

# How to Become a Master of Life

By

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Do you sometimes feel stressed and fed-up with life?

Want to be happy? Joyful?

Well I wonder if *joy* really is the state to aim for...

Is it even possible?

When you think about it, intense happiness and joy are, by their nature, short lived. Note the use of the words 'by their nature.' This implies that you cannot artificially sustain joy, say by maintaining or increasing the stimulus which produced it.



You know those Amazonian insect-eating plants? Once an insect has triggered the plant to close, no amount of further stimulation will have the slightest effect for several hours. You can put that plant on a lead and take it for a walk through a swarm of flies, and its lips will remain stubbornly sealed.

Our 'joy' mechanism is similar.

Once triggered, it activates, and then a certain time period must elapse before it can be triggered again. It is has filled its purpose; I will explain what that is in a moment.

The same is true of intense happiness. We feel this fleeting, wonderfully positive response when one of our needs starts to be met.

Carefully note those last words.

I did not say 'when one of our needs is fully met.' **Joy or intense happiness is our reward to ourselves for taking good care of the organism, just a pain is the opposite.**

## Our Needs

We have many needs, as I am sure you know.

First in the hierarchy come our physical needs (food, water, warmth, safety, shelter, sex, touch etc.). Many of these are essential for our physical survival and so these become pressing if not met. We feel intense and desperate pain (thirst, hunger, cold) and an intense joy at the first sip of water, morsel of food or warmth of the

blanket thrown around our shoulders. But this quickly wears off because that need has now been satisfied. More (or prolonged) warmth, more food or more water bring diminishing returns in happiness.

Soon we pass into boredom and indifference about those needs. We decline the third helping of swan's breast and wearily wave away the fifth overflowing goblet of mead and...isn't it getting a little *warm* in here? Can somebody *please* stop throwing peasants onto the fire...

Eventually, other needs come to the surface - the need to be cool, the need to rest and digest. Whereas before, the cold wind caused the most intense agony and you longed for a good crackling fire to warm your bottom against, now the cold breeze from the open window feels good against your face.

You feel a momentary flash of joy...

## How It All Began

In mankind's distant past, our physical needs were mostly all we took care of. Food, water, shelter, sex, warmth - that was what it was all about.

Fast forward one million years and many of us have cracked the 'physical needs' thing. Douglas Adams described the three stages of man's evolution as "How shall we eat?" "What shall we eat?" and "Where shall we do lunch?" Well, we're at the 'doing lunch' stage now, at least in the Western world. For the main part we are all more than adequately fed, watered and housed. Actually, this is a gross understatement - we luxuriate in a massive surplus of these things.

But we are far more than a collection of physical needs. We also have a whole range of intellectual and emotional needs. We also have 'spiritual' needs in the sense of wanting answers to "what's it all about?" questions and wanting to make sense of our life as a whole and attain meaning.

Let's call these our 'higher' needs.

## Higher Needs

Examples of 'higher level' needs include our need for

- love,
- meaning,
- contribution,
- efficacy,
- beauty,
- order,
- companionship,
- excitement,
- respect,
- authenticity,
- choice,
- trust,

- harmony,
- the list is a very long one (at least two dozen needs).

## Which Are More Important?

The temptation here is to class these 'higher level' needs as less important than the lower level. In just one way, they are.

Non-fulfilment of lower level needs often leads to death - the actual extinction of the organism. Not filling higher level needs rarely has this effect. But there, the difference ends.

**The purpose of life is not brute survival at any cost.** The purpose is to survive *as a man or woman*, with all that this implies. To both survive *and to thrive*. Thriving requires that your higher level needs are also met. If they are not met, the result will be misery, defeat, low self esteem and low energy.

If too many of your needs are not met for a long period, the result will be depression in all of its guises and possibly even psychosis or suicide. Yes, lack of water will kill the organism called 'man' in a few days; but solitary confinement will kill a *man* (not the organism but his spirit) in a few months.

Starvation will kill a woman in two weeks; but total lack of love, warmth or affection will kill a *woman* (not the organism but her spirit) in a few short years.

I do not mean to imply that men and women have a different set of needs. They do not.

## All humans share an identical set of needs.

### The Cyclical Nature of Needs

Our higher level needs are also cyclical. One example should suffice.

We have a need for companionship - we are social creatures *by nature*. This implies that our need for companionship is not optional. If we do not fill this need we start to feel pain. So imagine now being in solitary confinement (enforced or accidental).

After two or three days you feel discomfort. As the days of solitude accrue, you feel more intense pain - the pain of deep loneliness and the strong desire to see another human face or hear a voice.

