

Be Sensual

If you want to relax and ‘be here’, you only have to focus on the sensations of the present – sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. So far, I’ve asked you to focus mainly on the tactile sensations of the body. In the coming chapters, we’ll use the other senses as well. But first, a few words on the value of ‘being sensual’.

When you consciously taste an apple, or feel the texture of cloth or skin, or listen to a song, or smell the aroma of a flowering bush, the past and future and all their problems temporarily fade into the background. When you’re actively sensing something, you marginalise the habit of incessant thought that fuels the stress response.

In fact sensing and thinking are opposing mental functions. Sensing usually relaxes you and thinking arouses you, and one tends to eclipse the other. You can’t do a complex mathematical calculation and enjoy the flavour of a good soup at the same time.

Sensing and thinking use different parts of the brain, as a brain scan will demonstrate. Certain parts of the brain light up when you process visual or auditory stimuli, and different parts are used when you’re thinking or talking. The active parts use more glucose and oxygen and get warmer, and the inactive parts cool down. As a result, by consciously listening or looking or tasting, you divert your energy away from those parts of the brain that think. By starving them of oxygen and glucose temporarily, your thoughts become weaker.

Thinking and sensing also produce different electrical patterns across the whole brain. Thinking results in fast, erratic ‘beta’ brain waves, and sensing results in the slower, more rhythmic ‘alpha’ brain waves. Beta occurs when you are stressed or excited. Alpha, on the other hand,

being closer to your natural state of equilibrium, is more restful and uses less energy.

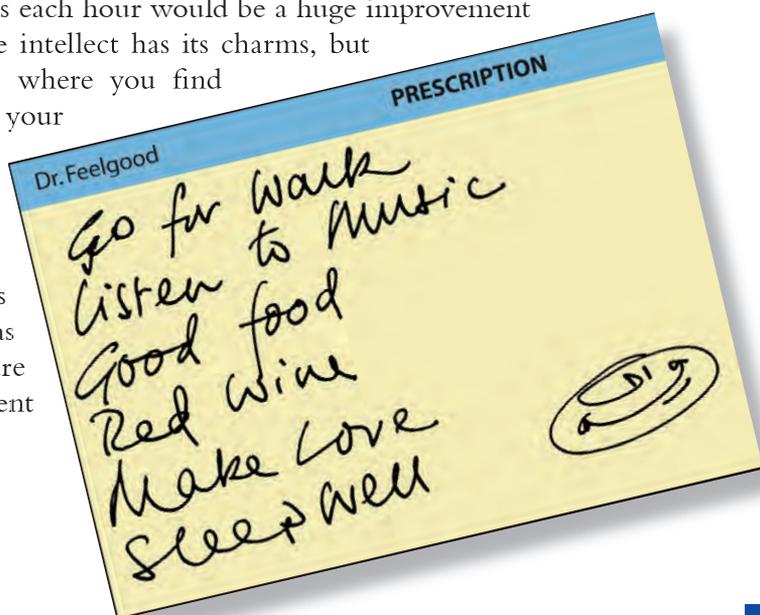
Sensing slows down the overactive mind. Thinking is typically fast and jumpy: you might have a hundred thoughts and shifts of focus in a minute. When we are in sensing mode however – listening to music or cuddling someone – the mind still moves but much more slowly. Sensations tend to lure us inwards and invite us to stay.

Sensing is typically more passive than thinking, and therefore burns less energy. To listen to the sounds around us, we have to sit back and wait for the sounds to come to us. Sensing is like the receptive, listening phase of a good conversation. You're not actually 'doing' anything, but it is still a skill.

Sensing sharpens the edge of the moment. It enables you to exactly notice the detail of a flavour, the subtlety of a colour, the location and quality of a sensation in the body. You only have to consider the abilities of great musicians or chefs or athletes to realise how much this skill can be developed. Just because we are all capable of listening and tasting doesn't mean to say we do it well.

It is amazing how little time we consciously spend in sensing mode – probably two or three minutes an hour on average. We live in our minds, and only check into the sense world for a second here and there so we don't bump into doors or get killed crossing the road.

If you want to be happier, try spending more time in the present. An extra five minutes each hour would be a huge improvement for most people. The intellect has its charms, but the sensate world is where you find pleasure. To enhance your feeling of well-being, I suggest you consciously taste and smell and see and hear and touch things every day. Regard it as part of your health care and stress management regime.



THE DEGREES OF FOCUS

It all comes down to how deeply you focus. When we're stressed or aroused, our focus is momentary at best. A speedy mind literally speeds from one thought to another within microseconds all day long, and our ability to taste or smell or hear at all is very superficial.

The way to enhance sensing is to train yourself to focus more deeply. In practice, this means you first choose what to focus on – this breath, or this sound or this sip of wine – and then put everything else into the background. Rather like focusing a camera, you'll find your object doesn't jump into sharp focus immediately. It takes a few seconds at least for you to clear the space and to allow the object to come forward.

Key Words

Be sensual
Focus well
Slow down
Look for detail
Make contact
Sustain contact
Absorption

After you've made contact with your object, you try to sustain that contact for fifteen or twenty seconds or more before your mind drifts away. When you can do this, time seems to slow down and you notice extra detail that wasn't obvious at first glance.

Occasionally you can become so fascinated by your object that it entirely fills your mental space for a few seconds. This is when there is nothing in your mind temporarily but the breath or the music or the taste of the wine. The technical name for this state of deep focus is 'absorption' or 'oneness' or 'samadhi'.

In effect there are degrees of focus, which the Buddhist texts describe by using the metaphor of a bee approaching a flower. The very first stage is when the bee is looking for the flower but not finding it. Most of us are in this unfocused, scanning state most of the day.

You can say the bee is actually 'focused' when she sees the flower and keeps it in sight. The bee 'makes contact' when she lands on the flower





and feels it beneath her feet. She ‘sustains contact’ when she goes inside the flower. ‘Absorption’ is when she sucks the nectar, oblivious to the world outside.

These degrees of focus are quite fluid, and we typically slide up and down the scale a lot when we meditate. You can’t grip on to a deep state by an act of will because good focus is naturally gentle and subtle. When your focus is strong, you virtually forget yourself and fall in love with the object. It occurs most often when you’ve completely lost interest in everything else. In other words, focusing is also the art of letting go.

All the exercises in this book involve focusing more deeply than you usually would. It hardly matters whether you focus on your body or an orange or an activity. It is the degree of focus, not the object, that determines how relaxed and clear-minded you become. In the chapters ahead, we’ll particularly pay attention to those senses we’ve neglected until now – sound, sight, taste and smell.