

Successes with Attention to the Present

IV International Symposium of the World Center for Humanist Studies



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**Canary Association for the Development
of Health through Attention**

Living by paying attention to the present, in a focussed way, is like taking a “daily health pill”, for our bodies, our thoughts, our emotions and our relationships.

<http://www.laatencionalpresente.com>

Dedicated to Juana the cleaning lady,
from whom I learned that honesty
speaks the language of simplicity.

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Training in abilities for daily living based on full attention (mindfulness) in Alzheimer's disease: Longitudinal study, Canary Islands



Introduction

Approach of the presentation

The focus of our work is centred on the practice of attention to the present so we try to ensure that our explanations are clear, concise and expressed in simple language. In seeking to contribute to human change we consider it necessary to express ourselves in the language of the majority.

Definition of attention to the present

Attention to the present is an intentional focus of attention that allows us to observe our bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts and external phenomena, without effort or judgements, while we are experiencing them.



Precedents

Human history abounds with testimonies about the benefits of intentional awareness or meditation. Health benefits that are available to any responsible, conscientious person.

Perhaps the most relevant text about the importance of being aware of what we experience is the Satipatthana Sutta in which the Buddha offers clear and practical instructions so that anyone can overcome the suffering within them and everything that entails.

Meditation throughout history has been closely linked to religious faiths, a phenomenon that has been changing over recent years, particularly in the West. Currently science has brought together many approaches, particularly from Buddhism, transforming them into an object of study. Some of these scientific trends maintain the links and a devotional language while others have adopted a strictly technical focus.



Consequences of involuntary thought

We are rarely aware of our presence.

We spend our lives accompanied by a background noise produced by the irrepressible flow of our involuntary thoughts. The painful discomfort that this noise produces in us affects and influences us both mentally and emotionally, predisposing us to experience situations that arise in our daily lives in an adversarial way.

The mood swings that this irritating noise produces in us are a source of unhappiness and suffering. We lose energy and flexibility; we tend to see things negatively; we easily become annoyed and lose our ability to deal with life's challenges.

At times this troublesome noise ceases giving us a sensation of relief. At other times we seek to relieve the pain that it causes us through alcohol, food, sex or other activities that help to anaesthetise it. The inner noise that causes us to drift does not only irritate us it puts us at odds with ourselves.



PROBLEM TO SOLVE

Thinking

Thinking is a great success of evolution, which is very useful to guide us in the physical dimension but ineffective if we use it to solve psychological problems created by us.

It is important to clarify that thinking creates images of reality that do not correspond to reality. What we believe just reflects what we think, never reality. Therefore being guided by a rigid chart of beliefs and thoughts is a permanent source of conflicts. This happens with all the charts that thinking constructs, like words. Words are not what names. Thinking is not fact.

In drifting thoughts feed themselves, confusing judgements with reality.



Limitations of the charts constructed by thinking

When thinking operates compulsively conditions arise that cause the dysfunctions that lead to human suffering. It is important to clarify that these conditions do not occur if we are attentive to the present, without clinging to, or identifying with the thoughts that may arise.

This is the case because thinking distances us from reality distorting what we experience through three of its characteristics.

1. Thinking creates the illusion of separation and division that is present in all of our judgements.
2. Thinking creates illusions about past and future moments that do not exist in real life, just in thoughts.
3. Thinking constructs its responses with its own or collective knowledge, coming from experiences lived in the past.

Thinking separates

The world that we create stems from the illusion of separation and division that is present in our value judgements. We steer ourselves through life with a chart built on a pattern of fragmentation. And this is a source of conflict, since we go through life thinking that we are detached from others and from the world that surrounds us. If I am separate from others I must defend myself from them.



Thinking gives us the impression that we are detached from others and from the world of which we form part and this isolation is a source of suffering. The pattern of solving our problems through thinking adds to the suffering we are trying to solve. Solving the conflicts arising from this pattern of compulsive thinking cannot be done using the thinking that caused the problem,

The activity of thinking when we are not attentive to the present, causes the sensation that we are detached from what we perceive. We are separate from the world. We divide it into good and bad, just and unjust, black and white, pleasant and unpleasant, etc. This illusion that isolates us is a source of conflict and anxiety.

