

Toward a Pedagogy of Self

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Background/Context: *The literature on emotional and social intelligence, based on the theoretical constructs of several authors, identifies self-awareness as a core skill for leadership development. However, there is very little research or theory on how one might develop a pedagogy of self-awareness for leaders.*

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: *This study describes an innovative leadership development program in self-awareness in the Summer Principals Academy at Teachers College. It describes both the theoretical and practical pedagogy of self-awareness training. What follows is a description of that pedagogy and some preliminary research results based on the journals and feedback of 45 students who completed the program in 2006.*

Intervention/Program/Practice: *The intervention consisted of daily 45-minute sessions of training in sensory awareness. The primary modes of training focused on breath, body sensations, listening, and visualizations. The training occurred as part of a five-day-per-week, six-week intensive leadership development master's degree program over two summers.*

Research Design: *Participants recorded their thoughts and feelings in semistructured journal entries immediately following the training sessions. At the end of each week, they reviewed their journal notes and wrote a weekly reflection on their experiences with the practice. In addition to the weekly reflections, they wrote three-week, six-week, and summative reflections on their experiences with the practice. These qualitative data were entered into NVivo software, coded, and analyzed for themes.*

Findings/Results: *The themes that emerged from the data led to the development of cognitive maps for practitioners that provide heuristics and developmental guides for practice, as well as refinements of the training protocols.*

INTRODUCTION

This special issue of *Teachers College Record* is devoted to the topic of spirituality in the classroom. One legitimate question for readers and writers alike is, What do we mean by spirituality? As a scholar, I find myself in the camp that says rigorous and thoughtful research is a requirement of the profession, independent of one's particular religious (or nonreligious) orientation, but spirituality is for me a notion that bridges the religious-secular divide in an extraordinary way. Many of us have had personal experiences with religion that have been extremely lacking in spirit—and as a researcher for more than 25 years, I can tell you that I've reviewed more than my fair share of research that has been just as dry and pointless as my experience of the rituals of my religion. So, from my perspective, there is something very wet and alive about spirit: We can find it almost anywhere under the right conditions—and almost nowhere under the wrong ones. It seems to me self-evident that a classroom could be such a lively environment, and I have a hunch that children very much want it to be.

How would I know if I was looking at a classroom where spirit is alive and well?

First of all, I would see children—and teachers for that matter—headed for the classroom door with focus and eagerness, as if they have an appointment they do not want to miss. The classroom would be led by a highly skillful teacher, comfortable in the practice of self-awareness and presence. Children would model that behavior by being self-aware and present to each other. The academic purposes of the classroom would be in harmony with its affective environment. Children who needed personal attention would get it in a way that supported and challenged them appropriately to grow and learn. Children would leave the classroom satisfied physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually, yet eager for the next day's lesson. As a teacher of leaders, I would find it an appropriate pedagogical challenge to consider the ways that we might encourage leaders to be more aware themselves, understand something of the pedagogy of self-awareness, and be able to recognize its relative degree of presence in students, teachers, and other adults in the school community. These guiding objectives motivated the present study.

This article describes our efforts in the Summer Principals Academy (SPA) at Teachers College to offer a graduate degree in school leadership that prepares principals who will both know and understand how to create classrooms that look and feel like what I've described very briefly. As the founding director of this program, it has been my responsibility to write up (and teach) a theoretical and practical pedagogy of self-

awareness training (SAT). What follows is a description of that pedagogy and some preliminary research results based on the journals and feedback of 45 students who first completed the program. One caveat is in order: Because pedagogy is itself alive, our current description is also evolving as our self-understanding deepens and our experience with teaching self-awareness leads us to fresher and more subtle perspectives. Our understanding is provisional.

WHY A PEDAGOGY OF THE SELF?

The pragmatic philosopher John Dewey once observed, “Education isn’t preparation for life. Education is life itself.” That statement speaks to the very heart of the current work. Education is not a commodity, although it is often sold; it is not an acquisition, although it is often treasured; nor is it an object, of which we are the subject. Education arises with life. It is intrinsic to life itself. To speak of education as something outside of life may be a necessary artifice of research, but to believe it is a fatal reification. Awareness is what distinguishes life from the inert, and the potential for self-awareness is what distinguishes humans from less complex life forms.

