**Mindfulness in Action - Thursday 3 November 2016**

Summary

A Warm Bashful Alley Welcome**: Arriving here:** Orientating to the rooms, nooks and crannies of Bashful Alley Centre.

Arrivals

Arrivals 1

Finding images on the walls that you like and dislike.

Arrivals 2(A)

Introducing each other: names and journeys to arrive here.

Arrivals 2(B)

Moving/milling and following the sound of your own name with your eyes closed.

Arrivals 3. Returning Practice

Your own special 'returning practice'

The places that you regularly return to for your own mindfulness practice and inspiration.

Departures

Where are we going?

Key Mindfulness-in-Action signposts:

* Expanding Consciousness

 The human capacity for extending sensory awareness.

* Comfort and discomfort

 Looking after yourself during the course.

* The Present Moment – Arrivals, Transits and Departures

 The flowing river of mindfulness.

* The point-of-not-quite-yet

 A Mindfulness-in-Action way to consider the inter-play at the mind- body interface.

* Mindfulness-in-Action and two distinct forms of human thought:

Thinking About: THE STORYTELLER

Thinking Into: THE EXPERIENCER

* Attention as the key
* 'Untensives': A new word for procedures born today!
* Healthy Action: developing a deep curiosity for how your foot lifts from the floor as you walk.
* The Questioning state: The Power of the Question ­ Openness to the unknown.

A Warm Bashful Alley Welcome

We are seven individuals meeting together for the first time. We share a lot: we speak the same language, we all began a journey to get here this morning and to arrive in cobbled Bashful Alley. We all shut behind us, our own front door and for at least a part of the journey, we all walked in the same human way- upright with a striding gait. We all climbed the same steep narrow steps beyond Bashful Alley Centre’s green door. We all walked into room at the top of the stairs - the space that cannot decide quite whether it is a kitchen or an office!

Parts of Bashful Alley Centre are over 500 years old. You can easily imagine walking in the footsteps of many long gone generations. Later on in the morning we consider walking in the pacing steps of the birthing and the dying. But for the moment, we gather together and meet for the first time.

Arrivals and departures are a fascinating aspect of Mindfulness-in-Action. There are three levels of arrival that form an opening invitation and greeting to participants on the Mindfulness-in-Action course.

Arrivals

Arrivals 1

First, there is an invitation to be openly curious about the building that you have just entered. Besides the Kitchen/Office there are three working Spaces: the Room of Openheartedness: the Room of Good Sense and the Room of Healthy Action. There are also a number of other 'secret' rooms with ancient beams and tiny doors that are open for you to explore. How amazing is it that those ancient oak roof-trusses could easily have begun life as saplings 2000 years ago?

An opening Mindfulness-in-Action 'Arrivals' invitation invites you to wander around the rooms and walkways of Bashful Alley Centre and to look at images and writing on the walls. You are asked to select two images: one that you are drawn to and that you like; and another that maybe strikes you quite the opposite way, one that you are, in some way, not drawn to and may not particularly like. You can approach this invitation quite intuitively. You will not be asked to justify your choice! As you do this exercise you will look through the present moment sensations and then, as you perceive and take in the images, you will draw upon various remembered values and past experiences that create within you, a sense of things that you like and are drawn to and also: the other opposite things that you dislike and somehow repel you.

 A little later on we will revisit this experience and perhaps develop and deepen our awareness of it.

Arrivals 2(A)

We meet each other by finding a partner and introducing each other: your name and where you came from and your journey to get here today. In a few sentences you discover where your partner has come from and establish a little about their recent journey to arrive in Bashful Alley.

We face one another as we introduce each other in this interaction, we stand up and we talk. This is highly conventional. It also makes sense: the front of the body is naturally more expressive and communicative! Certainly it would not be the same if the conversation took place back to back.

The next procedure is much less conventional and it contains a host of typical Mindfulness-in-Action challenges.

Arrivals 2(B)

In this Mindfulness-in-Action procedure one partner agrees to close their eyes while the other partner leads the ‘blind' one around the space. A lot goes on in this simple procedure. Trust and cooperation are very important: a trust in one's own process and a trust in the partner who leads you around space.

We are breathtakingly good at this - but only if you are prepared to leave yourself alone. The state we might enter into is the awakened and alert state of our ancestors. We are here, alive and present today because our ancestors were the forebears that survived. If this opening connection is made then the 'blind' partner is brought rivetingly into the Present Moment. Then the ***brain-between-the-ears*** will re-enmesh with ***the brain-below-the-ears.*** The whole head-to-toe length of the body is brought into an intense and listening state of poise. An active form of listening is engaged: We are ***'listening loudly'***. This will bring the spine into a poised length. With the vivid reconnection, the axis of the spine uncoils as if taking a finger from off a coiled spring. The body will turn around the axis of the spine with an uncanny precision as the head, balanced as it is on an axis that spans between the ears, spins around to follow the direction of the call of your name.

This Mindfulness-in-Action procedure is a fast-track way to experience an important and awakening aspect of the right effort of attention. It can be like waking up from a mechanical sleep, in some respects it is like reconnecting with the kindred spirits of our natural living ancestors, a way of linking deep into our origins and a way to walk in the footsteps of our predecessors.

Arrivals 3. Returning Practice

Mindfulness-in-Action explores ways to expand consciousness and awareness. We share so many things but in other important ways we are also unique, different and individual. One of the trajectories that bring our lives together on the course is a shared interest in Mindfulness, but we can come to it from many different starting points.

Over the years an important Mindful-in-Action maxim or slogan has developed. It suggests a crucial priority:

***Mindfulness first awakens before it informs***

It is a perfectly valid reason to enroll on a course such as this in order to find out more about mindfulness practice. However Mindfulness-in-Action practice itself is not so much ***learning about,*** as ***going into:*** particularly going into present moment experience. Later we shall consider important 'ripples in the pool' that emanate out from this important Mindfulness-in-Action maxim.

Your own special 'returning practice'

This opening 'Arrivals'session invites you to check that you have fully arrived and to sit quietly with yourself for five minutes. It is quite possible that many of us will arrive here with our own established returning practices. I liken such returning practices to something akin to a corkscrew-like auger that spins around - a bit like an oilrig drill. If it is a good routine practice, then each time you return to it, it will take you deeper and deeper into the experience of yourself. This invitation also openly acknowledges that what might work brilliantly well for you might not be quite so effective for another individual.

Just in case the idea of a practice that you routinely return to for Mindfulness practice is a new idea to you, I offer a little optional framework for this next short meditation. This is also based on listening loudly – in fact it links nicely into the practice earlier where you followed your name as you moved blindly around the space. My suggested framework also focuses on the listening sense. It likens the movement of sound in the air as being like ripples on the surface of the lake...

 *You float effortlessly in the centre of the lake of sound. There are distant sound-ripples. Out towards the shoreline the sound-ripples are just out of earshot. Then, as you open your ears to listen loudly, an imaginary distant songbird sings...*

Departures

Where are we going?

Expanding Consciousness

As human beings we have higher and lower qualities. An undoubted higher quality is the unique human capacity for conscious awareness. It is possible for us to observe mental activity within the field of our awareness. The capacity to observe mental events is a key feature of Mindfulness-in-Action. The right effort of attention can open up a vigilant self-watchfulness: A capacity to observe oneself without judgment.

Comfort and discomfort

This special effort of attention is emphasized at the start of the course with regard to comfort and discomfort. There are special and largely unexamined challenges to living as we all do, in a 'comfort society'. Likes and dislikes shape expectations with regard to our comfort zones. While every effort is made on these courses to look after your comfort and safety it is very important to emphasize that you look after yourself as we go through the many Mindfulness-in-Action challenges and explorations.

This heightened self-watchfulness is a flat playing field. If you are in a state of comfort it will invite you to observe the 'tissue-life' of your comfort. If you’re in a state of discomfort it will invite you to tune in to 'the tissue life' of your discomfort. At the end of the day, this process is revealed as something ***as simple as having kindness and care for yourself and also to extending that care and kindness to others***. So please: stay watchful, and if at any point you have a strong reason to leave any particular session, I am sure you will do it with care and concern for others in the group.

The Present Moment – Arrivals Transits and Departures

Discovering the richness of Life and sensations in the present moment is the key axis of Mindfulness-in-Action. My harrowing experience with my mother’s final years of dementia have made me very wary of any simplistic notions that I might once have had with regard to being in the Now. To be trapped in the present moment without any access to lines of connection with the past and the future is not heaven but human hell!

It helps to think that the present moment is not a state or a place but a flowing ongoing process. The movement, the flow means that there are continual arrival points, transitions and departures. Every aspect of the present moment is movingly rich and deeply fascinating. To appreciate the 'through-put' aspects of the present moment is an important dimension of Mindfulness-in-Action. To fully engage with the present moment gives as an opportunity to learn from the past and to constructively prepare for the future. Since Life is only present in the present moment that is where it all happens...

...If by a wave of a magic wand you could right now enter fully into the present moment then you would fully appreciate this: it is **taking you somewhere you have never ever been before:** every step, every breath every heartbeat, every action is kaleidoscopically different! Something within us mysteriously creates a pervasive illusion of sameness. This ever-changing flux and flow, depending on your mood, can be exhilarating or terrifying! It’s all sensational!

The point-of-not-quite-yet

The point or the moment-of-not-quite-yet is a highly important Mindfulness-in-Action idea or concept. A name or label: ***'the moment-of-not-quite-yet'***, has been created with the purpose of being able to point toward, or to guide your attention in a particular way in Mindfulness-in-Action practices.

A moment of reflection reveals how: simply everything that goes out into the world out there and that is modulated by muscle action, has a split second moment just before the muscles tweak and twitch into action. If you think of the river of sensations entering the present moment as being like a flowing river, then as the river enters into the present moment, it becomes like a cascade or waterfall. So, there is a moment in the flow just before the water cascades down into the present moment. *The moment-of-not-quite-yet, if you are present, represents the Mind-Body interface.* The aim is to be present in a playful, watchful and observant way. The mystery of it certainly deserves wonder awe and a deep curiosity! It requires discipline, great skill and acuity to navigate a way to this important mind-body interface.

A great deal has already happened by the time the moment-of-not-quite-yet is reached: This territory is referred to as ***'Non-Doing'*** because it is not driven by muscle energy ***(***aptly referred to as '***Doing***'). Powerful turbines have turned in the brain that consume a fine form of neuro-energy. The brain draws on 25% of the total energy cost of running the whole body and of course, there are NO muscles in your brain. Being present for and watchful over this neuro-power or activity draws on our highest human capacities. Proceed with consideration and care because it is a Big Call!

