

Effortless Focus: The Impact of Guided Awareness Instruction on Focusing

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Many studies suggest that attention can be broadly conceptualized as functioning in a manner which is either directed or receptive, and that these complementary states are supported by distinct neural systems within dorsal vs. ventro fronto-parietal brain regions (see Shulman and Corbetta, 2002). In collaboration with Buddhist Meditation teacher Loch Kelly, Dr. Jha will be investigating the influence of distinct modes of awareness on the ability to overcome habitual responses, inhibit distraction, sustain attention, and maintain and manipulate information. Participants will be split into three groups, and each will listen to a short audio recording instructing them to guide their awareness in a particular way.

One group will receive guided instructions to restrict and deliberately control their mental content to only a subset of stimuli (e.g., attention to your breath). A second group will receive guided instruction in nondual awareness. A third group will receive instructions to allow their attention to naturally wander freely. After listening to the recordings, all three groups will be given an identical set of computer-based tasks employed to index various aspects of attention. We will use the Flanker task to index the ability to overcome pre-potent response tendencies (See Rowe et al., 2005); the Sustained Attention Response Task (SART) to index sustained attention and vulnerability to mind-wandering (Smith et al., 2004); and the Operation Span Task to Index executive attention capacity. We will compare and contrast task performance to determine if instruction in distinct modes of awareness leads to performance differences across groups. The hypothesis is the Effortless Mindfulness is a way to improve focusing.

The full 30 student trial was never completed, and so was not published. The results of the first test of ten students at the University of Pennsylvania had a p value of .06 probability. The results of the first set of trials were analyzed by John Astin, Ph.D. of the Bauman Institute. The effect size was probably fairly robust about 94% chance of being true. Bottom line is that these results are certainly suggestive of something going on and should the same pattern continue with more subjects I imagine that would be worthy of reporting and following up with additional studies.