

THE THREE ASPECTS OF SIMPLE LIVING

At least a shopping cart full of books about simple living have been written over the last couple of decades, and hundreds of specific suggestions have been made. To avoid any confusion before we go further, we need to clarify what we mean by simple living as we'll be using it in this book.

Simple living as a practical pathway to peace has three aspects. First of all, it is the conscious commitment to **using the least of the earth's resources we can** while still being comfortable and having enough. Simple living is not about deprivation and denial, because as we limit our material goods, we find our lives enriched in other ways. Those ways may include the option to work fewer hours because our expenses have decreased, a reduction of the time and energy spent on insuring and maintaining lots of "toys," or better health from eating more vegetarian meals. What is required to be materially comfortable will be defined differently by each of us, but I believe that people sincere about being practical peacemakers will learn to distinguish the essential from the excess.

Essential expenditures in this context are not limited to food, housing, clothing and basic transportation, but could include tuition to further one's education, art supplies or athletic equipment, or thoughtfully planned entertainment and travel. What's important is to keep asking ourselves questions about minimizing environmental resources. The basic questions to ask are: *Can I do what I want to do in a different way that will be less consumptive of resources? Can I be happy doing an energy-intensive activity less often? Does what I think makes me happy really make me happy?* Activities that are notoriously heavy users of energy are transportation, especially driving alone in a fuel-inefficient vehicle, having large families (except by adoption), heating and cooling a poorly insulated home, eating meat, and buying new and imported items.

Getting down to specifics, we might ask: when I want to go to restaurants, classes or movies, can I bike or take public transportation instead of driving? Do I own a fuel-efficient vehicle? For my vacation, can I explore destinations closer to my home, or if more distant, can I travel to one place and stay there for the duration of the trip? In the case of getting certification or training for career advancement, can I meet requirements through online courses rather than commuting to a classroom building? For clothing and furniture, can I get the desired items in good used condition at consignment or thrift stores or at yard sales, rather than buying them new? Instead of stopping every morning for a latte (made from coffee shipped from South America), can I cut back to once a week? Is the latte truly conducive to my happiness, or is it a source of unwanted weight gain?

Secondly, simple living means **limiting our time commitments**. Are we rushed all day long from one task or appointment to another, falling farther behind on deadlines, feeling we have to forego activities we truly enjoy? A stressful lifestyle is inimical to peace within ourselves, and thus of peace in the world. Everyone needs "down time" for both mental and physical health, and must be proactive in setting aside time for it. Time spent doing nothing is not wasted, but may accommodate a prayer or meditation practice, lead to useful problem-solving insights, help us be better prepared for activities later in the day, or allow a refreshing nap. We can create needed space in our schedules by asking these questions about proposed activities: *Do I really want to do this or will I wish I hadn't agreed to it? Can I do this and still have time to do what I need to without being*

rushed?

Many working people yearn for the day when they can retire, but overlook the possibility of making their present lives look a little more like retirement right now. What is the desired activity that retirement promises to make possible? More time for hobbies, getting together with friends and family, or just taking it easy? To be able to enjoy these without waiting, we might ask: what less satisfying volunteer commitments or meetings in our non-job lives could be gradually eliminated to make more time now? Could housekeeping chores be simplified without sacrificing cleanliness and order? Could the time we spend watching television or talking on the phone be cut back? Could neighbors form co-ops for child care or meal preparation? Would it be possible to work more hours for a few days and then take a whole day off? Disencumbering oneself of organizational duties and externally derived expectations can be marvelously freeing.

Thirdly, simple living means paying attention to our ordinary lives moment by moment, **being present in the here and now**. Fortunately for our happiness, it is not really possible to live in the past or the future, but we constantly do this in our minds. When we think about the past, we mostly dwell on our regrets or disappointments; when we think about the future, we are often caught up in anxiety or fear. Such thinking keeps our attention away from being able to listen, speak and act in ways that bring more clarity to the situation right in front of us.