I divide the world into what I like and what I dislike. I look for the former. I run away from the latter. In this way by making comparisons I feed my illusion that I am detached. Fragmentation impacts on the effectiveness of the guidance provided to us by the charts constructed by our thoughts. We end up confusing the divisions with reality and the chart with territory. And we end up projecting onto the world the isolation with which we identify internally.

The chart is an illusion of reality. We perceive reality through our senses, but we communicate it to ourselves through the interpretation that we put on it by thinking. Likewise, we perceive the whole picture but we express it to ourselves through fragmented thoughts. Therefore our chart does not represent the reality of the territory, just an interpretation of reality. And there are as many charts or interpretations of reality as there are human beings in the world. That is where the root of the lack of human communication lies. That is where the cause of the confrontation and comparison lies that impels us to defend our beliefs and opinions tooth and nail.



If the root of conflict that feeds the lack of human communication lies:

In the fragmentation that thinking produces

And if this conflict is exacerbated by our involuntary thoughts

Creating anxiety

How are we to experience the whole picture without fragmenting it and, in turn, overcome our anxiety?

If we are guided by the screen of division it is not possible to experience the entirety that is the characteristic of life and nature.

Thinking creates a moment in time

Thinking creates illusions about past and future moments that do not exist in real life, just in thoughts. When thinking is separated from the present, it generates a conflict that distances us from a life of flow.

When we are carried away by our involuntary thoughts we are detached from our experience of the present.

We transform the present into a stage for nostalgia about the past and hope for the future. We lose the here and now by dreaming about a time that does not exist.



Thinking is outside time

Thoughts respond based on past experience not based on present experience. Our thoughts are shaped by memory so they are not objective. When we react to a stimulus thoughts construct their response with memories, so that the response is outside time. If we are guided by the response of our thinking it is because we identify with it, losing effectiveness by losing our connection with the present. Living without paying attention to the present encloses us within the anxious wandering of our involuntary thoughts. If we lose the present we will live an illusion.

Problem of reaction

It is true that our lives pass in reacting to what happens. And these judgements are produced by the involuntary thoughts that drift through our minds independently of our intentions.

When we find that our thoughts and feelings accelerate, and our reactivity increases, anxiety ravages us, our lives pass us by unnoticed and our perception of reality is distorted.



SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

Attention to the present as a solution

Active calm and the state of fulfilment provided by attention to the present are proven sources of health and well-being.

Attention to the present reduces suffering; it allows us to acknowledge ourselves; it helps us to get to know ourselves; it improves communication with ourselves and with others; it facilitates the development of consistent and harmonious modes of behaviour.

If we carry out daily tasks, aware of the present, a coherence arises that leads us to feel, think and act with the same focus. Conflicts, and our sources of tension are defused. And they are not defused because we deny them or look away but because a process of self-regulation is activated that is directed towards the coherence and harmony that allows us to recognise them, contemplating them without identifying ourselves with them and observing them without fear. Attention to the present makes us in tune with what happens from moment to moment. It focuses us on the sensation of being present at every moment, without division, without wanting to be different or to be elsewhere or in another time, and that is a source of calm and peace.

When I place value on what I experience at every moment I place it on the life I live. It is important to emphasise that the most important aspect of attention to the present is that it works. When the practice is carried out by focussing on the sensation you experience without identifying with the reactions caused by thinking, a state of peace and coherence is produced with significant benefits for individual and social health.



Attention to the present creates a natural order that does not just save us from the conflicts that compulsive thinking entails, but activates a process of self-regulation oriented towards coherence and harmony. Paying attention to the present, for example, dispels anxiety.

By contrast with the moral guidelines that arise from the process of thinking and that do not necessarily resolve the sensation of conflict, this does tend to disappear when, alive to the sensations that we experience in the present, a process of self-regulation is set in motion that guides us towards coherence and harmony.

Being aware means experiencing real life with awe.

Living an aware life by paying attention to the sensations of seeing, hearing, feeling, smelling, tasting and thinking in the here and now. By seeing myself as I am, I see what I am from moment to moment. In this way I learn about myself by experiencing life in a direct way. In this way, I am interested in seeing myself as I am, ceasing to pursue the distorted image of which my Ego dreams. When, aware of the sensation of myself, I attain inner calm and my thoughts quieten, a process of self-regulation is initiated that is directed towards harmony. Ultimately a coherence emerges that provides me, without words or the language of thoughts, with a suggestion for a correct course of action.

