

What Are You Doing? and Taking A Snapshot

Prologue

In the last Thursday meeting two women shared of when they were stressed. One woman talked of how anger came through her words to her husband. Another woman talked of how she went to help her mother living far away. Her mother was in a constant state of delirium. Her mother would need to be taken from her house if the delirium continued.

Both women were sharing about peak stressful moments: being in and expressing anger, and needing to intervene in a parent's life. In peak stressful moments, as we look back, we'll probably find ways we could have done better.

Preparing For Peak Stressful Moments

In peak stressful moments most of us are going to 'be swept away' to some degree. We won't be in a grounded and centered place inside ourselves throughout the peak stressful time. In peak moments the call to be present is very needed. The more that we're present (aware, relaxed and receptive), the better our actions will be.

It's easiest to practice presence (being aware, relaxed and receptive) when we're not under stress. Most people go through most of their day in a much lower amount of presence than is possible.

Most people go through most of their day on automatic; mechanically using their past patterns to handle what is happening at the moment. *If we live from past patterns in peak moments of our life, we're bound to fail to some degree. Peak moments require us to be fully present in that moment to meet the moment in the best way possible.*

The more we're present (aware, relaxed and receptive) in non-demanding or low level stressful times of everyday life, the more we'll be able to respond with presence to the demanding stressful moments/times of our lives.

This article is going to give two ways (of many possible ways) to help you be more present in any moment. The two ways are by asking the question 'what you you doing?' and by

‘taking a snapshot’ of ourselves. By doing these exercises every day, you can know if you’re more asleep (running on automatic, lost in thought) or more awake (being aware, relaxed and receptive).

Aware, Relaxed and Receptive

Aware is not being narrowly focused. Aware is having attention to ourselves and to whatever we’re doing; not being asleep to our state of body, mind and emotions, and not being automatic in our task (what we’re doing, saying or thinking).

Being relaxed involves being physically relaxed, mentally relaxed and emotionally relaxed.

Being receptive is including all that life has to offer in that moment; including what is happening inside you and outside you. Receptive can be being more open to feeling your feelings and being more open minded. Receptive can be opening to your intuition in the moment. Receptive can be listening more openly and more fully to what a person is saying.

We increase the possibility of being more present by being aware, relaxed and receptive in each moment.

Talking With Charles: What Are You Doing?

The last time I was talking with Charles in group he told the story of when he was being trained to shoot a thirty caliber machine gun. Charles began the story by saying he was on a shooting range. The instructor told him to pick up the machine gun. Charles picked up the machine gun and began shooting by moving the gun to the left and to the right and back to the left and back to the right.

As a young man he was mesmerized and excited by shooting a machine gun for the first time. The instructor had not told Charles to start shooting the machine gun. The instructor quickly yelled at him: “What are you doing!?!” This question snapped Charles out of his trance. He realized that he had no idea what he was doing.

After Charles finished his story, we were quiet. I was particularly intrigued as he was telling me the story. I didn’t know why I was so intrigued by this seemingly random story from about sixty years ago. Then it hit me. At times, I am exactly the same way he was when he was shooting the machine gun. I’m mindlessly doing what I’m doing. The question of ‘what are you doing’ woke me to the realization that there are times each day when I’m disconnected from myself and with what I’m doing, saying or thinking.

I told Charles of how his question of ‘what are you doing’ had such relevance to me. I realized that Charles had just given me a new tool to become more aware. I can ask myself: What are you doing?

As the afternoon proceeded multiple people in the group talked of how this question came alive for them. They realized that often they’re only partially aware of the wholeness of themselves.

The question of ‘what are you doing?’ is now a question I can ask during each day. The question stops me at that moment. I get to note the state of my body, mind and emotions, and how present I am to what I’m doing, saying or thinking.

Each of us goes through our day with our body and with our breathing being unnecessarily tight. We go through the day with our mind unnecessarily busy with thoughts. We go through our day with our emotions unnecessarily heightened or unnecessarily disconnected. And we wonder: Why don’t I feel more at peace? Why don’t I feel more alive? The exercise of asking and finding out ‘what are you doing?’ can help us to become more alive and more present.

Taking A Snapshot

I was in a Gurdjieff group for eleven years. One of Mr. Gurdjieff’s main premises is that we’re asleep most of the time; that we’re active (doing, thinking or saying) in a very automatic and unconscious way.

We are instructed in the Gurdjieff work to take snapshots of ourselves multiple times a day.¹ *In taking a snapshot, we try to gain as full of an impression of ourselves and of our activity as we can at that particular moment. We don’t tense ourselves or inhibit our breathing when we take a snapshot. We’re aware and relaxed as we take the snapshot.*

What is our mind thinking? What are we feeling emotionally? What is our body like? What is our breathing like? How aware am I of ‘my doing’/of my activity? Am I being mechanical/on automatic?

In taking a snapshot of ourselves, there is no sequence or set of questions that we go through. The questions arise as we note our mind, our emotions and our body, and as we note the doing of our task. This is like looking at a painting in a museum. We want to take in the entire painting. Each person will ‘take in’ the painting in their own way. They may look at the colors or the brush strokes or the composition of the painting or the shadows and light in any order. This order can change as they look at different paintings.

The more that I've done this exercise of having as full of an impression of myself and of my activity as I can in that moment, the easier it becomes to be more fully in touch with my activity and with my emotions, mind and body in that moment.

Many times I became aware of how little of a connection I had to my body, to my mind and to my emotions at that moment. I was running on automatic. I was often unbalanced in that moment with more attention on what I was doing, thinking or saying (on my action) and not on myself. And often my attention on what I was doing was only a partial attention.

Dual Attention

The purpose of taking a snapshot of ourselves is to find out if we're having a quality dual attention in that moment. *Dual attention is an awareness of our emotional feeling, of the state of our mind, of the state of our body, of our breathing, and also an awareness of what we're doing, saying or thinking.* This may seem like a lot to take in in each moment. Dual attention (a full attention/awareness of ourselves and of our activity) is our Natural State. It only seems like a lot because we haven't been living in our Natural State. This exercise becomes easier and more revealing the more times that it's done.

A balance of dual attention (inwardly to ourselves and outwardly to our action) is not always an advantage to have. If you're using a sharp knife when you're cutting food or using a power saw or making sure that it's safe for you and your child to cross the street, it's very good to have your attention focused outwardly on the important task.

Being More Alive And Amazed

The potential is there for us to be fully awake in each moment throughout our day; yet mostly we're more asleep than we are awake to the fullness of the moment.

It doesn't take any more time to have a dual attention to both what we're doing, saying or thinking and also having attention to ourselves – to our body, breathing, mind and emotions. It does take more attention. A gentle, relaxed attention will invite more presence than a focused and tense attention. It takes a new training for dual attention to become more common throughout our day.

As we become more aware of our body, mind, emotions and activity, we naturally fall into a deeper presence and a more conscious awareness. As we again and again ask the question of ‘what are you doing?’ and as we take more and more snapshots of ourselves, we can wake up a little more in that moment. As we develop a deeper attention and a deeper presence to our everyday moments, we open to the possibility of being more present in the peak stressful times.

Charles’ question of ‘what are you doing’ and Mr. Gurdjieff’s snapshots are two ways that help me live a more conscious life.

May all beings live in peace.

Footnotes:

- 1 Mr. Gurdjieff passed in 1949 so the word snapshot was used. [Click here](#) to go to Mr. Gurdjiff’s biography in wikipedia.