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THE MINDFUL LAWYER: 'SO, GATHER YOUR MONKEYS AND SQUIRRELS AND LET THEM LOOSE IN THE GARDEN OF YOUR IMAGINATION'

By Scott Rogers ▶ Special to the News ▶ Columns

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In today's column we'll explore a practice that traipses into the territory of mind wandering, yet more precisely meanders into the creative realm of daydreaming. A variant of a focused attention practice, we could refer to it as unfocused attention. Rather than directing attention to a fixed object, like the breath, *we establish mind wandering as the object of attention* and see where it takes us.

If you're familiar with mindfulness you probably know that mind wandering is to be expected, and practices like focused attention are really about noticing it. This kind of practice has been referred to as exercising the muscle of attention, or as pushups for the brain, as it can help steady attention and regulate emotions. If focused attention is like lifting a weight, the practice we'll learn now is like releasing the weight and can be a refreshing complement to the focused attention practice.

UNFOCUSED ATTENTION

The unfocused attention practice is a form of daydreaming that invites you to intentionally allow your mind to wander. Intention is key; mind wandering is the task. For example, you can sit with your eyes lowered or closed and instead of tethering attention to an object, treat it like a dove you release from your hands and watch fly away. Given how prone the mind is to wandering, you won't have to wait long. A few moments of solitude and silence and the mind will take flight.

Since mind wandering — mental chatter, monkey mind, squirrel shifting — may make for a challenging practice (especially if one resists this natural event), and this practice invites it, let's take a moment and distinguish mind wandering from daydreaming. Mind wandering happens when one train of thought, related to a task at hand (such as focusing on the breath or reading a case), is interrupted by unrelated thoughts. For shorthand, it is having task unrelated thoughts. Different brain networks are associated with focused attention and with mind wandering. When immersed in task-related thoughts, the executive

attention network is engaged. When mind wandering, what has been termed the “default mode network” or DMN is engaged.

DMN activity can be a source of “aha,” creativity — as in joyful, eureka moments, and it can be associated with a very different “aha,” as in you-made-a-mistake moments, filled with self-rebukes. An influential research paper found that mind wandering, which takes place approximately 47% of the time, is often associated with unpleasant thoughts and feelings. However, a more constructive daydreaming can tend to be relaxing and unleash the generative potential of the mind, as it is freed from the tether of rigid focus to make fresh insights. It allows the logical and rational aspect of our mental life to take a breather. Einstein noted that:

“The intellect has little to do on the road to discovery. There comes this leap in consciousness, call it intuition or what you will, the answer comes to you and you don’t know how or why.”

There is a difference between mind wandering that is unbidden, which, on the one hand, can lead to great insight or, on the other, be the scourge of a serene mind. You likely know both these moments. But what of mind wandering that we, with a curious mind and clear intent, set in motion? One that we keep an eye on?

This is the invitation and instruction for the unfocused attention practice — constructive daydream practice, what some call positive constructive daydreaming. So, gather your monkeys and squirrels and let them loose in the garden of your imagination. You even nudge your mind in a direction that interests you. As long as there is a lightness to their playful movements, sit back and relax. And should you lose your way, return to the breath and pick up where you left off. If you’d like to give the practice a try, set a timer for 5 minutes, close your eyes, take a few slower breaths, smile, and enjoy the journey — curious as to the acorns and bananas that come your way.



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