



The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Be Here Now

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“One cannot help but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, or of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. Never lose a holy curiosity.”

Albert Einstein

One of the best things about being human is to be able to wonder at yourself and the world, and to be stunned into silence by the unknowable mystery. This can happen when you walk into a forest, or first arrive at the mountaintop and see the vista, or step inside of certain cathedrals, or hear a great orchestra, or see a megacity unfolding below your approaching airplane. It is the experience of what Buddhists call “suchness” when you are no longer analyzing and judging the world through your self-filter, and suddenly everything appears in its full-blown strangeness, beyond comprehension yet touching an emotional core.

As a part-time advisor to the king, Lao Tzu said, “When the people lack a sense of awe, there will be trouble in the empire.” That is one reason we should cultivate wonder whenever possible, and learn to drink deeply at the fountain of amazement. We might then

become less insistent on rearranging the world: we won't need to consume so much in our endless search for satisfaction. As my teaching colleague Joanna Macy says, "Gratitude is the antidote to greed." The necessary new version of the American dream is not to get rich, but to realize that we are *already* rich.

The Awe Muscle

Often all it takes to arouse awe or appreciation is to reflect on the facts of life. I use an exercise I call "Be Here Wow!" that I consider a workout for your "awe muscle" (that's the one that makes your jaw drop open in amazement). If the exercise doesn't work for you, that's okay. Stay cynical for now. Sometimes you are just not in the mood to be amazed. But often a little reflection on the simple facts—like, say, your beating heart, a muscle that automatically flexes a few billion times in an average human life, pumping the necessary oxygen and nutrients through a circulatory system whose parts if laid end to end would

stretch around the earth—can completely change your mood. A famous Hindu guru, Swami Muktananda, once told me that he didn't need to perform miracles, adding, "I just tell people to pay attention to the blood circulating through their body. What miracle could I do to match it?"

Modern science tells us of apparent miracles, inside and all around us, in the sky and in our blood. A picture from the Hubble Space Telescope shows a single galaxy that contains sixty million suns, while the evolutionary biologists tell us that life has evolved from a single-celled being to a human, an organism that contains sixty trillion cells, each cell holding enough information to fill thousands of encyclopedia volumes. My friends, your complexity astounds me.

Sometimes all it takes to arouse wonder is a little existential musing on the rarity of life itself. So far we know of nothing like it anywhere in the vastness of the universe, except for right here, on the surface of earth. And the odds against life as we know it happening

Greetings

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(remember we are talking about you and me here) are literally and figuratively “astronomical.” Multiple conditions had to come together in just the right mix, with the laws of nature firmly established—the forces of electromagnetism and gravity set at precisely the right strength, and every atomic particle having a certain spin and mass, and all of the ingredients in exactly the right proportion to each other. If any of the particles or forces had been the slightest bit different it would not have turned out like this. (Look around. See the world and feel yourself, both so finely calibrated.)

The very elements that went into making your body required exacting specifications. For instance, the carbon necessary for life happened only because of the existence of an unstable form of beryllium that was capable of combining with helium to produce the carbon nucleus. If beryllium contained three protons instead of four, or if helium had three instead of two, they would not have been attracted to each other, and as a result there would not be any carbon. Then where would you be, Mr. and Ms. carbon-based life form?

If the size of a neutron or proton were a fraction of a degree larger or smaller, or if the nuclear force holding atomic nuclei together or the electromagnetic force pulling them apart had been just a tiny bit different, then atoms would have collapsed or flown apart, and no elements such as oxygen would have been created. And then where would you be, Mr. and Ms. oxygen-breathing life form?

It’s elementary, Watson.



When I can feel how impossible the odds are against *me* happening, a wave of amazement floods through my being. I escape from the melodrama of my life and suddenly feel privileged to be standing here, conscious of my self and my improbability. Once I begin to realize that the stories the scientists are telling us are actually about *me*, I have a new source of both wonder and self-esteem.

A Perfect Planet

Here I am, living on a planet that seems to be made for me; for all of us. Life as we know it would not have been possible had the earth been the slightest bit smaller or larger in size, or just a bit closer or further from the sun. If the earth had been smaller, astrophysicists believe that the heat of the decaying radioactive elements at the core would have burned it up, long before life ever had a chance. If the earth's orbit had been only slightly closer to the sun, we might all be living at the poles, or living underground as moles. If earth's orbit had been a little farther from the sun we might all look like woolly mammoths and be huddled around the equator, lowing at the sun, trying to stay warm.

