CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Posted on Sat, Jan. 06, 2007

Free your mind from 'doing' to just 'being'

Scientists study Buddhist monks in search of answers to mystery of mindfulness in concept of consciousness

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SEATTLE TIMES

Chances are most of you have already run the gantlet of stores, catalogues and online sites, and were busy awaiting the Christmas payoff, when expectations are unwrapped. So the first month of the new year seems ripe for experiment.

What if we simply enjoyed the day? Is it possible to stop rushing and expecting, fixating and fantasizing, and ruing and stewing?

To be in the here and now has never been harder, the matrix of variables and stresses never more complex.

Our techno-fed brains seem in a constant state of fragmenting. You could'a should'a done this or that or maybe you can in the future if only this or that falls into place. The stilling of our minds to the point of awareness or satisfaction -- no matter how fleeting -- is as rare as, well, the last deep breath you took.

Here's one way to look at it: Our brains have essentially two modes of transportation. The authors of "Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression" call one "doing" and the other, "being."

Doing is bent on accomplishment, striving to resolve where things are with where you want them to be. It's why you get things done, but it's also why you just can't seem to let things go. It's never quite satisfied, causing judgments to loop over and over in your head.

Being is just that. It goes with the flow, simply taking in the moment. It's the surfer who crashes and climbs right back on to ride the next wave. It is the vacation most of us never seem to take.

Unfortunately, in our society, "doing" tends to bully "being." Doing believes breaks are for sissies. We are serial planners, but also junkies of instant gratification with all its side effects, such as being neurotic, unhappy, greedy and harried.

Yet, doing and being co-exist just fine in some people. They relax in lines. They don't flip you off in traffic. They create art that's beautiful because of its honest simplicity. They separate work and play.

Neuroscientists are picking the brains of Buddhist monks. They see hope in answering both physical and mental ailments. Some scientists have gone so far as to label this level of mindfulness and the concept of "consciousness" as the "last great mystery of science."

Essentially, mindfulness is about focusing on the present with full participation but without judgment. It is about controlling your mind instead of letting it control you. The practice is used for treating everything from depression to pain to addiction. It also is used to help those who simply want to function better. When you get

right down to it, each strategy concerns itself with the same central question:

"What about now?"

I sat along a rectangular table inside a downtown high-rise conference room lit only by what noon sun seeped through the blinds. When one member of the Dialectical Behavior Therapy Center of Seattle tapped a singing bowl that sat before him, he, I and four therapists closed our eyes, held still, hands on laps, and paid attention to our breaths.

I had been asked to stay as still as possible and resist the urge to cough or scratch. I should acknowledge the sensations and let them pass as if they were on a conveyor belt. That was so I could experience the power of being present.

My nose itched from the very second I closed my eyes. I thought about how one quick scratch would be enough to last me the whole 20 minutes, but I held still and it dissipated soon. And then ... the beep, beep, beep of a truck backing up on the street below ... the nonsense someone had said earlier that day ... should I peek to see what others in the room were doing ... should I take notes ... a funny thought jumped into my head, pushing me to the brink of chuckling.

It's surprising what bounces around your brain when it's not on a mission. In fact, my thoughts ping-ponged the entire time, but the session went fast and I felt more refreshed than I do most mornings when I awake.

The therapists do this every workday at noon for 20 minutes as part of their mindfulness practice. It often is the first thing they teach clients. When I told them how miserably my mind performed, they told me there is no right or wrong. You acknowledge thoughts as they come and move on.

And you practice.

The ability to acknowledge thoughts and feelings, put them in their place and move on is the key. Most of us get stuck. The training comes in developing the ability to bring your mind back from the chatter to the moment.

Start small, suggests Stacy Shaw Welch, a therapist with the Anxiety and Stress Reduction Center of Seattle (part of the Dialectical Center).

"Try just sitting and focusing attention on the breath -- how it feels, the air as it comes in and out, etc. Distractions will arise and your mind will move away from the moment -- thoughts, emotions, physical sensations -- just notice, gently, with kindness and bring your attention back to your breathing. Try this for five or 10 minutes to start out."

And then there's the stuff, especially at this time of the year.

Stuff can make us feel better, especially when it's given with love. But stuff piles up and needs to be put in its place. People who live simply have learned to handle the flow and pile-up.

Many of us equate "living simply" with self-deprivation. It need not be, says Janet Luhrs of Seattle, author of "The Simple Living Guide," a practical book. De-cluttering is at the heart of her advice. She suggests de-cluttering not just our homes, but our lives and attention spans as well.

She suggests that people who live simply share one basic attribute: contentment. They learn to appreciate what they have and realize the difference between want and need. And with contentment, she says, comes being aware of what's here and now. Rodney Smith, guiding teacher of the nonprofit Seattle Insight Meditation Society, spent several years as a Buddhist monk in Thailand and many more years at a Seattle hospice. He leads

retreats, classes and workshops and helps those of us in the fast lane to slow down and enjoy the scenery, to separate reality from spin.

"During my hospice training, I spent a lot of time at the bedside of the dying. Sometimes they call their loved ones to their bedside to express appreciation for a life lived together, which they didn't have time to do before because they had asserted that they were going to live forever.

"But when you know your life isn't going to last forever -- which is a moment of mindfulness -- you take account of and appreciate the present.

"Why wait?"