Being present

The sensation of being present corresponds to the physical experience of being in the here and now that accompanies a state of awareness about what we are experiencing.



Self-observation

The feeling of living by paying attention to the present means understanding ourselves at every moment re-educating our process of perception.

To observe ourselves with clarity it is essential not to identify ourselves with the interpretations and judgements that thinking creates. It is necessary that thoughts transpire without us identifying with them.

If there is no identification with thoughts, when we observe ourselves, the distortion disappears that is caused by interpretations and assumptions. If we do not identify with thoughts, when we self-observe, we see ourselves just as we are at that moment. We establish a fulfilling relationship with ourselves. We exist. We feel complete, without stress, internal divisions or conflicts.

We start our process of learning by observing, with curiosity and without judging, our reactions of pleasure and displeasure. Later on we can identify the images that tend to accompany the reactions of pleasure and displeasure. After that we can observe how the reactions develop.

When we observe the reactions, without judging them or forcing them to change, the feelings that accompany the images lose intensity and influence. Gradually in the practice of self-observation of our reactions we cease to believe them and to be carried along by them. The attachment that previously drew us to wander is reduced allowing feelings to appear and to go away without leaving their mark.



ATTENTION AS A RESOURCE FOR MENTAL WELL-BEING

It is important to clarify that the focus of this project on attention to the present is as a resource for mental well-being. As a way of contributing towards individual and social health. It does not seek to gain transcendence or devotion. Mindfulness is a resource that nature gave us and that everyone can use freely. We are focussing particularly on mental well-being. And to communicate these ideas we are seeking to use a simple language that fits with the bodily sensations we experience; a language that focuses on actions and experiences.

We consider mindfulness to be a mental health resource to be incorporated into the everyday life of people, families, businesses, local communities, school centres, health centres, administrations, public services and every other scenario in our daily lives. We regard mindfulness as an individual mental health resource, to be treated with the same importance that we attach to brushing our teeth every day. We consider mindfulness to be a social health resource, to be treated with the same importance that is accorded to respect as a form of social conduct.

The individual foundation for engaging with mindfulness in our daily lives is intention. It is a focus that, without forcing it, comes from the responsibility we take for our lives. And it works because our sense of calm stems from it. It affects us personally and, through us, reaches others.



In this Manual we have not limited ourselves to presenting thoughts, considerations, reflections or theories about mindfulness. We have focussed on the most important aspect of “mindfulness”, which is practice. No knowledge about self-awareness is more important than practice.

Proven health benefits of attention to the present

We have scientifically verified the medical and mental health benefits, like stabilising the process of deterioration in patients with Alzheimer’s and in the field of health in general: the relief of stress, the calming of anxiety and improvements in metabolism, sleep, memory, emotional intelligence and relaxation .¹

Beyond the field of science we see the benefits of the process of self-regulation through the harmony produced by attention to the present.

¹ Training in abilities for daily living based on full attention (mindfulness) in Alzheimer’s Disease; a longitudinal study, Canary Islands (*see Appendix IV*).



Proven educational benefits of attention to the present

We have confirmed in students, teachers and parents that learning is easier and the experience of being together improves when weekly sessions are held to practise attention to the present, which assist in the daily practice of attention to the present. As far as students are concerned, it improves their attention and overall performance.

Attention is personal

Attention to the present is expressed in the first person because it is an individual exercise. The fact that, for various reasons, it is carried out in a group or with the mediation of another person, who contributes their experience, does not get away from the fact that the experience is purely personal as are the successes achieved.

It is advisable from the start of the mindfulness sessions that responses are sought within each of us, strengthening the compass and guidance within each of us and reducing the risk of psychological dependence that is so prevalent in human history.



Motivation for living an aware life

It is necessary to make clear, in ourselves and others, the degree and kind of motivation needed to live attentively. Ours is a culture geared towards pleasure and the intention needed to remain attentive does not fit with the pursuit of pleasure.

If the motivation is not right, once the curiosity or the novelty wears off we will abandon the practices of attention to the present.

The most effective sources of motivation are usually negative ones like fear of illness, loneliness or death. The positive sources that you tend to find in habitual practitioners are self-fulfilment, fortitude or vitality.

The sustained practice of attention to the present creates states of peace of mind that promote its continuance. The sustained practice of attention to the present creates a process of learning that contributes to strengthening it.

