

MINDFULNESS-TRAINING: EXPLORING PERSONAL CHANGE THROUGH SENSORY AWARENESS¹

by

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INTRODUCTION

Ancient Chinese Daoists honor the process of personal change through ‘The Law of Opposites,’ (Fung Yu-lan, 1937) which states that change and stability are recursively involved in any change process: in wanting change, one must respect stability; in wanting stability, one must honor change. *Mindfulness*, the practice of ‘everyday Zen,’ provides individuals an essential ‘inner compass’ to navigate this change process. Mindfulness is a continuous meditative state that, with awareness and attentive openness towards the present moment, *continues into the action itself*. In Buddhist terms, mindfulness is the realization of one’s true Nature, the realization of enlightenment.

Recent literature discusses the crucial role of mindfulness in psychotherapy² in treating chronic pain, anxiety and panic disorders, and stress-related diseases. (Kabat-Zinn, 1987, 1993, 1996; Teasdale, 1999, 2000; Teasdale, Segal, Williams, Ridgeway, Soulsby & Lau, 2000; Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002) However, mindfulness is not a technique reserved for specific occasions, but an attitude inherent within action. One may carry out every activity, however humble, with mindfulness.

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² Though the general denominator ‘psychotherapy’ is used in this paper, the main focus is on Cognitive Behavior Modification.

Epstein (1996: pp. 95–96) defines mindfulness as bare attention, in which moment-to-moment awareness of changing objects of perception is cultivated. Elsewhere Epstein (1996: p. 142) states that, like bare attention, mindfulness means being aware of exactly what is happening in the mind and body *as* it occurs. In my view, there is never a holding on to something in mindfulness, but a pervasive readiness to let go. It is a state where tranquillity and alertness are equally present. If the mindful state is fully reached, I believe that one sees into their True Nature, which transcends all duality. Mindfulness is *beyond* awareness and attention, *beyond* discrimination and concentration. To be mindful is to focus without focus, to concentrate without holding on, to be aware without discrimination.

THE METHOD OF SENSORY AWARENESS

Theoretical Considerations

Sensory Awareness is about *The Four Dignities of Man* (Selver & Brooks, 1966: 495; Brooks, 1974: 26): walking, standing, sitting and lying. In Buddhist literature, these activities describe ‘*the four respect-inspiring forms of behavior.*’ As training in mindfulness, it is these ordinary, day-to-day activities that Sensory Awareness focuses upon.

Sensory Awareness training is experiential in nature, honoring the activities of the intellect while offering a foreground to the immediacy of personal experience. It is a transformation where *you follow only your sensations, the natural tendencies of the organism*, (Selver, 1984: p. 21. my italics.) to reveal how we construct our experience from moment to moment.

The teacher of Sensory Awareness senses the time needed for the student’s exploration and stimulates directions that may bear fruit. (Selver & Brooks, 1966: p. 495) However, Sensory Awareness only leads to discovery by patiently attending to the process, which uncovers a personal path that no one else can show. There is no right or wrong in breathing, moving, or posturing of the body. The ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ is constantly re-discovered in its momentary, experiential state through the radical and personal confrontation with what is.

One uncovers his or her personal path by exploring a recursive dynamic that balances autonomy with external support. In exploring personal autonomy, one considers the symbiotic connection between the external environment and inner consciousness to seek response-able ways to understand and relate these two realms. To explore external support, one first considers that, physically, the earth supports us. Wherever we walk, sit, stand or recline, something is always underneath, lending support by carrying us. Psychological support, however, originates within another person. In Sensory Awareness training, one may experience human support not as a reduction of autonomy, but as a deeply nourishing *connectedness* with others, an essential antidote to feelings of isolation and stress.

Readiness, another meaningful theme in Sensory Awareness, refers to timing, the very moment that nerve cells are ready to fire, monitored by the awareness of the momentary state internal as well as external to the organism. Becoming aware of the right moment requires *liveliness*, the awake and alert state of the organism within its given context, and *attunement with impermanence*, the awareness of perpetual change and the patience to allow that change to happen.

In Sensory Awareness training, one may confront conditioned avoidance responses such as anxieties and fears, memories of a troublesome or traumatic nature, or catastrophic fantasies. In Sensory Awareness, these responses are gradually and patiently sorted out according to what is perception and what is image. We build upon sensations, particularly our proprioceptive sensations (Selver & Brooks, 1966: p. 492). The result of this process may well be a new and mindful re-learning, a trust in the information coming from the senses as the way to inner mastership. It is a process of *returning to the Source*, to the *Uncarved Block*, to True Nature, in which the point is not to demand from our organism, but rather to heighten sensitivity and experience what our organism asks of us.

The Effects of Sensory Awareness

A recent study incorporated Sensory Awareness training in a managerial setting to determine if, after participating in the Sensory Awareness seminar, an individual (1) is more aware of his bodily signals and (2) feels better as to his bodily functioning. (Tophoff, 2003) It was expected that (1) he would be more content about his relationships and (2) experience better functioning at his job. Using psychometrically reliable and valid measuring instruments, results showed that significant improvement in all of the above-mentioned categories.

