

"Awakening Inner Development, Developing Inner Awakening."
By Ned David Bratspis, MA, LMFT

Studying the well known medical case of Phineas P. Gage, a startling set of insights were revealed to two researchers of neuroscience, not only about the trajectory of the human capacity to survive difficulty and trauma , but about the vital role of emotion in contributing to the quality of behavioral choice based on the integrity with moral alignment. Gage, a foreman on the transcontinental railroad in New England, sustained a near-fatal brain injury when a 7 foot long steel rod accidentally was blasted through his skull. He survived, and in many ways was able to continue to use his mind, except experientially, never recovered the capacity to align "right action" when faced with decisions of right and wrong. It has been theorized that the reason this was so was damage to the part of the brain connecting actions to emotions.*

At some time or another we will all be faced with challenges that appear to test the limits of our capacity to align with skillful choices and actions. At those times the heightened emotion that can be inclined to painfully dysregulate, may actually be the key to the discovery of those necessary choices. Skillful choices and actions are usually defined by the capacity for empathy and compassion. Developing empathy and compassion may be seen, experientially as the skills which can transcend aggression, and provide an enduring basis for moving emotionally closer to others, increase the potential for kinship and bonding and social-interappreciation.+

Unlike the typical guidance and training we have received throughout our lives, through which we learn to set goals with particular steps to achieving them, and for which doing, taking actions, evaluating, and analyzing are integral parts, the being area of our lives is opened to and developed through awareness. There are numerous paths toward learning to develop awareness of the moment; entering those paths occurs by being in the moment, letting go of achievement, and even letting go of the previous moment, and the orientation toward the future moments. Letting go is the beginning of acceptance which may allow us a more yielding, receptive, and benign approach to thought and feeling patterns and the patterns of habits and conditionings that were previously assumed may be more clearly observed. In such moments, we begin to learn how frequently, for what duration and how intensely thought/feeling contents can get hold of the attention, mind and body. Observing these processes may provide insights that without striving, suggest options, creative choice and freedom. #

There are numerous practices that are available to assist the learning of awareness as a path to insight, self soothing, skillful lifestyle and practice, emotional regulation, and affect tolerance all of which can be part of an experiential embodiment of empowerment, and self kindness. These kinds of practices are the lived components of the development of compassion and empathy of self and other. Some Mind-Body practices encompass the process of the embodiment of skillful means and insight via their focus away from the "content of thought" to the more adaptive awareness of the

process that transcends thoughts/feelings from moment to moment. A prime example of a Mindfulness practice that embraces these principles is the “Body Scan.” The Body Scan is so universal in potential for application it can be used quite effectively for pain, tension, anxiety and depression. It has been documented for over twenty years in a variety of settings and the clearest explanation for how to begin its use can be found in the writings of Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph. D. 1

The Body scan embodies a two stage practice on acceptance that involves “being with” and then letting go. Sending the breath into and out of the various areas of the body, the breath moves in and out of the moment and to be with now is to let go now.

Further developing practices allow the awareness to pacify turbulent thoughts and feelings via moving with and into them. When we do this, our developing self-compassion unfolds as well into that which is helpful to others. Meditation teacher Matthieu Ricard states “...the more kindness and benevolence we develop, the less room there will be in our mind for their opposites, malice and ill will.” Ricard also cites a way of disidentification with troubling emotion via awareness. He states that if we simply observe the afflictive emotion in the same way we observe external events, awareness is not affected by the emotion it is observing (awareness is a larger container for the emotional event, during which (the emotion) has no solidity and given enough space will dissolve). 2

Awareness Practice, Mindfulness meditation, offers the skillful means that to use our moments of emotional upset and the anxious contraction and compression of the body and the recognition of the shallow breath as signals and memory cues which can offer steps toward a different relationship to ourselves and to the world. Working with the breath, working with the softening of the compressed body, and working with being with and accepting each moment is preparing us for developing kindness and allowing for our identification with thoughts, narratives, and judgments to dissolve. There is less emotional pull at that point toward avoiding the moment. The breath and body and mind have softened and in the absence of abrasive pressure, there is a recovery of the potential for insight and healing.

It is a “practice” in the sense of a special form of work in progress, maintained in this moment wherein subtle learnings incrementally are integrated as avoidance and self-judgment recede. Depression history often evokes strategies that incline us to live in our heads rather than our bodies. Thinking about feelings seems to be safer than experiencing them. Consequently the confidence to work with such experiences is less tested. In such cases, getting started in being more aware of the embodiment of emotion can, at first, trigger unpleasant emotion. The previously depressed person may respond to this contact with difficult, escalated or dysregulated emotion in habitually unskillful ways. This can lead to the avoidance which is often followed by pattern repetition, analysis, and rumination; all components of the depression landscape. Due to the often swift and seemingly automatic impact of these habit/conditioning patterns, returning to the beginning (basics) of practice and the unbundling of obstacles become

key elements of practice development. And basic to the practice is remembering to practice when a set-back occurs. 3

In this remembering, we begin to find that we return to a beginning, as often as there are obstacles. And as often as the obstacles trigger struggle, we can remember to apply acceptance and kindness, reduce our sense of aloneness and emotional pain, and use these elements as the road to balance and serenity. In this way we develop inner awakening and awaken inner development. 4

*Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain, Antonio R. Damasio, Penguin Putnam, 1994, New York.

+Schoore, A. (2003) Affect Dysregulation and Disorders of the self. New York. Norton.

The Depression Book; Depression as an Opportunity for Spiritual Growth, Cheri Huber and June Shiver, Keep it Simple Books, 1999, USA

1 Full Catastrophe Living; Using the Wisdom of your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., Dell Publishing, 1990, New York

2 Why meditate? Working with Thoughts and Emotions, Matthieu Ricard, Translated by Sherab Chozin Kohn, Hay House, Inc., 2010, Carlsbad, California

3 Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression; A New Approach to Preventing Relapse, Zindel V. Segal, J. Mark G. Williams, John D. Teasdale, The Guilford Press, 2002, New York

4 What You Practice Is What You Have; A Guide To having the Life You Want, Cheri Huber and June Shiver, Keep It Simple Books, 2010, USA