

The Awakened Leader

Interview with Dr. Susan Simpson (Part II)

Last month's Awakened Leader article focused on Dr. Susan Simpson's findings in measuring her brain state before and after she attended a spiritual awakening program at Oneness University in Chennai, India. This month's continuation of my interview with Susan more deeply explores her findings and how these relate to her work as a neuro-scientist. In Part III (to be released next month) we'll explore what these findings mean for organizational leaders, as seen through her experiences.

Nota bene: The study Susan is conducting and that is referred to in these interviews is intended solely to measure whether or not a neuro-biological change occurred in the brain after someone has awakened. It cannot be used to determine whether or not someone has awakened. While that could be a long-term goal, much more research, data, and studies are needed. Susan's work is to explore whether or not the neuro-biological state change that Oneness University has predicted will happen upon awakening has, in fact, happened. Ultimately, she wants to determine if there is a consistent pattern in the brains of people who have awakened.

Don: I asked Susan what Oneness University says about what areas of the brain change, what directions they change in and how can it be narrowed down for research.

Susan: In general, the frontal lobes are where the executive functions are—attention, focus, concentration—it's kind of where the ego resides and interacts with the outside world. This is common knowledge in neuroscience; it's consensual—not controversial.

If the right frontal lobe is much more active than the left, then you get someone who is moody, reactive, and sort of very emotionally-based, kind of irritable sometimes—just much more emotional. People who [-se frontal lobes] are more dominant on the left side move into a state of observation, since the left side is the more objective part of brain. A shift into left frontal lobe dominance is what Sri Bhagavan[Co-Founder of Oneness University] predicted would happen in the frontal lobes with awakening.

The second area of the brain that Oneness focuses on is the parietal lobes, which are the sensory motor areas—that part of the brain that is interacting with the outside world through the senses and the body. It is a place of creativity and where functions like math and science are processed. When alpha brain waves in the right side of the parietal lobes are dominant, this is when athletes, artists, executives talk about being in the zone, so focused in the moment.

When the parietal lobes are overactive, there is a sense of separation, of anxiety, of fear. We've had some success with neurofeedback [to quiet the parietal lobe] which results in being in the zone more often, with more stability and having a greater sense of connection with self and others.

[Upon awakening,] my parietal lobe activity went down by about 30%! Sri Bhagavan is operating in the neuroscience field and he's light years ahead of the rest of us!

Don: We next talked about Susan's work and how that relates to what she experienced at Oneness University.

Don: Susan, what does Valentus Clinics do?

Susan: We're an integrated, technology-based wellness clinic with a focus on working with the brain. We use different kinds of technologies, including naturopathic approaches, and focus primarily on EEG neurofeedback. We work with balancing the brain to create behavioral, emotional and functional shifts in people.

Don: How extensive is the use of EEG (electroencephalograph) in measuring brain states?

Susan: It is used extensively clinically, and the use of EEG and neurofeedback is growing dramatically. There is much validated, reliable, consistent research supporting the use of EEG and neurofeedback to deal with a number of problems that previously were treated with other modalities. Neurofeedback is

now widely recognized for depression, anxiety, trauma, concussion, brain injury, sleep problems, ADD and ADHD.

Don: What are three or four kinds of conditions your work can normalize or repair?

Susan: There are a number of conditions where we have had a lot of success, such as lifelong states of depression and anxiety, PTSD, concussions and head injuries, kids with learning problems, ADD and ADHD, and autism, for example. We're having really dramatic results with helping those brains shift to a much more functional state.

Currently, we're in a paradigm shift where we're still living under the old mechanistic model that when something is broken we apply drugs or surgery to it, not to fix it but to deal with the symptoms. This is an old way of thinking. It's an old model. We're now in a different model—a holistic model. As an example, when working with autistic children, we first look at balancing their diet and eliminating things they're allergic to, and then progress to working directly on their brain with neurofeedback.

Another example is someone who has had a stroke, which happens most often on the left side of brain (points to chart of the brain). The left side of the brain controls the right side of the body, and affects speech. When the stroke victim is in rehab, they do hours and hours of physiotherapy. With repeated movement, you're stimulating that part of the brain and it will eventually generate new neural connections, which will slowly result in recovery. With neurofeedback, we can work directly with the brain to repair itself in a fraction of the time that it takes with physical therapy

Don: If you can achieve all these changes in the brain, can you achieve the changes that awakening produces?