Breathing

As in Buddhist meditation practice, breathing plays a focal role in Sensory Awareness. Engineered by neurophysiological and neurochemical processes, breathing reflects connectedness with the world. “Breathing is what one is,” states Brooks (1974: p. 51). According to Selver (1984 b: no page nr.), breathing is the clearest index of what is happening in the person, yet it is a phenomenon surrounded by paradoxes. Breathing seems to be an automatism, quite outside our personal functioning. However, in sudden instants of crisis, be they somatic or psychological, breathing may become the focus of our very existence. Experientially, the relationship between breathing and emotion can be quite intense. (Reich 1969: p. 251) As Takase and Haruki demonstrated, (2001: p. 75) coordination of the ribcage and the abdomen deteriorate during stressful situations whereas they improve in a relaxed condition.

Many of us have a conditioned, habitual way of breathing and make no distinction between spontaneous and habitual breathing. (Selver, 1984b, no page nr.) For most, breathing occurs ‘passively’ (Austin 1998: p. 93) and, neurophysiologically, there is no conscious or explicit need to *do* something about it: breathing happens in us – *if we allow it*. (Selver, 1984b, *ibid.*) Breathing in Sensory Awareness, then, contrasts the routine with the new.

Breathing in awareness, allowing it to happen by itself, is a less than easy task. According to Selver (1984b), as our readiness and openness for what is happening develops, we first recognize this is in our breathing. “When the heart is touched, when the inner is touched, when we really allow something to – as we say so nicely – *touch* us, then something in ourselves opens, becomes awake and interested, and simply makes us breathe. We don’t make ourselves do it. *It makes itself felt.*”

Standing

Standing is a specific human activity that allows us to move easily into all positions and directions. In language, we use standing metaphorically in a wide spectrum of meanings. We may stand by, stand on, stand up, stand for, stand upon, stand out, etc. Many of those meanings refer to the autonomy and freedom that standing represents for us.

We cannot voluntarily change rigidified postures in a permanent way, as they are deeply conditioned within our intimate biography. However, in working with Sensory Awareness, our postures can relax into a different and lively relationship with the ground. We discover new ways of contacting the floor, of balance and stability. This change from rigidity to liveliness occurs through the mindful discovery of our whole organism, beyond our skeletal and muscular structure. We realize that not only is something always *underneath* us which we stand upon, but what is beneath our feet constantly carries us as well.

In a Sensory Awareness seminar, a participant is invited to ‘come to standing’ (Brooks, 1974: p. 23), to gradually experience how standing feels and what it requires. Standing upright requires that we constantly negotiate the steady downward pull of gravity to keep balance. Here, liveliness comes into focus as a living, ever changing *tension vitale* – as opposed to a rigid or frozen posture.

After processing the simple sensation of standing, the participant continues by slowly lifts his toes and letting them return softly to contact with

the floor. Again, after processing what is occurring within his organism, he slowly lifts his heels, then his foot, and let it gently return to the floor. He then spreads both arms and, once outstretched, drops them freely back to his sides. He repeats this exercise, but this time very slowly and mindfully accompanies his arms downward *with awareness*.

These exercises inspire an appreciation of the differences between ‘relaxation’ and ‘liveliness.’ Many participants learn how they hinder their own liveliness, e.g., by blocking off breathing or treating their extremities as objects to be thrown away. They often discover that their entire organism possesses a powerful sense of liveliness and how standing can become a true dignity, how letting go of old habits opens flexible spaces for new discoveries and behaviors.

In standing with awareness, the mind of the student becomes a *Beginner’s Mind*. To use Senryu Suzuki’s expression (1975: title): an unbiased, ‘innocent,’ and open mental attitude as the basis for often joyful, sometimes painful discoveries. With the discovery of our whole organism, however, it may not be necessary to carry our weight through the world for the ground carries us as well.

Lying

A person spends almost a third of their life lying down. Lying is often experienced as a passive state associated with sleep, an occasion to ‘turn the lights off’ and sever contact with the outside world. Sensory Awareness, in contrast, respects lying as an active process characterized by awareness, a vehicle for renewal, freshness, and liveliness. A person’s liveliness is directly proportionate to the degree to which the person is awake, alert, and connected to the environment. In lying on the floor, we explore how to give – in the tendons and in the musculature and simultaneously to give in to gravity. The more sensitively this is experienced, the more support from the ground is felt. Full support allows for more resting and renewal, and helps us experience a

much clearer receptivity and greater awareness. In lying down mindfully, we approach a degree of inner quiet that permits invading or oppressing emotions to now pass without attachment.

