Neuroscience & Mindfulness

Too much REST?

by Lindsay Michko

The mind, when at rest from a given task, turns automatically to concerns of oneself, asserts Naropa’s inaugural Varela Lecturer, University of Miami brain researcher Amishi Jha, PhD, summarizing recent findings in her research lab. Jha differentiates this default mind wandering from “daydreaming,” which typically occurs intentionally and with more creativity, constructiveness, and positivity.

On average, mind wandering consumes 47 percent of time spent performing tasks, largely without our initial awareness or intention, and often producing negative moods and decreased alertness. Thus, Jha humorously suggests that, in the context of the mind, “rest” should be an acronym for “rapid, ever-present, self-related
thinking.” It makes sense—recall moments of focus when your mind decides to “rest” without your intention. How often does this “rest” consist of mind wandering, rumination, or worry? Your answer is likely “often,” if not “always”—unless, perhaps, you engage frequently in mindfulness practice.

Francisco Varela Lecture Series: Amishi Jha and "Mindfulness & N...

See an excerpt from her talk above. Watch the entire lecture (http://www.naropa.edu/40/2014varela-lecture.php).

Defining “mindfulness” as a “mental mode characterized by attention to the present moment experience without conceptual elaboration or emotional reactivity,” Jha suggests, based on her research lab studies, that it can significantly reduce the mind’s involuntary wandering while focusing on a task. Like any other body part, the brain requires regular exercise to perform at its best. Recognizing when the mind wanders and regaining mental control during mindfulness practice exercises the brain’s attention “muscles,” allowing one to pay attention for a longer period without mental distraction.

Jha’s continued research proves invaluable, as this constant mind wandering can not only create stress and hinder focus, but it may also correspond to shorter cellular longevity, and thus a shorter lifespan. This research also inspires many interesting questions, such as the correlation of these findings to the Buddhist notions around the self, and what effect societal changes might have on our brains’ abilities to focus.
THE NAROPA INSTITUTE’S SUMMER OF 1978 SAW THE ADDITION OF CHILEAN PHILOSOPHER OF SCIENCE FRANCISCO VARELA, WHO SPEARHEADED DIALOGUES BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE, CO-FOUNDBING A COGNITIVE SCIENCE DEPARTMENT WITH MATHEMATICIAN NEWCOMB GREENLEAF. AHEAD OF ITS TIME, THE PROGRAM ONLY LASTED A FEW SHORT YEARS. NOW, IN OUR FORTIETH YEAR, WE CELEBRATE VARELA’S ROLE IN PIONEERING THESE DIALOGUES WITH A DEDICATED LECTURE SERIES.