

Train Your Brain: The Five Essential Skills

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AWARENESS: *Key Points*

"The truth shall set you free."

Keys to Awareness

- Feel that your own well-being and functioning matters. Get on your own side; be for yourself. Question: How many people does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Only one. But the light bulb has to want to change.
- Cultivate wanting to be in reality, to know the facts of the inner and outer worlds. Know and trust that your greatest safety and hope is in seeing what's true, no matter what it is. Whenever you move into awareness/observation mode, you instantly distance yourself from things (inside or outside yourself) that are painful, and center yourself in a place that is inherently calmer and wiser than just reacting. And the only way you can intervene in your experience or your environment in order to make things better is by knowing what the facts are and what has caused them to be.
- Bring compassion and kindness to yourself and to whatever your awareness finds. Hold your innermost feelings and longings with the sensitivity and concern you should have received as a child.

"Bare Witnessing"

- Be a neutral watcher of your experience and the outer world, an "observing ego." "No praise, no blame." "Just the facts, ma'am." "Don't know mind."
- Your observing awareness is separate from experience and world. You have thoughts, etc., but you are not the thoughts, etc., themselves. Know your experience without identifying with it. You are being with your experience, but not caught or hijacked by feelings, wants, etc. Watch the movie without jumping into the screen.
- We all repeatedly get sucked into our experience and lose the peaceful detachment of observing it. Don't worry, don't scold yourself, just return to an awareness of whatever's arising.

Awareness Is Never Tainted or Harmed

- Awareness is like a screen on which experience and the outer world register, "like a pond on which shadows are cast by geese flying overhead," but it is never sullied or changed by the passing show. No experience can hurt consciousness itself, the essence of who you are.
- Allow whatever is there in awareness to be present, without resistance. Sincerely and resolutely push through any reluctance to seeing the truth, both good news about yourself (often the hardest to let in!) and the world, and painful or dark things. Accept the way it is. Receive it, don't fight it.

Active Inquiry

- Actively peer into yourself, like a scientist. Inquire, turn over stones, look ever more deeply. The textures of experience and the landscapes of personality are endlessly interesting.
- Track both the breadth and depth of your experience. "Breadth" means the full spectrum of: thoughts, feelings, sensations, wants, images, memories. "Depth" means looking down into the layered mosaic of the self, which includes (A) structure (e.g., traits, sub-personalities, fundamental values), (B) softer, more vulnerable material beneath rigid positions and anger, and (C) material from childhood beneath here-and-now adult reactions.
- Look for recurring patterns, "psychodynamics," what leads to what.
- Develop a model of yourself, a growing picture. Be guided by knowing "the usual suspects."

Awareness and Attention

- Awareness is about attention: a spotlight illuminating objects.
 - Attention is knowing: "Breathing in, know that you are breathing in."
 - Concentration is a tight "beam" of attention on something, like the breath or a specific emotion.
- Mindfulness is a more diffuse, free-floating attentiveness to the whole of your experience. Getting better at both through informal and formal practice is the foundation of skillful awareness.

Concentration

- Concentration has two central factors: applying attention to an object and sustaining it there, like an ice skater plants her foot (applying) and then glides along (sustaining).
- When you practice formal concentration, keep returning attention to the object (e.g., breath, sensation, emotion, memory of your mother), fully aware of it, absorbed in it. If other thoughts, concerns, plans, etc. bubble up, let them arise but don't follow them, and keep giving your full attention to the object.
- When doing concentration, don't be tense or hard on yourself, but serious and intent, like a cat watching at a mousehole. Set a bit of your attention to watching how well you are staying concentrated, like a guardian, and to alert you to bringing your attention back if it starts to wander.
- Let each moment with the object be fresh. For example, notice the qualities of each breath.
- To help yourself be concentrated, especially in the beginning of practicing, you can experiment with counting breaths (up or down from ten; if you forget where you are, just start over) or with a soft mental note naming the object (e.g., "rising" [belly with the breath], "sadness," "planning")
- Useful objects of concentration: sensations of the breath around the nostrils or heart or belly; the feeling tone of positive/neutral/negative of each experience; good intentions, lovingkindness toward yourself or others (e.g., "May my body be at ease." "May I feel safe." "May I have happiness and the causes of happiness." "May my father be at peace." "May my daughter be healthy.")
- When doing concentration meditations, you may experience feelings of bliss, happiness, and one-pointedness; without striving, you can invite these feelings to arise and see what happens.

Mindfulness

- Anchored by background attention to a benign object – often the breath – mindfulness is a spacious, inclusive awareness of whatever is arising. Since that keeps changing, the trick of mindfulness is to stay aware of each part of the passing parade without getting sucked in.
- Experiment with dividing your awareness between the breath (or perhaps an image or a mantra) and the flow of experience.
- You could explore the four classic objects of mindfulness: (A) the body in all its sensations (notably, the breath), (B) the feeling tone of experience, (C) all the other psychological phenomena of thoughts, feelings, desires, etc., and (D) consciousness itself (so that you are aware of awareness).
- And you can explore mindfulness while sitting quietly, walking, talking, or doing other actions.

See the Nature of Experience

- Focused awareness lets you see into the fundamental nature of all experiences: Constantly changing; the result of endless prior causes; cascading along without need for an "I," a self; never affecting awareness itself -- accepting these facts brings great wisdom and peace of mind.

- Notice that when we resist our experience . . . or scold ourselves for having it . . . or cling to some part of it . . . or fill it with self . . . or think it will last . . . ---- then we feel bad and suffer.

Know Your Innate Goodness

- See the facts of your good qualities, like any other objectively true thing.
- Be aware of any resistance to that knowing. Let it flow and go.
- Reflect on your: Good intentions. Kindness toward others. Good character qualities.
- Sense your own essential being: conscious, interested, benign: a peaceful happy abiding.