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## The Practice of Awareness as a Form of Psychotherapy

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### *The practice*

The practice of awareness in its simplest form is as follows. The exercise lasts for fifteen minutes and is practiced twice daily. The time and frequency should be neither more nor less. The pupil is told to concentrate on the breath passing in and out of one nostril or on the rise and fall of the upper abdomen during respiration or on a point midway between the front and back of the abdomen about two inches above the navel, or on some other simple motif. He may also be told to repeat simple words in his mind such as "rising-falling" in connection with the second breathing exercise. He should sit in a comfortable enough position, but not in one that would encourage him to go to sleep. His eyes should be closed. He should not be very hungry, very sleepy, or physically exhausted at the time of the exercise. He should report to a supervisor on what happens briefly and not too often. The main point is for him to try to do this exercise regularly. These are simple instructions.

Buddhagosa, a practical philosopher born in North India in the fifth century A.D., is quite definite about the purpose of the exercise, and the importance of steady practice, without trying to be intellectual about it. "If, after having attended to the corporeal processes, one takes up the mental processes, and they do not present themselves clearly, the medi-

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tator should not abandon the practice, but should again and again comprehend, consider, take up and define just the corporeal processes. If the corporeal becomes to him fully distinct, unconfused and clear, the mental processes which have that corporeal process as object, will become clear by themselves."<sup>1</sup>

### *Historical notes on the practice*

According to Aldous Huxley, this type of systematic exercise is known to have been used in India and China several centuries before the birth of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Such practices, associated with religious belief, were not common in Europe till near the end of the Middle Ages. During the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries they became fashionable, but then, after the Quietist controversy, fell into disrepute as they were considered to encourage sloth.

In this century there has been a revival of public interest in the oriental variety, particularly in California following the Second World War.<sup>3</sup>

### *Semantics*

The practice of awareness is the least emotionally loaded name for this exercise. Although used in other religious groups in the East and in the West, "it is in teachings of the Buddha the Practice . . . is given its greatest emphasis as well as the clearest descriptions of *how* to put it into practice."<sup>4</sup>

Of other words used to describe the practice, meditation suggests to people a sort of logical creative thinking, which is not its purpose. Concentration suggests painful hard work and muscular tension. The practice of the presence of God is too Christian for agnostics. Samatha and vipassana sound too oriental. Silence of the heart seems sentimental, and restraint of the senses unpleasantly moralistic. Contemplation is confused with daydreaming. Recollection is confused with remembering. Mindfulness is rather medieval.



Variations and developments of the exercise are discussed by Underhill and by Mangalo.<sup>5</sup>

*The effect of the practice on thinking*

It is clear that this practice, whatever its other aims, is an attempt to learn to control thought, or what Jung has called the thinking function. Part of this function, analytical thought, is hypertrophied in some patients and also in some psychotherapists whose very training emphasizes this type of thinking. If it is overdeveloped it can interfere with other functions, especially those of feeling and intuition, and in general with the spontaneity essential to sexual, artistic, and athletic achievement.

Some people are painfully aware of this imbalance, the hypertrophy of the analytical faculty. They may try to overcome it by the use of alcohol or other drugs, by sexual experiences, or by such pastimes as sailing, which in rough weather precludes too much analytical thinking as immediate response to the elements is required. They may get some relief by work involving analytical thought such as philosophy, art criticism, or scientific research, or they may just remain in the rut of rumination.

Thinking includes thoughts about the past, present, and future. Remembering the past and looking into the future, if indulged in to excess, can result in depression and anxiety. Watts writes: "One of our greatest assets for survival is our sense of time, our marvellously sensitive memory, which enables us to predict the future from the pattern of the past. Yet awareness of time ceases to be an asset when concern for the future makes it impossible to live fully in the present, or when increasing knowledge of the future makes it increasingly certain that beyond a brief span we have no future."<sup>6</sup>

The ability to suspend or subdue this critical analytical faculty is associated with a facial expression of amused serenity, an expression of innocence that is shared by most children, many recidivist delinquents,



some hysterics, and many monks and nuns. All of these behave in a way that appears to be more spontaneous than that of the rest of mankind and seem to be less anxious about unhappy past experiences and the possible future results of present actions. The child has not yet developed his thinking function. The delinquent has not learned to use it to control his actions. The hysteric, whose detachment has been called *belle indifférence*, manages to use his analytical faculty selectively, not consciously to shape his behavior and attitudes in certain situations, but to deny anxiety. The mystic has reached the stage of development where he can retain awareness without its either causing anxiety or unduly interfering with spontaneity. His detachment has been called "holy indifference."

