

Peanut Butter

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This is part 2 of my interview with [deluks917](#). In [part 1](#) we discussed online weirdos, free thinkers, and Uyghurs. Stay tuned for part 3 on archetypes, the will to knowledge and Moana.

We talk about materialism, Buddhism, how to deal with the inevitable suffering that comes from attachment, and how peanut butter ties everything together. I have a lot of thoughts on all of the above! You can follow the links to my follow-ups from each question, or just read through the interview and get to my thoughts at the bottom.

Jacob: Before I get your view on materialism, I want to share a story from last week.

It was my wife's birthday, and she wanted to go to a fancy restaurant. A *very* fancy restaurant. We both wore nice outfits, and the meal cost more than everything we wore, including shoes.

At the start of the meal, we had large blue plates with golden trim in front of us. Then they put another round plate on top of that, and a smaller round plate, a square white plate, an even smaller round plate, and a tiny elongated plate on top of that. And on that pedestal of gleaming porcelain was an inch-long Italian pastry of some sort. Then they brought a cloth napkin wrapped around a slice of lemon and a twig of rosemary and poured water from a silver pitcher on the napkin so that it would be freshly wet.

I found the entire thing absurd, excess for the sake of excess. And I thought about you – as skeptical as I am of this sort of thing, you are far more skeptical. I remember coming over with a bottle of wine and asking if you had any wine glasses, and you said: “no, I’m not really into materialism” as if wine glasses were obviously superfluous.

deluks917: It seems that there is a path that almost everyone walks down. You get new things, and then you hedonically adapt. You start to feel like you can't give up certain material comforts. Suddenly you're willing to compromise your morals to get the money you feel you need.

People constantly want new cars, new clothes. Things they would've been very happy with in the past no longer make them happy. If I looked at my current life through the eyes of a subsistence farmer, shouldn't I just be filled with joy at this material abundance?

It's not just material things. You see people who are successful professors at good universities who are very upset because they won't win the Nobel prize.

And I see it in myself in some avenues. I play a lot of online games. On one game, Seven Wonders, I had an ELO score of 380 for a long while. Then I had a good run and I got to 440, then 450. But I played for six more hours and was down to 420. I felt like a failure. 420 seemed unbearably low, and just the day before it was higher than my all-time peak. I feel like I need an exorcist to get rid of these demons.

Are you happy with the material progress that's just the result of technology improving for everybody? Or do you want to avoid all progress, stepping off the hedonic treadmill entirely?

I don't think in terms of going up the treadmill or optimizing it. Shouldn't we just realize how amazing things are materially and hold hands and sing praises to God? Things are just so great materially. And the elephant is trying to ruin this.

So I'm trying to push the other way. Could I live *less* well materially and still be happy?

I give away money to EA causes and I save a decent amount. My financial goal is to have enough money that if something happened to me I could continue living a reasonable life. I'm not trying to become a monk. But it would be just wonderful to retire on 30K a year in the middle of nowhere. And if I had enough to retire I would do something in the EA community or work directly on AI risk.

[My thoughts on the hedonic treadmill]

It seems like your life is pretty well optimized, which is something a lot of rationalists are trying to do. This could mean getting more of something, or just being happy with less. As far as diet is concerned, you're definitely following the second path. Can you describe your diet?

By calories, my diet is about half peanut butter. The other half is things like beans and rice. I cook them in vegetable stock and add some ancho chili powder. It's very easy, I cook either 4 pounds or 8 pounds of beans at a time and throw it in the fridge.

You lost a lot of weight following the principles outlined in Stephan Guyenet's *The Hungry Brain*. Did you try an especially non-palatable diet or just a boring one?

What I have right now is a boring diet. The other diet, the one I lost 40 pounds on, is much more strict. In the other diet, you're not supposed to eat food that is tasty. I ate the "natural" kind of peanut butter with no emulsifiers in it where the oil separates. I really don't like that kind of peanut butter. You just eat plain pasta, maybe you can put salt on it. You eat plain bread, just bread.