As part of our own evolutionary survival strategy, we have shifted a great deal of awareness to the subconscious realm. Because many of us now have at least a bit of breathing room from the constant stresses of fight-flight scenarios, it makes sense to bring back into awareness those aspects of sensory perspective we have suppressed in the urgency of a narrower set of survival priorities. The central thesis of this article is that expanding and deepening our capacity for multisensory awareness—including our capacity for *sustained self-awareness*—will lead to a more relaxed, present, and meaningful life. Implicit in this conversation is the painful qualifier that too many children and adults experience poverty and unstable social and political environments and therefore do not have the crucial supports in place necessary to pursue such high-level aims. Lest one conclude that self-awareness is navel-gazing at the expense of others, the facts on the ground strongly suggest otherwise: we must take personal and social responsibility for our poor performance in establishing the economic, social, cultural, and spiritual conditions for a life that enriches human potential.

Several rational arguments could be presented for undertaking SAT. Among these are: (1) self-awareness is both a precondition for self-knowledge and a methodology for acquiring it—one cannot study that of which one is unaware; (2) self-awareness as a personal practice provides us with useful insights for understanding our present situation in the world;

(3) self-awareness leads to an increase in our capacity to empathize with the psychological and social conditions of others; (4) self-awareness reduces the stress we experience in our daily lives as our self-understanding and self-acceptance increase; (5) self-awareness reduces our psychological suffering and increases our capacity for happiness; (6) self-awareness offers an opportunity to recognize and address very deep patterns of self-defeating conditioning; and (7) if a path exists that leads to human self-actualization, then SAT must be fundamental to making progress on that path.¹ These are self-interested reasons to consider developing self-awareness. An altruistic perspective would add these two: (8) we could also become interested in SAT because we want to be skillful, compassionate, and present to the struggles and difficulties of those we lead; and (9) self-awareness will aid us in our aspiration to provide appropriate supports and challenges to those we teach so that they too can take steps on the path to wholeness, presence, and well-being. And finally, (10) we pursue self-awareness and self-understanding because we recognize that ultimately, we're all, as Buckminster Fuller once quipped, "members of the same space-ship earth." Although these 10 reasons are not an exhaustive list of justifications, I hope they are sufficiently robust to invite the reader to explore a bit further.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH PROTOCOL

We know that high levels of social and emotional intelligence are very powerful characteristics of successful leaders. The work of Peter Senge (1990); Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee, and Richard Boyatzis (2002); Howard Gardner (1993); Marc Brackett (Brackett et al. 2006); and Robert Kegan (Kegan 1982; Kegan and Laskow Lahey 2009) encouraged the faculty in the SPA to design a unique curriculum that emphasized the development of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, social intelligence, and multicultural intelligence in school leaders. As a benchmarking activity and preliminary focus for our work together, all faculty and staff are invited to take the 360-degree Hay Group Survey of Emotional Intelligence with all our incoming students. The purpose of the survey is to benchmark them (and us) in the four key components of emotional intelligence. Self-awareness is the core or fundamental skill of emotional intelligence on which other three depend. A major challenge for our collaborative team was to create a nonthreatening, noncompetitive environment where our students could together take some risks. Because I have been practicing self-awareness for more than 20 years and have taught meditation classes both at Teachers College and in other venues for some time, I felt this would be my responsibility. As a result, we created a 45-

minute program that meets five days a week for six weeks prior to the first academic class of the morning. We focus entirely on SAT, with 10 minutes of journaling and reflection at the end of each class. SAT is not a traditional meditation course. It is a training program specifically developed to strengthen the capacity of our aspiring principals' capacity to witness their sensations, feelings, and thoughts without reacting to them. It includes experiential training, journaling, and reflection. As Stephen Covey has aptly noted, it is in the gap between stimulus and response where all creative possibilities lie. We have also discovered that meta-cognitive capacities can emerge in practitioners who journal daily immediately following their practice and then reflect on their patterns of response over weeks and months of practice, when the habits of mind are more clearly available at the level of patterns or feedback systems.

Thus, once per week, students share with their instructors their insights on the noteworthy patterns in their journaling during the week. These data are the basis of student insights and reflections that you will find in this article, with appropriate protections to their anonymity. Additionally, my colleagues and I work with students individually and in small groups to help them reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in the core skill areas of emotional, social, and intercultural intelligence, and assist them in identifying specific areas for practice and personal development. We concentrate on helping students understand the results of their individual surveys and identify areas for particular focus to strengthen their skills. The second summer repeats the morning SAT but focuses more on social skills and multicultural contexts in other course settings. The key point here is that the basic training in self-awareness is foundational to the three areas of development—emotional, social, and intercultural intelligence—and is integrated as both practices and reflections over a 15-month curriculum. In short, we do not have a compartmentalized quasi-experimental design where specific treatments and their effects can be assessed. Our integrated approach requires a holistic assessment of whether the program leads to meaningful growth and insight for emerging leaders, and it cannot practically be compartmentalized. Furthermore, the SPA program has a cultural and programmatic ethos that values and respects self-awareness and self-reflection as foundational competencies for effective leadership. Thus, although SAT is ongoing, colleagues in other academic courses work with students to help them understand how self-awareness skills interact with their own processes of adult development and influence how they go about resolving conflicts and building effective leadership teams—all very exciting and messy work.