Mindfulness-in-Action and two distinct forms of human thought

The working framework offered here suggests that we embody ***two different types of thought*** (both of them forms of neuro-power!): One type of thought ***thinks about*** things and the other one ***thinks into*** them. As we shall soon see, they are very different from one another. We are very conditioned and familiar with only one of these types of thinking and you will discover for yourself that only one of these types of thinking permits a mindful entry to the sensations of the present moment. Unfortunately it is *not* the one we are most familiar with!

Here is a brief summary these two qualities: how they are named and labeled and their significant differences.

Thinking About: THE STORYTELLER or **THE REMEMBERING SELF**

We are very centred, schooled and conditioned in this type of thought. It endlessly thinks about things. It is very much language based. With the powerful aid of this form of thought we can push immediate experience to a necessary distance and we are able to name and label experience. It is exceptionally good at solving problems and runs a specialty in creating life scripts, narratives and the story lines that we weave and tell in order make sense of our experiences and ourselves. Another name to refer to this quality is: **THE REMEMBERING SELF** because it is the repository of memories that support the ego or Little Self.

Thinking Into: THE EXPERIENCER or **the EXPERIENCING SELF**

In our own culture this form of thought is unrefined and little developed. It is ***NOT*** language based and it does ***NOT*** think about things and it does solve problems. It is engaged by a particular ***effort of attention*** with which, rather than solving problems, it **de-solves** them or ***dissolves*** them. It works by dissolving the obstacles to an otherwise better flow of life and integrity. In lots of ways **the EXPERIENCING SELF** is actually the entry into present moment sensations and importantly as well an exit from the suffering and contortions of the human ego or Little Self.

Attention is the key to Mindfulness

Given only one word to describe Mindfulness-in-Action it would have to be: *'attention*'. The right effort of attention forms the entry point to present moment sensations and importantly, the exit door from a huge raft of human egoistic suffering. The right effort of attention can create an expansion in human consciousness and awareness. It continues to be the job of this is a inclusive form of attention to spot and select important salient features in this expansion of consciousness. As we broach this possibility, it is humbling to reflect tha***t all we can ever take from the raging River of Sensation is a tiny drople***t. Getting this right requires great openness, delicacy and skill.

'*Untensives'*: A new word for procedures - born today!

Mindfulness-in-Action practices involve periods of time in which you are invited to exercise the effort of attention that opens into the present moment sensations and a type of thinking different from ***thought***-about-things: this is: **thinking-into-in-action**.

On the train journey here today I was reflecting on the bracketed Mindfulness-in-Action periods of time and the way they seemed to me to demand an INTENSIVE focused attention. I stopped thinking about the process and then I then thought into the present moment experience of it. It became crystal clear in that moment, that the word 'in-tense-ive' was hopelessly inadequate and actually miles off-target. Because what happens in these procedures always involves ***a letting go of tension***: a release, a freeing-up, the made-up word “UNTENSIVE” is much better. This process is indeed how human consciousness is able to expand - ***by undoing whatever is preventing it!*** So in that moment I created the word ***'UNTENSIVE'***. It is a much more satisfying and accurate term or label for the characteristic letting-go that is engaged in these procedures.

**Procedural note:** *A typical Mindfulness-in-Action 'Untensive' session will have a clear end and beginning, one that is clearly marked by music/song/ or sometimes the sound of a bell.*

Healthy Action: developing a deep curiosity for how your foot lifts from the floor

This introductory session was a preparation for a forthcoming untensive procedure that will take us deep into the process of how you lift your foot when you walk.

A great deal of the human brain’s unconscious activity involves organizing and preparing the body for action. A fundamental part of this process features something that we are generally unaware of and pay very little attention to: the way that our physical weight is being continuously managed.

In this Mindfulness-in-Action session we engage with an awareness of the extraordinary sensations in the present moment that are involved in simply standing still. There is a huge amount of activity and also a huge metabolic cost in keeping your body standing upright. It requires constant movement to maintain dynamic balance. Even when this is being managed wonderfully well and in the most balanced way, there is always constant movement: those slight adjustment that have to be made to prevent us falling over. This is similar to adjusting the tip and travel of a pole that you might balance on your fingertip.

You are invited to explore the simple process of shifting weight from one foot to the other. We can easily achieve this. We can do it! It is obvious that we can achieve this but the quest here is to enquire into the process: so just exactly ***how*** this weight transference is in being modulated:

* So - exactly how does each foot accept the shift of bodyweight?
* Are there any differences in the way that the left and the right foot takes weight?
* How much can you ease and release from head to toe as one side is freed from the role of supporting your weight?

As we all walked here this morning through cobbled Bashful Alley approximately 80% of the time, in your walking gait, you will have supported yourself on one leg. That you can lift your foot off the floor to achieve this in order to walk (rather than shuffle!) is a certainty. It is characteristic of Mindfulness-in-Action practices we want to challenge habitual certainties such as this – we want to open up to its automatic nature and to question it. This kind of questioning particularly engages the Experiencing Self. You are invited to go deeply into this and to consider not the end-product, but the process: exactly how do you achieve lifting your foot lift from the floor in order to take a walking step. Can you embrace this uncertainty? Can you think into the action?

In this session you were invited to take your attention into the extraordinary process of how we manage, balance and transfer weight from one foot to the other. Consider it as ***play*** – as an **inter**-***play*** – it's serious fun!

As this session developed we used various ‘cradling’ rhythms to hold the action together - mostly from the natural living peoples of Africa, while we also explored in detail what happens to change a step into a stamp:

***“JEEK-A-LEE-LAY”*** means, everybody turn around.

***“GWEE-JAH-LEE-LAY***" means, everyone is welcome.

"HIM-NAN DJEE-LEM-BELO" means, yes – but life is great!

The Questioning state: The Power of the Question

Mindfulness-in-action Maxim: *the joy of learning is not in knowing the answers but in the process of finding out.*

In this session you are invited to allow some spoken questions simply to resound and echo in yourself. You are particularly invited to observe closely how the Remembering Self may react to these questions: for example, please notice: how does your remembering self react to:

 Questions that you think you know the answer to

 Questions that don't seem to make any sense at all

 Questions that you may feel you should know the answer to and perhaps do not

 Questions you simply do not know the answer to.

This is really an exercise in observing comfort and discomfort and in how we have been conditioned with regard to knowing the answers and not knowing. The invitation guides you to a starting point in which you allow the resonance of the questions to be suffused with a sense of openness: perhaps along the lines of:

"I do not know.

 I am comfortable with not knowing.

 I am open and curious as to how, TOGETHER we might act, think, cooperate in order to discover".

We could perhaps dip into a venerable ancient wisdom tradition and consider that the process that we are exploring here as coming close to the essence of the ***Socratic method.*** Socrates is said to have died being absolutely sure of only one thing: That he did not know. As perhaps the wisest person that's ever lived on the planet interestingly, he also reputedly, never wrote anything down!

Question 1. How many vowels sounds are there in human spoken speech?

Question 2. How big is your armpit?

Question 3. How many bones are there in your body?

Question 4. What is a life lived with meaning?

Question 5. What proportion of the human brain is conscious?

Question 6. How many individual cells constitute the human body?

Question 7. What is the precise distance right now between your elbows?

Question 8. Where on the planet is the city of Uruk?

Question 9. What happened in the city of Uruk to completely transform the course of human history?

Question 10. What was your original face in the moment just before you were conceived?

Question 12. What word in the English language is the exact opposite of the word "dementia"?

 Question 13. What is the difference between awareness and attention?

Question 14. How much does your sense of self weigh?

The first session closed with a 5 minute 'Untensive' Meditation:

This is a silent contemplation that simply made a space for any question that is perhaps particularly resonant for you in the moment.

I shared my own inner question regarding a feeling that ***nothing is ever good enough*** and how it becomes an anxiety for me that I never prepare enough for a course. Through questioning I would like this particular demon to be positioned so I am looking it straight in the eye, rather than allow it to ‘cattle prod’ my backside as it has done most of my life!

Thank you for all that you brought to the first meeting!

John Woodward, 3rd November 2016

Mindfulness in Action - Thursday 10 November 2016

Summary

Arrivals: Shared experience. The Mindfulness-in-Action Philosophy of First Times

Liked and disliked images revisited. Flow and tactics.

Untensive 1) Expanding your awareness into your standing body

A short easy meditation that ‘builds’ the length of your standing body from the floor-up. Bringing an experience of integrity, a dignity of length to your backbone.

Untensive 2) Re-engaging the brain-between-the ears with the brain-below-the-ears

A variation on last week’s listening loudly procedure - this time we used music to guide movements as you move blindfold through space.

The Opposites Game: Movement/Milling: Stop/Go; Walk/Run; Dance/Sing

Untensive 3) The Remembering Self and the Experiencing Self

The poetry locked into your front door

A sidewise exploration into poetry, stories, song and narratives. How the poetic nature of present-moment experience underpins the language and thinking of the Remembering Self. The expansion of consciousness and soundscapes. Listening loudly revisited.

A brief introduction to developmental Neuro-biology

Your skin as your brain turned inside out. Insights derived from embryology-how your brain grows from the bottom-up and from the back to the front. The “lizard brain”/ the Limbic System and 5 five key functions: ***MAMMA.*** How the conscious forebrain structures link with the ancient emotional limbic system.

Untensive 4) A 20 minute guided meditation

The skin and your brains ‘GCHQ’ Security System. A closing wish: May we all be safe and well!

Arrivals: Shared experience and a Mindfulness-in-Action Philosophy of First Times

We all left home this morning. We shut the front door behind us and we took the dozen or so first walking steps to arrive here in the kitchen/office.

You are invited to revisit again, the opening exercise from last week, the one in which you walked around the Centre and chose an image or writing on the wall that appealed to you, and one that you did not like. In one important respect this exercise is different: it is the second time that you have done it! There is an important Mindfulness in Action Principle often referred to as the philosophy of first times. This is based on a reality: that every breath, that every heartbeat, that every moment is subtly different as the configuration of tension and release in muscles becomes slightly different from any previous moment. Wow!! No wonder we so desperately need to create anchorages and fixed points in all that ever-changing flux!

This week the exercise is different in another way: This time you cover the same ground and you walk around all the rooms and spaces, but you are invited not to stop at any point, but this time to keep flowing and moving through the space. Of course, you are also invited to stay aware of all that is around you as you go round and at some point in the exercise you will pass by your liked and disliked images. So it is the same exercise but different! There is a different 'tactic': this time your attention is invited to be more broadly engaged- not actively looking but simply flowing by - just being here. 'Tactic' by the way, is by origin an ancient Greek word that means, 'arranging or ordering'. So in a way, this exercise involves mindfully observing how you arrange your experience into some kind of order. Arranging things into a better coherence and order comes interestingly close to the root meaning of 'Integration'.

