

THE FELT SENSE OF SELF

If we are feeling better about ourselves, then we hold ourselves differently; we walk differently; we feel differently; and we see things differently. Then we ‘feel’ a whole lot better about ourselves; we ‘feel’ our Self; and we ‘feel’ a sense of our Self. How can we get back to this feeling?

Exercise

This exercise is designed to help you get back in touch with a ‘felt sense’ of your Self. It is in three sections and each section has three parts. The whole exercise should take about 20 minutes. You can do it anywhere: and at any almost time; though obviously not when you are working, or driving a car. You can do it on a bus, or on the train to work. It is probably best to do it whilst sitting down, rather than lying down. You can do it whilst walking – say on your morning exercise route, or with the dog. It is also best to practice this regularly, until it becomes more like second-nature: until it becomes your usual, proper sense of Self. This exercise is one way, if you start using it, on a regular basis. There are, of course, many other ways, but these usually involve other people or events. This you can do for yourself, by yourself, quietly and regularly. As you do it, you will start to build in your own changes and modifications – so that it works for you! As you do it, you should be able to find that you get an increasing feeling of your Sense of Self.

First Section

- **First Part:** Become more aware of your breathing. You are (obviously) breathing all the time: every moment of every day: but how often are you aware of your breathing? We breathe basically in two different ways: there is the belly-breathing method that is encouraged in Yoga. This is where your belly moves in and out and – because of your diaphragm – the movement in the belly draws air in, or pushes it out, of your lungs: so, it works a little like a bicycle pump. The second basic method of breathing is a ‘bellows-type’ of breathing. You often do this, if you have just run up a couple of flights of stairs. This is where your chest expands and your rib cage expands, and the air is drawn in and out of your lungs by a bellows-type of action. When we are very anxious or afraid, our breathing becomes quite shallow and quite ‘high’; panting a little, with most of the breathing action happening in the throat. When we are anxious, we also tend to breathe in and hold; and then breathe in and hold: we take more air in, but don’t breathe out very much. When the fear or stress or tension goes, then we breathe out a lot and start to relax. So, how are you breathing now? How much, how often, and where? Just become aware of your pattern of breathing. Spend just **a couple of minutes** re-connecting with your pattern of breathing.

- **Second Part:** You are not just breath: you also have a body. So, spend a couple of minutes becoming more aware of your body. You are probably sitting on a chair: become aware of the chair against your back and bottom. You may be sitting in a particular position: arms folded, or not; legs crossed, or not; become aware of this position. You may be wearing a watch, or a belt, or a necklace, or something: become aware of the physical sensations of wearing these objects. Become conscious of the feeling of your clothes against your skin: your shoes may be a little tight – whatever! We receive all of these sensations into our body all of the time: just become more aware of all of these sensations. Become aware of your body as a living, functioning organism: you have quite an amazing body: it mostly works very well for most of the time: 60-70 years of non-stop functioning. Appreciate it a little now: spend **a couple of minutes** being amazed!

- **Third Part:** So, you now are a breathing, aware body. Now, become aware of the environment that you are in. There are lots of things around you: sights, sounds, smells, textures, temperatures, qualities of light, noises outside the house, etc. Spend a minute or two becoming aware of your breathing body in the environment that it is in, at this moment in time. Become more aware of the sensations and affects of the environment around you: the smell of the room you are in; the hum of the computer (if there is one); the noises in the street outside; birdsong perhaps. **Spend a couple of minutes** ‘being’ in the environment around you. This is all part of You being You, and becoming more your Self, in the Here and Now.

***** Do this First Section only for a couple of weeks (i.e. about six minutes, once or twice a day): and then add in the Second Section.**

Second Section

- **First Part:** You are not just a body in the here-and-now: you also have feelings: lots of them. There are those feelings that are more on the ‘surface’: more easily accessible. Today, you are reasonably happy because ... (hopefully) ... the sun is shining; or ... not so fine, because you have just had an argument with your partner, or child, or work colleague; or someone who you thought liked (or didn’t like) you said something nasty (or nice) about you; or you are looking forward to the weekend, and so forth. You may recognise that you are hungry, or thirsty. Spend a little time, **a couple of minutes**, in just contacting and being more aware of all those different ‘surface’ – here-and-now – feelings.

- **Second Part:** Underneath these ‘surface’ feelings, there are lots of other – often contrasting – feelings. People that we basically like, but who also have some irritating (possibly infuriating) habits; whilst we may love someone, we can also really dislike ‘this’ or ‘that’ about them, or dislike them when they do ‘this’ or ‘that’. We love our children dearly, and we are also sometimes really infuriated by them. We may really want to move to another town, but we are also scared to lose our friends here. We are basically a nice, jolly person, and sometimes we can get very angry, or jealous, or we can have mean

nasty thoughts. We have to become aware of these ‘mixed’ or ‘secondary’ feelings, and then (perhaps) we can work through, or with, some of these conflicts. **Spend a couple of minutes** just allowing your awareness of some of these conflicting emotions: you won’t be able to sort them out in these few minutes, so just notice them, and hold your awareness of them. Let them bubble up; let both these ‘opposites’ be held as relevant and valid; and then breathe and let them go on going out.

