



Living a More Conscious Life

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Conscious living. We hear this phrase often enough - you may use it yourself - but do you really understand what it means? Do you know how to achieve it? And do you really want your life, your choices and your responses to be conscious?

According to Caroline Myss, author of *Why People Don't Heal and How They Can* (Harmony), consciousness is something we seek, and then run from. Why? Because consciousness demands responsibility and action. If I know I'm being harmed, if I know I'm harming someone else, if I know I'm not living up to my own personal honor code, there is only one way to respond consciously: I have to act. I have to change whatever I am doing or not doing. I have to change the way I am living.

But wait. Sometimes we miss a large piece of the point. Consciousness also requires that I recognize when I am treating *myself* in a way I would never want to treat another human being. Stephen Levine, who has worked for more than twenty years in with conscious living and conscious dying, talks a great deal about living with mercy and loving kindness, for other - yes - but even more significantly, for ourselves. *Mercy and loving kindness*. Imagine offering yourself mercy and loving kindness instead of self-punishment and self-loathing. Imagine treating yourself with mercy instead of with bitterness and resentment. Imagine treating yourself with loving kindness instead of calling yourself names like '*stupid*,' '*bad*,' '*ugly*' or worse.

When Levine speaks of living consciously, he means living in the body, conscious from moment to moment of thought and sensation, but not becoming attached to thoughts which hurt, frighten, create anxiety and/or punish. You see, the mind isn't to be trusted. It fools us and it lies to us. In one moment, it tells you to have some ice-cream or buy yourself something, and in the next moment, after you've done it, it tells you you're a pig, you're bad, that you have no self-control, you should never have eaten the food or bought the thing. How can you trust this lying mind to tell you what kind of person you are? You can't. And yet, that's exactly what we all do. We fall prey to the mind which criticizes us, which terrorizes us; which tells us to do something and then punishes us for doing it.

One of the things the mind constantly lies about is pain. The mind tells us that pain is bad and we must resist it and avoid it at all costs. However, in reality, pain is a natural consequence of living. It is sensation in the body, fear in the mind. Our fear of and resistance to pain, both physical and emotional, is what causes much of our suffering. Living consciously means learning to accept, even embrace, pain without resistance. This doesn't mean you don't take medication when it's appropriate. It means learning to still the internal impulse to resist, the

pulling away, the breath-holding, the attempts to deny it, to 'rise-above' pain as if it weren't there. Rumi, the Sufi poet and mystic, said "We are pain and what cures pain, both."

In his work with the dying and in his capacity as a teacher of Buddhist meditation, Levine has created many beautiful meditations, many of which lead to a relaxed state which he calls '*soft belly*.' Soft belly is exactly what it sounds like. If you wish to experience it, close your eyes and let your body breathe gently and bring all your attention to the belly. Give yourself enough time for the attention to gather there, and then simply allow your belly to soften. You'll probably become aware of some sensations there, in your belly, or in your heart, or even in your throat or behind your eyes. There is nothing to do with these sensations, nothing to add to them, nothing to change, just notice them, whatever and wherever they are. Thought may accompany these sensations. If so, as a thought arises, notice it and let it be. Let it float there in soft belly. Notice it, but don't attach to it. Don't try to force it away. Notice that a single thought may be enough to make the belly begin to harden again, but notice without judgement. Be loving and merciful with yourself. When you notice your belly harden, just continue to breathe gently and soften your belly once again.

Soft belly can become an excellent signal that lets us know how we're responding to life: consciously, belly soft, experiencing feeling as it comes, from one moment to the next, or resisting and denying, belly hard, pulling away from ourselves and our experience. I'm sure women can't help but notice that everything in the culture in which we live demands that we should always have a hard, flat belly. Men too, although a heavy man is not judged on the same scale as a heavy woman. Men are taught to 'suck it up,' harden the belly and pull the chest up. What does this say about our culture? Its norms keep us away from our feelings and keep us away from our conscious selves.

An open heart is the key to conscious living. Actually, the heart is always open in the same way the sun is always shining. The sun's light is blocked by clouds, trees, by structures we build to keep ourselves out of the elements - out of the rain and cold and snow and sleet, but also out of the sun. The open heart is blocked in a body where the belly has become hardened against feeling hurt, anger, fear, doubt, confusion, even love. Learning to receive these feelings with gentleness, mercy and loving kindness toward ourselves is the way to unblock the heart. It's useless, however, to command ourselves to be kind and merciful to ourselves. The belly can't be softened by force. All of us can only lean, gently, toward mercy...be open to it. We need to discover mercy for ourselves, even as we observe the merciless thoughts the mind directs toward us.

It isn't our fault that our minds are merciless. This is an ingrained, habitual, and ancient response. So, please don't beat yourself up emotionally because you have unkind thoughts about yourself. Be kind. Be loving. Have mercy. Treat yourself, as Stephen Levine suggests, "as if you were your only child." Cradle your pain in loving kindness. Cradle your merciless thoughts in loving kindness, too. Remember that the goal of consciousness is not so much *enlightenment* as it is to *lighten* - to lighten your heart.

To talk to an APS psychologist today, ask your GP for a referral to PBP Consultancy or simply write to prabu1@pbpconsultancy.com or visit www.pbpconsultancy.com or T/+61 41639056