Meares has suggested that the common factor to all methods of successful healing of the psyche, whether hypnosis, abreaction, ataractic drugs, analytical psychotherapy, yoga, Zen practices, or Christian prayer, is what he has called "atavistic regression," "the process by which the mind ceases to function at a logical critical level, and reverts to a biologically more primitive mode of functioning."<sup>7</sup>

There is much emphasis in analytical psychology and in psychoanalysis on dealing with the "here and now," or the "actual present" current relationship between therapist and patient. The practice of awareness is an attempt to concentrate on the "here and now" to a far greater extent and may be a necessary adjunct to analytical psychotherapy in the overthoughtful client, the one like Isaac Babel, who described himself as "a man with spectacles on his nose and autumn in his heart."<sup>8</sup>

### *The physiology of awareness*

Tart, editing an anthology of papers on altered states of consciousness, notes the scarcity of published scientific work on the meditative process.<sup>9</sup> Eight of the papers in his book are directly about the practice of awareness. Different workers have noted specific electroencephalographic changes during the practice. The patterns observed were different from



those in sleep or during hypnotic trance and were more prominent in more experienced practitioners. Adepts showed almost continuous alpha waves during the practice.

Kamiya describes several experiments designed to teach subjects to control their own electroencephalographs.<sup>10</sup> One involved an electronic apparatus that turned on a special tone in the room whenever alpha rhythm appeared on the electroencephalograph. The subjects who found this state a desirable one associated with calm were able to learn to retain it for longer periods by trying to keep the tone audible.

Wallace and Allison have studied respiratory and cardiovascular function during the practice.<sup>11</sup>

### *Resistances to the exercise*

There are many resistances to trying this exercise. An obsessional person who will ruminate for hours on a subject chosen by himself (e.g., his ugliness) may object strongly to the idea of concentrating on a subject (e.g., breathing) chosen by someone else. He may continue in the belief that thinking about his alleged problem will solve it. It is not easy to persuade him that the practice of awareness may develop his intuitive ability so that he may know or realize the source of his troubles—or even, through developing his ability to live in the present, not need to know in detail why he had been unhappy.

The apparent lack of purpose in the exercise disturbs many who prefer to relax in some sport or task, such as mowing the lawn, where results can be immediately seen. The beauty of the exercise described above is in fact its simplicity. Similar exercises in concentration can be made out of such actions as firing an arrow from a bow<sup>12</sup> or singing,<sup>13</sup> but in these the *desire* to achieve a bull's-eye or a top note interferes with the *ability* to achieve to a far greater extent than in the observation of one's breathing.

The association of this practice with the word "mysticism" frightens some people who fear that it will drive them mad. Others dislike the fact



that it is commonly associated with religious belief. One person thought that it was a solitary narcissistic practice, like masturbation. The idea of regular practice in solitude is off-putting to many in an epoch when self-discipline is an unpopular concept.

*Psychoanalysts and the practice of awareness*

It must be apparent so far, and will be further demonstrated later, that the attitude of awareness is different from that in analytical psychotherapy. What have the analysts had to say on the subject?

C. G. Jung, foremost, was interested in these matters, and from 1932 wrote long and interesting commentaries on translations of Eastern philosophical and religious works. He had mixed reactions to the basic ideas, but he was the son of a Protestant pastor, he had involved himself in the predominantly Jewish psychoanalytical movement and, although a bold man, had to protect himself from the charge of being a metaphysical, unscientific renegade.

Jung visited India in 1938 at the age of sixty-three and wrote about it in his memoirs. There were exciting experiences and realizations:

When I visited the stupas of Sanchi where Buddha delivered his fire sermon, I was overcome by a strong emotion of the kind that frequently develops in me when I encounter a thing, person, or idea of whose significance I am still unconscious. . . .

Christ—like Buddha—is an embodiment of the self, but in an altogether different sense. Both stood for an overcoming of the world; Buddha out of rational insight; Christ as a foredoomed sacrifice.<sup>14</sup>

He seems on the other hand to have been wary of getting too involved:

[In India] I studiously avoided all so-called “holy men.” I did so because I had to make do with my own truth, not accept from others what I could not attain on my own. I would have felt it as a theft had I attempted to learn from the holy men and to accept their truth for myself.