- **Third Part:** Below these conflicting emotions, there are our deeper, basic feelings: our ‘gut’ feelings. These are beyond dispute: they cover things like the horror of warfare; the fear of violence; the basic human desire for peace and calm; a love of gentleness and beauty; the pleasure that we get from being in nature – those things that touch us all deeply. We may never, ever (possibly) vote Conservative – or Labour: that is just not who we are! We are deeply religious, or we are agnostic! It probably won’t change. These ‘gut’ feelings don’t often change: they help to go together form something of our identity. Sometimes, we have had a crisis, or a near-death experience, or something – and that is when some of these feelings do change. This level is where we can feel our common humanity; and our connectedness to all things. These deep feelings build up to confirm our identity, and, from here, we can also begin to feel something of our spirituality. **Spend a couple of minutes** at this part of yourself, just contacting these deeper feelings. You can come back here, anytime. However, you can’t short-cut the process and omit the second part, the conflictual bit. People try to do this all the time, by joining a political party, or by following a sect, or getting a guru, or by joining a movement. Only by going *through* these emotional conflicts, can we really make sense of these things, and retain a sense of the deeper understanding.

***** Do the First and Second Section together (i.e. about 12 minutes) for a couple of weeks, one or twice a day. Then, add in the Third Section.**

Third Section

You are not just a body and a set of feelings. There is much more to you than that. Who you are now is who you have become. There have been many influences throughout your life; you made decisions along the road, and there have been many different choices, and there were some missed opportunities, and so on, and so forth. You may have a frustrated musician inside of you, because – perhaps – you had to give up piano at age seven, when your family moved house; or there may be a series of dreams of crossing the Gobi Desert on a camel, or of climbing Kilimanjaro. What might have happened (or not happened) if you hadn’t gone to *that* party, or caught *that* train? This whole section deals with that part of the whole ‘You’ that is not manifest at this particular point in time - yet. However, I don’t want to be too precise, because otherwise I may indicate something that isn’t there, or you may inhibit or overlook something that is there. You will have to ‘feel’ your way into this section, over time, and through repetition: asking yourself something like: “*What could I be doing? What should I be doing? How do I move forward?*”

- **First Part:** The first part of this section is to do with your present dreams and aspirations; maybe this is even your Next Step; or that which you are planning to do now, but haven't done yet. You may feel that you deserve to be: ... the branch manager, or the section head. You may have fantasies about how you would do 'this' or 'that'; or you might have always wanted a child, or another child – the girl that you have always longed for, or the boy to carry your name forward. These thoughts, dreams, hopes, aspirations, are all absolutely fine: all of these are possibly possible; they may (or may not) happen; and whether they do or not is relatively irrelevant; however, this part of yourself is a manifestation of your present potential; of the 'You' that you are trying to exert; to move forward; or to do something more in your life. This leads you gently forward from the 'here-and-now' towards new possibilities. Take a couple of minutes for this part. Spend a little time (**a couple of minutes**) "dreaming up" this part of your Self a little more.

- **Second Part:** This part of this section is a little less clear: as it is to do with your deeper Unrealised Potential. You have millions of brain cells that you don't use very much (if at all): what might you be like if you were using more of them? With a bit of a push, in a particular direction, and with some determination and specialist training, you could be (or have been) ... a musician, an astronaut, a university professor, a lawyer, ... whatever! However, you chose differently, which is fine, and that part of your potential is almost certainly still there – latent within you – in some form or another. You could tap into something of that potential now, if you wanted to: do so now! It is like a bank of reserve batteries, just waiting for you to use them; or a savings account that you might have forgotten about – use it now. Spend **a couple of minutes** with this part of yourself: tapping into this aspect of your potential Self. Help this part of your Self to move on, in this direction, or two or three steps further ahead.

- **Third Part:** This is the place, or the level, where you can go to contact 'That' which is 'Greater' than 'Thou'; – or the 'God' part of yourself; or that which is 'Other' and yet which is also part of your Self. This is (perhaps) your personal connection to God, the Universe, or where You can be at One with Everything – however you might envisage this. There are not really good words for this part: it is almost beyond words. But most people can connect with something they can call their Higher Self, or their Guardian Angel, or that part of Them that touches the 'Other', or God, or Allah, or whomsoever you pray to: 'That' which is greater than your Self. I am sure that you know what I mean. Spend **a couple of minutes** just 'Being Here – and Present – with this Other'.

The whole (three sections of the) exercise should have taken about 18-20 minutes – at the most. See if you can find the time to do this built-up exercise – regularly: once or twice a day; or 3-4 times a week perhaps; or more, or less; as part of your everyday relaxation time, or as a quiet meditation in your lunch break, or (as I said) on the bus or train or in the car on the way to work. As the weeks unfold, your 'Felt Sense' of your Self will – almost inevitably – increase and deepen, become fuller, richer, more complex.

