

## LESSON TWO

### SEEING RED DIFFERENTLY: ENGAGING THE “RIGHT” BRAIN IN MEDITATION

*In the name of God, stop a moment, cease your work, look around you.*

— Leo Tolstoy, *Essays, Letters and Miscellanies*

IN TODAY’S LESSON we focus on how the left and right hemispheres of the brain have distinct “personalities.” Understanding these differences can both help you overcome common frustrations with learning how to meditate and encourage you to keep trying.

One of the reasons it’s so hard for many people to meditate is that our brains have adapted to modern life, which places little value on sitting still and unplugging from external stimulation like phones, screens, and media. The other big reason meditation seems daunting to many folks is that much of our life requires serial thinking—for example, remembering that one plus one equals two, knowing that you flush a toilet after you use it, not before, and my favorite example of serial thinking—stopping your car at a red light because you know that a red light is a command to stop.



#### *Learning at a Glance*

- Why it’s sometimes difficult—but beneficial—to idle the logical left brain
- How the nonliteral right brain can trigger your body’s relaxation response and help you find peace in each moment
- Why it’s normal to fear letting go of the feeling of control we get from the logical left-brain’s literal processing power

## Left-Brain Logic: Stop on Red

Everyone knows that a red light is a command to stop. And, generally speaking, the reason you never forget this is because of the wonderful, powerful, and relentless activity of the left hemisphere of your brain. The left brain is your “thinking organ.” Its job is to process patterns and decisions in an orderly manner. It links one thing to another, then another, finding linear (sequential) connections among and between bits of data.

Here’s are a few examples of left-brain logic:

- “Take an umbrella with you in case it rains.”
- “Mix the dry ingredients together before adding the egg.”
- “Call your mother after you arrive in Chicago.”
- “Wearing a black shirt in the sun will feel hotter than a white shirt.”

The continuous activity of our thinking left brain often occupies our attention so fully that we easily mistake our cognitive activity with *who we are*. The phrase “I think therefore I am” kind of sums this up. And the left brain is amazingly good at finding discrepancies and judging right from wrong. It knows that a full gas tank is better than an empty one, and it especially knows that you stop at red lights to avoid instant death, or worse—dents in your new Volkswagen.

## Right-Brain Logic: Behold the Beautiful, Glowing, Red Orb

Of course, this is a joke. Some researchers have speculated that humor is one result of the right brain’s “cross-talk” with the left brain.<sup>1</sup> So is the experience of beauty, melody, serenity, creativity, and joy. That’s because the right brain excels at non-linear, parallel processing—which means making simultaneous connections from one kind of thing to others. For example, using serial processing (left brain), if you look at large cluster of white oaks, you see them as individual trees. But using parallel processing (right brain), you see a forest.

Examples that require the parallel-processing right brain:

- The framed pixels of multicolored ink hanging in your living room are your children.

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<sup>1</sup> The actual brain structures shown to be activated from humor are the right middle temporal gyrus and right medial frontal gyrus, the left superior frontal gyrus and left inferior parietal lobule, and the left ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the bilateral parahippocampal gyri and the bilateral amygdalae. See why I’d rather just say right and left brain?

- A \$20 bill isn't just a piece of paper.
- The words on this page (or screen) go into your brain.
- "It's raining cats and dogs," means it's raining heavily.

| <i>Functions of the left brain</i>                                                                                                                 | <i>Functions of the right brain</i>                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language</li> <li>• Logic</li> <li>• Critical thinking</li> <li>• Numbers</li> <li>• Reasoning</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognizing faces</li> <li>• Expressing emotions</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Reading emotions</li> <li>• Visualizing images</li> <li>• Intuition</li> <li>• Creativity</li> </ul> |

The activity of the right brain is a more convoluted and meandering kind of mental activity, but it is no less essential to learning and functioning in the world. You can learn Spanish by studying a language book (mostly serial processing), or you can learn it by immersion, living in a foreign city (lots of parallel processing). Effective learning requires both serial and parallel processing, and being too dominant toward either left- or right-brain modes can make life challenging. Most importantly for our purposes, meditation pacifies and quiets the roving and insatiable-for-action left brain. And when your left-brain chills, your body's relaxation response is more free to kick in.

### **Chilling Out with the Right Brain and the Relaxation Response**

The relaxation response is your body's hormonal counterbalance to the stress response, also known as the fight-or-flight reflex. Dr. Robert Sapolsky's acclaimed book on stress, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, details the extent to which our stress response—when the sympathetic nervous system dumps stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline into your bloodstream—may be conditioned to be activated simply by reading an email or watching the news. Humans, he argues, didn't evolve to be so plugged into a society that constantly pings the sympathetic nervous system (the stress response) while having so few habits that turn on the parasympathetic nervous system (the relaxation response). This is why the non-literal right-brain activity of meditation

(focusing on body sensations and non-language use of imagination) so powerfully triggers your body's relaxation response.

So while the left brain uses reductionist or relatively narrow logic, like “a red light is a command to stop,” the right brain uses a holistic and broad kind of intelligence such as “Ohhh, what a beautiful, glowing, red, dangling orb, swaying in the...BAM!”

This brings me to my last point for today, which is that it's perfectly natural to have a subconscious phobia or fear of meditation, because letting go of your serial processing, logical left brain activity can feel as though you're literally running a red light. For good reason, everything inside you tells you not to do it.