If this continues indefinitely, the result is depression and even suicide. Can you possibly imagine that you might say: "Leave me alone! I want to be by myself! I need my space!?" No, this seems inconceivable. But let us see...

Suppose after months of confinement, you receive a visitor. What intense joy! What rapture! You cling on to the person, greedily devouring every line and wrinkle in their face; sucking up their words like a parched traveler in a desert.

## Too Much of a Good Thing?

Now I want you to imagine a second visitor and a third - all friends and much loved family. Such happiness! You greet them all warmly. Now a fourth and a fifth; soon fifty well-wishers and friends are crowded into your room.

Hours pass, you start to feel weary. So many people, so much talk. You start to long for some peace and quiet. But your guests have no intention of going. They stay and stay - for hours, then days. They crowd your bedroom whilst you sleep, lovingly watching over you. They crowd your living room whilst you are awake, cuddling you, kissing you, touching you - saying nice things.

Gradually it becomes unbearable. You long for solitude. Your need for companionship has been sated and your need for space and quiet is now urgent. You scream out in pain:

**"Please! Will you all just GO AWAY!  
I want to be alone! I need space!"**

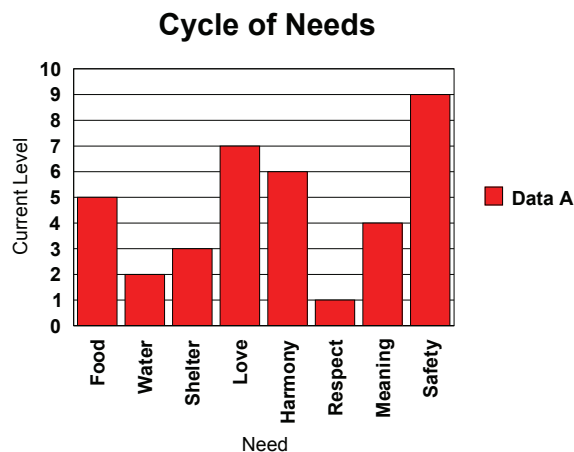
To dark mutterings of "Well! Of all the ungrateful..." they stalk off into the night, leaving you with that which you most need at present...

...solitude.

And so it goes on, round and round.

You could call this a 'cycle of needs.'

I like to imagine this as one of the those Hi Fi volume meters made up of moving illuminated bars (like a bar chart).



Each bar represents a need, the current level of the bar indicating the intensity of that need at any one moment. They never stand still. They dance up and down as each need is either met, or comes to the foreground demanding to be met.

The further below the mid line (5) a bar drops, the more pain you feel. This triggers you into action to get that need met and hopefully the bar comes up to midway - the object is to keep it there.

If it goes above midway, you have overfilled that need (too much food, too much warmth, too much companionship); this also causes pain and triggers you to further action.

[Aside: Can you have too much of seemingly positive things like love or harmony? Sure you can! Imagine a cloying, overbearing lover who will not leave your side for one second and who strums lutes below your lighted window each night - or a 100% harmonious world with never an argument, never a disagreement, everything always being perfect.]



You could say that *everything* you do in life is a strategy for keeping those bars all in a line, in the middle. Often our strategies are misguided and even counterproductive, but still the *intention* is to fill a need.

## No Final Result

Of course this is a dynamic thing, like juggling. It is never static.

There is never a time - not once in your entire life - where you can sit back and admire your straight line of bars, secure in the knowledge that they will remain that way for longer than a few moments.

A juggler can never relax her concentration and have the balls remain in a perfect arc above her head. And here's the really important bit: **even when those bars are in a line, it does not produce joy or ecstatic happiness**. These, as we have seen, are our brief reward for *starting* to fill an urgent, chronic need.

So what do you think is the emotion corresponding to a full set of well-filled needs?

*Contentment*.

Now we are getting closer to a sustainable and desirable state to aim for.

Everyone thinks they want to be blissfully happy, (in this particular article I am using this word in the sense of intense happiness bordering on joy.) **In fact, this is unsustainable by any means** - just as the fly trap cannot munch its way through an endless queue of suicidal bluebottles. It is not in the nature of the plant to do this. It is not in our nature to feel constant joy.

This is such an important point that I want you to be very clear about it.

As an organism, it is *not* the case that our purpose is to move towards a state of permanent intense happiness (joy), any more than the juggler aims to attain a perfect frozen arc of equally-spaced balls above her head so that she might relax, arms folded.

So what is our purpose?

It is to maintain a state of *dynamic equilibrium* - neither too hot, nor too cold; neither too tired, nor over-rested; neither starving, nor bloated.