[My thoughts on diet]

Are you doing your current diet for health reasons? Or does it just appeal to you to eat rice, beans, and peanut butter forever?

Peanut butter is good. If you handed it to a hunter-gatherer they'd be pretty impressed. It sure beats mongongo nuts you cook in sand. You can never get the sand off the nuts, man!

Sometimes I'll eat other things, but this sort of thing is most of it. It's fine, it tastes great.

I look at it from a Buddhist point of view. Think about the actual inputs to your brain: you have taste receptors, a picture you're seeing, and your own thoughts which are an input in some sense. If you just meditate on what it's really like to eat, the signal is pretty sparse. A lot of what happens is created in the mind. This is how you get people drinking fancy wine but they can't tell it apart from a cheap version in a blind taste test.

So as a matter of daily experience, it's not that much better to eat other foods. I enjoy my diet quite a bit. It doesn't get you to 100% of the hedonic enjoyment of eating normal food but it's pretty enjoyable.

[My thoughts on taste tests]

I've been trying to learn about Buddhism, and it seems to be ultimately about detaching yourself from your desires. My initial reaction is that it's not somewhere I want to get to. I enjoy having a moderate number of unfulfilled desires for things like better food, interesting people, beautiful women. But I could be wrong about that.

Where are you with Buddhism? Are you on the way to nirvana?

Desires will cause you suffering. That's just what desires do, from a Buddhist point of view. But given this, whether you should have desires remains an interesting question.

I certainly desire that AI doesn't destroy the world. This desire actually causes me a lot of suffering. I worry about AI all the time. But me caring about that probably reduces total suffering if you integrate over everyone in the world.

[My thoughts on attachments]

It seems that most of what Buddhism is against are elephant-based desires, not reducing existential risk to humanity. Satisfying those desires brings some happiness to you personally, but ultimately that satisfaction is not permanent and its impermanence brings suffering. So Buddhism says that it's better to just get rid of your elephant desires completely.

Do you agree with this characterization and with the conclusion?

On some level, I'm attached to my sense of self. Even though the self is not really a fundamentally coherent concept. To me the basic claims of the Buddhist worldview are true. They are right about suffering and desires. I guess the question is: would you wirehead?

Authentic Buddhism is basically a guide to wireheading. If you follow Buddhism really strictly, you become a monk who sits and meditates all day and eats one bowl of rice. There's no magic, you're not restoring karma to the universe, you have just found a way to be very happy. But it's not obvious to say what part of yourself you're willing to part with to be happy.

You think that nirvana is happiness or just a lack of suffering?

If you are sufficiently enlightened, you should be very fulfilled in the usual sense.

The way I see it, there are short-term pleasures and short-term suffering, and I probably spend more time in the latter. Other people definitely seem to. So you oscillate between very positive and very negative experiences, and nirvana replaces that with a steady baseline. That baseline is above 0 – being a monk in nirvana is better than death. But wireheading could be way better, it can be a permanent baseline that's as high as my current peak experiences.

Being an enlightened monk is a very enjoyable experience on a deep level. You can get a taste of this if you meditate. The traditional Buddhist position is that you should not get attached to enjoyable meditation experiences. But if you meditate enough you will probably have some deeply enjoyable experiences just sitting on a rock.

How much do you meditate?

30 minutes a day, on average.

Would you wirehead if I just handed you a device that would put you there?

No, I don't think I would wirehead. And that's the reason why I'm not super interested in reaching traditional Buddhist nirvana.

Because it would change who you are too much?

If my only goal was to remove my suffering this would be a great experience. But I'm not overly motivated to put myself in a position where I'm just having a great time all the time. If everything was fine in the world then maybe I would take the wireheading, but maybe not. Being really happy all the time just isn't that appealing to me.

Think about the conclusions that Buddhism or Derek Parfit come to with regards to the self. All you're really achieving is that *someone* is having a great time, all the time. The ties that bind you to your sense of self are also the things causing you suffering. I am not sure I want to sever those ties.

