

Dharma Talk on Second Life
By DoKwang Augenblick
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(DoK tells a corny joke) Are we laughing yet? Remember, enlightenment is literally lightening up, let's get with the program. Now let's get even lighter and do our A-B-C Mindfulness exercise.

Does anyone here say grace before dinner? Something like "for the food we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly grateful? What is gratitude if not openness to receiving? So what we do in mindfulness is to open ourselves up to whatever wisdom or lack thereof there is here to be shared with you during our time together.

(DoK leads group through the A-B-C mindfulness exercise)

Be fully attentive to what is in this moment; keep part of your attention on the breath, your inner body, other sounds as I am talking.

(A participant says, wow that was a lot of material)

Actually, what we did was letting go of material, and taking that with you and using it as much as possible through your day. That exercise is an exercise in joy, there is no difference, no boundary. This is a meditation I developed from many sources and which accompanies my dharma talk "Enlightenment is as simple as A-B-C.

I want to talk today about something exciting for me, my friend/aikido student brought back to me my EEG biofeedback system that had broken and he promised he would fix for me. I had given it to him a year and a half ago and he just got around to working on it. I had used it to treat clients since 1996, working on neurological and psychological problems. He was still unable to fix it; however, the side benefit of his returning it to me was that I also had another type of biofeedback device installed on that computer, one called Heartmath. Biofeedback measures many physiological parameters, it uses sensors to detect different body signals, like muscle tension, skin temperature, skin conductance, blood pressure, brainwaves (EEG) and heart rate variability, and uses a computer program to feed back this information to the user, showing exactly what level that particular response is expressing at that moment, in real-time. Biofeedback operates on the principle that by being aware of a body response, even one that is assumed to be involuntary, you can change it. For example, say someone has tension headaches. A biofeedback practitioner might use muscle tension feedback, where the tension is measured in units of microvolts that the person is putting out and can be measured with sensors. Chronic, unconscious muscle tension is a major contributor to headaches. The biofeedback instrument will give a reading of just how tense the person is and display it on the computer screen in graphic form. The amazing thing is that just by watching (and the signals are run through a program that sets up a simple computer game on the screen)

the person can learn to consciously relax those muscles that are tense, and stop creating their own headaches. It's a wonderful therapeutic tool, totally noninvasive or drug based. It in effect holds up our physiology to a mirror, that we can then observe and use that information to make ourselves better. You can't fix what you can't observe, like if you're having a bad hair day, how do you fix your hair without being able to look in a mirror.

So anyway, I got back my heartrate variability instrument and started to use it again after an almost 2 year hiatus, and after a couple of sessions, it struck me how sensitive a measure of one's state of mindfulness this heartrate variability parameter was, and I thought, WOW, this thing is like an "Enlightenometer". If there were such a machine, a very sensitive measure to how present you are and how much out of thought/egomind dominated consciousness a person is, this would be IT! It is an excellent tool to gauge yourself as to whether you are truly calm and relaxed to the core, or if you are having internal distress on a physiological level that you might not even be aware of.

So, what is "heartrate variability"? Essentially, it is the interval or rate of change of the intervals between heartbeats. If someone measures your heartrate in beats per minute and finds that your average heartrate is, say, 60 beats per minute, that would seem to imply that the heart is beating at exactly one beat per second, but that is not the case. In reality, the interval between heartbeats is always varying, beat by beat, and is never exactly the same as the beat before or after. And depending on how stressed out or how relaxed we are, that interval will vary in, respectively from a very erratic and chaotic way to very smooth and coherent way.

So this heartrate monitoring system uses a sensor which measures the pulse and feeds that information to a computer which has a program that calculates the average of the change in the interval and measures whether it is expanding and contracting at a gradual, smooth up and down rate or jumping up and down chaotically, erratically. A coherent variability rate would be, for example, 1 second, 1.1 second, 1.2 second, 1.3 second, 1.2 second, 1.1 second, 1 second, 0.9 second, 0.8 second, 0.7 second, 0.8 second, 0.9 second, 1 second, etc., in this smooth upward and downward change of intervals length. However, when your heartrate is not coherent, when you are in a state of stress, feeling that sense of "separation" and emotional reactivity, that interval varies very chaotically, as does the overall heartrate, so, as an example, you might have intervals of 1 second, then 1.5 second, 0.5 second, 1.1 second, two seconds 0.9 second, 2.2 second, 1.4 second, 1.8 second, 0.7 second... on and on like this jumping erratically up and down and with large differences from one beat to the next.

And you can watch this pattern unfold in real-time seeing it on the computer screen as it creates a graph. When the heartrate variability is in an incoherent, stressful mode, the graph is as chaotic as one of those stock market charts during a bad day on Wall Street. When it is in a coherent mode, the up and down pattern is just as coherent, creating a beautiful sine curve, the intervals moving up and down in this smooth, gradual way.