In Leo Tolstoy's story *Three Questions*,¹ a king seeks answers on how to live effectively. The king's questions are these: When is the right time to do something? Who are the most important people? What is the most important thing to do? The king disguises himself as a peasant, journeying up into the mountains to seek advice from a wise hermit. When he arrives, the disguised king leaves his bodyguards to wait out of sight a little distance below. The hermit, who is digging his garden, doesn't answer the king's questions. Noticing that the hermit is elderly and tired, the king helps with the digging, which delays the king's departure. Then when an injured man suddenly appears on the scene, the king takes care of him, dressing his wounds. The injured man subsequently reveals that he is an old enemy who had sought to kill the king in revenge for the man's brother's death at the king's hands. However, while waiting below to ambush and kill the king, the man had instead been wounded by the king's bodyguards. Now that the king has saved his life, the man begs forgiveness and offers his faithful service.

Before the king leaves, he again asks his three questions of the hermit, who replies that the questions have already been answered. Helping the hermit dig when he needed help delayed the king's departure. That additional interval of time meant his enemy's intention to attack the king was thwarted by the royal bodyguards; thus, the right time is now. "Now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power," writes Tolstoy. Dressing the injured enemy's wounds turned that enemy into a friend. Thus, the most important person is the one we're with, and the most important action is to do good to that person.

Had the king been preoccupied with his need to get the questions answered when he first arrived at the hermit's hut, and left in impatience when the hermit didn't answer him, the king would have been murdered by his enemy. Had the king not been compassionate to the injured man, the man would probably have died and his heirs would continue to seek revenge on the king. By doing what he did, the king learned the answers

to his questions through life experience, rather than getting someone's opinion.

Although our choices may not involve life-and-death situations like those of the king in this story, we may miss great opportunities if we do not keep our attention in the present, and try to do good right where we find ourselves instead of being lost in the past or the future. Questions we can ask about our focus are these: *Am I present in my life most of the time, or am I often fantasizing about the future, daydreaming, or going over past events? Do I pay enough attention to be open to helping the person with me right now?*

Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of the bestselling *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence*, speaks of paying attention as a way to be more fully compassionate: "The first step in compassion is to notice the other's need . . . the enemy of compassion is preoccupation with the self."² Noticing others' needs has for most of us become less likely to happen, because we have become increasingly distracted by busyness, ubiquitous entertainment and other material pursuits. Efforts to focus our attention through meditation have been criticized by some people as too self-indulgent, benefitting no one except possibly the meditator. From the standpoint of recent discoveries in neuroscience, however, Goleman offers a practical answer to this objection. Our meditative calmness can actually help others, he says, "not just in some metaphorical way, but actually, in hard scientific terms . . . If you have a loved one who is suffering, and you yourself are calm, equanimous and loving, your presence is going to help them. It's more than just a nice thing to do; it's an effective thing to do."

We also need to notice when our attention goes outward in wanting, for example, in greed or attachment to something we perceive as pleasurable; and when our attention turns inward in avoidance or aversion to something we perceive as threatening or painful. These responses destroy peace and prevent us from experiencing the present moment calmly and fully.

We can learn to be more alert when we find ourselves daydreaming or worrying, desiring or rejecting, so as not to be carried away by these thoughts. They're just thoughts passing through, and we need to let them pass through rather than reaching out, grasping and exploring them, arranging them in sequence, feeding on them, trying to make desired results happen, and warding off undesired ones. This is not to say that we never plan for the future nor review and learn from what happened in the past, but that we are wise to limit the time we spend inside our heads, somewhere other than in the present moment.

Dogen, a famous 13th century Japanese Zen master, wrote:

Above all, don't wish to become a future Buddha;
Your only concern should be,
As thought follows thought,
To avoid clinging to any of them.

If we can reduce our consumption, pare down our schedules and pay attention to the present moment, we can enjoy greater peace ourselves, and make greater peace possible for people, other living creatures and the planet.

1. Tolstoy, Leo. *Twenty-three tales* / by Tolstoy; translated by L. and A. Maude. London ; New York [etc.] : H. Frowde, [1906].

2. Salzberg, Sharon. "I Feel Your Brain." Interview with Daniel Goleman. *Tricycle*, Winter 2006.