

Finding Your Own Answers: Cultivating "Aha!" Moments

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"An essential part of seeing clearly is finding the willingness to look closely and to go beyond our own ideas." ~ Cheri Huber

We've all had to face difficult situations and tough choices in our lives. Sometimes they come in the form of a dysfunctional relationship, a financial dilemma, a creative impasse, a mid-life crisis, or a catch-22. We know what it's like to feel worried, stressed, anxious and overwhelmed, or depleted, stagnant and depressed because we just can't figure out what to do next. Our thoughts run around in fitful circles, rehashing the facts, rehearsing our next uncertain steps, and we get nowhere emotionally, mentally, or spiritually.

We know there has to be an answer or a solution out there somewhere, but we're just not able to see it. We seek advice from our friends, confide in our online social network, and browse the internet looking for an answer. Sometimes these methods work well, but sometimes nothing feels right or resonates within us and we end up feeling stuck and paralyzed.

At other times we may feel like we're looking for the next step on our spiritual path. We want to be inspired, learn something new, and see something we've never seen before. We gobble up quotes, read books on spirituality, philosophy, psychology, or self-help. We listen to our favorite teacher or speaker hoping for a clue, a spark, or an epiphany. Again, sometimes these methods work well, but sometimes nothing feels right or resonates within us and we end up feeling stuck and paralyzed.

Going, going, going

We're so heavily conditioned to be doers that it rarely occurs to us to just sit. Our minds chatter on, informing our perceptions, feeding our emotions, and leading us on wild goose chases all the time. It's a frenetic pace around a Mobius strip that never transcends a superficial awareness of how we got there and how to get off.

Don't just do something, sit there

Sit with the situation. Stop feeding the mind agitated energy. Like quicksand, the more we struggle the faster we sink. It may be hard to remember, but the advice is to just stop. You don't have to listen to the harried, querulous, victimized ranting of your thoughts. The following are some healthy ways to disengage from inductive rambling and engage some deductive reasoning.

Shhhh...Be still

When our minds are agitated, our bodies are tense and vice versa. Take the time to be still. Make time for yourself. Schedule it in if you have to. Pick a quiet spot in your home, turn the lights down, and start with a body-scan to become aware of and release any physical tension you might be carrying. Take a few, deep, conscious breaths to stretch out the ribcage. On the exhale, let your breathing settle down into your belly and let your core muscles drop and release. When the body relaxes it sends signals to the brain that it too can relax. This really helps. Really.

Next, engage some of your Mindfulness Meditation practices. Become aware of your body breathing. Just feel the breath coming in, pausing, going out, and pausing. Find the tactile sensation of breathing wherever it is most predominant for you. Some find it more easily in the belly, some in the chest, and some find the sensation of breathing just inside the nose easiest to locate. When your mind wanders and you realize that you're no longer gently paying attention to breathing, just return to the breath. Avoid confusing conceptualization with feeling. Your mind may have the tendency to analyze, think about, or conceptualize the practice. Just recognize that this is more mental wandering and gently return to the breath without thinking about it.

As you return the mind to the breath, it is naturally more present in the here-and-now, felt quality of this moment. As you continue to patiently follow through with the practice, the mind will begin to settle down, become quiet, and take on a more spacious feeling that is bright, aware, alert, and treads lightly through your conscious experience. You can't help but notice the shift, and it does come with time, but it doesn't come by way of force. You cannot break into mindful awareness by brute mental force. It's more like an agreement that takes place between the ego and deep-consciousness. Just lean on the practice of breath awareness, and the door will slowly open for you.

Speaking from the Quaker perspective, J. Brant Bill in Holy Silence describes the experience as having “cast off from the shore” and made way “around the edge of the spiritual sea,” we “launch out to the depths,” to a place that is “deeper spiritually” and “higher emotionally” than “any place we normally live.”

“Contain your experience with the divine so that it does not escape you but rather shapes you. Be silent. Silence will help you avoid engaging in the games of competition and illusion that regularly seduce us in the outside world. Silence also helps you avoid distraction. It helps focus the busy mind---the mind that always has to be doing something, thinking something, the mind that always has to be otherwise engaged lest it become introspective and allow the soul's voice to override its own. The silence I am describing is a silence that you use to contain the grace you receive when you enter the Castle of your soul. This quality of silence allows you to engage in discernment.” ~ Caroline Myss

Contemplation

Contemplation isn't the same as thinking. It's more of a spacious, peaceful, and receptive state of mind that doesn't search, grasp, or analyze. When you feel the mind shift to this settled and alert awareness you can pose your question or problem with intention, but cast it off, let it go, and try not to think about it again. Make no demands, set no expectations, and don't try too hard. Simply rest in the moment, exert no effort to figure it out, and just watch in mindful awareness. If your mind becomes agitated and busy with the problem again, simply start over by relaxing the body, returning to the breath, and allow time for the mind to settle.

Deeper wisdom will arise when we allow it time to float to the surface. Wisdom, in fact, is there always, but its gentle whisper is rarely heard above the din of the unskillful mind. Watch for the mind to become agitated with the practice. Watch for the mind to get busy with the daily affairs of life. Watch for the impulse to get up and do something and just BE with it. Resist the urge by non-resistance. Just watch. Just be. When you feel in your heart that you have sat long enough, express gratitude, take a few conscious breaths, slowly open your eyes, and slowly return to physical activity.

Contemplation is a mental skill which will grow over time with practice. Even if you have no moment of epiphany, the body, the mind, and the emotions will enjoy a deep and cleansing moment of peace. This, in and of itself, makes the practice worthwhile, and will refresh your ability to think creatively as you head back out into the world. It's not, therefore, unusual for the “Aha!” moment to come later that day like a “tip-of-the-tongue” experience.

“No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it.” ~ Albert Einstein

Other Contemplation Suggestions

Who or What am I?

What is the meaning of life?

What is the nature of change and impermanence?

The preciousness of life and the inevitability of death.

The interdependence of all beings.

What legacy do I want to leave when I am gone?

What values and principles are worth living for?

How can I help relieve the sufferings of others?

“Soon silence will have passed into legend. Man has turned his back on silence. Day after day he invents machines and devices that increase noise and distract humanity from the essence of life, contemplation, meditation.” ~ Jean Arp