Using it helps one to learn how it feels to be in coherent state of heart rate variability, so it is like all biofeedback instruments, they act like training wheels on a bicycle that allow you to feel that sense of balance you need to ride it while keeping you safe from falling down. But once that sense of balance is achieved, you don't need the training wheels, or the biofeedback instrument, any more. It is a learned response, internalized and consolidated just like learning how to read or play a sport or musical instrument. You've got it and you can remind yourself to get into that state whenever you want during the course of your day, whenever you realize that you are in a stressful state. That is what mindfulness is all about.

Mindfulness is simply meditation in action, taking that centered, balanced, permeable, open, expansive state of mind that we sit in meditation to develop, and bringing it out into the marketplace, into the hustle and bustle of the ordinary "busy-ness" of our daily activities.

(A participant questions if DoK has used the instrument during meditation).

I have, to see how "effective" my meditation has been, and I will also do this A-B-C mindfulness exercise with it some time soon. If enlightenment is as simple as shifting your awareness, shifting attention away from thoughts, that practice puts you in a state that this biofeedback device can measure. Understand that in biofeedback the harder you try the worse you do. Enlightenment is relaxation, is effortlessness. During EEG biofeedback training, the trainee watches a computer screen while their brainwaves are being monitored, and there is a simple game up on the screen, a game in which the trainee gets reinforcement (a green light and a pleasant sounding tone) when their brainwaves are in a balanced state. That is the positive reinforcement. When the brainwaves go out of balance, the green light turns to red and the tone disappears. That is the negative reinforcement. I'd tell them that their job was to keep the green light on and the tone playing as much as possible during the sessions. So people would ask, "What am I supposed to do to achieve that state", and I'd say, first, don't *try* to do anything. There are only two things you need to do, first, relax and second, pay attention. But don't try to do anything. *Trying* is actually creating the problematic brainwaves that prevent you from de-stressing.

The ego's need to control and its resistance to "what is" is what causes stress. Stress is not an event; it is the reaction to an event, and a choice. Biofeedback therapists call the process a trainee uses to create the positive reinforcement state "passive volition", which is simply a "scientific" way of saying surrendering or letting go. I was thinking about science a few minutes ago and had the thought that science is a feeble attempt that the ego uses to try to understand the mind of God. Problem is, the mind of God cannot be "understood"; it can only be experienced, and only by stopping the "trying" and just letting go.

(A participant questions the use of the phrase "mind of God", saying that Buddhism does not have a belief in "God").

When I use the word “God”, I use it as a shorthand device, it’s just a label I use to express “universal consciousness”, “divine spirit”, they are all the same, it’s just a label. The whole point of what the Buddha and Jesus taught is that we must go beyond belief to experience. Belief is just thoughts, and thoughts are exactly what are keeping us separate from realizing our Buddha nature, our Christ consciousness, our divinity, whatever you want to call it, it’s just labels. But you *experienced* what that was, at least a taste of it, when we practiced the A-B-C mindfulness exercise just before.

(The same participant states that the Buddha was not a god.)

That’s true, he himself said that he was not “god” or “a god”, as I said, I simply use the work “god” to describe that level of consciousness.

(The same participant states that the dharma is a fire that is inextinguishable.)

Carl Jung said that in human life we move from unconscious perfection to conscious imperfection to conscious perfection. When we are born we are perfect but unaware, it’s our task to grow in consciousness as we age. The problem is that when we do not receive the right treatment in infancy and childhood, when we do not receive the proper physical contact, we start to experience the sense of separation, a sense of anxiety and it is out of this “problem” that we create an ego, a structure in our mind constructed to deal with that anxiety, one which creates strategies whereby we can act on the world in order to get us the things we think we need to get rid of that anxiety. But we can’t ever get rid of that anxiety by getting things of the outside world. That’s the state of conscious imperfection; it’s being dominated by the ego and its needs and fears and inappropriate behavior strategies.

Then we hear or get the sense that something is “missing” from our lives, and some of us find some sort of belief system or spiritual practice that we hope will eventually get us back to that sense of perfection, but doing it consciously. Animals don’t go through a stage of ego, of anxiety or depression. Unlike humans, animals are comfortable in their own skin. They have “emotions” but animals that are in the wild and not pets, not in constant contact with and conditioned by humans have “pure” emotions, they are aggressive but not hating or hostile, they have grief but are not depressed, they have fear but not anxiety. Pet animals pick up on our conscious imperfection, and it is only human egos that won’t let go of things. Animals dwell in unconscious perfection, but they are not self reflective. Buddhist teachings say that having human birth is extremely rare. All sentient beings want to reincarnate as humans because only through that human incarnation is it possible for one to reach enlightenment.

Go beyond beliefs to experience, wake up from the dream of beliefs, then it doesn’t matter what you believe or don’t believe, you’re just awake. When you become present, it doesn’t matter what you believe.

Wake up

Wake up

Wake up

Are we still breathing? Are we still in a state of awareness? Then this has been a very good talk!