By keeping the body relaxed and without clinging to, or identifying with, the opinions and judgements that arise in us, we will help ourselves to remain attentive to the present.

Being present in what we experience without clinging to expectations, opinions and judgements does not stem from indifference but the intention to choose our response. This intention, which is demonstrated by the act of letting go of our expectations, opinions and judgements helps us to be present in what we are going through. Being aware of what we experience without identifying with views and opinions that arise in us and with judgements, leads us to appreciate ourselves just as we are and to nurture an affection for ourselves.



Sensation is a necessary witness

The experience of attention to the present always manifests itself in a bodily sensation, so this is a witness that we are present. This is true in the basic exercises for paying attention to the sensation that we are breathing as well in the sensation of bodily presence and self-observation.

To avoid interpretations that drift into beliefs we recommend that descriptions of the experiences are limited to sensations.

Attachment

The ability to self-observe in the present without identifying with or clinging to the reaction of thoughts, feelings or sensations lets us observe the experience in a direct way, without the critical filters of interpretations.



RANGE OF BENEFITS OF ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT

Practice is the most important aspect.

Practising mental well-being by voluntarily living with a full awareness of the present is an individual responsibility for our own well-being.

Attention with judgements

When the practice of attention develops along the lines of thoughts and opinions the most we can achieve is to relax.

Attention to sensations without judgements

When the practice of attention to sensations develops without us identifying with the judgements of our reactions, or simply without the judgements of our thoughts, the tensions of our conflicts dissipate and we are led to connect, through the natural process of self-regulation, with coherence and harmony.



Attention to sensations without judgements in relation to others

Practising attention to sensations without judgements in relation to others

Thinking, feeling and acting with the same focus is a prescription for coherence in your life.

Coherence progresses as thinking, feeling and acting progress with the same focus.

If we could think, feel and act with the same focus, and if what we did were not to contradict what we felt, we would say that our life were coherent. We would be personally reliable but not necessarily seen as dependable by our immediate environment. We ought to achieve the same coherence in our relationships with others by treating others as we would like to be treated.

When we are attentive to the present and observe without judging, and without our thoughts intervening, we do not feel emotionally detached from what we perceive and we experience peace of mind. By observing our attachments without judging we dilute our identification with the illusory identity constructed through our hopes and memories.

When, alive to my bodily sensations, I feel complete, an integral part of my life and of the world that surrounds me, coherent in my thoughts, feelings and actions and in a profound state of calm I experience my presence.



We start our process of learning with self-observation, watching our reactions of pleasure and displeasure with curiosity and without judging. After that we can identify the images that tend to accompany our reactions of pleasure and displeasure. Later on we can observe how our reactions develop.

When we observe our reactions, without judging them or forcing them to change, the feelings that accompany the images lose intensity and impact. Gradually through the practice of self-observation focussing on our reactions we cease to believe them and to be carried along by them. The attachment that previously drew us towards drifting is reduced allowing feelings to appear and to go away without leaving their mark.

When, aware of the sensation of myself, I attain inner calm and my thoughts quieten, a process of self-regulation is initiated that is directed towards harmony and ultimately a coherence emerges that provides me, without words or a dialogue with my thoughts, with a suggestion for a correct course of action.

Natural and universal process of self-regulation

The process of self-regulation is manifested when we pay attention to the present without the intervention of the judgement of thoughts. The process of self-regulation is a natural and universal process. Its existence does not depend on us. Connecting with the process of self-regulation depends on our honest intention to pay attention to the present and a correct focus of our attention on what we are experiencing.

The process of self-regulation is a key resource for the individual and social transformation of people. An “Archimedes’ lever” that nature provides for us to overcome the selfish model that has prevailed throughout human history.



Warning to those on a journey

It is advisable to safeguard the “key” to attention to the present from the different forms of appropriation to which it has been subjected throughout history. Each time attention and intelligence have been kidnapped, some enlightened one has emerged that mediates with the source of peace and harmony that nature offers us. This would not be a problem if it did not affect the creation of peace and harmony. The experience of attention that allows us to connect with the natural and universal process of self-regulation is “individual” and does not admit interventions.

Therefore it is advisable to strip mindfulness of its devotional, commercial, scientific etc. appearance to unveil it as a resource that nature offers us for health and individual and social transformation.

