

Intention and sustained attention

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We heard Meister Eckhart say: “Everybody who wants to be sensitive to the Highest Truth ..must be....conscious of neither ‘before’ nor ‘after’, unhindered by their achievements, uninfluenced by any idea they ever understood, innocent and free....there is only one Now. Look!’

In this dialogue between a meditator and a neuroscientist in her second edition of *The Blissful Brain* Dr Shanida Nataraja brings out the importance of paying full attention on whatever you are doing, whether it will be during meditation or in daily life.

“*Meditator:* Periodically, throughout the day, I become consciously aware of the fact that my mind is not focused on the now –instead, I’m remembering an event from my past or fretting about some potential experience in the future. As I become aware of this, I decide to empty my mind of thoughts and bring my mind to focus on every single aspect of the present-moment experience and whatever I’m doing. This might be meditating, looking at a scenic view on a walk or something as mundane as doing the washing up. This conscious decision to focus my attention on every facet of the present moment experience is essentially the intention to be mindful.....Thoughts spontaneously pop into my head –something I forgot during a recent trip to the supermarket, a comment from a work colleague earlier in the day –but after acknowledging them, perhaps naming them – that’s thinking, that’s planning, that’s fretting –I let them go and return to the present-now.

Slowly, over time, the gap between these interrupting thoughts gets longer and it takes less effort to focus my attention on my mantra in meditation, the beautiful scene or a sink full of dirty dishes.

Neuroscientist: At this point, there is an increase in activity in the right attention association area, and a decrease in activity in the surrounding areas, in the right frontal cortex. From time to time there are short bursts of activity in brain cells in the [left] frontal cortex. This reflects random thoughts arising and then dissipating. As the activity in the attention association area increases even further, with persistent and sustained attention, the short bursts of activity are eventually dampened down and thoughts become more infrequent and less disturbing.

Meditator: When I am mindful of the present moment, my awareness of my surroundings recedes into the background. At times I lose myself in the present-now moment, and time passes during which I'm not aware of my surroundings, not aware of my body or the ache in my back that was troubling me earlier. I almost feel absorbed in the present moment experience of meditation, of the smell of the washing up liquid, or the touch of the soft soaping suds on my hands, and the glistening of the clean plates in the sunlight. I feel a union with something much greater than myself, a connectedness with others and the universe as a whole.

Neuroscientist: A decrease in activity in the right orientation association area has occurred. Through focused attention, and the effect of this sustained attention on the thalamus, the individual effectively filters out any so called redundant information, including information from the sensory elements that build up a body image. As a result, the body image becomes blurred, and this can be detected by a decrease in activity in the right orientation association area. This gives rise to a sense of interconnectedness and unity with something that is greater than the individual sense of 'self'.

In fact as Shanida says earlier in her book: "Our brain contains 'hard-wiring' that allows us to experience both higher states of consciousness and an all-pervading unity that can be equated to God."