

Our minds are being tested well beyond the limits of “normal”. The global market is complex, fluid and furiously competitive. The information density confronts the functional limits of our mind. All too often the result is overload, confusion and mindlessness. We pay in missed opportunity, error, conflict, sleep disruption, anxiety, and frustration. We suffer! Leaders are working at fitness and emotional intelligence. The next frontier will be training our minds to steward life through chaos.

Body, Emotion, Brain and Mind

Evolution unfolds upward from body, through emotion, into a more complex brain and ultimately mind – or consciousness. The body is the organ of movement and regeneration. Emotions evoke movement – approach or avoid. The brain is a physical processing device. It is wired with dispositions that automatically fire in certain situations – food, sex, fight, flight and sleep.

Body, emotion and brain can operate without consciousness. They are cleverly designed to deal with the environments we evolved in. Conscious mind is optional. Most of us are vaguely aware that we are sitting, eating or talking. We become more acutely aware when we are in pain and seek urgent remedy – perhaps pills or intoxication.

In fact, it can be argued that to be too conscious was hazardous. It was better to trust our instincts. Many still warn: “you think too much!”

The written word was the first huge step in human awakening. Ancient philosophers began to dig deep into the realm of mind about 2,500 years ago. The enlightenment and rise of science has accelerated our capacity to reflect, think, generate options and seek better solutions. Today we operate in a very abstract, virtual and cognitive

world. We can spend the entire day securing an income, acquiring food, finding mates and entertaining ourselves through a screen in bed.

Welcome to the disembodied world of mind.

What exactly is mind? Mind is awareness. Mind allows us to shine a light on body, emotion and brain. Starting slowly, we begin to “see” how we are responding to environmental stimulus. This consciousness begins with a vague sense of self – “I am here”. Next we become aware of how we are responding to a situation – “I am running for the bus”. Then we start to construct a story of our life – “I am a doctor saving lives”.

Finally, we have the option to examine these conscious images. We look more deeply inwards, start to question the wired dispositions and perhaps even investigate whether we might change the story or our lives or our leadership.

It is this conscious insight into the mechanics of life that awakens the leadership mind. We start to understand self, others and reality. We move from judgement to curiosity, from defence to creativity and from anxiety to joy. The conscious leader is fully awake, creative and a steward of constructive change.

However, there are many obstacles and traps!

Failing at the Basics

When our health suffers, consciousness suffers. Fatigue, poor nutrition, overweight, low fitness, and distress destroy our capacity to awaken the mind. Destructive emotions collapse the potential of mind. Fear, anger, sadness, pride and contempt create deluded perceptions and destructive actions. It is critical to get your basics right.

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Information Overload

From the perspective of the human brain, we are hopelessly overloaded with information. We have replaced the natural stimuli of nature with a deluge of digital and marketing images designed skilfully to capture our attention. Whether this is your e-mail, texts, Facebook page or simply driving through a city, there is too much input.

Our prefrontal cortex and seat of attention control is barraged by information. Neurobiologists estimate that we can only handle four discrete issues at any one time and be effective. When emotions such as anxiety, craving or anger are attached it further strains available resources.

From the perspective of mind, it is very difficult to focus consciously on what is important. To truly pay attention to one issue, such as a conversation or writing an e-mail, is enormously expensive biologically. The brain consumes close on a quarter of available oxygen and glucose when focused. As a consequence these bursts of attention (type-2 thinking) can be very short.

The brain saves fuel by switching to a cheaper, shallow thinking (type-1 thinking). Unfortunately the mind doesn't notice the switch. Neurobiologists call it attentional blink. One second we are focused and the next we are daydreaming or fidgeting. This is where we make our mistakes.

The take out is that we need to cycle attention from focused engagement to rest. The challenge is to learn how much sleep you need, when you should take a break, or how to insert a micropause during activity. Relaxation or mindfulness training is very helpful. We teach the brain to pay attention and to recognise when attention is likely to fail.

From Monkey Mind to Alpha Mind

The next step is to pay attention to the content of thought. While this feels like an unnatural act, with practice we notice that the mind is endlessly chattering away. Listen to these voices in your head. We term this endless dialogue monkey mind. Anxiety-based monkeys worry and chatter away about the future. Angry and sad monkeys chatter away about the past. Angry monkeys attack others and sad monkeys blame you.

Welcome to suffering. An uncontrolled troop of monkeys in your head is the primary source of distress. Primate troops can only function with an alpha in charge. Our job is to select one of the monkeys for leadership. This monkey is responsible for taking care of the troop. Philosophers call this the watchman or witness. We put one of our thought streams in charge of staying alert, calm and caring for the mind.