To achieve this, evolution has provided us with two important feelings: pain and pleasure. Pain is the stick, goading us away from danger, chronic lack, or massive excess. Pleasure is the carrot, enticing us to act in a way that gets it just right - perfectly balanced. Both have the purpose of getting us to *act* - to do something to restore equilibrium.

Once equilibrium has been achieved, the feeling is *not* one of intense, prolonged happiness (that is our reward for *starting* to fill a much neglected need.) The result is equilibrium for the organism and we experience this as a quality of contentment.

## Master Juggler

**If we become a master juggler of life and get the hang of keeping those tricky bars all in a row, or balls in the air, our reward is deep and lasting contentment.**

Since words have many meanings, let me be a little more specific about this state. You feel that all is right with your world (which, of course, it is). You feel calm, in flow, certain, in focus, open, poised, sensitive and clear.

Other people will feel a very special quality about you and want to be close to it - they crave it too, just as every human being does. Life seems easy for you. You wonder why on earth you struggled and strained for so many years, wracked by guilt, angst, pain and unhappiness.

The reason is that you were not, at that point, a master of life.

To push the juggler analogy a teensy bit further; top jugglers like Brad Byers in the above picture spend years learning exactly how to keep all of those balls or clubs flying in an arc above his head. I imagine that at times it seemed impossible; he felt like giving up. He was probably often frustrated, angry and despairing about *ever* being able to do such a difficult thing. But having mastered it, the process now is *almost* effortless for him. When juggling, he is in a 'flow' state - not struggling, sweating and striving to maintain the arc, but calm, certain, almost in a meditative state.



Master Juggler  
Brad Byers in Action

## Natural or Not?

Is contentment the 'natural' human state?

Well, that depends on what you mean by 'natural.'**Our default condition is not one of contentment.**

It is entirely incorrect to say that if you do nothing, let go or drop out then you will default to a 'natural' state of contentment. **The exact opposite is true, in fact.**

If you seek contentment you are *required* to engage in a constant, relentless struggle with nature and reality (required by your essential nature, that is). Disengaging with this struggle, as you might expect, rapidly produces discontentment closely followed by unhappiness, pain and then death. All the balls come tumbling to the ground and the audience holds its breath, wondering if this is a joke or whether they are witnessing a disaster.

Books, courses and religions which claim that man's 'natural' state is one of happiness are just plain wrong - as wrong as a book on juggling which claims that the balls 'naturally' want to be in a neat arc and that your task as a juggler is to 'get in touch' with this natural state and 'release' the balls to 'do their own thing'...

**Mankind's 'natural' state is one of constant struggle to maintain equilibrium. His reward for this, if he masters it, is contentment.**

Does all this talk about 'constant struggle' put you off? Perhaps you are thinking that happiness and even contentment are now well out of your reach?

Not so.

Just because you are engaged in a lifelong 'dance' with nature, does not mean that it is arduous, deeply painful and harsh - although it can be these things if you get it wrong. The truth is that it *is* possible to be content because our needs are not that difficult to meet, particularly these days. Not easy, but not that hard either.

The reason we feel such discontent, pain, unhappiness and angst is mainly because of false information leading to erroneous and completely incorrect strategies for filling our needs. But more of that in a later newsletter. For now, I want to summarise the important things I have been explaining to you:

1. You have many needs, both 'lower level' (e.g. food) and 'higher level' (e.g. love).
2. Your needs are the 'voice' of the organism called a 'human being' telling you what it needs for survival *as a human* (not survival at any level, e.g. as a cringing, naked half-starved beast.)
3. Your needs are never filled, finally, for all time. They are cyclical. Your two dozen (or so) needs cycle round and around. At any one moment, several are urgently screaming at you, a few are muttering for attention and others are satisfied - for now.
4. When a need is not filled, you feel discomfort and then pain. This is the human organism's method of alerting the higher part of your mind (the strategy part) to come up with some plans, pronto, for filling that need.

5. If a need has been unfilled for a long time, when you attend to it you feel a burst of an emotion we call 'joy.' This is your instant reward for getting started. **It is not a sustainable feeling.**

6. Gradually, as you master how to juggle your needs and respond to them in a timely fashion, your reward is a feeling we call 'contentment.'

7. The trick is to become a 'master of life' - a master juggler. This is not a 'natural' state. You need to work at it and practice it. You also need an instructor. (If you have ever tried your hand at juggling, you will know it is impossible to learn, by yourself, from first principles. But if someone shows you the step-by-step method, then anyone can learn to juggle three balls in around five hours. Five balls? Come back in five years!)

In case you have not yet realised this fact, it is going to take time for you to become a 'master of life'.

A good time to start is... now.

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