A good step is not to put labels on the action of paying attention. The selfish interests of the usurpers tend to hide behind them.

There is much to do to achieve a critical mass in certain communities and whatever we do to disseminate information about attention to the present is limited. To this end, any action that helps people to connect with the natural and universal process of self-regulation will make an overall contribution. Independently of people’s professions, beliefs and cultures. These are secondary to the purpose of human change.



APPENDICES

I. Basic practice of Attention to the present

2018. Manual of Exercises for Attention to the Present

<https://www.laatencionalpresente.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Manual-de-Ejercicios-para-Atender-al-Presente-2018.pdf>

II. Practice of sharing awareness

Manual of Exercises for Attention to the Present, in a shared way, for caregivers and Alzheimer's patients in mild and moderate stages (GDS 3 and 4).

The simple exercises that we suggest are summarised in graphic form in the Manual of "Mindfulness Exercises to Share" that you can find at:

<https://www.laatencionalpresente.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/MANUAL-EJERCICIOS-COMPARTIDOS-2018.pdf>



III. Practice of self-observation

2018. Manual of Self-observation

<https://www.laatencionalpresente.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Manual-de-Autobservacion-2018.pdf>

In practising exercises in self-observation we have the opportunity to observe and understand that identifying with our assumptions, views, prejudices, beliefs and opinions is the cause of our conflicts.

It is about understanding for yourself, in a direct and existential way, the origin of our conflicts: not through interpretations we make via our thoughts, nor from explanations that ideas, knowledge and learning bring us nor from definitions that come from thinking. It is about observing thoughts, reactions and judgements without words.

We observe without forcing, without interfering, without resisting, without naming, without condemning or accepting, without wanting to change what we observe. We simply observe with kindness, watching what we experience in silence. We simply realise how our bodies react, by observing our breathing, muscular tensions, thoughts, emotions and feelings. We simply observe with curiosity.



When we observe thoughts, these quieten and the right conditions are established to observe, understand and overcome our conflicts.

With our thoughts quietened, we can understand, observe ourselves and gain clarity about our reactions by being open to what arises and having a sensitivity and affection for ourselves.

We experience the feeling of the practice of self-observation as a responsibility in our lives and in life in general, a responsibility towards our health that comes from peace of mind. Health and peace of mind do not end with ourselves, but affect the world that surrounds us.

You can download some of the presentations on the exercises in the Manual of Self-observation free of charge at:

<https://campus.laatencionalpresente.com>

IV. Study

Training in abilities for daily living based on full attention (mindfulness) in Alzheimer's disease; a longitudinal study, Canary Islands

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INTRODUCTION

Loss of functionality is the main criterion in the diagnosis of dementia. In this study a programme of informal training has been established based on mindfulness for principal caregivers and Alzheimer's patients.

OBJECTIVE

Assessing the efficacy of the combined therapy including Donepezil and psychological treatments (cognitive stimulation, a programme of treatments based on mindfulness or a Jacobson type relaxation) in the maintenance of functionality in Alzheimer's disease.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

An initial assessment was carried out of 495 persons who wanted to participate in the study and those were selected who fulfilled the criteria of NINCDS-ADRA (McKhan et al. 1984). The patients were randomised in single-blind experimental groups and variables were measured every six months for two years. The study population consisted of 161 elderly people, divided into three experimental groups and one control group. The test applied to measure functionality was the Rapid Disability Assessment Scale-2 (RDRS-2).

RESULTS

We performed non-parametric analysis ($p < 0.05$) of Kruskal-Vallis for the 4 groups and of Mann-Whitney with the Bonferroni correction for pairs of groups ($p < 0.008$). Significant differences in functional capacity were found throughout the study in favour of the treatment group using mindfulness.

CONCLUSIONS

The treatment based on mindfulness was shown to be significantly better than the others throughout the entire study. It is necessary to continue to study in this line to confirm these results.

CANARY ASSOCIATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTH THROUGH ATTENTION

VISION

People and society need to know the benefits for their overall health that attention to the present is able to bring them.

MISSION

Our mission is to focus on generating research programmes and training that improve individual and social health by embracing a way of life that pays attention to reality, without prejudice and with an affection and respect for life in all its manifestations.

CONTACT

To obtain more information about the Canary Association for the Development of Health through Attention connect with us through the media and social networks of your choice:

