

An overview of Mindsight, Mindfulness, and Attunement

Introduction

Mindsight is a term that Daniel Siegel has coined to emphasise a sort of secular perspective on Mindfulness. I have found the following definition of Mindsight most helpful:

Mindsight is a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal working of our own minds. It helps us to be aware of our mental processes without being swept away by them, enables us to get ourselves off the autopilot of ingrained behaviours and habitual responses, and moves us beyond the reactive emotional loops we have a tendency to get trapped in. It lets us “name and tame” the emotions we are experiencing, rather than being overwhelmed by them.

Siegel 2010 pp xi-xii

In many respects it thus overlaps with Mindfulness, but perhaps Mindsight focuses more on neuro-physiological aspects and “*the new science of personal transformation*”, as the subtitle of American edition makes clear (Siegel 2010). Now the concept of Mindfulness has appeared in the scientific literature increasingly during the last decade or two – and in this context it does not have any particular religious connotations. The two terms are to some extent interchangeable. Autogenic Training forms an excellent foundation for developing our skills in mindfulness / mindsight.

Mental Training, in the context of meditative-type practices (such as Meditation and Autogenic Training), have been shown to have specific effects on certain areas of the brain – especially the pre-frontal cortex: and it is thought that the altered neuro-circuitry in the brain that comes about by such practices is responsible for the very positive benefits to the individual, in terms of overall well being and in terms of social relationships.

In this section C of Autogenic Dynamics, we will be looking specifically at the benefits that can come about in those that develop a regular mindful / meditative type practice – especially in terms of some of the underlying research in this area. Now much of this research is new, and has only become possible during the last decade or two as a result of increasingly sophisticated methods of measuring activities in the brain in non-invasive and safe ways. This means that some of our formulations are at present somewhat tentative, yet the underlying message seems clear: meditative practice can profoundly benefit each of us – and humanity in general.

Daniel Siegel has a great gift of presenting complex research in an accessible manner: and then having the courage to suggest possible neural dynamics that are compatible with these findings (e.g. Siegel 2007 pp 189 – 208; especially 192 – 193). In this context, it is important to note that our brains and neural circuits are not fixed entities, but rather are malleable and flexible; and so are open to the creation of new neural-circuits and connections and neurones (Gould 1999a; Gould 1999b; Kempermann 1997; 1999) that can bring about positive change – and thus be of great value to both the individual and society.

The systematic training of the mind – the cultivation of happiness¹, the genuine inner transformation by deliberately selecting and focusing on positive mental states and challenging negative mental states, is possible because of the very structure and function of the brain..... Neuroscientists have documented the fact that the brain can design new patterns, new combinations of nerve cells and neurotransmitters (chemicals that transmit messages between nerve cells) in response to new input. In fact, our brains are malleable, ever changing, reconfiguring their wiring according to new thoughts and experiences.

Howard Cutler 1998 p 31
(in conversations with the Dali Lama)

¹ Happiness here embraces the wider concept of well-being (See A3 on this website; and Ross 2010 p 278 - referring to a talk given by Angela Clow, Professor of Psychology University at the Edinburgh International Science Festival, 09.04.2006)

Meditative practices and mindfulness

In sections C and D we will be exploring further the concept of Mindfulness. In terms of Autogenic practice in the context of the standard exercises, and other meditative practices, I have found the following definition by Kabat-Zinn to be most helpful:

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way:

- on purpose,
- in the present moment,
- and non-judgementally.

Kabat-Zinn 1994; p 4

Thus, when we say focusing on “Solar plexus warm”, we are doing this on purpose; we are in the present moment; and we are non-judgemental. That is, if it feels warm, that is fine; if it does not feel warm, that is fine. If our mind wanders, we simply note when we realise (become mindful) that it has wandered and return to SPW without giving ourselves a row or being self-critical².

Note that the phrase “in the present moment” means just that. Kabat-Zinn was once discussing mindfulness with a journalist, and she said words to the effect: “O, you mean living for the present moment”; Kabat-Zinn replied with words to the effect: “No; I did not say that – I said living in the present moment”; that is, being in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn 1990 / 2004: p 19).

Not being in the present moment – to being present

Many of us may find that we are sometimes unable to focus on the present moment – say a beautiful sunset or the smile on a child’s face. This can be because our brain circuits are preoccupied with clutter (e.g. pursuing the past; losing ourselves in the future – Hanh 1990). Meditative type training has been shown to facilitate our ability to focus on present moment by moment experiences – and this seems to be mediated through enhanced activity of the posterior parietal cortex and the lateral pre-frontal cortex (Farb et al 2007 – especially figures 2 and 3 on pages 316 & 317 respectively).

In the context of Autogenic Training Standard Exercises, this is exactly what we are doing: learning to focus on our present, moment by moment, experience of e.g. “Right arm heavy”; the important factor is of course the mental contact with the part of the body (e.g. solar plexus) or process (e.g. breath) that we are focusing on at that point in time.

Now the “mental chatter” that we experience during such mental training can be seen in terms of “top down” cortical processes; whereas the present moment experience of, say, “forehead cool” can be seen in terms of a “bottom up” process mediated through our basic (five) senses (Siegel 2007B and 2010); or the activation of these by our imagination or slow focused repetition of the phrase. [See also B6 on this website for a more detailed look at these dynamics.]

Kabat-Zinn has written a wonderful book – called “Full Catastrophe Living” (Kabat-Zinn 1990). At first I was put off by the title until I realised that in this book he is talking about people who have suffered from a major catastrophe – such as cancer, a heart attack, or the loss of someone very close to them: his special Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre helps such people to still live a full life. In his mindfulness-based programme, yoga plays an important part. He suggests that yoga is a form of meditation. Now when in my early thirties I joined a yoga class, I was doing the exercises in a striving way to get results – for example, to get more and more supple: that was not mindful. So yoga becomes a form of meditation when we are in a non-striving mental mode; and we are focusing on each exercise mindfully³ in a moment by present moment sense: thus we become present.

² Some may find it helpful, as we become aware of the intrusion, to label it, silently saying to ourselves, for example: “mind wandering”; “judging mind”; “shopping thought” – in a non-judging sort of way as we return to the Standard Exercise sequence (Creswell 2007; C7).

³ So for example, if we are rotating our neck, we are focusing specifically on the sensations in the neck.

Autogenic Training can facilitate in this process. On the feedback sheet from a woman following one of the recent Autogenic groups I was taking, she said that for her one of the most important outcomes was her ability to now live much more “in the present moment”.

Attunement and Mindfulness

During the last decade or so it has become increasingly apparent that mindfulness practices and the mother-child relationship in the psycho-biologically attuned mother overlap – in terms of brain neuro-physiology and in terms of positive relationships with others (Siegel 2007 – e.g. xiii - xx; Schore 2003B, 2003C). Internal attunement with ourselves can be greatly facilitated by mental training, and this in turn leads to increased attunement with others – specifically through the activation of our “Resonance Circuits” (Siegel 2007 pp164 – 168 and C3). These resonance circuits embrace the mirror neurone systems. The above dynamics are explored further in the rest of section C.

As we become more attuned to ourselves and others, we may also find that we are becoming more attuned and alive to nature – to a passing cloud in the sky, to the wonder of sunlight shining through leaves.

Neural Integration

It is suggested that positive outcomes in psychotherapy – and from mindfulness practices, come about – at least in part – through neural integration (Farb et al 2007; Siegel 2007A and 2007B; 2010 especially pp 189 – 208).

Distressed states and on-going anxieties / fears are produced in part by real or imagined threats that then impinge on the limbic system and amygdala circuits, activating our “Threat and Protect” systems that result in outcomes and behaviours reflecting, for example, the FEAR and / or RAGE systems⁴ (Panksepp 1998 and B3; Gilbert 2009; 2010; and B9). Now when such distressed states are brought about by negative ruminations or by imagining negative outcomes, the activation of these neural circuits is mal-adaptive and leads to disharmony of our inner being⁵. Such distress that can lead to a feeling of mental disintegration.

In contrast to this, meditative practices have the potential to activate areas of the middle pre-frontal cortex that are associated with positive outcomes – such as:

- i. Reduced inappropriate reactions to situations;
- ii. Increased attunement to others;
- iii. Increased emotional balance (see e.g. Siegel 2007 pp 341 – 345 for an overview of the research in this area).
- iv. Inhibiting fear circuits in the amygdala (via lateral and ventro-medial pre-frontal cortex dynamics⁶); and:
- v. Positive re-appraisal / reframing (Gross 2002; Delgado et al 2008; Ross 2010 p 211; and B2).

For further details of these middle pre-frontal cortex functions, please see C2 in this series.

All of these processes can bring about increased well-being through neural integration – from neural circuits that were previously mis-attuned or mis-integrated from the perspective of inner harmony. In addition, specific forms of psycho-therapy that embrace mindfulness concepts can facilitate in bringing about various forms of integration in the individual – such as horizontal integration, vertical integration, and narrative integration. These matters are discussed in a very approachable way by Daniel Siegel in his book *Mindsight* – where he gives some very moving descriptions of such integration in clinical practice (Siegel 2010; e.g. pp 79 – 294; and see also: C6; C7; C8; C9 on this website).

[References and sources /](#)

⁴ That is, the FEAR / RAGE Emotional Operating Neural Circuits.

⁵ Exactly the implications of getting trapped in emotional loops outlined in Siegel's definition at the start of this paper.

⁶ Note that these circuits overlap with the extinction circuits that can inhibit conditional responses to conditional stimuli in the context of Pavlovian type learning (Again Gross 2002; Delgado et al 2008; Ross 2010 p 211; and B2 on this website).

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Linked themes in this Autogenic Dynamics section

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B2	Reframing, Reappraisal and Well-Being
B3	Emotional Operating Neuro Circuits – a brief introduction to Panksepp's model
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