Untensive 1) Expanding your awareness into your standing body

Standing is a considerable activity. It comes at quite a high metabolic cost– there is a lot going on! Stability and balance form the underpinning of all human movement. A moment’s reflection on the sheer amount of time and energy and attention it took as a human youngster, to stand upright, before taking your first walking step. Perhaps this will convey well, the true significance of such ongoing human achievements.

We are the most restless and unstable of creatures! It is all so improbable: rearing up on our hind-legs and making such a remarkable successful evolutionary ‘go’ of things! This achievement stretches to the full, the parameters of balance within the four-legged mammalian design. What we lose in stability, we gain in an extraordinarily successful responsiveness and adaptability. Key parts deep in your brain have been extended to accommodate to these achievements. Balance requires a considerable amount of neuro-power! In this procedure we simply intend to be present for some of the extraordinary nature of this sub-cortical activity. A mind-ful appreciation of this, as ever, can turn the grey and ordinary into the awesome and the extraordinary!

In this First Untensive exercise of the session you expand and extend your awareness into the length of your standing body. A different type of thinking is involved. It involves consciousness. It does not involve a self-conscious judgmental thinking about how well or badly you are standing. It does involve an effort of attention to engage the Mindfulness in-action thinking-into-action mode as the conscious mind engages with the sensations of the present moment.

In this case our interest and attention is in sensations that underpin the continuous adjustments in your balancing standing body. Many times a day you can use this short procedure, especially in those moments of downtime and modern ennui when you are standing in queues at supermarkets and waiting for your turn at the ATM or whilst waiting: *“while you listen carefully to the following seven options*”.

In this procedure we will 'build' the length of your body from the feet upwards to the head. In a number of different ways it also catches the key Mindfulness in Action Bottom-up Principle that was introduced last week.

You think of your body as a series of boxes or segments that are stacked one on top of the other. Start by taking your awareness into your feet. As you stack 'the boxes' one on top of the other, alignment is a key issue: It is as if you want to carefully stack the central gravity of one box in an ordered way on top of the other. That is the tactic here!

Your awareness spreads and extends to your feet. Feet are special in so many ways. They are the foundations of support for so much of our movement and gait. They are also exceptionally rich in sensation: no other area of the body, besides the lips, has anything close to the number of sensory detectors per unit area. They are also special in being one of only two areas of the body marked out as being exceptional and special by having four layers of musculature, as opposed to the rest of the body that has only ‘the standard issue’ three layers. The abdomen is the only other special zone having four layers.

With your awareness now expanded to take in the richness of sensations coming from the sole of your foot, you may begin to explore swaying weight around, back and forth and from side to side. Simply follow and be with, the way that your weight transmission shifts and changes.

You may shrug your shoulders and take upright balance for granted as we so often do, but the whole process of standing upright is exactly like balancing a pole on your fingertip. It is the feet that behave like the responsive fingertip touch on the base of the balancing pole, constantly adjusting the tip and travel. An expanded and grateful conscious awareness can be, as always, a source of awe or even celebration! This is very much a part of Mindfulness-in-action!

You may now progress upward from your feet taking-in the length of your standing body. This is a Mindfulness in Action Untensive procedure so as you go through it ***less tension*** is involved in maintaining uprightness. Often this will indeed work wonderfully well to untense you, to free and to liberate tension by the blessing or touch that is the presence of your attention in a particular area of the body. What it unlocks here is a continual and cosmically complex interchange. It works simply ***to swap the unnecessary tensions of holding and stiffness for the ease and responsiveness of balance***. Such adaptability is our evolutionary inheritance. You do not do this you undo whatever is preventing it! We are delving deep into the sub-cortical territory of Non-Doing.

 As you progress upwards through the length of your standing body, you will systematically add one 'box' or body-segment on top of the other:

First:

* The shinbones placed up on top of the feet;
* Then the thighbones;
* The pelvis;
* The 'mast' of the backbone as it fits into 'the boat' of the pelvis;
* The basket of the ribs;
* The yoke of the arms and shoulders on top of the ribs;
* And lastly your head the final segment as it sits - plonk - on top of the column of the spine.

There is a handy refinement of this standing meditation in which you attune to a soft springy release in the back of your knee. In essence this is a related untensive process that does not add to the overall amount of tension but helps to reduce it.

You can use this next little procedure in the same way as you would use the bubble in a spirit level in order to check on your alignment. In this procedure you begin by deliberately taking your weight back onto the heels. Very slowly you ease your head-to-toe weight forward. At a certain point you hit a 50/50-balance point between the heel and the ball of the foot and the back of the knee will soften, open and release. This will indicate that your entire head-to-toe structure is now optimally well aligned with gravity. It means that gravity is now being used to actually keep your structure upright and balanced without superfluous and restrictive stiffness or fixity.

A word from the ancient wisdom traditions: According to the ancient Greeks it is this process of becoming uniquely upright that potentially makes human beings a messenger for the Gods! We are marked out as special with our feet at one end on the clay-earth and our head at the other in the heavens. The ancient Greeks were psycho- physically very advanced! Culturally we seem to be failing dismally with this connection between the earth and heavens!

A CODA: At the end of this procedure, hopefully, we finish up with a greater presence of mind and in this more mindful state we recalled and remembered those liked and disliked images that we passed while walking around the Centre.

The invitation that brought the session to a close, suggested that you to attempt to bring some of the elements of the liked image to the disliked one, and vice versa: to bring some element of the liked image to disliked one. Just be curious and watchful as to what might drop out of this.

The game of opposites: Healthy confusion

Kids just love games that makes language playful in this way! It is a game that celebrates a ***healthy confusion***. Somewhere in the roots of the word 'confusion' is a sense of that healthiness: 'Con' means 'with' and 'fusion' so it could mean 'coming together'!

We moved briskly around dodging each other. When the leader says “Stop” you respond immediately by stopping dead in your tracks. When the leader says “Go” - you start again dodging around. And then we play around by swapping the meaning of the words: "Stop" "Go" to mean the opposite. This game extends to "Walk/Run" and "Dance/Sing". These words and actions then swap around in meaning and the 'healthy confusion' grows!

Untensive 2) Re-engaging the brain-between-the ears and the brain-below-the-ears

The second Untensive of the session also revisited some aspects of a procedure that we explored last week in which we let go so exclusively of existing solely in our heads. Again the procedure is the same but very slightly different: in this session instead of using names, we used pure sound to orientate the body through space with your eyes closed.

Discomfort. This procedure brought up highly important issues concerning comfort. Some participants found this challenging and uncomfortable. Discomfort is invaluable material for mindfulness practice. It is indeed a Big Ask, but the challenge here is to observe and penetrate into the tissue-life of the discomfort as it comes up in the moment. Ideally we want to be present for this important learning resource so we have it straight in front of us and so we can question:

* Does it involve fear?
* Does it involve mistrust?
* Is there a sense of closing down in the face of an overload of information?

We cannot achieve this open questioning if we react to the discomfort. If we can be mindful and open then some very interesting and responsive choices may well open up in future. Characteristically such discomforts work reactively driving us from behind and keep us within the narrow confines of our comfort zones. ***We live and operate within a comfort society***. This is bound to be difficult and challenging!

Untensive 3) The Remembering Self and the Experiencing Self. The poetry locked in your front door

In this Mindfulness-in-Action exploration we work in pairs and describe to each other our familiar front door and also we give an account of the first dozen or so steps to get here today. The chances are that these accounts will begin by being quite factual and that is fine, but you can if you like, include something of your feelings about your own front door. For example: what it is about your front door that is unique and special to you. What would enable you to easily pick it out from a builder’s yard full of other people’s front doors? What special memories does it hold?

We take a couple of minutes each way, to listen to each other and to tell stories about our front door.

Then, before the next part of the exercise we once again, reflect on the huge amount of information that is subconsciously transmitted beyond the straightforward meaning of words, this includes: tone of voice, gesture, body language.

Tales told to us by Herr H. a 600.000 year old German skull

This next Untensive procedure was prefixed by a short telling of the intriguing story of an ancient human skull found near Heidelberg in Germany. We know for sure by carbon dating, that this ancestor, subsequently called Heidelbergerensis lived some 600,000 years ago. Through a fascinating bit of modern forensic archaeological science, we can fairly reasonably deduce that our early hominid ancestor almost certainly possessed all the necessary hardware necessary for speech and language. However it seems equally likely that Herr H. and his kind would not have been in the possession of the necessary software 'neuro-power': the brain capacity required ‘to run’ speech and language. Now we know from the fossil record that Herr H. and his clan successfully survived for around 1 million years before eventually morphing into a creature much more 'wordy' - like us. So what on earth were the Heidelbergerensis crew doing and more importantly, how did they communicate? A reasonable hypothesis is that they communicated through: pitch, tone of voice, sign language and gesture. In short they sang and chanted to each other, very much as we still instinctively do today with our very young children. I am going to refer to the zone that underpins our speech and language, one that we all still possess to some degree as: 'the poetic dimension'. You are about to be invited to enter into this zone. But before we delve in some depth into this poetic dimension we reflect for a moment on the ancient wisdom tradition claim that:

“In the beginning was the Word.”

It is important to bear in mind that ‘the Logos ‘or Word referred to “in the beginning”, would be heard for millennia before it was ever seen. It was only relatively recently that some human genius in the ancient Mesopotamian city of Uruk thought up the outrageous and extraordinary idea of writing a word down. This allowed the word for the first time to be recorded and so for the first time to be seen and eventually, and not necessarily anymore heard! The rest is history. In that particular transformative beginning pre-history became his-story!

A personal note: I love the challenges, the craft and 'the nuts and bolts' of writing. It is interesting and I want you to know, that I find great difficulty in writing about the experience of this part of the workshop. Whatever difficulty and discomforts there are here demand of me that I mindfully sit and, to go into them...

Running

Every time your door opens

I fall

I fall

There are two steps and

I am falling down

Down into the rubbish skip of cracked broken promises.

Every time the door opens - it’s the same -

Step stumble step

Step stumble step

We run away

We run away in different directions

You and your crumbly pie-in-the-sky promises

They flake like the blues on your front door

John Woodward 10 November 2016. (The day that the world heard that Leonard Cohen had died)...

...The next part of this procedure involves taking a few sentences from your partner and their account of their front door and of their first few steps and condensing it down even further into a few of the words the sound or feel of which somehow grab your attention.

The three guide rules for what happens next to make an entry into the poetic dimension seem very simple - which does not necessarily mean easy!

* Repeat things;
* Put in lots of pauses and spaces;
* Listen loudly.

A normal 'wordy' conversation is a bit like a tennis match. You ‘serve’ your words and they are ‘returned’ from the other side of the net. Something significant may change in this exercise: you can be chanting words and spaces and doing it all at the same time.

