The Buddhist idea about the human predicament was called duhkka and could very roughly be described as a sense of unsatisfactoriness that is ever-present in life. This human tendency to cling our feelings and reach for always the next thing leaves us never present in our own lives. The happiest moments of my life and the moments I have felt the most at peace are the moments in my life that I was able to let go of some of that clinging and leave behind the desires of fears of what comes next. If this was a question of whether or not I personally agree with this diagnosis, the answer would be yes.

However, this is a question of whether or not this concept holds any weight in a scientific context. I believe the answer to that question is yes, somewhat. I believe there is enough evidence to make this claim although I think that the evidence is somewhat minimal and I’d like to see more studies done on this concept.

Of course we can look at natural selection and see how quickly pleasure leaves. Nothing is permanent and yet we still hold onto what give us these very brief moments of a rush. Yet, even though these things are brief moments of pleasure, in the (metaphorical) eyes of natural selection this is a good thing. All these moments that we chase for a moments are things that, ideally, would aid in getting genes into the next generation. They keep your attention while you have them and once they are gone you are already searching for the next.

Similarly, the Buddha had an idea about the human mind and feelings. I’m not going to talk about the concept of not-self as we talked about that in the last essay, but when the Buddha talked about feelings he wasn’t so much talking about emotions as he was taking about more of the raw ingredients to feeling. These can be positive, negative or neutral, but to a Buddhist they aren’t an accurate portrayal of the world and they cannot be trusted.

Does this hold up in a scientific context? I personally believe the answer is yes, in a similar way as above. Natural selection has done a good job at motivate us towards what will (or would have) kept us alive and would have spread our genes. Keeping us afraid of things that could or might harm us and motivating us towards things that look friendly seems a likely reasoning for much of the feeling we have now. Of course our environment has changed rapidly and so this means that a lot of these feelings don’t quite do what they were meant for. These pre-judgements are wrong sometimes- even a lot of the times. So because of this it’s easy to say that a lot of what we think and feel can’t be trusted.

I have experienced the strange but wonderful ease that is those moments when I am able to let go of my clinging. To be able to see and live in the moment, knowing how impermanent it all is, knowing that your feelings are a one sided story, is a truly fulfilling experience. However, I do have to say that I personally believe that natural selection and my own experience is enough for me to agree with both of these arguments but I don’t believe that there is enough evidence from modern psychology to make the claim that these are backed entirely by science.