There are many different facets to a properly developed Sense of Self (see below), and that list might also help you explore other aspects of your Self. And ‘that’ is what ‘this’ is all about!

What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Different Facets of the ‘Sense of Self’

(adapted and enlarged from D.N. Stern)

- **The Embodied Self**
 - Has bodily coherence; a sense of being complete; a physical whole with good boundaries; the centre of any integrated action, both moving and still. Loss or injury of this leads to feelings of: fragmentation of bodily experience, depersonalization, out-of-body experiences, being ethereal or unreal, possible somatoform disorders, etc.
- **The Spatial Self**
 - A sense of having space; being on firm ground; having the ability to move; the ability to manipulate objects; physical potency. Loss of this leads to feelings of: passivity; helplessness with respect to objects; powerlessness; not feeling one has a ‘proper’ place or home.
- **The Self in Time**
 - A coherent sense of time; has a personal history and a sense of enduring; a sense of continuity with one’s own past or with history; a feeling that one ‘goes on being’; that can change whilst remaining basically the same. Loss of this leads to feelings of: temporal dissociation, fugue states, amnesia, a sense of ‘not being’, fear of change, etc.
- **The Self as Agent**
 - A sense of responsibility for one’s own actions; having volition; feeling in control over self-generated actions; initiating actions. Loss of this leads to feelings of: powerlessness, paralysis, no responsibility for own actions, loss of control to external agents, paranoia, etc.
- **The Emotional Self**
 - A sense of an effective self; experiencing inner qualities of patterned feelings (affects) that ‘belong’ with other experiences of self; being aware of different levels of feelings. Loss of this leads to feelings of: the inability to experience ordinary pleasurable emotions; dissociated states; being unemotional, withdrawn or unavailable; etc.
- **The Relational Self**
 - A sense of belonging or participation; being reasonably friendly and empathic; enjoying the company of others. Loss of this leads to feelings of: isolation; loneliness; being reclusive; anti-social; etc.
- **The (En)gendered Self**
 - A sense of self as male or female; pleasure and security in that; the ability to relate to others as men and women. Loss or injury of this leads to feelings of: fear of sexual relationships; gender identity disorders; homophobia or misogyny; psychosexual dysfunction).
- **The Intellectual Self**
 - A sense of rationality; the ability to study and reason; an awareness of and interest in different ideas that does not threaten. Loss or lack of this leads to feelings of: confusion; inability to be rational; threatened by new or different ideas; etc.

- **The Moral Self**
 - sense that one's actions are (or should be) influenced by social rules, collective rationality or philosophical principles, rather than immediate gains and losses.
- **The Verbal Self**
 - sense of 'ownership' of language and of relationship associated with membership in particular language community
- **The Narrative Self**
 - the self as a set of symbolic narratives (Loss of or injury to leads to neurotic or other problems in work and family relations)
- **The Creative Self**
 - sense of freedom and efficacy in transforming given forms, of dealing with chaos, and of expressing the self
- **The Spiritual Self**
 - a sense of the transpersonal, of transcendence beyond the confines of the individual self

Each of these facets is complex in itself and this only a rough "working model" of ... you!.

Several points should be noted:

- A. These various facets of the sense of self develop at different times in one's life and it is likely that later ones (e.g. verbal and narrative selves) build upon the development of earlier facets (the embodied self, the affective self, etc.)
- B. Most of the facets are non-verbal and develop as a result of early bodily interactions and emotional experiences.
- C. The task of development involves not only the development of each facet, but also their integration into a harmonious whole. This developmental integrational process is the essential inner 'work' of our life and gives a template for any therapy to help to heal any early disruptive or dysfunctional experiences that may have 'damaged' or prevented one of these facets developing.

Further Reading:

- Eugene T. Gendlin: *Focusing: How to Open Up Your Deeper Feelings and Intuition*. Rider & Co: 2003
 Eugene T. Gendlin: *Let Your Body Interpret Your Dreams*. Chiron Publications: 1986
 Helen G. Brenner: *I Know I'm in There Somewhere: A Woman's Guide to Finding Her Inner Voice and Living a Life of Authenticity*. Gotham Books: 2004
 C.K. Germer: *The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion*. Guilford Press: 2003
 Rick Hanson & Richard Mendius: *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom*. New Harbinger Pubs: 2009
 Thich Nhat Hahn: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Rider & Co: 2008
 Thich Nhat Hahn: *Peace is Every Step*. Rider & Co: 1991
 Paul Jones: *How to Live in the Here and Now: A Guide to Accelerated Enlightenment, Unlocking the Power of Mindful Awareness*. O Books: 2009
 Ram Das: *Be Here Now*. Crown Publications, 1971.
 D.N. Stern: *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*. New York: Basic Books: 2000
 D.N. Stern: *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*. New York: Norton: 2004
 John Kabat Zinn: *Full Catastrophe Living (Revised Edition)*. London: Piatkus: 2013.