Eventually, if you settle into this dimension the whole room fills with a shared sound-scape. You may expand your awareness to include everyone else in the room. It was wonderful how quite spontaneously and naturally not only sounds and words, but also gestures started to be shared amongst the group.

Perhaps there is something inherently musical here? In a Mozart opera five people sing entirely different things with entirely different words and it communicates - well - magically. The same five people speaking loudly at you and all at the same time would be cacophony!

This session finished with a song:

BOM-BAH-LENA-EE-AH-EE-OH: a song from the Ba - Ma Mbuti pygmies of the Cameroonian rainforest

“BOM-BAH-LENA-EE-AH-EE-OH” Now you have no idea what this might mean in the language of the Ba – Ma- Mbuti pygmies but nonetheless, you accurately guessed more than half of its meaning!

Such chants and songs as this are so far away from our idea about singing and performance! Part of the purpose of these chants is practical: Because these natural living peoples live, hunt and forage in dense jungle foliage, all day long, they will keep up continuous song such as BOM-BAH-LENA-EE-AH-EE-OH: it means “It keeps the group in close touch and all without digital media!!

The pygmies will be keen to convince you that their singing and chant is not only a deep celebration of an intimate connection to the world around them but is also a very refined form of echolocation: they 'read' the changing forest in this way. Such possibilities are largely off our radar but they are still there somewhere locked in our genes.

A short introduction to developmental Neuro-biology

Integration: Two becomes one

The point-of-not-quite-yet is a key transit stage in Mindfulness-in-Action. It represents the moment fractionally before a muscle action begins. Another 'point-of-not-quite-yet' moment and yet another equal source of wonder, is the moment just before a sperm penetrates the egg or ovum. This is the moment just before your individual life was created and began. We are bundles of matter and energy and information that move through space and time. In this particular extraordinary event, two separate and distinct bundles of matter, energy and information flow together and become one single individual entity: YOU. Two becomes one. So right from the very beginning there is a process of integration. 'Integer' means whole. Integration then, is a process of becoming more whole. It is not a giant step to consider this in terms of a healing process. But the important point here is that right from the start, ***life is about integration.*** From that extraordinary integration-moment when two-becomes-one, we are just about to follow some of the key ‘neuro-players’ in the game of life and integration through the complex maze of embryonic growth.

The one becomes many: The 3 layers

Very rapidly after the two-becomes-one moment, a huge energy explosion is initiated in which cells fervently divide and multiply. At first the cells are exact copies, clones that are identical one to the other. Eventually this spinning 'Catherine wheel' firework of exploding cell growth reaches a point when the cells begin to differentiate: they are no longer the same cell repeatedly multiplying. It is at this point that the expanding 'glob' of cell growth forms itself into three plates or distinct layers. This process is called lamination. Quite rapidly this forms a ball of cells with three distinct layers:

This early unfurling of a basic ‘triune’ plan is still with us in the present moment: now, in the form of 3 distinct complex systems that form:

**1) An outer layer (ecto-derm);**

1. **A middle layer (meso-derm)**

**3) The inner layer (endo-derm**

Neuro-Power: Matter Energy and Information flow from insides to outsides

We can glean important simple pointers from how things develop at this very early stage of embryonic growth. Remember that the outer layer is set to become the brain and nervous system. The specialist proto-neuron cells that develop on the outer layer of that blastosphere, operate right from the start to modulate **the flow of information and energy between the inside and the outside of the developing fetus**. Remember that a key feature of integration is to maintain and enhance wholeness, as life in the form of matter energy and information, flowing across various membrane separating insides from outsides.

As the process of differentiation in these laminating plates grows they now desperately need space to continue to expand and grow. They create space by starting to fold in complex ways. It becomes like a wonderfully complex form of origami! The cells on the outside now fold in on themselves and create a kind of valley that enables a process of folding inwards. This inward folding is called invagination.

A Hand Model: how your skin, Nervous System and Brain grow

To get a sense of how this works hold out your two hands with the palms facing one another and then bring each fingertip loosely into contact with its opposite fingertip. In this way your two hands now form the equivalent of the ball of developing foetal cells. Now begin to fold your fingers inwards - until you finish up with two fists that are pressed together knuckle to knuckle. As your fingers fold inwards, this represents the journey that the cells that form your brain and nervous system made early on in embryonic growth. The proto-neuron cells of the Central Nervous System (CNS) migrated from the outside to eventually arrive and become your brain, safely encased inside the skull. In this analogy with your hand, your fingernails that finished up deep in the palm of your fisted hand, represent your brain while the outside surface of your hands remains on the outside to develop as the intimate partner of your brain:skin. The important point here is the all these neurons (and eventually there will be a hundred billion of them in your brain), began life on the surface of that ball of cells and despite the complexity, they continue to do the simple job of integrating flows of energy and information between inside and outside. There are more possible interactions between neurons in your brain than there are atoms in the known universe but despite this cosmic complexity, there remains a revealing simplicity buried in their origins. It is essentially about integration, about drawing together disparate elements and an ongoing process that is continuously figuring out better ways to form themselves into more life-enhancing wholes.

The brain grows from the bottom up and from the back to the front

We are now leaving the developing foetus at the point when it is still only days old, in order to take a great leap forward in the process of brain growth, one that continues to develop throughout early infancy. How the brain develops from the bottom-up i.e. from the spinal chord upwards and also from the back to the front is significant and may help to understand important priorities.

Once again my presentation uses the wonderfully ingenious hand-model devised by neuro-scientist Dan Siegel to help to understand some key details:

Hold out one hand with your five fingers outstretched. Look at the palm of your hand. Where your wrist enters the palm of your hand there are bulges both at the base of the thumb and on the little finger side of your palm. These bulges represent the brainstem. It is a bulbous extension developing on top of the spinal-cord which is represented by your wrist. The brainstem contains all the vital regulatory functions. It looks after breathing, heartrate, balance. Also at the brainstem level are vital features that look after the body's survival mechanisms of fight, flight or freeze responses.

You can consider the further growth of your brain as the development of the thumb and your four fingers. As it is in the hand, it is the thumb that is quite special. Take your thumb and fold it across into the palm of your hand. Then wrap your fingers around so that your thumb is now buried deep in the palm of your fisted hand. Your thumb now represents the ancient Limbic System. There are five core-functions stored in this ancient Limbic area sometimes called the 'Lizard Brain'. I remember these important core functions by thinking of the acronym: Mamma. Here are the five core functions and the limbic system:

M.A.M.M.A

Motivational states. Arousal. Sex Drive

Appraisal. How the Limbic System assign value and significance.

Memory. This is not explicit memories but implicit memory. Feelings.

Mammalian love and care for the young. Attachment. Bonding.

Affect. Primitive emotional states like anger, disgust, rage, fear.

So the rest of the brain grows around the thumb as the fingers of your hand fold around your thumb (the ancient limbic system). The growth pattern is from back to front. The functions that are represented by the back of your hand are the ones that map the external world through the portals of the senses. Bear in mind that all of the senses sometimes called extero-receptors: the eyes and taste and smell ***are all directly derived from the Mammy and Daddy of all the senses the Touch Sense.*** Perhaps the order in which this develops reflects the fact that first you have to sense what is happening before you plan appropriate actions. The frontal areas of your brain represented by your folded fingers, are involved in planning and regulating action. The second joint of your finger represents the pre-motor cortex. The very last joints and in particular your fingernails represents the most important and advanced bulbous extension to the brain that is called the pre-frontal cortex. This high-level system of regulation controls actions and reactions - especially the primitive emotions of the limbic system to which it is intimately connected.

It has recently been established that the highest capacity that human beings are capable of, is the function of the prefrontal cortex which has been aptly dubbed 'the Power of Won’t': This is a Non-Doing capacity. It does not make things happen. It holds you back from reaction. It has the capacity to veto at a higher level, various plans, decisions and emotional reactions. This is the area of the brain that can ease you off automatic pilot. Even at this very highest level of a uniquely human capacity, the essential thrust of neuro-power remains essentially about energy and information flow with the aim of maintaining an improved integrity of the whole.

Untensive 4) A 20 minute Mindfulness-in-Action Meditation “May all be safe and well”

The sense of one's self is always situated in the present moment: we always are positioned somewhere in space and time. We are six different individuals who occupy the same room space. In this procedure you are invited to inwardly turn your attention in order to more fully tune-in to the specific relationship between the inner space contained within your skin, and the outer space contained within the four walls of the room.

Your attention is guided to an expanding awareness by way of the thought-in-action mode. Your consciousness in the present moment opens and spreads to an awareness of the surface of your skin.

In this procedure we celebrate the high degree of control that we have over our attention and how it can be controlled to move around between both inner and outer spaces. We touch into a sense of the important boundary between inner and outer space by selecting points on the skin surface and then radiating imaginary lines outwards to the four surrounding walls. As these lines multiply it develops an exquisite sense of the exact volume and shape taken by your sitting body. As you move your attention around following these projected lines, whenever a line intersects with another body/self in the room, you may acknowledge and deeply respect their presence by breaking the line until you get to the other side of their inner space and continue out to the wall.

We sit quite intimately still in this procedure and it builds up a mindful sense of how in the moment, the structures of our bodies relate to each other within the space of the room. From that still and present-centred awareness, even a tiny movement: a lift of the finger or a raise of the elbow creates a shimmering and complex kaleidoscopic shifting of the radiating lines.  If we were to go on upstairs from this still place, and begin to explore movement and action, the inner space and outer space would change in incredibly complex ways.

In this Mindfulness-in-Action procedure the experiencing self is guided through thought-into-action and mentored to an awareness of the global head to toe nature of the skin. The meditation guides your attention finally zeroing-in as it finds a site-specific place on the skin surface: the place that the air around becomes the current of breath as it enters through the nostrils or lips.

There is a free play with attention as it moves back and forth from the breath to different points on the outside 'edges' of the body.  Attention moves out from different points on your body surface and out into the surrounding space pausing at different points, sometimes this might be on a particular body surface spot and then sometimes it may move out as far out of the walls, or perhaps it may pause a while at arm’s length. Eventually this creates that strong sense of the complex space or the volume occupied by the body as if seen from the outside.

Attention now fully comes to focus on the entry point of the breath. This is the point on the body surface around the nostrils and lips where the diffuse air in the space around the body becomes the focused flowing current of air that then enters only outside to travel deep into the inside of the body. The nostrils and lips becomes a useful symbol for crossing an important line or threshold between the inside and the outside of the body.

Every breath crosses a series of membranes as it travels deeper and deeper into the body. Eventually the breath will nourish every part of the interior of the body and this will include the brain. The brain draws upon approximately a quarter of the total metabolic cost of 'running' a body. We are currently now ‘surf-riding’ the current of the breath as it moves around the body. Eventually this can take us deep into an ancient circuitry that is buried deep within your brain. The system of this complex circuitry system continuously filters through a mind-boggling flow of information. It behaves a little like the national security monitoring center at GCHQ in Cheltenham. Complex as the information is that our Inner Security System handles; basically this system processes a very simple question:

***Is this current situation/person/surroundings safe?***

If the outcome of the complex sifting process is:

***"Yes. It is safe".***

If the answer is yes then the body and in particular the social engagement circuitry in the brain clicks into place and we are ready and open to new possibilities.

If the answer is:

***“No, the situation is not safe”.***

In this case the brain proceeds to go into 'lock down' and it will shut down engagement with the world around and in particular with relationships with people around. It will do this in order to prioritize as it looks to protect the integrity of the body. Should this develop to a high state of security alert then eventually it will engage the freeze, fight, flight mode.

The aim of this particular Mindfulness-in-Action Untensive practice is to open and to acknowledge and express gratitude to this Inner Security System. We are here in our present incarnation because of the way that it has functioned in our evolutionary pas. This remains true even though, especially modern living conditions, it can often make some pretty life ruining errors! Often these errors focus on the False Negative: when the security system regards something as a threat to your integrity that is perhaps not really a threat at all. However if we think about the way that evolution has shaped things. It makes sense that it is most likely to err in this direction. This is because our ancestors were most likely the ones who successfully scarpered or took the appropriate defensive or offensive action when there was occasionally, no real threat at all. The ancient individuals who ignored the danger warning signs and who made the False Positive error, well - they are very likely not our ancestors!

A key higher aim of advanced Mindfulness-in-Action Meditation practice is to become aware of mental activity and to notice and to engage the highest capacity to observe this activity. In this way we get to know our Selves. In an important sense we begin to ‘kin’ or to ‘ken’ ourselves. This is actually how we become ‘kinned’ or ‘kind’ in this way. How we feel and act out of a sense of kindness and compassion. This is an intimate and intuitive process, a kind and accepting type of knowingness that is not worldly in its nature. It does not belong in the realm of the remembering self. It is in fact a deep and experiential Self-knowing.

This closing Mindfulness-in-Action Meditation is perhaps maybe a first step to create a choice in the face of the discomforts of reactivity. Our Inner Security System can, if we fail to get to know it well, occasionally cause havoc and life ruining chaos in a modern life.

Our closing meditation moves toward the end with a high level wish or intention that acknowledges once again a deep and genuine gratitude for this ancient Security System. The kind and curious attention that may watch over the operation of the system in the brain opens out at the end of the meditation to become an extended wish or intention to be safe and secure:

“May I be safe and well and may others around me today also be safe and well"

The Mindfulness-in-Action 'Untensive' meditation closes with a celebration of the diffuse air all around us as something similar to the support of the ground we sit on –something that we all share.

John Woodward, 10th November 2016

**Mindfulness in Action - 17 November 2016**

**Summary**

**‘Leaves’ and Arrivals**

Choose a leaf - celebrate subtle differences.

**Returning practice**

Finding your own inner place of safety. Strengthening your attention. Picking the low-lying fruit first.

**Untensive procedure 1): Returning to the breath**

Using a gesture of finger to thumb in order to return your attention to the key change-over points (in-to-out and out-to-in) in the breath cycle.

**Half-way Review of Mindfulness-in-Action Practices**

The point-of-not-quite-yet. Inter-playing at the mind-body junction. Grown-up play. Serious fun.

**Ace Detectives**

Agatha Christie: Penetrating mystery at the point of not quite yet.

**Thought modes: thinking-into and thinking-about.**

Two modes of human thought: Thinking into and thinking about.

**Reflections on suffering**

Buddhist psychology. The importance of establishing the first-things-first.

**Healthy Action**

**Poise:** Stillness in-Activity and activity-in-skills. Tactics. Some way-markers and directions.

**Untensive procedure 2): “Keep it in the time because you own your own time”**

Expanding awareness with sound and movement.

**Untensive procedure 3): A 10 minute long contemplative walk**

Mindful or contemplative walking. Bringing your attention to how your foot leaves the floor.

**Untensive procedure 4): Thic Nat Hahn Breath and movement**

Breath cycle synchronised with reach and grasp arm movement/lunge.

**Untensive procedure 5): Raindrops**

Gentle fingertip touch and centred standing

**Point-of-not-quite-yet mystery stories**

Stories and reflections of mindful moments from the last week.

 **‘Leaves’ and Arrivals**

We meet together for the third session and choose a leaf from a pile of leaves collected earlier in the morning. As with every breath that we breathe, and like every step that we take, every leaf is different one from the other. In the same way as we gather together for the third session, we can perhaps celebrate the way that we too are all different individuals.

**Returning practice**

To begin we sat together in the Room of Openness to consider ***returning practice.*** Perhaps we all have own particular mindful place to which we return. Perhaps like the leaves our inner places are all different and individual. However, they will share the fact that they all have ***an inward return of attention.*** This could simply be a place where you feel safe, centred and peaceful. Such a place of innocence is after all, where we begin life in early childhood. Such points of return are precious anchorages in the sometimes chilly waters and stormy seas of life. They are warm places of forgiveness and self-healing. They are also places that, when Humpty Dumpty falls off the wall, there is a possible return to a place where Humpty can be put back together again! Of course, we hope that the self-same nurturing place of inner watchfulness will also help to ensure that Humpty does not fall off the wall again. However it will happen! A more accessible hope is that it won’t happen again ***in exactly the same way.*** If it does then we have a problem: we are fixed and stuck in a self-destructive and habitual groove.

**Picking the low lying fruit**

***Anchoring your attention in present-moment experience*** is a key part of ***the effort of attention*** involved in returning practices. This is tricky - especially when other things are so insistent and pull your attention out into the world and give great significance to worldly attainments and achievements. Always we are in movement. Even if we are still and at rest there are always circulations of all kinds: blood-flow, breath rhythms. In Mindfulness-in-Action practices it really doesn’t matter what action that we are doing in the moment, because any action is perfect and full of possibilities for the efforts of attention that can bring us into the rich flow of present moment experience. However some experiences never leave us and so are always available. They can be considered as ***the low-lying fruit*** that you can always pick easily and without the strain and risks of danger from overreaching for the higher hanging fruit. Two great examples of ***the low-lying fruit***: you are always somewhere in the cycle of a breath and you are always in some way responding to the ever-present and unchanging presence of gravity. While it is true that frequently we will attentionally leave these ever-present experiences, happily ***they never leave us***– at least while we are in life! This means that ***breath and support*** are always reliably available to you whenever you make a special effort of attention to open and expand your awareness to their supportive presence. Rarely do we appreciate and express gratitude for how sacred they are– until that is, they are no longer present. As a wry ancient Japanese proverb goes***:***

***"God to a drowning man is one cubic centimetre of air!"***

**Strengthening the 'muscle' of attention**

Before we began the next ‘Untensive’ procedure we reflected on an important common feature of Mindfulness in-Action practices. This centres on the way that they select some sensory aspect of present moment experience and use it ***as an anchor point to maintain your attention:*** to keep a constant and vigilant monitoring, one that returns you to the ongoing nature of the sensory experience. We have explored this in terms of ***eyes*** (looking, observing), ***ears*** (listening hearing) and ***feeling***/touch (body sense). The common thread in these explorations is ***to sustain and maintain the focus.*** It is this neuro-effort that will strengthen ***the 'muscle' of your attention.*** This *is* an analogy! ***There are no muscles in your brain*** so therefore the current of energy that the effort of attention draws upon is ***mind-power.*** The effort of attention is driven by ***neuro-energy.***

As a preamble to this practice we opened with some awe and wonder, to the way that modern neuroscience has been able to study practitioners of contemplative practice and to establish that they actually ***change the structure and architecture of their brain***s. How amazing is this? If you change your mind then you change your brain! This is certainly worth a pause and a moment of awe to begin the first Mindfulness-in-Action Untensive session of the morning: Breathing and returning practice.

**Untensive procedure 1): Returning to the breath**

You are always somewhere in the cycle of the current breath. In this procedure you expand your conscious awareness and extend it to include the breath. In previous Mindfulness-in-Action Untensive practices, we have opened and expanded awareness in order to take-in *a* ***place on the body surface where the diffuse air that is all around, becomes the directed and flowing current of breath and life-giving oxygen energ***y.

There are very obvious key change-over points in the rhythm of the breath cycle. We stop breathing-in in order to start breathing-out. We stop breathing-out in order to breathe-in. So there are ***two key change-over points or transitions in the breath cycle***. In this Untensive practice you are invited to use a gesture to mark the moment of transition. Any gesture will do. The invitation here is to use *a* ***light touch together of finger to thumb.*** These are important transitional moments in the breath cycle and they mark ***a point-of-not-quite-yet.*** This is the moment of suspension just before the breathing process transitions from the in-breath to an out-breath and similarly from the out-breath to an in-breath. The invitation is to use a light touch of a finger-to-thumb to mark these key moments.

You are invited here to a five-minute block of time to explore the efforts of attention that will synchronize moments of change and transition in the breath cycle with the finger to thumb gesture. A slightly more advanced Mindfulness practice involves you in expanding your awareness to further take in ***any other mental events that may drag your attention away from these moments***. This effort will help to maintain the high level of curiosity. Watch out for self-judgement! Remember that the important feature here is to develop the mind strength ***to maintain*** a watchful attention. As the neuro-power strengthens your attention it becomes more resilient and more capable of withstanding distraction and the ever-present contemporary mauling of the attention from consumer-driven manipulations. Change your mind and change your brain and become less susceptible!

**A Half-way Review of Mindfulness-in-Action Practices**

**The point-of-not-quite-yet moment and the inter-play of mind and body**

*A point-of-not-quite-yet* moment is really the flowing point of entry into the present-the moment. As we progress and dig deeper, this moment is revealed as ***the interface between mind and body***. This interface is like the (-) hyphen that we put between mind (-) body, between the psycho (-) physical and between the neuro (-) muscular. It is a very important crossover or transition point. The order of priority in which we hyphenate these words is in itself significant. A moment’s reflective thought reveals this priority: ***that it is neurons that drive the muscles.*** Put it more bluntly: ***no neuro-power, no muscle action.*** It is literally all in the mind - to start with at least!

To navigate to, and to position oneself at the point-of-not-quite-yet moment is curiously difficult. It is hard to work out just ***what stands in the way*** of working and playing at this all-important interface. Mindfulness-in-Action has given much consideration to these difficulties. Try to understand: ***what are the obstacles that stand in your way of this inner achievement?*** A great deal is at stake! Refining this understanding has led to an interesting Mindfulness-in-Action conclusion: that being present for the traffic flow across this interface between mind and body, **is a thoroughly grown-up, adult form of play.** It contains all the features of healthy, innocent child-like play. It is the same but it is different! To catch some of the sense of paradox, I like to refer to it ***as serious fun***. The grown-up version of child-like playing at this interface also accrues for itself: (-) a hyphen-link. Think of the grown-up version as a process of **Inter*(-)*play** between mind and body.

**Ace Detectives: The mystery at the point-of-not-quite-yet as an Agatha Christie style 'whodunnit'**

Certainly at that moment of the point-of-not-quite-yet, we are invited to embrace the nature of ***uncertainty.*** Much as we might try to predict and strive to have a complete control over what occurs next, in fact - invariably we just don’t know. It is a mystery! This is serious-fun and the inter-play at the point-of-not-quite-yet can be aptly likened to popular fiction Detective stories: an Agatha Christie or a Columbo style detective murder mystery plot: a 'who-dun-it!'

Consider how Endeavor Morse, Jane Marple or Detective Inspector Colombo operate. This may reveal to us some of the mystery inherent in the point-of-not-quite-yet. The detectives are certainly open to mystery. They are responsive and sensitive: they detect clues. They endeavor to penetrate into the mystery of meaning: ***'how could that event have come about'***? And '***what were the exact circumstances that led up to the dirty deed'***. Notice how Morse, Columbo and Jane Marple are alike in ***the way that they hold back***. They pause and refrain from jumping to conclusions. They are clever and sound rational thinkers for sure, but they rely on ***an essentially intuitive process*** primarily in solving the mystery***.*** They are open to the unknown, to the implausible and to the unexpected. They are also extremely empathic. They read character and their different motivations. They tune into the individuals involved. They try and get into their shoes. Often they will spot tiny significant discrepancies in the actual walking or running steps suspects have ***claimed*** that they have undertaken. They will often literally walk around the murder scene in the shoes of different characters. They are far from gullible. It seems that sociopaths are invariably very charming charismatic and convincing but hey - they don’t pull any wool over the eyes of the likes of Morse, Jane Marple and Detective Inspector Columbo! They make lateral leaps sidewise. Notice how they never take the spaces in between individuals and how they relate to each other as being empty. They enter fully into how individuals relate in space and time. They spot synchronicities and deep and hidden connecting links. With all the clues set out before them, their brilliant detection work, sees the spaces in between as full of possibility and potential for the unthought of, the unusual and unexpected. They will persistently consider and re-work all the circumstances leading up to the moment just before 'the dirty deed' as they close unremitting in on the perpetrator.

Well - perhaps you get the general idea here that entering into the inherent mystery of the point-of-not-quite-yet is very awakening. It sharpens your wits! From this brief survey of clever fictional detective work and the mystery that is inherent in the point-of-not-quite-yet, we can create the next home-made Untensive procedure. Let’s call it a little bit of serious-fun, a form of embracing mystery. I very much admire a quote from the great German poet and philosopher Goethe, when he said simply:

***“Not everything that is mysterious is necessarily miraculous”.***

It openly invites a sense of embracing and entering into mystery.

In this bit of serious fun you are invited to reflect and recall a mindful moment from your life: Perhaps something that recently happened in the last week. This might be a moment when you were successfully mindful and you had the presence of mind to awaken to detect certain prevailing clues and connections. It might be equally interesting to consider a moment when afterwards, you dearly wished that ***there was such a thing as the fast rewind button!*** If only you could replay the moment up to the point-of-not-quite-yet then perhaps, you could have been a little bit more awake and responsive to what was about to happen. Perhaps this time you would make some better decisions and choices! As you reflect on this try to develop a rich sense of all that led up to that moment - just before your mindfulness moment or that not-so-mindful-moment. You are left to mull over this for a while and later in the session we will be going deep into the mystery of it all!

**A Half-way Review of the two thought modes: thinking-into and thinking-about**

In this half-way review we surveyed the two distinct and different types of thinking: the ***thought-into-action*** mode that engages the ***Experiencing Self*** and the richness of present-moment sensations, and ***the thinking-abou***t mode associated with the storytelling ***Remembering Self.*** The Mindfulness-in-Action Untensive procedures engage the less familiar ***thought-into-action*** mode in order to fully enter into the immediacy and imminence of the sensations of the moment.

One huge issue here: ***life only exists in the present moment.*** So therefore we can only be true to life through the means of ***the thought into action*** mode. The other form of human thought, the one ***that thinks about things:*** the storytelling mode, derives its entire extraordinary power entirely on the basis of ***its capacity to hold back from immediate experience***, and to push it to a necessary distance in order to ***name and label*** human experience. So consider how ***thinking about*** life is distinctly different from ***thinking into*** it!

**Buddhist psychology: Human suffering and First-things-first**

There are huge issues of human suffering that arise and these issues are really not that baffling when we consider and deeply understand the nature and operation of these two human thought modes. ***The first and fundamental concern is to simply establish a correct priority***: ***the right order in which these human thought modes operate.*** This then establishes ***how we can become true to life***. With this beginning in process the underpinning cause of a huge raft of characteristic human suffering becomes clear. This is probably best expressed and encapsulated in the clearest and most practical form in the ***Buddhist Four Noble truths.*** These contain some of the finest psychology of the last 3000 years. It goes something like this: ***First the bad news***: there is a whole lot of suffering in your life. ***Now the good news***: you put it there! The practical help offered will guide to you to relinquish the grip of attachment and how to free yourself from that suffering; you need to know how ***TO LET GO*** of attachment: to how you hold on to and cling to what it is that causes your suffering. But what is it? Certainly anything that practically helps to reduce the holding-on could well be referred to as ***an Untensive process***. It never ***adds*** to the existing amount of holding and tension. The essence of such a process always involves ***letting go***. In our Untensive Work/Play so far, you are often invited to expand your awareness to 'the tissue life' of such attachment, of holding on ***to ideas about*** life in order to go into, and to experience directly ***whatever blocks or stands in the way of the flow of life. You become more true to life only if you can let go of whatever is in the way***! Simple but not easy! Much of this of course, involves central ideas about yourself that in fact form the warp and the weft of the Ego: the little self. So therefore, much of the process of breaking free of attachment involves in essence your identity. As these Mindfulness-in-Action processes open out they will reveal to you that you are so much more than that identity: this is some really serious fun, grown-up play!

**Healthy Action**

**Stillness-in-activity and Activity-in stillness**

We considered ***the finding stillness-in activity mode and the finding activity-in stillness mode.*** These are subtly different types of Mindfulness-in-Action explorations and they meet at the same point in the middle. That midpoint involves a deepening understanding of balance and ***POISE***. In the process of *finding stillness-in-activity* we have a definite activity focus. In the next procedure for example, the activity of interest is climbing a stair or step. The 'stillness' in these Untensive procedures involves reducing unnecessary muscle tensions or activities. With this stillness-in-activity mode in operation, invariably we discover that ***we can achieve the same end result with much less physical effort***. Obviously this process makes the ongoing activity more economical and efficient. It is also engaging–serious fun!

The activity-in-stillness mode is a little more challenging because it goes directly into observing the activity of the brain: the mind power or the neuro power that makes possible such a process as the above stillness-in-activity procedures. For these explorations we are ***not*** activity focused but instead we bring the body into a state of rest and repose in order to focus and observe the mental activities, the thought-in-action processes that are capable ***of creating a condition of poise.*** An important point:  ***poise is not an action but a preparation for healthy action.***

**Untensive procedure 2): “Keep it in the time because you own your own time”**

As a warm-up for the next Mindfulness-in-Action procedure we took a leaf out of the tree of natural living peoples and their ways: we explored various creative ways of using rhythmic steps and the words and rhythms of the chant:

***“Keep it in the time because you own your own time”.***

This procedure creates a different ethos from the more usual wordy conversations and relationships. Information exchanges take place but they do so all at the same time! There is an expanding awareness of the sounds, shapes, relationships, positions and dynamic movements of other people in space. We are all in it together! It is dynamic and playful.

**Finding the stillness-in-the activity of climbing the stairs**

In order to get up here and to enter the room of Healthy Action we had to climb up the stairs. Now we put the action of climbing stair or step through the inner eye or lens of Mindfulness-in-Action. In this case the inner eye of acute and mindful observation is particularly focused on the fundamental issue of where the support is coming from to underpin the action of climbing the step or stair. You’re invited to be aware of the 'Automatic Pilot' or habitual version of this action and to observe how this action might involve a dropping forward of weight onto the advancing leg, the one that is about to climb the step.

We are particularly interested to establish ***a sense of a direction through space***. Such considerations are very much about thinking-into action and about brainpower! If you are well centred in the support of the rear leg then you ***do not begin the stair climbing action by pushing your weight forward and hanging it over onto the advancing leg.*** Instead you give attention to a direction through space in which ***a poised length moves you up and over the rear or supporting leg.*** This smoothly transfers the length of your spine onto the advancing leg and ultimately onto the next step. Measure with a strain-gauge the forces involved here and it can be established scientifically that this is the most energy efficient way of managing the action of climbing a step. Remember: poise is not an action but something that happens in the brain well before the action. Poise is best thought of as a mental preparation for intended action. Poise is brainpower information

The point here is that when you both see this action happening in a poised way in others, and when you feel the ease with which happens in yourself, it becomes clear experientially, that some ***good tactics*** have been employed here. It not only makes this every day familiar action more economical it also has its own endorphin affirmation – it is simply more enjoyable that way. That endorphin rush is good feedback. It truly is food. Healthy action is always nourishing in this way that is the result of good tactics and the right inter-play between mind and body. It is grown-up play!

We return next to an earlier questioning of a certainty:

**How does your foot leave the floor when you walk?**

**Untensive procedure 3): A 10 minute long contemplative walk**

It is hard to read the print on a fast-moving bus! Sometimes we need to slow down the action. The simple rule in this Mindfulness-in-Action meditative procedure is that you ***never take two consecutive forward steps together.*** After each forward step you drop back and take a slow, measured back-step. You may repeat this back-step action as many times as you like during this Untensive procedure. Our aim in this procedure is to fully enter the rich sensations of the present moment and in particular, to focus on the supportive action of the rear foot. Bear in mind the work of the last stair climbing procedure in which a great deal of attention was given to the support of the back foot. In this case rather than taking your centre of gravity and lifting it up in order to climb the stairs, this time it carries your centre of gravity forward rather than upwards.

The action of taking a mindful back-step becomes a great way to experience a more centred state as you move *slowly to* bring attention to the length of the back of yourself and to the space behind and to either side. Your conscious awareness is as expensive as ever.

