



## The Eternal Summer Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

**By Stuart White**  
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I attended a mindfulness retreat a few weeks back. For those not in the spiritual know mindfulness refers to achieving a state of awareness of the moment and putting all other thoughts aside, or as a cynical friend of mine teased, being in denial about everything. In one group exercise we were to empty our minds of all thoughts. It goes something like this; close your eyes, count your breaths and do whatever you need to do to focus on nothing, on merely being and being here. At the end of the exercise we had to recount how successful we had been. Well instead of becoming void, my brain flapped around like a demented butterfly (the yogi's call it chattering or monkey mind) - and I went on a journey from here to there thinking about everything and anything with random ideas, thoughts and visuals. This and that flashed through my mind and ended with me remembering an arbitrary day 30 odd years ago sitting utterly detached to the goings-on in my high school assembly – possibly the last time my mind was actually empty.

Keeping attention and maintaining focus is getting harder and harder due to a number of factors; our fast-paced digital, multi-tasking, multi-media environment; constantly refreshing our on-line pages; reviewing our personal and business e-mails; checking out tweets, Facebook posts and text messages; fielding video Skype calls; photo streaming, etc. It never stops and we can't switch off – it amounts to elective, collective adult ADHD and compounds the problem of our lack of attention. We are in a world of constant distraction. According to an article in the New York Times "We are, in short, terminally distracted". And *distracted*, the alarmists will remind you, was once a synonym for *insane*. (Shakespeare: "poverty hath distracted her")

A Harvard University study has shown that most people spend 46.9% of their waking hours in a state of distraction. The study found that people were thinking of anything other than what was happening around them for nearly half their time awake. According to the study "A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind." They further observed that people's brains seem to have a default pattern of mind wandering spending time thinking about past events, possible future events and other imaginations, all of which is unique to humans; animals only think about what is happening around them – much like a voyeur at a strip club. They live their lives in a constant state of mindfulness.

At the moment distraction is at fever pitch. And it's not caused by digital overload but the annual rushing towards winding down period. Winding up to winding down and it is hugely unsettling. There are so many thoughts that go on in everyone's head at this time. "Where did the year go? Did I accomplish what I set out to? I am a year older but am I further along?" And that's just on the personal front.

In business, people are showing signs of being anxious, tired, disinterested, and needing a break. I am the same but I don't know why I feel so indifferent and apathetic. I had a holiday in August and like a lot of people have managed to take some breaks throughout the year. It's just that time of year I guess! When I commented to my daughter the other morning how I was feeling she said "you get like this every year at this time, Dad".

It feels easier to get pulled away from core business and purpose at this time of year and replace thoughts of targets, productivity and achievement with where to go for the holidays, what to do, who to see, what to buy, and how much you can realistically eat without wanting to shoot yourself in January because all the gym work you did during the year has been undone. Add on the jingles, the songs, the music the food...and the end-of-year feeling is upon us. The period is active in some respects, inactive in others. There's energy and simultaneously there's inertia. It all feels a bit dichotomous really. Everyone you talk to either wants to finish stuff before Xmas – as if it's the ultimate end of everything, or wait until the new year with 'no point' in doing anything now type of attitude. It is all a giant distraction. No-one is here in spirit, even if in body – everyone is mentally on holiday already and there are still 4 weeks to go.

But there is no sense fighting it. One of the things that I have learned from mindful meditation is not to fight everything. It's like this every year – the big end-of-year distraction and dissolution. And if it's winding down season you may as well wind down with everyone else because you can't go it alone. Allow some distraction but at least enjoy it. Don't beat yourself up over the fact that you aren't as focussed as you should be, you have stopped going to gym, you are eating more than you should and you are being swept along on an irresistible yuletide. Because all tides are governed by the pull of the moon which makes them lunar. And when we allow ourselves to be pulled along too, we become lunatics, gripped by a collective seasonal madness inhabiting us all. Don't worry - like all tides, it comes in, then goes out again and the sure cure for December distraction and the ants in our travelling pants is a simple course of total chill pills.

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