

March/April 2007

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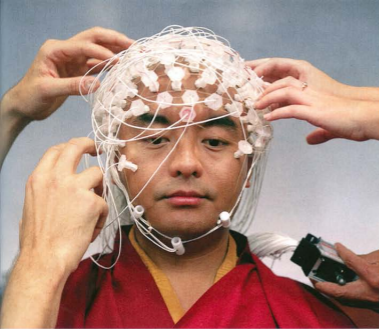
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The Dalai Lama handpicked the author to participate in medical investigations of the brain's activity during meditation.

tion that passed through my mind, the illusion of a limited self would dissolve, to be replaced by a sense of awareness that is much more calm, spacious, and serene. And what I learned from other scientists is that, because experience changes the neuronal structure of the brain, when we observe the mind this way, we can change the cellular gossip that perpetuates our experience of our "self."

The Direct Experience of Natural Mind

According to the Buddha, the basic nature of mind can be directly experienced by allowing the mind to rest simply as it is. This is not a meditation exercise. In fact, it's an exercise in "non-meditation" — an old Buddhist practice that, as my father explained it, takes the pressure off thinking you have to achieve a goal or experience some sort of special state. In non-meditation, we just watch whatever happens without interfering.

First, assume a comfortable position in which your spine is straight, your body relaxed, and your eyes open. When your body is positioned comfortably, just allow your mind to simply rest for three minutes or so. Just let your mind go, as though you've just finished a long and difficult task.

Whatever happens, whether thoughts or emotions occur, whether you notice some physical discomfort, whether you're aware of sounds or smells around you, or your mind is a total blank, don't worry. So now, just rest in the awareness of whatever is passing through your mind... Just rest... Just rest...

When the three minutes are up, ask yourself, how was that experience? Don't judge it, don't try to explain it. Just review what happened and how you felt. You might have experienced a brief taste of peace or openness. That's good. Or you might

BEYOND THE MIND AND THE BRAIN

The key — the *how* of Buddhist practice — lies in learning to simply rest in a bare awareness of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions as they occur. In the Buddhist tradition, this gentle awareness is known as *mindfulness*, which in turn is simply resting in the mind's natural clarity. If I become aware of my habitual thoughts, perceptions, and sensations, rather than being carried away by them, their power over me begins to fade. I could experience their coming and going as nothing more than the natural function of the mind, in the same way waves naturally ripple across the surface of a lake or ocean. And ultimately, I realize, this is exactly what happened when I sat alone in my retreat room trying to overcome the anxiety that had made me so uncomfortable throughout my childhood. Simply *looking* at what was going on in my mind actually changed what was going on there.

You can begin to taste the same freedom of natural clarity right now through a simple exercise (see box, below). You're not the limited, anxious person you think you are. Any trained Buddhist teacher can tell you with all the conviction of personal experience that, really, you're the heart of compassion, completely aware, and fully capable of achieving the greatest good,

(continued on page 90)

have been aware of a million different thoughts, feelings, and sensations. That's also good. Why? Because either way, as long as you've maintained at least a bare awareness of what you were thinking or feeling, you've had a direct glimpse of your own mind just performing its natural functions.

So let me confide in you a big secret: whatever you experience when you simply rest your attention on whatever's going on in your mind at any given moment is meditation — the experience of natural mind. The only difference between meditation and the ordinary, everyday process of thinking, feeling, and sensing is the application of the simple, bare awareness that occurs when you allow your mind to rest simply as it is.

If we allow ourselves to relax and take a mental step back, we can begin to recognize that all these different thoughts or feelings of anger, anxiety, and fear, are simply coming and going within the context of an unlimited mind which, like space, remains fundamentally unperturbed by whatever occurs within it. No special focus, no special effort. If you cannot rest your mind, you can observe whatever comes up, hang out for a couple of seconds, and then dissolve, and acknowledge, "Oh, that's what's going on in my mind right now... Cool."