*The right brain is active during meditation and literally pacifies and quiets the roving and insatiable-for-action left brain. And when your left brain chills, your body's relaxation response kicks in.*

The right brain gets the short shrift in a world where life depends on your ability to know that a red light is a command to stop. I've heard many people describe their fear about engaging the right brain through meditation: “Stopping to smell the roses feels indulgent. If I sit still and let my meandering right brain turn on, I'll never be able to focus and keep up the discipline I need to fight through all the obstacles in my already-overwhelming life full of responsibilities.” In other words, it's easy to avoid things like meditation because we can't see the immediate, clear-cut benefit. Somehow it's as if we think we'll get lost as we tiptoe through the tulips, relaxing and clearing our mind, and we'll lose our chance to be better, faster, stronger. What if meditation makes you lose your mental grip on life?

But thousands of scientific and medical studies are very clear that this is a myth. In fact, when you learn to engage the right brain, and intentionally stabilize your attention on the present moment, you end up having more accurate and efficient left brain (logic) processing. You also feel more appreciation, patience, and peace. In other words, you live your life more fully than if you let your left brain dart your attention around to every noise and distraction. Paradoxically, you learn that you can be more “real” and stay in each moment longer, because the constant drone of serial thoughts parading through your mind suddenly have less urgency and importance.

*Letting go of your serial processing, logical left brain activity can feel as though you're literally running a red light. Everything inside of you tells you not to do it.*

## Counting the Breath to Keep the Left Brain Happy

In today's meditation, I provide prompts to help engage your right brain activity. For example, I'll tell you to just notice your breath without trying to change it. The same goes for paying attention to sensations in or around your body. And to help your left brain feel comfortable and give it something to do that isn't stimulating or stressful, I introduce the idea of counting your breath. In addition, I'll utilize some imagery and visualization. Try to really use the imagery, even if your left brain makes you feel like you're only acting. Do it anyway. Act as though you're really breathing in a white mist and breathing out a gray mist, for example. Even if it doesn't feel "real" to you, I guarantee you're still engaging your right brain. With practice, your left brain will learn to take a comfortable seat, and will let you detach from being absorbed with the literal nature of each thought or feeling. Your body will predictably respond, getting cues from the right brain that it can relax, triggering your parasympathetic nervous system and its cascade of soothing hormones.

*We count our breath and use imagery in meditation to help the left brain feel comfortable and give it something to do that isn't stimulating or stressful.*

 You may now proceed to listen to the Lesson Two meditation.

**After completing this meditation, turn to the next page to complete the Lesson Two journal and reflection questions.**  



## *Lesson Two—Journal Questions*

1. Write down the activity you were doing right before beginning the meditation.

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2. What feelings or thoughts were you aware of prior to the meditation? (For example, you might have felt distracted, stressed, confused, tired, or been struggling with a problem at work or with your kids, or rehashing an argument with your partner.) Just jot down enough information to record, generally, what mental state you were transitioning from to start the meditation.

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3. How stressed or relaxed did you feel before you started the meditation?

(Overwhelmed with stress) 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10 (Totally relaxed)

4. How stressed or relaxed did you feel after the meditation?

(Overwhelmed with stress) 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10 (Totally relaxed)

## Lesson Two—Reflection Questions

# Are You a Left-Brained Thinker?



### Part I

Using the scale below, rate each of the following statements to assess whether you tend to be a serial processor (left brain dominant) or a parallel processor (right brain dominant):

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Neutral
4. Agree
5. Strongly agree

\_\_\_\_\_ I remember events as snapshots of what actually happened.

\_\_\_\_\_ I solve problems by working through facts until I understand the problem.

\_\_\_\_\_ I'm pragmatic and look to the "bottom line."

\_\_\_\_\_ I start with facts and then form a big picture.

\_\_\_\_\_ I trust experience first and trust words and symbols less.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes I pay so much attention to facts, either present or past, that I miss new possibilities.



**Part II**

Use scale below (not the same as above) to rate the statements below:

5: Strongly disagree

4: Disagree

3: Neutral

2: Agree

1: Strongly agree

\_\_\_\_\_ I remember events by what I read “between the lines” about their meaning.

\_\_\_\_\_ I solve problems by leaping between different ideas and possibilities.

\_\_\_\_\_ I’m interested in doing things that are new and different.

\_\_\_\_\_ I like to see the big picture, then find out the facts.

\_\_\_\_\_ I trust impressions, symbols, and metaphors more than what I actually experience.

\_\_\_\_\_ Sometimes I think so much about new possibilities that I never look at how to make them a reality.

**Part I total:** \_\_\_\_\_

12–24: Low left-brain dominance

26–36: Moderate-low left brain dominance

37–48: Moderate-high left-brain dominance

49–60: High left-brain dominance

**Part II total:** \_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from Looking at Type: The Fundamentals

by Charles R. Martin (CAPT 1997)



## LESSON TWO ITEM CHECKLIST:

- ☐ Watched Lesson Two video introduction
- ☐ Read Lesson Two workbook chapter
- ☐ Completed Lesson Two audio meditation
- ☐ Completed Lesson Two journal and reflection questions

Note: Remember, you have 21 days to complete the 15 lessons.