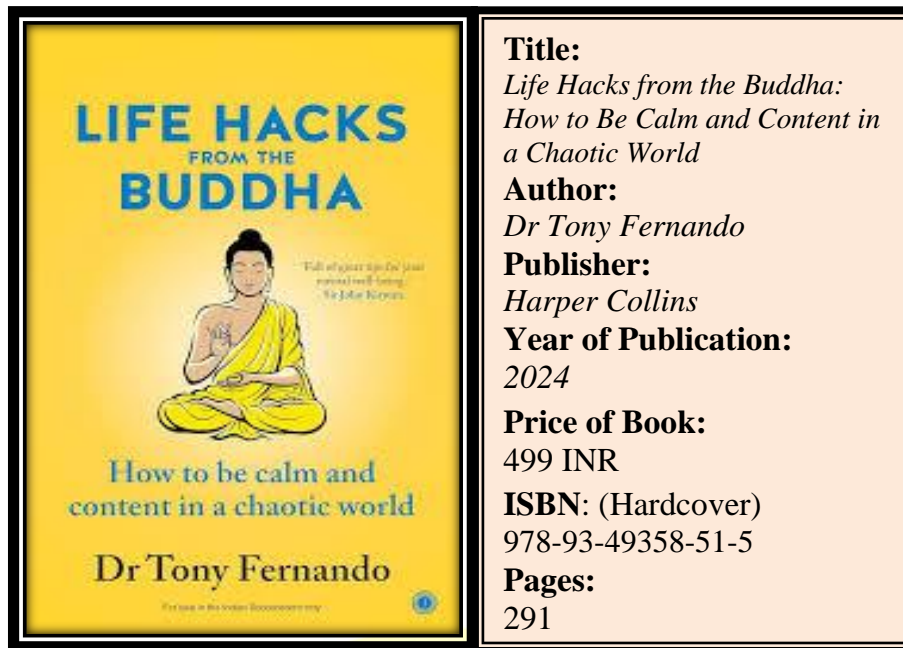


## LIFE HACKS FROM THE BUDDHA: HOW TO BE CALM AND CONTENT IN A CHAOTIC WORLD: A BOOK REVIEW

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### About Book:



#### Title:

*Life Hacks from the Buddha:  
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*Dr Tony Fernando*

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### Full Book Review

Dr Tony Fernando's *Life Hacks from the Buddha: How to Be Calm and Content in a Chaotic World* is an engaging and insightful work that blends Buddhist philosophy with contemporary psychological science. Written by a Philippines-born psychiatrist and sleep specialist based in Auckland, New Zealand, the book reflects Dr Fernando's unique background as a clinician, academic, and temporarily ordained Buddhist monk. He earned his medical degree from the University of the Philippines and later trained in psychiatry and sleep medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. Widely regarded as Australasia's only psychiatrist formally trained in insomnia, he has worked as a consultant psychiatrist and sleep physician and served as a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland, receiving several teaching awards. His academic interests include compassion in healthcare, a field in which he completed a PhD exploring why doctors lose empathy. Drawing on his clinical expertise and monastic experience, Dr Fernando integrates Buddhist psychology with modern psychiatry, and through *Life Hacks from the Buddha* and his teaching, he promotes mindfulness, compassion, and emotional resilience in clinical, community, and correctional settings.

Through its clear structure of fifteen chapters, preceded by a Prologue and Introduction and followed by an Epilogue, the book takes readers on a progressive journey from understanding the nature of human suffering to adopting practical mental and ethical strategies for cultivating calm, clarity, and compassion. The chapterisation of the book is pedagogically sequenced, beginning with the diagnosis of human dissatisfaction and moving toward the systematic training suggested by the Buddha, mirroring the structure of classical Buddhist teaching frameworks such as the Four



Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Prologue establishes Fernando's starting point: as a clinician, he observed that even after treatment, many patients still felt empty, anxious, or dissatisfied, which led him to look for a system that could address deeper existential concerns. His exploration of positive psychology and mindfulness eventually led him to Buddhist teachings, which he regards as offering the most comprehensive and psychologically sound method for understanding and overcoming suffering. In the Introduction, he positions the Buddha not as a divine figure but as "the smartest psychologist, who ever lived," a teacher who understood the human mind with extraordinary clarity and offered a training program rather than a faith-based system. This framing sets the tone for the rest of the book, which consistently approaches Buddhism as an evidence-aligned, experiential discipline rather than a religious doctrine.

The first two chapters serve as the diagnostic section of the book. Chapter 1, "The pursuit of happiness," introduces the Buddhist idea of *dukkha*, the subtle dissatisfaction inherent in human experience, and shows how, despite unprecedented access to comforts, entertainment, and luxury, modern humans often feel perpetually discontented. Through examples such as Sally, a wealthy entrepreneur who could afford a helicopter to avoid traffic yet felt persistently dissatisfied, Fernando demonstrates that external circumstances cannot secure lasting happiness. His personal narratives, such as feeling restless during a dream vacation, further illustrate the universal instability of pleasure and the human tendency to habituate to positive experiences. Chapter 2, "We are all crazy," expands this diagnosis by highlighting the irrationality and unreliability of human perception, drawing on both Buddhist insights and modern neuroscience. The story of Mr J, a veteran whose trauma conditioned him to perceive Asian people as threats, showcases how subjective our worldviews can be and how deeply shaped we are by past experiences and cognitive biases. These chapters establish the core argument that suffering is created not by external events but by the mind's reactions; its grasping, expectations, biases, and misperceptions. Chapters 3–6 form the ethical foundation of the book. In Chapter 3, "Living harmlessly," Fernando argues that peace arises from reducing harm to ourselves and others, making ethical living a psychological necessity rather than a religious obligation. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 break down the Five Buddhist Precepts; kind and honest speech, non-harm, moderation, truthfulness, and mindful consumption, showing how each precept functions like psychological hygiene. He reframes them not as commandments but as practical guidelines for reducing guilt, interpersonal conflict, and internal agitation. This section reflects the Buddhist understanding that ethical conduct (*sila*) stabilizes the mind and creates conditions for deeper insight. Fernando's reinterpretation of ethics as a mental health tool makes the precepts accessible across belief systems and cultural contexts.