[My thoughts on suffering]

Going back to peanut butter: it's delicious, but it's hard for almost everyone to accept eating nothing else forever. This is a surprisingly good metaphor for monogamy.

And yet, we are both non-monogamous. Do you see the irony in being poly, given that romance is the one area where non-monks are trying to curb their pursuit of more and be happy with limiting their choices? What wisdom does Buddhism have to offer about romance?

You got me here! There is a conflict. Traditional Buddhism is skeptical of sex and romance. If you are a monk you are supposed to refrain from all sexual and romantic attachments. Even masturbation is forbidden. There is a very funny quote from the Vinya, the rules for monks:

It would be better that your penis be stuck into the mouth of a poisonous snake than into a woman's vagina. It would be better that your penis be stuck into the mouth of a black viper than into a woman's vagina. It would be better that your penis be stuck into a pit of burning embers, blazing and glowing, than into a woman's vagina.

Why is that? For that reason you would undergo death or death-like suffering, but you would not on that account, at the break-up of the body, after death, fall into deprivation, the bad destination, the abyss, hell.

Of course, the celibacy rules are intended for monks and not lay people. But traditional Buddhism recommends that everyone weaken their attachment to sexual pleasure. Polyamory is a very bad idea from this perspective. Switching to poly is moving in the opposite of the wise direction and will almost certainly cause me quite a lot of suffering.

I am certainly interested in reducing my own suffering, but it's not my top goal. I am ultimately motivated by a desire to know what is true. Polyamory is such an interesting idea. I have many poly friends who seem to be doing great, and they seem to do better the fewer restrictions they place on their relationships. Maybe monogamy is just a dogma we can let go of. That is a crazy thought.

I just have to find out if it's true for me. If I have to suffer to see this for myself so be it.

[Geoffrey Miller's (and my) thoughts on polyamory as a frontier for scientific exploration]

Do you feel that the life you are living is close to your ideal? Have you've figured things out?

I think that I have gotten some of the easier things correct. But even if you look at Scott's writings from 2009, the greatest demon is akrasia or lack of focus. And this is the reason why all the self-help ideas on LessWrong don't work truly amazingly. I think they

work, but they're not as transformative as people thought they would be.

Akrasia is a tough demon. If I could slay that monster I'd be happy with my life.

What's the plan for slaying it? What are you trying?

I've tried a lot of things. Right now I'm thinking of a new approach.

Throughout the day you vary a lot in how conscious or lucid you are. When you are especially lucid, instead of trying to be directly productive you can instead try to push your less conscious self in the right direction. When you're the rider, instead of reading the book you should push the elephant towards the library. Then if you take a nap you'll wake up near the library.

I'm not quite sure how useful this insight will be, but I hope it turns out to be wise.

[The Center for Applied Rationality teaches many techniques a rider can use to train their elephant. A promising one is Trigger Action Planning.]

Another idea is Gendlin's focusing. Based on focusing I have realized some feelings like tiredness are not really 'real'. They're just a felt sense of not wanting to keep programming. If the two of us were about to play a video game or a board game I liked, I wouldn't feel tired. So it's not a real tiredness, just an aversive felt sense.

And there are bad feedback loops that I don't know how to break. If I talk to some people online about rationality I'll get some validation and it will seem important. Whereas if I spend some time learning to program or doing my job, the immediate feedback is not going to be as good. My brain knows this on a deep level. So I'm thinking a lot about how to break this cycle.

Thank you for doing this interview, you certainly gave me a lot to think about!

Follow up thoughts

The Hedonic Treadmill

In my guide to getting rich slowly, I wrote that my goal is to improve my material lifestyle by 2% a year. I still stand by it. I think that even slow progress (coupled with technology getting better) feels a lot better than stagnation. Sharp increases in lifestyle don't increase happiness by a commensurate amount and can't be ratcheted back without causing suffering. Effective Altruism is a wonderful way to use the extra money for happiness and fulfillment while keeping material lifestyle inflation in check.

A 2% increase in consumption is certainly achievable if you're willing to work and do sensible financial planning, especially if your starting point is modest. For other pursuits it's harder – I don't know how to guarantee that I sleep with partners who are 2% sexier every year for the rest of my life.