**Untensive procedure 4): Thic Nat Hahn Breath and movement**

Here we explore a gentle lunge forward and a reach with the arm as if to pick a grape from a high vine. This reach and grasp movement is coordinated with a mindful breath.We intend to develop focus and discipline with our attention and to anchor it into an expanding awareness that is the province of the Experiencing Self. How in the moment the body supports itself is such an important ever-present anchor, something we can bring attention to and to enter more fully into the Present Moment. Another readily accessible experience is the omni-present rise and fall of the breath. In this procedure we explore how both breath and support work together in a lunge forward and reach with the arm as if to pick a grape from a high vine.

As you breathe in you can either think-or even say out loud the word: ***"In".***

As you breathe out you can use the word: "***Out".***

Once you settle into this you can expand the in breath a little more with the words: ***"In"/calm".***

On the out breath this can be expanded to: ***"Out/ease”.***

Sometimes the words can you help to anchor your attention to the present moment sensations.

**Untensive procedure 5): Raindrops**

In this delightful procedure we work with a partner and use fingertip touches somewhere on the skin surface, while the partner who is receiving the light fingertip touch may keep their eyes closed in order to maintain a sense of connection with the Experiencing Self and to the all-important and sensory-rich touch sense.

**Mystery: stories and reflections**

After the raindrops procedure we stayed with our partners. It was at this point that we shared our mindful moments, or our wished-for-mindful moments. The direction here is to give your partner an account of all that was leading up to your moment up to the point-of-not-quite-yet. This is the moment - a fraction of a second before the mindful moment. Later on you will explain to the rest of the group what was happening for your partner up to the point-of-not-quite-yet moment. As the game develops we will try at first, to guess just what happened next.

**In the room of a Good Sense**

Together we went back down the stairs and on into the room a Good Sense to finish the session by sitting and sharing the mysteries and stories of our mindful moments up to the point of not quite yet.

It is not appropriate to put into the public domain participant's personal accounts. However I am happy to offer my own mindfulness moment (in fact a very much *wished-for* mindful moment!) up to the moment of not quite yet:

*My best chum and I are making a small shelf/table for my computer. We are creating it from an old school library desktop made out of a wonderful old piece of beech wood. This piece of wood has history because it has etched into it some typical school graffiti. Some of the graffiti refers to my mate who was a gifted craft and design teacher at the school for 30 years. A practical man of the tools and yet he inspired his kids about mystery and magic!*

*I have been (uncharacteristically!) meticulous in the making of a very accurate template for my computer shelf. The walls of my house are at least 500 years old and are very irregular and wany. Working first to make a cardboard template, I then used a sheet of chipboard to create another more durable template that was precision fit. However that sheet of chipboard had a little bit of bant or 'give' in it. This is significant to what happened next.*

*My mate had cut the beach desktop accurately to thousands of an inch. We are coming up to the final point of the job when were about to finally position the beech shelf. It is looking like a snug precision fit. However it will not just quite drop level onto the battens on the wall to either side off-the-shelf. It is a matter of just a few thousands of an inch that are holding it from dropping into place. Of course it is down to the fact that the beechwood does not have that little bit of bant and so the shelf is jammed at slight angle and is holding off from dropping snugly onto the waiting side battens.*

*As we approach my point-of-not-quite- moment I have lifted my raised fist in order to bring it down and tamp the shelf down and into its final position...*

***What happened next? ...***

Well -this is what actually happened: my wise friend said:

“Hang on! Don’t do that because if you do - you are likely to splinter the edges of the shelf!”

My mate would probably not recognise himself as my mindfulness teacher but of course he is!

John Woodward

17 November 2016 with grateful thanks for all the insight and wisdom participants are bringing to this series of Mindfulness-in-Action courses.

**Mindfulness in Action - 24 November 2016**

**Summary**

**Meeting backs as well as Fronts**

We arrived and sat back to back. An unconventional meeting and greeting: saying ‘hello’ to each other’s back as well as to the front.

**Untensive session 1: Returning Practice**

While continuing to sit back to back we explore a 10 minute long Arrivals/ Returning Practice Meditation.

**A reflection on human interconnectedness and the human brain**

The brain is the same basic structure for all human beings and it responds in an identical way across all cultures and contemplative traditions. So why then do we continue to kill and maim each other in droves over insignificant differences in religious doctrine? Is this not completely crazy?

**GOOD SENSE**

“On the heart:” The story of Hillel. Playing with the sound of A***llavivacha”***

**Two Zen questions:**

***Question 1)."*What was your original face in the moment just before you were conceived?"**

***Question 2).* "Where is the birth of a genuine smile?"**

**Untensive Session 2) Exploring the birth of a smile and your “Original Face*”***

A deep exploration into Activity-in-Stillness. Letting-go of the muscles behind the personality and the mask of the face

**Meeting backs as well as fronts**

To open the final session we sat with a partner back to back. Most of our usual interactions involve a face-to-face contact. This of course, makes total sense because the front is so much more naturally communicative than the back. In particular the face is especially expressive. We spoke a little at the start of this session about discomfort and how, when we experience discomfort, it is especially tricky and a very important Mindfulness-in- Action practice, to notice and observe the ***”tissue- life” of discomfort***. Exactly where is the discomfort played out in the present moment sensations of the body? It engages a much higher capacity make such searching observations ***before we are cattle-prodded into some kind of withdrawal reaction***.

As we continued to sit back-to-backI spoke about a moment of awkwardness this morning. This occurred today when an attractive young woman sat opposite me on the train journey. As she was picking up a text message, I guess it was from someone with whom she had a deep loving friendship, she looked up at me with such a warm and intimate, loving smile, a smile that escaped from the usual tight buffers in in the way strangers interact. I simply happened to be in the way of a smile ***that was not meant for me.*** I was not meant to be the recipient. Whoever, he or she was, she/he was somewhere else, albeit very much present in her mind as they lovingly connected in cyberspace. We very soon resumed stranger-distance in terms of how we normally occupy our personal spaces on a crowded Northern train! I returned the smile, I hope in a way that acknowledged a brief human moment of awkward discomfort hoping to communicate that it was okay- that there was no ambiguity in our awkward ***smile that-escaped moment***. However the experience made ponder at the start of the day, on how much a smile is a very human and powerful thing. Just think of our delight at our baby’s first smile!

In the preamble to our first session of the morning: an Arrival or Return Practice Meditation, we recalled from an earlier session, something of the Ground Plan design that so wonderfully reveals itself in the way that the spine and brain grow early-on in embryo. This time we explored the early growth of the spinal cord and the way that it reveals a remarkably simple plan or outline: Nerves radiate out of the front and from the back of the spinal cord. The nerves coming out to the front are motor nerves and the nerves that radiate out from the back of the spinal cord are all sensory nerves. Perhaps this ancient front to back division derives from a very early period of our evolution when we were once a primitive wiggly-creature moving around in the primal slime. Such creatures have their sensors running down the length of their back and their effectors, that is, the means by which they move around, slung underneath– a bit like the centipede design.

That basic ‘Ground Plan’ continues to grow out in embryological growth and it becomes the mature brain. It is the rear part of the brain, which grows first. It is this area that ***contains the senses***. Despite the cosmic complexity we are looking here at the way that the brain ***in-here*** maps the world ***out-there***. It is about ***inside/ outside connections*** and interaction. The front part of the brain develops last and it is this front part that organizes and plans how we are going to respond and act with regard to whatever it is that we have first sensed. This order, of course makes sense: you first need to sense what it is that it is coming at you, before planning appropriate action- even if what is coming at you is an unexpected warm and intimate smile!!

Using a hand formed into a fist wrapped around the thumb as a model of the brain, the part of the hand/brain from the knuckles to the fingernail is considered as exclusively involving with how we plan and organize action and body movements. This may help us toward an important principle in Mindfulness-in-Action. The key principle here is that Mindfulness in these terms, is not some blissed out state of Nirvana but something much more down-to-earth and practical and it concerns the complex thought processes that organize how action gets carried out in the world. Mindfulness-in-Action in this way is more about paths and ways into a healthy and into integrated action and less about attaining some free-floating state of ecstasy.

**Untensive session 1: Returning Practice**

Sitting back to back we begin with an opportunity to engage with your own process and your own particular way of drawing your attention inward. When you are sitting back to back in this way, it tends to invite a sense of bringing your attention a little further back than usual: to include the rich and complex sensations of your partner’s back: warmth, pressure support and movement, even when we sit very still, there are movements in your partners back as they breathe. This is an invitation to expand your conscious awareness. Sitting back-to-back can be especially helpful because it helps to expand your attention not only anchoring it to the breath but including the back of yourself too.

 In this session you were invited add the same finger to thumb gesture used in the session last week. It may well help to anchor your attention to the key change over-points in your breath cycle.

**A reflection on interconnectedness and the human brain**

After the first Arrivals Untensive we reflected on a growing body of research investigating the effect of this kind of ***effort of sustained attention***. It shows unambiguously that ***it does not matter which tradition of contemplatives practice that is employed, the effect is exactly the same on the brain***. It makes no difference if it is chanting Tibetan Buddhist monks, Christian nuns praying in Christ-consciousness, Indian yogic practitioners deep in transcendental meditation, Japanese Zen Buddhists… oh the list could go on for much longer! There is a profound point that has just struck me for the first time here: ***we all have the same brain structure and it functions in exactly the same way***. If the same efforts of attention are made, then the architecture of the brain will restructure itself in exactly the same way And yet: ***trivial differences in religious doctrine, which make no difference whatsoever in terms of the brain, are the major cause of the loss and maiming of multi-millions of human lives***. This continues unabated up-to today. Surely to an alien intelligence watching over us in a spaceship, this would not make sense at all! The only conclusion the aliens could come to is that we are a completely deranged and crazy species.

The Dalai Lama stated very clearly in a recent meeting with world-renowned neuroscientists that, as a world religious leader of some standing, he had to say that in his venerable opinion the world’s religions had failed mankind. There has now to be some other kind of transformation- a new and different way of thinking. The Dalai Lama humbly hoped that perhaps this transition might come from the extraordinary insights of Brain Science. The research of neuroscience does suggest without contention, that we are all one– all interconnected. Is there a new way of conceiving who we really are and what we might become? Here’s hoping!