The job of the elected alpha is to keep the monkeys focused on the task at hand. This is the higher mind. It decides what is most important and marshals all our cognitive resources towards that task. It is rapidly obvious that mindless chatter about what has already happened or might happen detracts from the reality unfolding now. As we learn to keep all mental activity focused on the situation at hand – the PRESENT – we become massively more effective and relaxed.

When the mind is fully present we have only three options – focused attention, relaxed awareness or deep sleep. Be prepared to spot wayward monkeys and administer a sharp slap to bring them back to the present.

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This is the single most important step in awakening the alpha mind and realising life beyond suffering.

Focus

Learning how to marshal our mind into a state of focused attention is the next challenge. Quite clearly this type-2 thinking – alert, focused, complex and fully in the present - is trainable. This has been demonstrated in Richard Davidson's research and has long been a central principle of meditation practice. When we train attention the muscles of attention – left prefrontal cortex and nucleus accumbens – become strong.

We start by instructing the alpha mind to focus

deeply on an activity. This may be reading, exercise or listening to someone. Initially, we might limit the time to a few minutes and be sure to place a recovery pause before resuming. Alpha mind will have to stay vigilant for wayward monkeys. Random thoughts will intrude. The job is to notice the diversion and gently bring attention back to the chosen activity.

Many mindfulness practices are available to deepen the power of focus. Em-wave biofeedback is a great and simple start. Mindwave is an option that directly measures prefrontal activation. Sound based training also shows potential. Learning a mindfulness practice is the most robust pathway. It requires practical help from a good teacher.

We can train the mind to stay focused for 30 minutes or more. As we accumulate practice, the effort required reduces. However, neurobiological research suggests that this might take a good 10,000 hours of meditation.

Open Presence

A version of mindfulness training is a calm, relaxed and observing state. While focused

attention fixes on a point – sound, breath, part of body or image – open presence just notices what comes and goes. Alpha monkey is up in a tree aware of the troop confident in the knowledge that there is no imminent threat. Alpha mind is deeply relaxed, clear and alert. This is the witness state. We notice but quickly release – empty mind.

In open presence we sink more deeply into the nature of mind and explore the essence of self and being. Each thought, emotion or physical

change is accepted for what it is. No judgement takes place. Over time, we notice that previously distracting or irritating monkeys just fade back away and we return to the witness. In my experience this is a difficult practice but one that can be

deeply rewarding and pleasurable.

In our complex, hyperkinetic world this ability to stay calm, clear and contented removes much of the strain and distress. As noisy thinking and destructive emotions fade away, we are able to access a much more creative state of mind. Open presence leads to contentment, playfulness, curiosity and deep insights into the gap between current state and desired future state.

Flexible Perspective

Awakening to the deeper aspects of mind frees us from the constraints of repetitive, defensive and offensive thought traps and habits. As fear, anger and resentment fade we experience life with greater equanimity (calm). People, events and experiences don't trigger such strong reactions. This is liberating. However, the real benefit is to be more understanding and flexible in our responses.

For example; a person's behaviour that used to drive you nuts becomes interesting. You can simply watch the show, understanding that it is normal and real for that person. Perhaps you can even feel some respect and compassion. In this

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case you are not attached to the way someone or something “should be”. Your openness allows you to remain calm, attentive and connected. Your response becomes skilful and appropriate – both for you and for the other person.

To be a good parent, leader or friend recognising the different ways life unfolds in a calm, respectful and empathic manner, enables creative responses. We are no longer locked into our own constrained demands of “how it should be”. Others will sense this change and doors will open to more skilful and creative interactions.

Generating Positivity

An element of awakened mind is the capacity to access and generate positive emotion. Positive emotions such as contentment, gratitude, passion, joy, and kindness are very helpful in the journey of awakening the mind. Destructive emotions close the mind. When we build positive emotions we build strength in the left prefrontal cortex. Brain studies show a strong correlation with a high performance mind, health and happiness.

While this can be practiced in simple ways, it can also be built into your mindfulness training. Spend five minutes sitting quietly and bring forward these positive emotions. For example, if you choose joy think of something that gives you profound joy. Concentrate on that feeling and see if you can strengthen it allowing the joy to concentrate, expand, fill your being and even radiate out to the environment and others.

Transformation

An awakened mind is the crucible for real transformation. Whether this is to transform your life – from fitness to spirituality – or to transform your relationships, this happens when we can deeply appreciate the reality of a situation and resolve to seek a better way forward. An awakened mind has the insight to appreciate reality, the creativity to generate better alternatives, and the resolve to execute the skilful changes required in body, heart mind and spirit.

Can there be a more important journey?

References

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