Susan: I haven't been able to and haven't heard of anyone who has. Using myself as a single case study, I had a traumatic childhood, and because of this it would take me three or four hours to fall asleep each night. I had low levels of energy, mild chronic depression, and anxiety. With neurofeedback, all that has changed. Even when I'm in a strange hotel I fall asleep right away and sleep through the night. My energy level increased "3,000 times." As my brain came into greater balance with neurofeedback, my functioning improved in a lot of areas, but I was never able to achieve awakened states.

A lot of research with neurofeedback has been done on people who are "experienced meditators," people who been meditating for 40 years, such as Buddhist monks. Researchers used the brainwave patterns of these advanced meditators as a basis for developing algorithms of optimal brain patterns for neurofeedback. This research has been done over and over by many different groups, beginning with Dr. Herbert Benson in the 1970's with the relaxation response.

Through this research, we've achieved quite a bit [in understanding the brain patterns that reflect] a level of stability, happiness and functionality. We know what an optimal brain pattern looks like—it is flexible as opposed to being locked into one kind of pattern. With PTSD, for example, brains are locked into a fight/flight pattern; in learning difficulties frontal lobes are locked into one kind of pattern that gets in the way.

One of the most important qualities of a healthy brain is that it's flexible, that it can respond to the present moment. The other area of focus is the relationship between the left and right side and the front and back areas of the brain. In the frontal lobes, we try to make sure that the left lobe is slightly more dominant over the right side. In mindfulness research or meditation research, everybody agrees that this brain pattern is preferable. I was never able to achieve it [in myself] with neurofeedback, except for short periods of time, but never permanently.

It was stunning for me to go back and retest my brain [after India]. It completely shifted from the right side to the left side being dominant.

Don: Is your brain pattern similar now to these ideal brain states?

Susan: Yes.

Don: Are those based on studies of long-term meditators?

Susan: Yes.

Don: Is it fair to say if someone has not been a meditator for years and years and has not gone through some kind of neurofeedback brain balancing thing, that their brains are sub-optimal in some regard?

Susan: I wouldn't use the term 'sub-optimal'. It's not uncommon to find a lack of balance in people's brain patterns that produce experiences that are less than desirable or optimal for them. Certain overactivity is associated with anxiety. When you lower activity, anxiety goes away. In sleeping problems, brains show a consistent pattern. Change the pattern and sleep patterns change.

It's a correlation—you can't say a brain pattern causes this, but when you change the brain pattern, the experience changes, so it's pretty direct.

Don: Is another way of describing what you're attempting to accomplish through awakening is that you are bringing your brain to a more optimal state for certain things?

Susan: If we go into the area of business leaders as an example, since I know that's what you're interested in, I've worked a lot with executives and they're presenting complaints related to feeling overwhelmed or having problems juggling things or their anxiety is a concern and they don't sleep. They're feeling overwhelmed, and are not able to handle everything coming at them.

When we look at their brain patterns, often the most common thing is an overactive frontal lobe. It's like having ten TV sets on at the same time. You're not going to be able to process [all that] information. They can't focus on one thing, finish it, and go to the next thing. They start one thing, drop it, go on to the next—all kind of disorganized.

When we work with their brain and quiet that overactivity in the frontal lobes, as well as patterns in other parts of their brains, they end up feeling very focused and very calm. They are much, much more productive.

Don: Is that a permanent brain state change?

Susan: Yes [for a short time], except that they often go back into that same environment. The brain was not designed to be an executive, juggling 20 projects, 8,000 people, and a multi-million dollar budget. They go back into their old environment for eight or ten months, [and their prior state returns]. After that initial program that gets their brains aligned, we have a maintenance program where they come in for a session about once or twice a month to keep their brain in that more balanced state.

Don: How many sessions does it take to get into that more optimal state in the first treatment?

Susan: The average is eight to ten 1½-hour sessions, with one- to two-hour sessions every so often.

When these executives talk about some of the side effects of doing the neurofeedback sessions, they report that they are happier, they get along with people better, their need for substances [tobacco, alcohol, marijuana] is reduced or eliminated most of the time. They even use words like, 'I feel more in the present moment', and they can meditate and experience moments of quietness.

I don't know if they go into awakened states or not. I don't think I ever did. I've gone into some states of bliss, but I've done a lot of meditation as well as neurofeedback. I'm hoping that learning more about what the awakened brain looks like, we will be able to create awakening in the clinic as well, or at least support the process of awakening with neurofeedback.

Next

Part III of my interview with Dr. Susan Simpson will explore more deeply what she has experienced since awakening and what the implications are for organizational leaders.