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Diet

How's my diet going? The experiment was to see if I could lose even 4 pounds, and I predicted that if I can achieve that I'll be even more motivated to stick to counting calories and daily intermittent fasting. Instead, I quickly lost 5 pounds and then plateaued there, which is really demotivating.

After interviewing deluks917 I bought some peanuts and carrots and had just that for lunch for four days straight. It worked great in suppressing my appetite and keeping my diet on track, but also really bummed me out. I will keep trying to replace more of what I eat every day with routine staples, but I don't think I'll ever get to having nothing but 3 items in my fridge.

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Taste Tests

My friend Spencer ran a blind tasting experiment which confirmed that people have no idea what they're drinking and that cheap stuff often tastes better. My favorite blind tasting red wine, which was also the crowd's favorite, was the Mirassou pinot noir which you can get for under \$10.

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Attachments

The issue of attachment brings together Buddhist and Stoic philosophy, although they ultimately arrive at different answers. Buddhism sees the suffering as inevitable – whatever you enjoy will ultimately bring you grief because it is impermanent. It is better to give it up from the start. Stoicism is more optimistic, holding that it's possible to sever the feeling of attachment without necessarily giving up the object of desire itself.

Stoicism endorses eating peanut butter, but not forever – just long enough to dispel the fear of losing access to a rich diet. Once you realize how great peanut butter is, you can better enjoy the steaks and caviar. The same is true for things like relationships. I know people who have wasted lifetimes in codependent, abusive, or just unsatisfying relationships because they couldn't get over the fear of being alone. Getting rid of the fear doesn't require giving up relationships.

The Stoic Seneca advised:

Set aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: 'Is this the condition that I feared?'

When I was 22, I worked 12 hours a day for Israeli minimum wage in a small city in the desert far from my friends. I was single and shared an apartment with 2 roommates and six cats. And I was far from unhappy because I had just finished four years of mandatory military service and civilian life of any sort was an upgrade.

Today I work 9 hours a day for a whole lot more money, and I live with my wife in New York City surrounded by friends. This is way better, and I wouldn't give any of it up without a fight. But I know that I can lose it all and the world won't end.

Perhaps this is how Buddhism and Stoicism can be integrated – learning to meditate not in order to permanently dissolve all suffering but to know that meditation works and that negative mental states are not all that scary.

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Suffering

I can think of two compelling criticisms of the core Buddhist project: avoiding suffering by letting go of desires.

The first is utopian – instead of changing our minds to be content with an unsatisfactory universe, let's change the universe to satisfy our desires. We used to be sick, hungry, and cold; we invented antibiotics, peanut butter, and the Uniqlo ultralight down jacket. Mental illness? Loneliness? Death? We're working on it. As a benefit, actually solving problems instead of meditating them away helps those who aren't meditators instead of throwing them under the bus.

The second answer is... I'll let Zarathustra speak for himself:

“We have discovered happiness”—say the last men, and blink thereby.

One still worketh, for work is a pastime. But one is careful lest the pastime should hurt one.

One no longer becometh poor or rich; both are too burdensome. Who still wanteth to rule? Who still wanteth to obey? Both are too burdensome.

Every one wanteth the same; every one is equal: he who hath other sentiments goeth voluntarily into the madhouse.

“Formerly all the world was insane,”—say the subtlest of them,

“We have discovered happiness,”—say the last men, and blink thereby.

– ***Thus Spake Zarathustra*** by *Friedrich Nietzsche*.

The Nietzschean response to Buddhism is that suffering is necessary, for nothing else drives creativity and transformation. The universe is full of dust and gas that feel no suffering, along with a handful of humans who alone are capable of suffering and also doing anything whatsoever. Would we give it up to become more like rocks?

I find wisdom in all three approaches. Some suffering is an illusion that should be dispelled, some can be solved by applied technology, and some must be borne to propel us to greatness.

Telling which is which is left as an exercise for the reader.

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