'll watch more sunsets,  
I'll climb more mountains,  
I'll swim more rivers,  
I'll go to more places - I've never been,  
I'll eat more ice creams and less (lime) beans,  
I'll have more real problems - and less imaginary ones,  
I was one of those people who live  
prudent and prolific lives -  
each minute of his life,  
Of course that I had moments of joy - but,  
if I could go back I'll try to have only good moments,

If you don't know – that's what life is made of,  
Don't lose the now!

I was one of those who never goes anywhere  
without a thermometer,  
without a hot-water bottle,  
and without an umbrella and without a parachute,

If I could live again - I will travel light,  
If I could live again - I'll try to work bare feet  
at the beginning of spring till the end of autumn,  
I'll ride more carts,  
I'll watch more sunrises and play with more children,  
If I have the life to live - but now I am 85,  
- and I know that I am dying ...

- Jorge Luis Borges

# An EXPRESSION OF HEARTFELT GRATITUDE

*If the only prayer you ever say in your whole life is "thank you," that would suffice.  
- Meister Eckhart.*

To all my friends who have supported me in the writing and publishing of this book,

Thank you!

Travelling light,  
But with lots of love,  
*kahyein*

*Gratitude is the memory of the heart.  
- Jean Baptiste Massieu, translated from French*

## Small is beautiful



In *A Kite in the Wind*, Chan Kah Yein talks about how she practises simplicity as a person who is caught up with the trivialities and complexities of life. She interprets the ancient and time-tested teachings in her simple way, and at the same time, finds truths in modern literature as well. In this book, she shares tips on how we can incorporate simplicity into our busy lifestyle, and thereby gain more happiness and peace.

*He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.*  
– Lao Tzu