As far as we know, the only place that life exists in *any form* is right here on this narrow landing strip at the surface of the planet. The biologist E. O. Wilson wants you to imagine walking from the center of the earth outward toward the surface: for months you move through molten magma and mountains of rock, and then, a few hundred yards before you come to the earth's surface, you see some bacteria and microbes in the deep underground waters, tiny pieces of matter that seem to move themselves around. Finally you break through the earth's crust and you suddenly see a veritable explosion of moving, breathing, replicating life forms—micro-organisms, plants, and animals, millions of different species—all concentrated within these few vertical yards of space. A few minutes later into your planetary core-to-surface walk all of the life is gone, except for a few birds or people in airplanes.

We rarely see the profusion of life all around us. We see the large mammals, including birds; a few insects, usually the annoying ones who seek us out; and the flora that grows in our particular climate, the trees, grasses, flowers, and weeds. Hidden from our awareness, in nature's little nooks and crannies, is a world in miniature, where huge populations of beings are living out their tiny little lives.

Wilson illustrates this miniature world by having us picture a large beetle, an inch or so long, living on a tree, eating lichens and fungi. As it walks around the trunk of the tree, the big beetle is not aware of the small hollows in the bark beneath him. Inside those hollows lives another species of smaller beetles, existing in a different scale of space. The surface of the tree trunk seems a hundred times greater for the small beetles who may not visit much of the tree in their lifetime.

Meanwhile, beneath the smaller beetle are still smaller crevices where patches of algae and fungi grow in spaces too narrow for even the small beetle to enter. Inside of those crevices are even smaller insects, such as armored mites that are less than a millimeter long. Finally, these tiniest of insects crawl over grains of dirt or sand upon which are growing colonies of ten or more species of bacteria.

Likewise, in the plumage of a bird is an entire eco-system, containing many different species of mites and microscopic organisms. These creatures are so small and localized that they will spend their entire life on one tiny part of the bird's feather. Different species of mites will live on the outer quill of a wing feather, on the vane of a body feather, or in the interior of a downy feather, and so on "through what to feather mites is the equivalent of a forest of trees and shrubs." A parrot that lives in Mexico is known to be host to as many as thirty distinct species of mites, with up to seven species occupying different regions of the same individual feather.



When we look around us, the variety of creatures that we see is an expression of life's number one imperative—keep living! In every blossom, thorn, leg, nostril, bite, feather, leaf, call, color, etc., each being is expressing the ways it has found to keep its genetic information alive. Our looks and behavior are all means of survival, and judging from the proliferation of life we conclude that Nature is a determined and successful designer.

Take a Bow, Maestro

“The outside world is silent and dull of itself. There is no color in nature, no sound, no touch, no smell or feel. All of it exists inside our nerve circuits.”

Robert Ornstein

Evidence of Mother Nature’s brilliance is as close as the nose on your face (or as near as your eyes and ears).

Do a little experiment: For a few moments bring attention to your sense of hearing. Listen to the sounds, and as you do remember that the world outside of your head is completely silent. Be aware that what is registering on your eardrum is nothing but vibrations of air: what we call “sound” and the experience of hearing itself are all created inside your head.



To aid in survival (the senses exist for that reason) life has evolved this amazing Rube Goldberg–like sound system so you can perceive events that happen some distance away from you. Something in the environment causes the air to move in particular patterns (air element), which then vibrate the drum of your ear in a certain way, which in turn rattles three small bones (earth element) that press against a fluid (water element) whose ripples vibrate another membrane that moves some tiny hairs that trigger nerve cells that send electrical signals (fire element) to the auditory center of the brain that produces what we call sound. (And the green grass grows all around, all around . . .)

Equal cause for wonder is how our brain not only turns the vibrations of air into sound, but also identifies the source of the vibrations (human voices speaking, wind moving through

trees, engines humming) and translates it for us into useful information or even pleasure. Our natural sound system plucks meaning out of the air, along with thunder and the howling of wolves and the bad news on the radio, music, bird songs, and sweet nothings.

Art Lives!

There are other marvelous and hard-to-believe phenomena happening inside of you right now, and seeing is believing. Just look around, in any direction, and you will view a masterpiece, a work of three-dimensional art, painted by the greatest painter that ever lived - your eyes and brain.

As you look around reflect that what you are seeing is *not the original*. Your brain is creating a moment-to-moment repainting of the scene that enters through your eyes, a reasonable facsimile to be sure, but not the pure, unfiltered picture. The canvas that appears in your consciousness is being painted inside of your head, moment after moment. Move over, Michelangelo.

A glimpse of the painting process can be found by looking around with the understanding that there is no “color” in the world. Your eyes are adding all the pigments to the photons of light, filling in the hues, splashing your consciousness with color. There is speculation that color arose in the jungle, so that our ancestors could tell when the fruit was ripe and the flesh was rotten.

Remember, the eye itself is just a small piece of flesh, built entirely out of sugars, fats, water, and a little protein, yet it has millions of precisely calibrated moving parts. In the early human embryo, various groups of cells grow over time to arrange themselves in a coordinated fashion to create the eyeball, optic nerve, and visual cortex of the brain, as if they had somehow met and agreed in advance on the design and construction of the most sophisticated sensing instrument ever to emerge in nature.

The eye is an “instamatic,” a camera for dummies. It can change focus in a fraction of a second, all the while adjusting for light and movement. Researchers say that the different muscle groups around the eyeball make up to ten thousand adjustments every day, putting out the energy equivalent to walking several miles.



The process of seeing is taking place inside of you at this very moment. Streams of photons are emanating from the letters on this page and striking the screen of your retina, which contains over a hundred million receptors or “seeing elements.” If something moves across your field of vision certain receptors will register its motion, others will register the object’s distance from you, while other receptors are so specialized that they will only be triggered by part of a human face. What gets sent to the visual cortex for processing is not a painting of what you are seeing. The light rays get turned into electrical pulses, which then get telegraphed along the million-fiber optic nerve to the primary visual cortex at the back of the brain. The electrical pulses are then sent to at least thirty other brain regions. What happens next is a brain wide conference call or group e-mail. Remember, during the process there is no “picture” being sent to the different parts of the brain, just electrical pulses. Some groups of cells will translate those pulses into a recognizable object or scene, others will locate it in relation to you, others will gauge its intention and whether the object is friend or foe, while other parts of the brain will begin preparing some response.

The image of the world that you eventually “see” in your mind’s eye, the picture, is formed at the visual cortex, a layer of cells two millimeters thick on the back surface of the brain. The picture is like a map of the imprints on the retina, showing varying degrees of intensity of light. The signals from both eyes arrive at the cortex simultaneously, are processed separately, and then combined to give a sense of depth and distance.

Remember that “you” don’t do any of this. As you look at these words, the process I am describing is taking place automatically. You are not transforming the light into electrical pulses, or directing them to different parts of the brain, or turning them into shapes and meaningful information. Evolution has designed the system and does most of the work for you.

Even the coolest, most objective of scientists are astonished by the phenomena of our eyes. As Charles Darwin wrote: “To suppose that the eye . . . could have been formed by natural selection seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree.”

Was sight foreseen? Were the eyes built by some design? A seeing-eye god? The mystery remains opaque.

By reflecting on our senses of hearing and seeing, we discover that each of us is a natural-born artist. As Alfred North Whitehead wrote: “The various qualities of the world are purely the creation of the mind. Nature always gets the credit which should in truth be reserved for ourselves: the rose for its scent; the nightingale for its song; and the sun for its radiance. The poets are entirely mistaken. They should address their lyrics to themselves.”

We don’t need to go to painting school or practice the piano for a million hours or knit our brow to find the right words of poesy. Through our senses we are creating symphonies, improvised jazz, and great painted masterpieces in every moment. Inside each of us is the best artist in the world, sometimes known as nature, sometimes as god.

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The long and the short

© Robert Jackson-Paton

Asked by a teacher to
Hold on to positive experience
I envision the mountains
A warm fall afternoon
Light dancing through the trees
Warm boulders
Along a gentle river
Like fresh potatoes
Pulled from a fire

This vision is both
Positive experience and
Safe place
Refuge
Healing connection

But the teacher's purpose is
For us to pair this good
With something painful
Something difficult
Old or new
To encourage the good
To seep into the hurt

I open up to my current
Challenges of
Feeling uncertain and
Unstable in body and mind
The post-brain-injury
Experience of disorientation
Intense emotional extremes
Learning to function while
Feeling completely overwhelmed

In attempting to link these
Divergent experiences
I see the comfort and healing
Allowing the stability of a
Warm mountain boulder
Fills me with certainty

But then something happens
As the healing presence of
The tranquil mountains fill me
As the whisper of the river
Reassures me

A larger uncertainty awakens

A greater sense of despair
Suddenly a window
Back through the years opens
The many homes
The friends lost
The moves
The tension, unspoken
But not unseen

The healing comfort of safety
Along a mountain river
The rustle of leaves
Seeing the dance of light and shadow
The warm rocks
I let this in
Soak it up

Because the fear of instability
Uncertainty
Lack of security
That has felt particularly intense
Lately
As I do what I can to heal
From head trauma

In this moment
I now know
It is something
That I have been searching for
For a very long time



What We Say, Not What We Do

© Shakil Choudhury

Adapted from *Deep Diversity: Overcoming Us vs. Them* by Shakil Choudhury. 2015.

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In the current political context of Black Lives Matter, rising Islamophobia and anti-immigration sentiment as well as mass shootings, racial tensions are at a peak not seen in decades. We are all vulnerable to becoming polarized into Us versus Them positions by such intense inter-group friction. Compassion and self-awareness is needed more than ever to create racial justice. Yet we must overcome not just the structures of history that perpetuate inequality but the structures of the mind that exert a hidden influence on our interactions with people who are different from us, especially racially. The following excerpt from my book will help explain what I mean...

A university student, Nina, sits patiently in the waiting area of a nondescript office. Two other students, one black and one white, are also waiting to be called in. After a few moments, the black student notices his cell phone is missing and heads to the adjacent hallway to retrieve it. On his way out, he accidentally bumps the white student's leg. No words are exchanged, but once the black student has left the waiting room, the white student mutters: "Clumsy nigger."

Ninaⁱ has arrived at this office to be part of a research project. She doesn't realize, though, that the study has already begun in the waiting room. What's happening is part of a Canada-U.S. study conducted by researchers from York University, the University of British Columbia, and Yale University.ⁱⁱ The black and white students are actors, and the focus of the study is on Nina's response.



Subjects were divided into three research groups. One group saw this exchange happen on a video (Watchers). A second group only read about it (Readers). The third group (Experiencers) actually experienced the interaction directly with live black and white actors.

Unsurprisingly, when asked to imagine themselves in this situation, the Readers and Watchers indicated that they would be outraged. When asked which student they would choose to work with in a follow-up activity, more than 80 per cent of the Watchers said that they would choose to work with the black student over the white student. Similarly, about 75 per cent of the Readers said that they, too, would choose the black student as a partner.

None of these results should be surprising. After all, they took place in 2009 in a university setting in Toronto, one of the world's most multicultural cities.

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for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom**

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But what were the results from the Experiencers group? How did Nina and others like her respond? How many of the Experiencers said or did anything in response to the racist comment?

We would expect the numbers to be a little bit lower. For most of us, responding in real time is more difficult than an imagined intervention. Maybe 50 per cent of the study group would have stepped in? But perhaps that still sounds

too high. A conservative guess might be that 30 per cent - three out of every ten students - would have said or done something in response. Or sceptics in the crowd might suggest that only one out of ten students would step in.

The actual results? According to study co-author Kerry Kawakami, of those who experienced the racist event first-hand, *no one* intervened or said anything.ⁱⁱⁱ Nor, when interviewed later, did anyone report being upset by the comment. And disturbingly, most of the students chose the white person who made the racist comment as their partner for a later assignment.

Excuse me? Yes - you read that correctly. The vast majority of the students - over 70 per cent - chose the white student rather than the black student as a partner, despite having witnessed the incident first-hand.

Here's another twist - all of the students who participated in the study were non-black. Some were white; some came from a variety of ethnocultural racial backgrounds. They were well educated, young, and living in a profoundly multiracial city. A diverse bunch of university students - the odds don't get much better for a group we would expect to have empathy for their peers and potentially intervene in such a situation.

The researchers concluded that this study is an example of our inability to accurately predict how we will *feel* - and therefore react - in future situations, especially regarding bias and discrimination. The study investigated emotions and behaviours in the context of racial difference.

So why are emotions important? This is the first insight about issues of diversity and inclusion. *How we feel directly influences how we act.*^{iv}

Our emotions are invisible and controlling. Whether we're aware of them or not, they significantly influence our choices and behaviours. Some scientists even argue that we feel rather than think our way through the world.^v Further, social pain (for example, being excluded) and physical pain (such as being hit) share overlapping neural regions in the brain. This helps shed light on why angry expressions or words of rejection can hurt so much.^{vi}

To tackle contemporary discrimination and racism, we need to connect what we feel with what we think, the choices we make with how we behave. Developing emotional literacy, therefore, is key to focal point of the framework called Deep Diversity.

A Compassionate Approach for Tackling Contemporary Racism

Once you know why change is so hard, you can drop the brute force method and take a more psychologically sophisticated approach.

– Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist, NYU Stern School of Business

For twenty years now, I've been an educator and consultant on issues of diversity and inclusion. I help organizations work through their differences, to nurture environments where all people feel like they matter and belong. Our team at Anima Leadership is called in to train staff and students when a school has a racist incident. We are consulted when a human rights settlement requires an intervention. We have developed trainings, curricula, and measurement tools for federal and provincial governments in Canada and assisted private and public sector organizations to improve their diversity outcomes. Internationally, I've led intercultural dialogue projects for communities in conflict, specifically in Europe and South America.



For a long time, I believed that issues of racism and discrimination were simply a matter of ignorance. I thought that if we, as good citizens in egalitarian, democratic societies had the “right” information, we would make better, more thoughtful and fair choices. Gradually I discovered that this appeal-to-the-head-and-behaviour-will-change strategy - a cognitive approach to social change - works only in a limited manner.

As the opening vignette indicates, the problem is much more complex than being misinformed. The Yale-York-British Columbia study demonstrated that even young, educated, and ethnoculturally diverse students have a significant discrepancy between what they think and feel about discrimination, and what they actually do in the face of a racist event. Other studies in this book will suggest that we have greater empathy for those who are racially most like ourselves.

Compared to 50 years ago, when state sanctioned segregation, deliberate persecution and violence was normal, there are fewer examples of humanity’s old villain, overt racism, today. Yet the Yale-York-British Columbia study is a manifestation of its slyer yet still toxic twin, subtle racism— also referred to as *systemic discrimination*. This form of racism is hard to see and therefore even harder to discuss. As exemplified by the public conversations about

racial profiling following the tragic deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, it can easily fracture groups along racial lines of Us/Them.

And this is what's holding us back collectively. I will argue that overcoming systemic discrimination is the next part of the incomplete historical social project towards racial justice. The Deep Diversity framework offers a non-judgmental, comprehensive approach to nurturing inclusion in both organizations and communities.

In short, Deep Diversity exposes some hard-to-see intergroup dynamics that perpetuate the Us/Them dynamic. It makes both our brain (cognition) and heart (emotions) vulnerable to constructive change.

Using Brain Science to Understand Us/Them

At the heart of the Us versus Them dynamic is our tendency to see a person as a symbol of a group, especially of a racial or ethnic group, rather than as an individual.^{vii} When we do this, our empathy is reduced and we may dehumanize the person in some small or big way. Research described as “robust” demonstrates our tendency to see those who are racially different in simplistic, primitive stereotypes - more like animals or objects than people.^{viii} This tendency, called *infracumanization* or objectification, shows itself whenever we make generalizations about a sub-set of people, especially so-called minority groups. (For example, associating blacks with apes and violence, or seeing East Asians as hard-working, expressionless, almost robotically efficient.)

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

Fundamental to this discussion is understanding that our unconscious mind - automatic, reactive, emotional, and intuitive - easily dominates the conscious mind, the realm of logic, language, reason, and abstraction.^{ix} In the words of a respected researcher, Joseph Ledoux of New York University, “Consciousness may

get all the focus . . . but consciousness is a small part of what the brain does, and it's a slave to everything that works beneath it.”^x

As *Deep Diversity* shows, our unconscious biases and automatic brain processes frequently favour those most “like us,” creating racial blind spots and hard-to-see discrimination that become systemic against “them.” This causes many hard-working individuals and groups to be hurt or prevented from moving forward in society because of their ethnocultural or racial background. It also explores how power dynamics and group status make things more complicated. Many minority group members also dehumanize themselves, while favouring the dominant racial group's members, characteristics, and values.

Turning inwards to the level of gut feelings and emotions will offer a greater appreciation of the problem, as well as possible solutions. As we appreciate the depth of what we collectively face and are able to generate some compassion for why we get stuck, we may be better positioned to progress towards racial equality in new, more helpful directions. In brain science terms, we have to disrupt and alter the neural pathways that result in biases that do not serve us collectively.^{xi} In plain language, we have to break some bad habits regarding issues of racial difference.

Inner Skill 1: Self-Awareness

To manage rather than be controlled by our feelings, and break our prejudice habits, we need to develop an early-warning system to the emotions bubbling below the surface of awareness. Self-awareness is the tool required for such advanced detection, the foundation of all inner skills.

According to Michael Inzlicht, a neuroscientist at the University of Toronto Scarborough: “There is substantial evidence that those with more executive control are able to regulate their prejudiced responses. . . . People who are better able to focus their attention and manage their emotions tend to be people who are able to regulate their stereotyped associations.”^{xii}

Executive control refers to the work of the prefrontal cortex, including planning, evaluating, thinking about ourselves, and impulse control. And executive control is premised on self-awareness, the starting point for inner skill development.^{xiii}

Self-awareness starts with attentiveness to our own emotions and needs. It includes knowing our strengths and weaknesses, and having a strong sense of our worth and capabilities. It is the ability to self-reflect, follow our instincts and gut reactions, and be aware of the impact we have on others and the world around us (and of their impact on us).

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Even with a good handle on our conscious selves, it's the elusive unconscious parts that behave as personal blind spots. Learning to direct our focused attention to the internal workings of our mind is critical to living a life where our actions and choices are aligned with our values. Especially regarding issues of racial difference and diversity.



Researcher and psychiatrist Dan Siegel argues that developing such inner knowledge - what he calls *mindsight* - helps us “name and tame” our emotions, so that we know how and when to constructively process and express them.^{xv} It also helps us counter the sweeping emotional charges that underlie intergroup interactions, especially when there is competition or conflict.

The most extensive process for developing self-awareness that I’m aware of also happens to be the second inner skill, mindfulness meditation. This technique offers simple exercises for the brain that include attention to breathing, body sensations, and relaxation.^{xvi}

Prejudice and stereotypes are simply neural habits. As such, they are subject to neuroplasticity: they are flexible and can be altered through conscious attention. Mindfulness meditation has been shown to help change negative habits of the mind. It is the tried and true method of over two millennia for improving our focused concentration. It's a specific form of attention that emphasizes our here-and-now experience. Mindfulness meditation is about being aware of what is happening in both the mind and the body, without reacting or judging.

This Eastern contemplative tradition has spread across the Western world over the last several decades. It has been modified for use in a variety of non-religious settings, including health care, personal growth, general stress relief, and leadership development.

Many strategies besides meditation can also help us develop self-awareness, especially regarding racial difference. Questions to spark personal reflection can also be supportive. The following sample questions are adapted from cultural proficiency educator Randall Lindsay and his colleagues:^{xvii}

- To what social identity groups (including race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability) do I belong?
- How are institutions and organizations in this country influenced by the dominant ethno-racial culture?
- How has my race and identity helped or hindered my progress in society, in small or big ways?
- How does race and social identity help or hinder people in my organization?
- How does my perceived status based on social identity in an organization (or society at large) affect my behaviour and motivation to achieve? In general, how might perceived status affect behaviour and motivation to achieve?

It's not easy to confront parts of ourselves that we are less aware of or that are contradictory to our espoused values. It can fuel painful emotions such as guilt, shame, anger, or defensiveness. This is where Deep Diversity's compassionate approach becomes important. Self-compassion helps us observe ourselves with curiosity rather than judgment. It's the salve to lessen the painful sting of our mistakes so we don't beat ourselves up. Yet it still holds us accountable. Compassion is essential; without it, we may not be able to focus our attention long enough to learn about and unlearn some bad habits about relating to others.

Finally, the key to developing any skill is practice and repetition. Although this may seem obvious, it's still worth mentioning. Persevering is the hardest part of any habit breaking and forming process. If you're like me, it's an imperfect series of forward and backward steps. So, practise noticing your body language and breathing, even if there's a stretch of days in which you don't. Continue to ask yourself about the impact of your social identity on each situation, even if it's an afterthought. Practise. Rinse. Repeat. Do this until it becomes automatic.

Acknowledging this challenge from the onset may help us push through periods of inconsistency without getting demoralized. In this case, "fake it till you make it" is a completely acceptable principle. It may also be the most realistic path of learning for most of us.

Bias Reduction Strategies

In 2007, I completed the Implicit Association Test on race - a highly respected on-line bias assessment tool - that revealed I had a *moderate* preference for white people over black. I felt embarrassed and devastated. As someone who works in the field of diversity and prejudice reduction, this was a significant result that led to some profound reflection. Part of me



wondered if I should quit my day job. I sat with the results for many months, thinking about their implications for my work.

My results, however, did make some kind of sense. On a personal level, they fit my earlier life story. I am of South Asian ethnicity, and I grew up in small-town Canada. Part of me wanted to be white. I worked hard to assimilate and “fit in.” On a broader, societal level, pro-white preference is part of the collective North American story. As Project Implicit research demonstrates, the majority of both white and non-white people have pro-white bias. We’ve all drunk from the same cultural punch bowl, and our tongues are stained similar colours.

So, what to do? I started by doing what I knew best - I asked questions, I read, I sought out new research and revisited studies addressing implicit bias. I found evidence that although implicit bias is consistent over time and rooted in unconscious processes, it is not completely fixed. That means we can change it. I was struck by the simplicity of one particular approach developed by researcher Brandon Stewart. He instructed study participants to use a counter-stereotype - specifically, the word “safe” - whenever they encountered a black person, and found a reduction in anti-black prejudice.^{xviii}

Given what I was learning about how the brain works, Stewart’s strategy made sense. If stereotypes are simply an overused neural pathway - with the association between black people and danger being particularly entrenched in our minds - then just telling myself to not make the association would likely fail. Stewart’s strategy suggested that I needed to build a new neural pathway by creating a new association between black and positive qualities.

Over the next few years, I began a simple experiment with myself, usually when I was riding the subway. Public transit allows natural time and space to people-watch. Taking advantage of the opportunity, whenever I saw black people in the subway car, I would close my eyes and intentionally make a positive association: *kind, generous, philosophical, hard-working, engineer*. I repeated the words to myself several times while trying to picture the person’s face with my eyes closed. Tackling my own anti-black bias became a mini-habit, a regular way to pass a minute or three of my time.

In November 2012, five years after I took my first IAT, I repeated the process. This time, the results indicated that I had “little to no automatic preference between white people and black people,” the lowest level of the IAT. Although it’s far from a scientific conclusion, I

credit the method inspired by Stewart's research for helping reduce my anti-black bias.

While I adopted this method, I was also conscious of three things. First, that I was attempting to broaden the number of overall possible categories of black people in my mind, with an emphasis on increasing my list of positive, non-stereotypical associations. (There are also positive stereotypes of blacks: athletic, cool, good dancers, and so on).

Second, that black people are just another human group and so should not be romanticized as possessing only "good" qualities. (I did not, however, actively work to increase my negative list of qualities - society has done that adequately for us all.) But the awareness is important that within all our groups - within all individuals, really - exist the range and potential for a multitude of positive and negative human qualities.



And finally, that this process is awful to describe and may be painful for many of us to read. For that I am deeply sorry. I find it beyond deplorable that, in this day and age, members of our human tribe would be described as "unsafe," as somehow "less than," because of an arbitrary measure such as skin colour or ethnicity.

The criticism may also be levelled that to "gaze" at another person for our own learning in this manner is distasteful, perhaps even dehumanizing. And there is validity to such a

critique. The thing is, it's happening all the time regardless. Recall that our unconscious mind absorbs information from our surroundings, tracking information that reinforces bias and stereotypes. So, do we want to do it unconsciously with a negative collective outcome or positively for a mutually beneficial outcome? It's a less-than-ideal choice, but choose we must. By guiding our conscious attention, we may be able to undo the unconscious habits of mind that hinder fairness between individuals and groups.

This strategy, known as counter-stereotypes, is one of many promising prejudice reduction strategies that researchers have shown can reduce bias. A complete list of strategies is included in my book.

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Skillful Means

[Your Skillful Means](#), sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more.

Emotional Awareness Meditation

Purpose/Effects

- This meditation brings about a great deal of equanimity with emotions. They will not seem to affect us as deeply or adversely.
- Many people have trouble contacting their emotions directly. Even if we feel that we know what emotion we are having, that does not necessarily mean that we are contacting it directly.
- To contact an emotion directly means to feel it in the body. This is the opposite of most people's experience, which is to related ideas about the emotion.
- Here is an example. A person asks you how you are feeling. You respond by saying, "I am angry, because..." You then go on to tell the person all the reasons you are angry.
- In this example, only the first three words, "I am angry" have anything to do with contacting emotion. All the rest of the explanation is about concepts.
- A fuller example of contacting emotions directly, that is somatically, would be to say, "I am angry. I can feel a sort of gripping tension in my belly that is uncomfortable. The

tense area feels kind of twisted and sharp. Parts of it are throbbing. It also feels like it is radiating heat outwards.”

- Notice that the cause of the anger is irrelevant. The practice here is to feel the physical expression of the anger as completely as possible.
- Extended practice of this meditation will bring about “skill at feeling,” that is, a tremendous amount of clarity in the emotional world. Emotional intelligence.
- It will also help emotions to process and release much more quickly and completely, because we are not holding on to ideas about the emotions. The body processes emotion quickly, naturally, and fully.

Method

Summary

Feel the physical expression of an emotion as completely as possible.

Long Version

1. Settle into a comfortable meditation posture.
2. Breathing normally, bring your attention to your emotions. Notice if you are feeling any emotions, no matter how faintly. It is not necessary to know precisely which emotion you are having, or why you are having it. Just knowing that you are feeling something emotional is enough. Guessing is OK.
3. Once you detect an emotion, see if you can find its expression in your body. Maybe there is a feeling of tension, gripping, tightening, burning, twisting, throbbing, pressure, lightness, openness, etc.
4. If you like, you can mentally make the label “feel” when you detect a body sensation of emotion. Other labels are possible (“emotion” for example).
5. Each time you detect an emotional body sensation, try to actually feel the sensation in your body, as completely as possible. Feel it through and through.
6. Completely let go of any ideas you have about the emotion, or self talk you might have about why the emotion is arising. Return to the body sensation of the emotion.
7. Continue contacting these emotional body sensations for as long as you wish.

History

Meditating on emotions is a traditional part of Vipassana practice in Buddhism. It is, for example, one of the four main techniques covered in the Vissudhimagga (The Path to Purity), an important Buddhist text.

The version presented here is a summary of a practice given by American Buddhist teacher Shinzen Young.

Notes

- At first, practicing this meditation may make it seem as if the emotions are getting bigger. If they are negative emotions, this may seem overwhelming for a while. This is natural. It is occurring not because the emotions are actually getting bigger, but for two interesting reasons. The first is because we are no longer suppressing them. We are allowing them to actually express themselves fully. The second is because we are observing them (actually feeling them) very closely. Just as a microscope makes small things look bigger, the “microscope” of attention makes the emotional body sensations seem larger than they really are.
- The good news here is that as the emotions express themselves freely in the body, they are being processed. Usually this means that they will pass much more quickly.
- If we are feeling a positive emotion in this way, it may pass quickly, but we will also derive much more satisfaction from it, because our experience of it is so rich and complete.
- If we are feeling a negative emotion in this way, we will experience much less suffering from it, because we are not resisting and suppressing it.

See Also

[What Is Meditation?](#)

[Meditation Posture](#)

External Links

[Shinzen Young's website](#)

Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.