

MEDITATION: THE MIND BODY CONNECTION

“Meditation can literally change your brain!” Sara said, visibly excited.

Sara was not simply declaring her own personal belief. This Sara happened to be Sara Lazar, the esteemed neuroscientist speaking at the conference about Mindfulness and Psychotherapy on UCLA campus. These were the concluding remarks of her presentation listing all very fresh research findings from her own research on the effects of meditation on brain structure. The preliminary findings of research with Buddhist meditation practitioners, she said, show that the prefrontal cortex thickens, the high frequency gamma waves increase, and the amygdala shows decreased activity.

What does all this mean any way? In terms of behavior change, this means is the following,

- 1) Meditation improves attention and decreases distractibility,
- 2) The “me” part of the brain becomes less active and the “body” attention part becomes more active.
- 3) A more stable integrated state is achieved. This may imply that the anxious chatter in your brain can be put in perspective, sooner than usual.

Meditation, especially the Buddhist style of meditation, is considered a tool for quieting your mind. It is a tool for regulating the ups and downs of your emotions. Meditation gives you awareness of your mind and body functioning, in a non-attached observing way. With renewed interest in this 2500 year old tradition, research is being done to find if the claims made by long term meditation practitioners are true or not. Several preliminary findings point in the direction of how meditation can promote the sense of well being, for both mind and body.

The mind-body connection in meditation practice can be looked at in 3 different ways.

- 1) Neuroplasticity : the neuroscience research showing that the brain structure is indeed affected by meditation,
- 2) Physical health: reduced stress promotes better immune system.
- 3) The meditative posture is demanding on the body. As you meditate, in certain Buddhist meditations, you are expected to sit through the discomforts and temptations to move. As your body is training itself

to sit through the physical discomfort, because of the mind-body connection, the mind is supposed to get trained to sit through emotional discomfort, as a byproduct. This is the theory behind how meditation can train the mind to learn to sit through temptations and aversions, without falling into a desperate action. This claim is not directly scientifically proven, however, long term meditation practitioners will attest to its validity.

The good news is that the above mentioned research results were observed with research subjects who meditated as little as 20 minutes a day. You do not need to be a monk with meditation practice for 30 years, in order to experience the good effects of meditation. However, there is no free lunch! You do need to develop a meditation practice under the guidance of a teacher.