In a seminar, participants are asked to lie down on the floor to explore the possibilities of truly coming to rest. The floor offers nothing but a hostile form of resistance and does not give an inch so that the participants must make necessary adjustments to discover how flexible and supple they may potentially become. Lying down is experienced as an *activity*, and the participants can get a taste of how lively lying down can become. Maybe, just for one moment, they become aware of giving themselves to the supportive characteristics of the ground, how to respect the downward pull of gravity to arrive at a full resting. As awareness of inner quiet and peacefulness arise, rejuvenation and regeneration become possible

Sensory Awareness offers additional experiments to come to lying in a more mindful way, such as slowly lifting of *one* leg off the floor allow it to be 'in the air' for some time to 'land' again on the ground. This exercise helps us become aware of the demands of lifting our leg, e.g. how much force is necessary to do so and how much is too much. We also become aware of how our breathing responds. Is it interrupted or held in by the effort or continuously nourishing the work? What happens when the leg is lowered? Is the landing abrupt or is there a gentle journey towards the floor until reaching a full and satisfying resting? Is something mentally given up, so to say, once the leg has landed? Has the awareness of liveliness in the leg suddenly come to an end? Or could liveliness continue, even after landing? Would it be possible to come to a new form of resting? And what is happening in the *other* leg?

Walking

What could be more ordinary than walking? It is everybody's daily exercise. In Sensory Awareness, walking does not necessarily mean to cover the distance between two points in the shortest and fastest way. Mindful

walking may be practiced as such *all* during the day. During a seminar session, people may wonder if, in walking, they can remain open for inner and outer signals. Can they stay *connected* with their organism, within the interplay of breathing, musculature, weight, gravity, etc., as well as with their surroundings? Awareness allows one to hear, integrate, and use internal and external feedback. It offers the chance to let go of separateness, isolation, lack of attention, etc. in order to achieve a more connected way of functioning.

Sitting

Sitting is a responsive activity of the organism with liveliness that is never static or rigid. Without liveliness, sitting is merely posturing. Sitting implies flexibility as well as connectedness. By *receiving* the support under him, the sitting person *gives* his weight. In sitting, the interaction between receiving support and giving weight includes the versatility and movability of the pelvis, spinal column and extremities.

Brooks (1974: p. 79) differentiates between sitting *on* and sitting *in* a chair. We sometimes experience sitting in a chair as *sinking* into it in a slumping, ‘relaxed’ way that hinders breathing by constricting the chest musculature and restricting the flexibility of the extremities. This posture impedes the person from actively connecting with his surroundings. Should this way of sitting become chronic, pathology of the locomotive apparatus frequently results.

In a Sensory Awareness seminar, with a ‘Beginner’s Mind’ we explore what sitting asks of us, what the organism must give, and how support from what we are sitting on may be received. Brooks (1974: p. 84) emphasizes the anatomical fact that sitting is orchestrated by two sitting bones which form an architectural foundation crowned by the head. This way of sitting indeed reflects dignity. It transmits presence and liveliness in allowing freedom of interaction with the world.

Implementation

Participants are not required to perform any specific exercise, rehearsal, or preparation before beginning a seminar. Work in Sensory Awareness consists not of exercises, but of a series of here and now experiments following the *Four Dignities* in sitting, walking, standing and lying which do not have a correct way to be carried out. The student, in his explorations, gradually discovers ‘*how they want to be*’ within their organism, in the structure of their musculature, in breathing, in standing, etc. Students learn to attend to the dynamic process of change in the organism and how this change may be hindered or allowed.

The teaching format of Sensory Awareness usually consists of a 3-day seminar of six sessions and a 1-day follow-up with an average of ten participants. Each session consists of a 70-minute period of non-verbal work followed by a 20-minute period of verbal sharing. During the verbal period, participants may express whatever they have experienced during the session, what has been important, or what has touched them. Though not the focus, should feelings, memories, or images arise, they may surface in an atmosphere of acceptance, though differentiated from the experience of one’s sensations.

All sessions focus on the *Four Dignities* of standing, lying, walking, and sitting, but differ in the emphasis each receives. However, beyond the *Four Dignities*, Sensory Awareness seminars incorporate exercises that demonstrate connectedness. One connectedness exercise asks a participant to lift her arms high into the air and then, when *ready*, let them slowly sink downwards. At the same time, her two partners, standing on either side wait to ‘receive’ her arms until they rest cradled in their hands. When her arms have come to a full resting, the two helpers bring her arms naturally and freely down to rest.

Participants often make amazing observations through this experience. The person lowering her arms is certain that she has given their weight over to her helpers. The helpers, in turn, declare that the weight of her arms was under her control and not given at all. The participants recognize how, although

believing differently, they do exercise control over their lives. They gain insight about fears of giving up control or lack of trust in other people. The two helpers may confront their own lack of patience, their tendency to control, or their expectations about how things should be instead of how they are.

Sensory Awareness seminars conclude with an invitation to the group to come to standing once more. They again become quietly aware of what standing requires and how they respond. In standing upright, they experience being connected to the ground supporting them wherever they go and being amidst other persons, wide-awake, with full readiness. Through mindfulness, they experience their own dignity and value as they discover the possibilities of their organism coming closer to their True Nature, which is not sought outside themselves but within that they already possess.

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