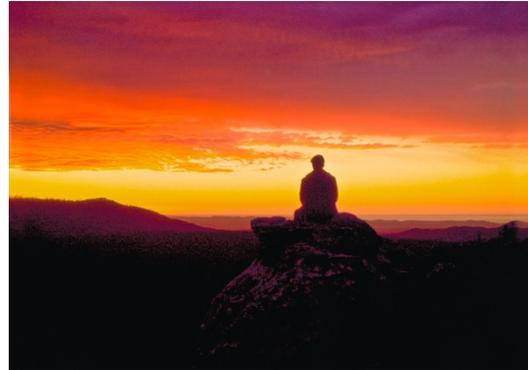


Aikido as a Way to Enlightenment by John Turnbull Sensei

What is mind? What is the purpose of life? Where and how originates that enormous and wonderful power we call love? What is the meaning of death?

Such questions have intrigued the human race since it evolved enough to be capable of abstract thought - and only now are the answers slowly revealing themselves.

We know now that our brains are divided into two hemispheres, each with areas wherein reside specific functions - sensory perception, verbal skill, visualisation ability, attentiveness, aesthetic awareness and so on. In general, the left hemisphere handles mechanical, digital, logical activities, while the right (which controls the left side of the body) performs extrapolative and analogical operations. Some of the functions carried out within the right hemisphere are:



The ability to process many different lines of information simultaneously!

The ability to make extrapolations and predictions from small amounts of data or clues. In Aikido, for example, which develops right brain functions simultaneously with left brain abilities, it is said that students must train to hear one word and understand ten.

The ability to comprehend how elements of a system combine into a whole which can be greater than the sum of the parts. (The opposite of analysis or the breaking down of wholes into their parts.)

The ability to comprehend and clarify the way things function through analogy, metaphor and simile.

The ability to visualise and integrate apparently disparate abstract concepts.

The ability to grasp the movement and position of objects in space and keep track of multidimensional spatial relationships. (As when a skilled footballer keeps track of the position of the ball and all players on both teams at once, so he can be in the right place at the right time.)

The ability to perceive the reality of things, instead of being forced to either ignore them as incomprehensible, or to treat them as mere words or symbols. (Such as truly comprehending the reality of infinity rather than handling it merely as a symbol, as most mathematicians are forced to do - for mathematics is principally a left brain activity.) This latter has always been considered of enormous importance in Japanese art, and hence phrases such as knowing the true taste of something. But the modern Western educational system only emphasises the development of the functions in the left hemisphere, some of which are:

The ability to sequentially process information in a step-by-step or logical manner. (The way words are spoken and written.)

The ability to think rationally.

The ability to calculate digitally.

The capacity to analyse and understand a system's functioning by examining its components.

The ability to comprehend and create linear systems.

These are the abilities which have provided Western civilisation with the commercial, technical and organisational skills which have enabled it to exploit the environment more fully than any creature ever has before. One result is a society littered with the most amazing machines and weapons, yet with little grasp of true nature of life and the cosmos. It is as if we literally cannot see the forest because we are too busy playing silly games in the trees - such as chopping them down to make knickknacks which are soon discarded!

Obviously, if a person is to be properly capable of grasping the big picture, he or she needs to have both halves of the brain developed in order to properly integrate all aspects of a subject. More importantly, balanced development means an ever-ready ability for creative thought and action, and for aesthetic appreciation of the multidimensional yet integrated functions of this wonderful world of which we're part.

Yet complex as the human brain is, in some ways it's analogous to a simple computer. It can, for instance, be programmed, the way a computer is. And without programming - education - we can never develop our potential, any more than a computer can. But the human organism is much more sophisticated than any computer, and it can be programmed in a variety of ways, such as through repetition (as when memorising poetry or multiplication tables; modelling (as when copying another person's attitudes, emotions and actions) and visualisation (as when visualising one's self doing something).

Here's an interesting example of human programming to do a complex task: some years ago my then seven-years old son accompanied me while I taught cross-country skiing to a group of beginners. On a small slope I demonstrated the basic snowplough technique to them, then suggested they practice it. To my surprise, Ben snowploughed down the slope (which he already knew how to do) but at the bottom wheeled around in a perfect Telemark turn, which is a very advanced technique, and which he had never before done!

I asked him to do it again, and he cheerfully climbed back up the slope and slid down again in a snowplough which he then skilfully converted into a perfect Telemark.

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked in amazement.

He looked at me as if I was silly and said, "That's what you just did, Dad!."

Then I remembered. Once during my several demonstrations of the snowplough I had cut my descent short and wheeled back up the slope in a Telemark in order to explain something. Ben had been watching with all that intensity of a child tuning into something interesting, and with all the powers of both sides of his brain activated. Consequently he had got the feel of what I was doing - in other words, after only seeing it done once, he had programmed himself to do an advanced skiing manoeuvre which takes most adults years to learn.

Interestingly, Ben could Telemark to both left and right, although he had only seen me turn one way. This means that not only had he copied me through that process of empathy at which children are so wonderful, but he had also visualised turning the opposite way.

Small children always learn things the way Ben did, at least until they begin their formal schooling and are forced to sit in mind-numbing immobility at desks which distort their body movements, and are made to neglect the imaginative, creative and incredibly powerful functions of their right brains while forced to memorise often irrelevant information. Until their right-brain development is thus stymied, and until the holistic, integrative, extrapolative, analogic and multidimensional abilities of their full minds are still being employed, they often display that touch of magical insight we call genius.