Focusing on What Matters, Moment By Moment
by B. Alan Wallace

We in the modern West assume that the normal mind is a healthy one. But a “healthy mind” is still subject to many types of distress, including depression, anxiety, frustration, restlessness, boredom, and resentment. Only when such imbalances are excessive are we advised to seek counseling and drug therapy. The implication is that unhappiness is part of life, and we’re to make the best of it and learn from it, while happiness comes from outside: from sensual enjoyments, possessions, other people, or God.

The world’s contemplative traditions teach that the normal mind is afflicted in various ways; that since it so readily brings us suffering and anxiety, it can’t be deemed healthy. One symptom of a diseased mind is that the attention oscillates between obsessive-compulsive states (grasping onto thoughts and emotions) and slipping into stupor.

When the mind is subject to such attentional dysfunction, its emotional ground state is dissatisfaction, for which we take solace in outer and inner pleasurable stimuli. By refining the attention we can make the mind serviceable and thereby rediscover the sense of well-being that emerges spontaneously from a balanced mind. The contemplative traditions of the world have long known this.

Creating Your Universe

The importance of the attention has not been overlooked in the modern world. The American psychologist and philosopher William James maintained, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.” The role of attention is crucial in determining the type of world we experience. When we fail to pay attention to some aspect of the world around us or of our inner lives, those facets of reality do not vanish. They continue to exist and may profoundly influence us. But the things and events we focus on make up the world we perceive and think we dwell in. This means, as James commented, that “Each of us literally chooses, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit.” In short, for the moment, what we attend to is reality.

The role of attention in education is obviously crucial, since students who can’t pay attention won’t learn. So training the attention should be a primary emphasis, especially in elementary school, to help students learn and think more effectively. As James declared, “An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.” In his research more than a century ago, he found that geniuses of all kinds shared one mental trait, despite the wide range of their individual brilliance: They all possessed an exceptional capacity for sustained, voluntary attention. The advantages of this capacity are evident for all human endeavors, including athletics, education, business, the arts, and personal relationships. My wife taught Tiger Woods at Stanford University before he emerged as a superstar of golf. What most impressed her was his powerful ability to focus—a skill that has evidently contributed to his recent achievements.

Releasing Our Genius

Can this capacity for sustained, vivid, focused attention be cultivated, or is the faculty hardwired? Given the importance of this question, it's remarkable that modern psychologists neglected the field for so long. With the recent increase of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), it seems clear that our capacity for sustained attention can decline. But with mental training, can we actually correct attention disorders, as opposed to managing their symptoms with drug therapy?

For those with a “normal” capacity for attention, can training optimize our performance in whatever we do? To some degree, we may all have an innate genius for some activity, whether it's parenthood, sports, business, art, mathematics, or science. If attention deficit or hyperactivity can obscure our native genius, it would follow that a highly developed capacity for attention would allow us to tap our inner resources more fully. James recognized the importance of these questions, but he despondently concluded, “It is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about.” While finding ways to refine the attention has not been a theme of modern psychology, it has long been a central concern of many contemplative traditions. The exercises listed below, taken from these ancient traditions, can be readily practiced, regardless of philosophical or religious beliefs. They vary in subtlety, from the accessible to the more challenging. Most, perhaps all, may be taught to children and even introduced in the classroom for a minute at a time as “sponge activities,” to soak up time between other scheduled activities.

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