Chapters 7–11 shift into the mental training component of the book, beginning with generosity. Chapter 7 defines generosity as a practice that loosens the grip of the ego and shifts attention outward, reducing self-centered rumination, while Chapter 8 explains the psychological and emotional benefits of giving, supported by both Buddhist tradition and contemporary well-being research. Chapters 9, 10, and 11 comprise the most sustained section on mindfulness, broken into three stages: understanding mindfulness, developing mindfulness, and strengthening the "mindfulness muscle." The three-chapter structure is pedagogically deliberate, mirroring how mindfulness must be learned gradually. Fernando presents mindfulness as the key skill that enables individuals to observe thoughts without reacting, identify craving as it arises, and step out of habitual emotional loops. His clinical examples, such as inmates using mindfulness to overcome panic attacks triggered by slamming prison doors, illustrate its transformative potential. This mindfulness section builds the core psychological toolbox that the rest of the book relies on. Chapters 12 and 13 focus on simplification and letting go, connecting Buddhist insights to modern issues of consumerism, digital addiction, and overstimulation. Chapter 12, "Living simply,"



argues that simplicity is not deprivation but freedom from cognitive clutter. Chapter 13, “Unshackling from our addictions,” examines the compulsive behaviours; technological, emotional, material that dominate contemporary life, linking them to craving and grasping. These chapters act as a bridge between the internal mental cultivation of mindfulness and the outward expression of compassion.

The final section, Chapters 14 and 15, culminates in compassion, which Fernando identifies as the highest and most transformative mental quality in Buddhism. Chapter 14 defines compassion as a trainable state that counters hatred, anxiety, and self-preoccupation, while Chapter 15 provides practical exercises for developing kindness and compassion in everyday life. Drawing on his PhD research in compassion science, Fernando demonstrates that compassion is neurologically beneficial, reduces stress hormones, and strengthens interpersonal relationships. Ending the book with compassion is deliberate: it completes the arc from understanding suffering, to cultivating ethical conduct, to training the mind, to simplifying life, and ultimately to opening the heart.

The chapter scheme thus follows a progressive and coherent design:

- ✓ Understanding the nature of suffering;
- ✓ Ethical foundations for reducing harm;
- ✓ Mental training through generosity and mindfulness;
- ✓ Simplifying and letting go;
- ✓ Cultivating compassion as the culmination of spiritual and psychological growth.

This reflects the structure of Buddhist practice itself, which moves from right understanding to right action, right mindfulness, and right intention, mirroring the Eightfold Path. Throughout the book, Fernando employs a conversational yet intellectually grounded style, combining personal anecdotes, clinical observations, Buddhist stories, and modern scientific research. His self-deprecating humour and honesty about his own cravings, biases, and emotional reactions humanize the text and eliminate any hierarchical distance between author and reader. Rather than presenting himself as a perfected monk or infallible expert, he positions himself as a fellow traveller learning through experience, which increases the book’s credibility and relatability. At the same time, his professional background as a psychiatrist and compassion researcher lends authority and depth, ensuring that his interpretations of Buddhist teachings are aligned with both ancient texts and modern therapeutic practices.

A major strength of the book is its grounded integration of Buddhist wisdom with cognitive psychology, affective neuroscience, and behavioural science. Concepts such as habituation, cognitive distortions, predictive processing, emotional conditioning, expectation management, and attention training are seamlessly woven into the discussion of dukkha, tanha, impermanence, and compassion. This synthesis demonstrates the timeless relevance of Buddhist insights and shows that they are not mystical abstractions but empirically verifiable observations about the human mind. The book argues persuasively that the Buddha’s teachings are not religion-dependent but universally applicable tools for managing stress, anxiety, desire, and interpersonal conflict.

While the book intentionally avoids complex doctrinal territory, this choice enhances accessibility and ensures that the text remains practical rather than theoretical. Some academic readers may wish for deeper philosophical engagement with concepts such as non-self (anatta) or dependent origination, but given the book’s purpose—to provide usable “life hacks”, its simplicity is appropriate. The narrative reliance on personal stories may reduce scholarly density, but it enhances emotional connection and pedagogical effectiveness.





Overall, *Life Hacks from the Buddha* is a compelling, practical, and psychologically grounded guide to cultivating inner peace in a chaotic world. Its structured chapter scheme, blending diagnosis, ethics, mental training, lifestyle change, and compassion, mirrors the classical Buddhist path while remaining fully accessible to contemporary readers of all backgrounds. Dr Tony Fernando succeeds in demonstrating that ancient Buddhist teachings remain profoundly relevant, offering a coherent framework for understanding the mind, overcoming stress, and living with clarity, kindness, and contentment.

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