I collected and analyzed the qualitative data from the weekly reflections

of the 2006 graduating cohort of fellows and used these data to illustrate the kinds of issues that novices in self-awareness typically experience at various stages in their formative training. Occasionally, I combined the individual responses to reflect a more complete archetype of response pattern that represents a larger group of students and to help protect the anonymity of the respondent.

Primarily, we seek to be supportive of aspiring principals in graduate training in their clinical and experiential learning with self-awareness. Each of the domains of self-awareness—bodily sensation, feelings, emotions, and thoughts—requires its own skill sets and analytic capacities and offers up its own insights. In the following sections, we will acquire some conceptual tools useful for an exploration of self-awareness and for understanding how increasing self-awareness contributes to fostering concentration, empathic capacities, skillfulness in listening, management of conflicts, understanding of other viewpoints, and simply being present. The research literature on leadership frequently identifies these core skills as foundational to successful leadership.

Here are a few quotes from the respondents regarding some of the positive outcomes they experienced as a result of their practice.

MA: I did not look at the mental diversions as something I should critique myself about. I instead looked at them as wanderings that I could either chose to follow or redirect. I did find myself trying to find times out of the morning sessions where I could practice the self-awareness exercises we use in the morning. I tried it on the subway and was somewhat successful, even though people and frequent stops are somewhat distracting. I found that the most effective time for me to do it was on the Long Island Rail Road in the morning. Even though my trip is only 15 minutes, it is enough time to go through the process.

EB: Most of all, I enjoyed the sensation of being aware. Through greater awareness of myself, my sense of awareness was sharpened for people and circumstances faced each day. The self-awareness training both in the daily and Friday sessions provided tangible means to become and remain self-aware. I look forward to enhanced social and professional presence now that I have become reacquainted with the joy of being present for myself.

MP: The training has enabled me to be more reflective in some of my interactions. I notice in some instances how I have extended the time between a thought or feeling and my actions

. . . I still have a long way to go, but I know that's OK and the nature of the practice. I look forward to continuing the training.

BW: When I began the self-awareness training 6 weeks ago I used the word *holistic* to best describe my experience. Well, I think I can now articulate what I meant. In my opinion, the self-awareness training in the mornings has been an integral part of creating a whole new—reflective and sensitive—state of mind *and* body. The self-awareness training completed the loop in a variety of ways. Coupled with several articles on self-renewal, for example, the morning sessions implored us to get in touch with our body, which is all too often ignored. As I look back at the journal entries I can see my own personal growth as I made conscious adjustments to heighten—or understand—my personal state of awareness.

FL: I have seen the benefit in the self-awareness training within myself. I appreciated the calmness with which I entered the program during the day. I also felt that the breathing was a tangible and helpful way to center myself; I see this as helping me when I feel my temper being triggered during the year.

ES: I particularly enjoyed the exercises that challenged me to use my senses as I had not used them before. I noticed that it is hard to disassociate my thoughts from the functions of my senses. When I hear something, I try to make sense of what it is that I am hearing, and when I was asked to feel, smell, and taste the lemon, I had a difficult time repressing my assumptions about what I was about to encounter before I had a chance to. I can see how this relates to the real world, as I am sure that my assumptions about something or someone often cloud my judgment and keep me from experiencing all of the nuances that make the person or the thing compelling.