**Good Sense**

In the room of Good Sense we began swaying weight from side to side and allowed this gently to expand to include a brief moment when you completely stand on one leg. As we explored this feat of human balance, a tale is related of a workshop leader called ***Hillel:***

***“****One of Hillel's workshop participants is a forthright and somewhat impatient young man. He already feels overloaded with information and so he challenges the workshop leader quite tetchily and assertively:*

*"****Look”, he says: "I want you to put what this is all about into a nut-shell for me and I want you to do it briefly -do it in the length of time that I can balance on one leg”.***

 *He proceeds to wobble and balance on one leg. Hillel unfazed and quite up for the challenge, says briefly, as his impatient young pupil stands on one leg:*

***"That which you find hateful that others do to you- do not do this to your neighbour!”***

*The impatient younger man puts his foot down and says to Hillel:*

***“Okay- now I get that easily enough. What next?"…”***

Before we go on with the story of Hillel you are invited now to repeat this standing on one leg exercise as a Mindfulness-in-Action practice. Balancing on one leg can be tricky. Often participants only manage a very short time on one leg so the message gets shortened to:

***"Be kind."***

Balance improves slightly. We try this for a second time. This time there is time enough to put in:

***"Before being kind to others, first be kind to yourself."***

Now back to the story… we were at the point that the impatient young man asks: **“S***o what next?...*

…*The workshop leader, Hillel answers:*

*"****Now that you have put your foot down you may consider this as taking the first step on the path of self study and self questioning!"***

This is the extremely tricky it is true but -hey -it really is where all the fun begins!

What happened to the young man in his efforts to walk the way of self-study and self-questioning?

We do not know. We have no idea. The account of the workshop was written down over 2000 years ago. It is calculated that it was sometime between 30BC and 10AD. Last week we considered the Buddhist tradition with particular regard to human suffering. This account comes from yet another noble wisdom tradition: Hillel was a leading rabbinical patriarch acting in the role of guide and mentor to others in reading the Talmud. All the great wisdom traditions have a similar version to Hillel's nutshell version. In fact the concise admonition to: ***"Love thy neighbour as thyself***” was formulated by yet another Jew contemporaneously and pretty much in the same spot on the globe. Christianity of course forms yet another venerable wisdom tradition!

***The point?***The Remembering Self can ‘**get it’**. We may attain a concept. We can get the idea. In contemporary Mindfulness-in-Action practice the hard work of self-study and self-questioning must engage the action and the conduct of the Experiencing Self and the Present Moment. Only through a mindful process of this kind, one that integrates the Remembering Self with the Experiencing Self, can we start to live the principals, to "find the Path” and “walk the talk”. It is in this that way the Experiencing Self can participate in the inner life of an ever-changing interaction of stillness and noise that figure ground, one against the other.

**“ALAVAVACHA** “

This session concluded with a creative play with the sounds of the Hebrew expression: ***ALAVAVACHA.*** At this point we have no idea what these strange Middle Eastern guttural sounds mean.

 The words form a recurring leitmotif in Hebrew prayers and are translated as: meaning: ***“ON THE HEART”.***

There followed a lively discussion: enquiring why for example, does ***ALAVAVACHA*** mean***: “On”*** rather than ***”In”*** the heart. What might these wise and memorable words mean in practice?

**A Zen question:*"What was your original face in the moment just before you were conceived?"***

We are about to explore an entry into the muscles of the face through a focus on letting-go and muscle release. The process of release is really an adventure in stillness. The muscles of the face are such an important part of “the mask “of the personality that belongs to the Remembering Self.

The origin of the word "***personality"*** is very revealing. ”***Personality”*** means ‘*that which sounds through’* ("s***onare")*** the mask of the expressive face ***“per”.*** So the origin of the word “***personality”*** actually comes from a Roman preoccupation with partying, with masked balls. Because the mask covered the face, it muffled the voice. For this reason the Roman masks had a built-in tiny the little mega-phone like device so that the voice would ***sound through*** the mask. Hence ***“Per-sonare”*** or “***personality.”- By origin it means: “that which “sounds through the mask”.***

A slightly different way to introduce this exploration takes the form of another Zen like question:

***"Where is a genuine smile born?"***

Before we began this Mindfulness-in-Action procedure we briefly considered the anatomy of the enigmatic mystery of a human smile. It takes barely half a muscle for the face to smile*: the zygomaticus major* by name. Interestingly it takes 23 muscles or more to draw the human brow into its characteristic furrowed frown. Saving energy and expending energy wisely are proper mindfulness concerns. So a great slogan is:

 ***Smile it saves your energy!***

We also considered how psychologists have calculated that the average child smiles over 400 times a day while the average adult is lucky to put in more than a dozen.

So, a good related question crops up here: ***whatever has happened to wipe that energy-conserving smile off our faces***?

**Untensive 2). Exploring the birth of a smile and your “Original Face*”***

*To open this session we reviewed the fascinating embryonic origins of the skin as it develops from the ectoderm: the outer layer of the rapidly developing ball of cells that was once you and I as a Conceptus at around 3 or 4 days after conception. This discussion continues to deepen the exploration of how nerves and synapses* ***mediate the interaction between the insides and outsides the body*** *and a sense of the skin as the organ of the brain that finds out and interacts with the world around us. The crucial importance of the skin and touch in the early development of the human self were again emphasized.*

 We begin by lying on a mat on the floor in a position that supports the whole length of your body. In this final Untensive exploration we are interested in ***the activity-in-stillness.***  We aim as much as possible, to zero and neutralize any demands on the muscular activities of balance support and movement.

You are invited to consider any muscle activity as akin to the twinkling of stars in the night sky. The backdrop of the night sky is likened to the ever-present background of muscles that are currently in the released state of recharging themselves. The process of muscle release is inherently a silent event. There are always unconscious tensions that form an inner “noise” of which we are usually largely unaware. Our aim and intention in this procedure is to discover in particular, the subtle holdings and tensions in the muscles that form the face, the mask or the social face of the personality.

First some curious questions:

***Are these tensions in the mask of the face present in the moment before we awaken from sleep?***

***Is there a moment when the social face assembles itself as we come fully to awakening and begin our waking day?***

 To begin, our attention in the present moment is drawn to the right-hand index finger. You are invited to allow your consciousness to spread to an awareness of the exact position of that index finger. Already that thought alone will have occasioned the activity of millions of cascades of nerves and synapses that snap crackle and pop into action as information and energy whizzes around within the Distributed Nervous System. The Experiencing Self takes in these tingling and enlivening sensations. Life lies in the present moment. The sensations of the present moment are always contained within the receptacle or vessel of the body.

You are now asked to imagine- purely in your mind, the movement that your right-hand index finger would make if it were to now lift the length of the arm to shoulder height. In your minds-eye only you finish up with your right hand index finger pointing up towards the ceiling. Next, imagine in as much detail as possible, the arc that your finger might make through space in order to come down and to touch a point right in the middle of your forehead. This is the spot where Indian ladies often have a red dot. In that culture the red dot represents the Third-Eye, which is thought to be located in the Pineal Gland, which is directly behind that red spot in the middle of the forehead. It is a spot just above the place where a frown gathers in the brow.

From this midpoint in your forehead you are invited throughout this procedure to mentally go through a series of strokes from the mid-line of your face and out over the right side of your head and your skull. Eventually during the procedure you will be asked to move progressively down the midline of the face, from the forehead, moving down the midline of the face, in your imagination and to continue to imagine the finger stroking across and around the right half of the globe of the head. The finger is seeking out and releasing muscle tension.

We start now in the middle of the Forehead. The finger traces from the midpoint in your forehead and back over the region of a midline parting through the hair. It continues to return to the same middlebrow point and moves out and down the right side of the gentle curve of the right side of your skull. The probing finger discovers hidden tension in the scalp. Releasing the tension can be like slackening the skin of a drum. When that right-hand index finger eventually comes to a point when it now almost strokes horizontally from the mid-brow-spot and out across toward the temples, it is time to drop a little down the midline of the face: This time to a point where a frown gathers as it furrows the brow. From this point the finger traces out a line across the line of the right eyebrow and around the scalp. The aim is to discover and release hidden tensions in the muscles that lift the right eyebrow.

Next move down from the centre of the frown and drop down a little to the very top of the bridge of the nose: to a place where a pair of glasses sits comfortably. The imaginary stroking action of the right-hand index finger now takes in, first, the upper eyelid and then, the lower eyelid. The eyelids contain a delicate tracery of horizontally organized fibres. If they are released then the eyelids will drape comfortably over the eyeball.

At this point the right-hand index finger probes even deeper. There are six suspensory muscles around the eyeball. Often these muscles are caught in an unconscious tension. In its most extreme form it becomes an aggressive hard staring glare! If these muscles are allowed to release it is possible to feel, as these muscles release, the physical weight of the eyeball and to experience the feeling of a soft space that opens out at the back of the eye. Released in this way you might experience an incipient slight movement of the eye as it moves towards the outer part of the eye socket. This forms the ***"twinkle in the eye” and it is the birthplace of a genuine smile***! The suspensory muscles of the eye also have a close and intimate connection with subtle musculature deep at the back of the skull - at the place where the top of the column of the spine attaches deep onto the underside part of the skull. Releasing the eyeball can open and release these muscles that are exquisitely rich in sensory nerve endings. They will free muscle tensions in your neck in the deepest way possible! It can create a real champagne feeling of lightness and ease!

Next we move to a lower midline point this time: in the middle of the nose. An outward stroke across the right cheek can guide a sequence of releases that will allow the powerful cheek muscles to release and drape up and over the cheekbone. This creates a slight lifting the facial muscles. Again this is all part of the outward ripples of a smile! In a fascinating way it links to the outward opening ripple that emanates out from that eye-twinkle of release from where a smile is born in that soft space at of the back of your eye.

Proceeding on we progressively move down the midline: next we imagine the right hand and index finger touching the tip of the nose. It then traces out along the right nostril and over the lower cheek. Consider your nostrils as like “nose wings” that lift in order to welcome and ‘smile-in’ in each breath. In this way each non-doing breath is welcomed with a grateful smile!

Moving down next we engage with the area in the middle of the ridge between the nostrils and the upper lip. A sideways stroke to the right releases tension in the upper teeth and lips. As with all of these movements of release from the midline, they allow the face to fall open. This openness is the natural state – an experience of the original face of innocence? Is this the face of awe and wonder in a young child?

We proceed with the release across the upper and the lower lip and we maybe notice that the process creates an imperceptible lift in the corner of the right hand lips. Is this the essence of the enigmatic Mona Lisa smiles so famously captured by the artistic genius of Leonardo?

This particular Mindfulness-in-Action exploration finishes in the midline: right in the middle of the dimple that forms in the middle of the chin. A final stroke across the right-hand side will take in the right-hand side of the jaw and once again promote a softening release of the jaw. Such releases are often partnered with release of tightness in the back of the throat as well as deep under the chin.

The exploration that opens the right-hand side of the face ends by bringing the attention back from behind the mask and out to the outside world as your right-hand index finger finally lowers in your imagination from shoulder height and returns to its place lying by your side.

***The second half of the procedure is exactly the same. This time we are using the left-hand index finger to open from the midline of the opposite side of the face this time on the left-hand side.***