He [the Indian] wishes to free himself from nature; in keeping with this aim he seeks in meditation the condition of imagelessness and emptiness. I on the other



hand wish to persist in the state of the lively contemplation of nature and of the psychic images. I want to be freed neither from human beings, nor from myself nor from nature.<sup>15</sup>

In his writings about Eastern religion, both before and after his visit, he warns many times against the use of Eastern contemplative practices by Europeans:

I wish particularly to warn against the often attempted imitation of Indian practices and sentiment. As a rule nothing comes of it except an artificial stultification of our Western Intelligence.<sup>16</sup>

I do not wish to question the possibilities of success when the meditation exercise is conducted in some kind of ecclesiastical setting. But, outside of some such setting, the thing does not as a rule work, or it may even lead to deplorable results.<sup>17</sup>

Great as is the value of Zen Buddhism for understanding the religious transformation process, its use among Western people is very problematical. The mental education necessary for Zen is lacking in the West. Who among us would place such implicit trust in a superior Master and his incomprehensible way?<sup>18</sup>

Yoga in Mayfair or Fifth Avenue, or in any other place which is on the telephone is a spiritual fake.<sup>19</sup>

Fromm, on the other hand, points out that oriental philosophy has in some respects a close connection with the method of psychoanalysis, for example: "Freud did not share the high evaluation of our thought system, so characteristic of modern Western man."<sup>20</sup>

In his wish to break through the conscious thought system, Freud devised the method of free association:

By emphasizing free association he transcended in an essential point the conventional rationalistic mode of thinking of the Western world, and moved in a direction which had been developed farther and much more radically in the thought of the East.<sup>21</sup>

One of the difficulties in the psychoanalytical process for the thoughtful analyst is that he is instructed to try to be spontaneous, which is paradoxical. The practice of awareness as homework, as an exercise in controlling conscious thought processes, can increase spontaneity in the



psychotherapeutic relationship. Jung's fears that such practices would lead to stultification seem to be exaggerated.

### *Personal experience*

In 1960, I attended a meditation group run by an old woman. About eight of us sat for an hour a week in a small, heavily curtained room in her house. Books lined one wall. The room was lit by a single candle. Various religious figures, a statue of the Buddha, a painting of the Madonna and Child, made the atmosphere pleasantly eclectic. We sat in silence for periods of twenty minutes or so and then briefly described our experiences to the woman, who made little comment but looked benevolent. After the meeting, three of us had drinks and a chat in a pub. We practiced little outside the group.

After a year or so of this, we moved to another weekly group, this time in a Buddhist Vihara in North London. The priest who conducted this group was dramatic, knowledgeable about modern psychology, and strict in manner. At the first meeting, on St. Patrick's Day, the statue of the Buddha had been decked with shamrock. At the beginning of each meeting those who wished joined in chanting the Five Precepts in Pali. These are an undertaking to try to refrain from killing, stealing, slander, sexual excess, and intoxication. But again, though able to attend the group, we were desultory in our practice outside the group.

In 1968, after a long absence, I went to a lecture by another Buddhist priest who had become the Incumbent of the Vihara, an old Englishman. After the lecture I questioned him: "I and several friends profess an interest in this exercise and feel that it is helpful, but, in fact, we do not practice it for this trivial amount of time, fifteen minutes twice daily. What is the resistance?" The priest just said in even tones: "I don't know." This remark, or the way in which it was made, was somehow very impressive and I started and maintained regular solitary practice from that day. Perhaps it was his refusal of even this small demand for dependency that was effective.





*Resistances within the exercise*

**Sensations.** One can be distracted from the object of awareness by a sensation such as itching. The instructions are that the itch should be noted as unemotionally as possible and the attention then directed back on the object. If after several attempts to do this the itch becomes intolerable, one may scratch, but this must be done mindfully and not compulsively. Backache, hunger, sexual desire, and other sensations may also distract one.

**Visions.** These, if they do occur, should also be noted and then discarded till after the end of the practice. This, of course, is contrary to the practice in psychoanalysis, where they are greeted with joy by therapist and patient, and examined. I have had only one vision. During the exercise I saw a troop of toy soldiers marching and regarded them with benign amusement, a detached observer. Suddenly I was one of them, marching in step, with a feeling of inevitability and no possibility of escape. Fear at this quite new type of experience was followed by relief that it had happened without disaster.

**Thoughts.** The chief distraction for many is thinking. Thoughts, if logical, are usually most trivial: for example, what one had said to X or what one might say to Y. On the other hand, one often drifts toward sleep when thoughts equally trivial and of an illogical sort interrupt the practice. A more alluring distraction is when one gets an original, creative, or illuminating thought. This too must be noted and discarded in favor of returning to the study of the breath or other object of the exercise. (These creative thoughts will usually be remembered after the exercise is over.)

Mangalo advises that "one patiently perseveres in catching the thoughts—like bringing a puppy back to heel each time he wanders."<sup>22</sup> The practice is rather similar in feel to a yachtsman's use of the tiller and sheets, making the best use of wind, waves, and currents to get to his destination. These similes are mentioned because this is literally an exercise in self-discipline, and the word "discipline" has acquired nasty con-



notations with punishment, authoritarianism, and deprivation of pleasure. In its original sense and as used here it is connected with teaching, learning, training (Lat. *discere*). The training of a puppy and sailing a boat are in the context of exercise. Taming a lion or weight lifting would not be appropriate comparisons.

*Feelings.* Feelings are also to be noted as distractions and as far as possible impersonally. For example, not “I am depressed,” but “This is depression.”

The earliest feelings I had were associated with the thoughts “How boring,” “I can’t stand this,” “How many more minutes are there to go,” “What a waste of time,” “Am I doing better or worse than the others in the group?” In fact, one could stand it, one was wasting much more time outside the group, and one would never know whether the others were better or worse.

Later came feelings of depression, anxiety, or anger about how inept one was at the exercise, or of triumph on a “good” day. All these needed to be discarded as distractions.

More recently for a few moments there was an intense feeling of desire without object and, instead of the concentration on one’s breathing being a tedious task, it appeared to be an act without which this intense feeling would not have been bearable.

### *Coincidental events*

As has been implied, dramatic experiences during the exercise were rare in my case. This seems similar to the experiences of those who indulge in the tedious ritual of daily physical jerks, in which instance also the effect is mainly noticed outside the exercise periods when heavier suitcases can be carried farther. If awareness is practiced regularly, the attitude encouraged during the exercise is carried over to the rest of the day, and also perhaps to the night.

During the period of regular practice there seems to have been a fa-



avorable development in almost all aspects of one's personal life, work, relationships, and pastimes. Occasionally outside the practice period—which is currently thirty minutes twice daily—there were experiences the like of which had not occurred before. One example will suffice. On my first visit to the United States, in Chicago on a sultry day and in a gloomy mood I was walking with a friend toward the shore of Lake Michigan. We crossed a footbridge spanning a busy motor road and in the middle of the bridge felt the breeze from the lake in our faces. The gloomy mood was replaced by one of happiness. But, at the moment of change, there came the realization that joy and despair are always coexistent and that one could know this fact only when one was not actually engulfed in either. This glimpse was extremely reassuring. Several hours later I tried to tell the friend about this experience and he reminded me that in the middle of the bridge I had mentioned a phobia present since childhood—that of heights.

As for one's attitude to the exercise itself, this has changed in the direction described by Humphreys: "It has been said that awareness is first an effort, then a habit, and finally a joyous necessity."<sup>23</sup>

### *Dangers?*

Humphreys adds: "When the third stage comes, and it often comes very soon, beware lest the great discovery . . . should lure one from the due performance of the daily round." Supervision should ensure that the practice of mindfulness does not become a stultifying addiction, which was one of Jung's fears. His other fears that it is in opposition to the "lively contemplation of nature and of the psychic images" and that it might interfere with relationships to others are not justified. In my own experience, it has enhanced all three in the period outside the practice.

### *Summary*

The practice of awareness most clearly defined by Buddhist writers is de-



scribed. The effect of the practice on thought processes and the views of Jung and of Fromm on such exercises are discussed. There are many resistances both to the idea of doing the exercise and within the exercise. The writer describes his own experience and suggests that the practice may be an important aid to analytical psychotherapy for those in whom the critical analytical type of thinking is highly developed.

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