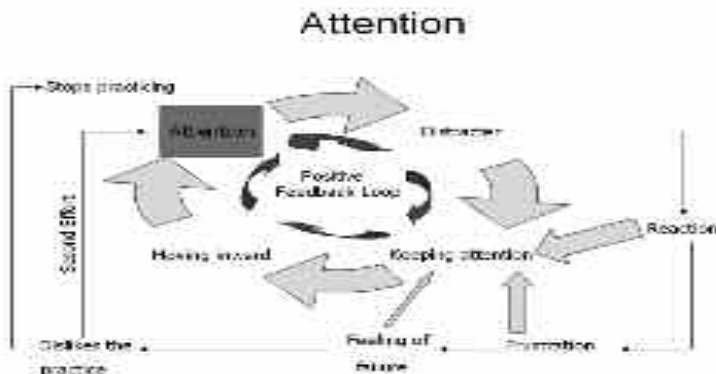
HT: I found this last week of self-awareness training quite powerful. It was really frustrating. But as the week went on I became much more self-sufficient. I think I shared with you that on Thursday I was actually able to quell an albuterol inhaler adrenal anxiety attack! It was remarkable. I actually didn't go into the session thinking this would happen, or trying to make it happen, but it did.

This brief selection of journal entries provides only a hint of some of the positive outcomes this group of young leaders experienced as they began to understand how self-awareness helps them to live a more integrated and self-empowered life.

It will be helpful to clarify at the beginning the distinction between SAT and meditation. Meditation covers a vast territory of interior and exterior practices. Virtually anything and everything can be an object of attention. In this book, we focus on a narrow subset of skills that attend to two equally important aspects of SAT. First, we explain how to practice and expand our capacity to witness our sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Second, and equally important, we work on growing a capacity to reflect metacognitively on the experiences of SAT, independent of the content of the experience. We then encourage the SPA fellows to carry these skills into their everyday lives and interactions with others, whether these interactions are physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. Figure 1 provides a diagram of the basic process for developing self-awareness using SAT. In the very beginning, positive experiences tend to reinforce practice and commitment. However, over the longer run, it is a novice's trap because the kind of experience we have reinforces our judgment about the practice as a consumer good. "I want to feel good if I'm going to spend my time doing this practice" is how one student made this point.

However, if we take a honest look at where we have our growth challenges in life, we must conclude that it is precisely our blind spots, our inability to be with the uncomfortable, and even painful, sensations we experience when we confront a sticking point in our growth that causes us the most trouble. Thus, early addiction to pleasant experiences in SAT practice sets us up for quitting when they are replaced by feelings and sensations we would rather not experience or focus on and that we have

Figure 1. Attention



previously stuffed down in our bodies and out of surface awareness.

The master key to sustaining one's practice is the experiential insight that we are not reducible to our sensations, emotions, or thoughts. We can experience them—witness their arising and passing away—without having to believe that we are identical with those feelings. We can also notice that in fact, all sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts arise in our own field of awareness, and sooner or later, they vanish from it as magically as they initially arose. This point is a fundamental insight into the practice of SAT. We act as if our minds are more than one, and in extreme cases, we can have vigorous arguments with ourselves such that we even harm our own bodies because we dislike what one part of us is doing or saying. A close friend of mine once said in moment of sharp disappointment with her own self-critical nature, "The only hope I have is to be someone else." Being a longtime practitioner of self-awareness, she immediately laughed at the statement, paused briefly, and then laughed again. She then shared this observation:

First one part of me was disappointed with the other part of me and wanted to completely disown it. Then I saw the humor in trying to disown one's self and it made me laugh. Then I laughed at myself for laughing because, laughing at myself was just another part of me coming forward to disown the other two who were squabbling with each other.

At that point, she smiled again but said nothing. The point here is that we cannot get outside of ourselves: *All viewpoints are inside*. Some are vastly more spacious and free than others, but they are all inside. Essentially, the mind has no outside.

The mind stores thoughts with strong feelings much more deeply (it makes stronger neural feedback loops) than thoughts with mild or neutral feelings. If a poem deeply moves us, for example, it will be much easier to recall than if it does not. Repetition also deepens a thought or habit. As a storage mechanism, the mind has no preference for good or bad thoughts and feelings. This is both its blessing and its curse. Once thoughts are deeply deposited, they will resurface many times because of the strong feelings (imagine a lot of stored kinetic-habit energy cycles with strong neural connections and chemical support structures). The good news: If we can allow the habitual thought to arise from a neutral perspective, it will weaken with each repeated arising. This can go on for hours, days, weeks, or years depending on the previously stored power of the thought. SAT is one effective way to neutralize negative thinking because it interrupts the habitual stimulus-response loop by inserting a

delay. That delay creates a space for alternative response possibilities (creativity).

A PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SELF-AWARENESS

SAT has been mastered by many great past practitioners of meditation. We have access to the historical record of their accomplishments and a number of the skills they taught their students. Since the 1970s, many of the Eastern techniques have been studied by Western scientists seeking to uncover the physical and psychological correlates to the states of consciousness described in these texts and practiced by the yogis trained in them. The particular approach presented in this article acknowledges all these great teachers and their many contributions. At the same time, we are traveling a different path—it may be the same fundamental landscape—but with a change in perspective.

Meditation has been primarily associated in the Western mind with mystical and religious traditions. However, the 21st century is an age of science, and an approach to self-actualization using SAT that is rooted in rational pedagogical processes and language rather than mystical language is more accessible to educators. It may also be helpful to anyone who wants a practice that will increase both his or her own self-understanding and his or her understanding of others without a religious overlay. Ultimately, SAT has psychological and pedagogical correlates. The subjective nature of SAT, however, does not imply that we are unable to develop scientific conventions for studying the transpersonal, cultural, or systemic effects that the practice of SAT has on individuals.

Hard science can measure and describe the *physical correlates* of SAT, but social sciences are necessary to tell us about the *meanings* attributed to the experience. To illustrate, a scientist can observe and study the variations in brain waves and states of consciousness associated with brain waves, such as alpha, beta, delta, gamma, and theta waves. However, science cannot determine the meaning of the experiences produced by those states within individuals. You have to ask the practitioner to get at the meaning. At the end of the day, the phenomenology of self-awareness is fundamentally subjective. You are the subject of your own inquiry. You are the observer and reporter of your own experience—the first scientist. Everyone else has the secondhand version. At the same time, one can be trained to become a connoisseur of one's subjective experiences and can develop a vocabulary to describe them that can be shared and even compared with the experiences of other practitioners.² Using such methods, we can investigate the extent to which a group of individuals share common features of their subjective experience, and these common reports

can be cross-checked against brain wave data and brain region activity to establish correlations. By analogy, anthropologists can study shamanism using scientific methodologies and compare their results with other anthropologists, but they are still unlikely to experience what the shaman does unless they commit to apprenticeship. Some anthropologists, like Michael Harner, have described this boundary crossing and integrated the two world views quite successfully, as he reported in his classic book, *The Way of the Shaman*. The point of this digression is that our notions of the relationship between what is inside and outside, what is observable and what is experienced, are artificially constructed and often not helpful for self-understanding or understanding others. Perhaps you have made this point with your own children by taking a long, thin strip of paper, twisting it a half-turn, and taping the ends together. You now have a mobius strip. If you hand a marker to the child and ask him or her to draw an unbroken line down the middle of the mobius, very soon the mobius has a line down the inside and the outside that is unbroken. We are very much like a living mobius; our insides and outsides are relatively true, but not absolutely true. If we overreact to this ambiguity, we can find ourselves seeing everything as subjective and personal—or conversely, seeing everything as objective and impersonal. From my view, pedagogy is the art of dancing between the two in the highly contingent realm where life and learning, to again paraphrase Dewey, coemerge.

Allow me to provide you with a graphic example of how students who participated in the SAT assigned very different meanings to the same events. Remember that our training consisted of introducing a specific sensory object of study. In these examples, the student's own breath, the feel, smell, and taste of a lemon, the sound of chimes, and, finally, an internal visualization, were various sensory inputs. Following are a few selected student reactions to these practices:

SW: The bell, the bell, the bell! I know that the bell worked for others but for me it was very intrusive. It felt as if, as soon as I was getting into a comfortable place, the bell would ring and break my trance. I don't mind loud noises but the bell sounded extremely loud. I can't seem to explain why I was so sensitive to the sound. I have tried to think of a reason, any reason, why I found the sound so intrusive but I can't.

RM: I find not scratching to be difficult. In the end, however, when I let these desires to scratch pass I feel more empowered and that I accomplished something. I also find it valuable to actually center my mind and enter the practice with a focused mind.

The practice of focusing my mind on the parts of my body that I could not feel was illuminating. I found that as I focused on the edges between feeling and not feeling it led to heightened sensitivity in those areas and less sensitivity in other areas.

S6: Some of the practices were not useful to me at all, and in fact made me feel annoyed —visualization techniques were not useful, because I found my mind wandering only to places I know well, rather than being able to create a visual metaphor for my thoughts.

S9: With each stair climbed, I felt as if I was leaving something heavy behind. When I finally climbed the last stair, I felt as if I was floating. It was almost frightening how vivid the visualization was. For some reason, I can't explain, I felt exposed and vulnerable after the visualization was over and I was not comfortable with it. I knew the visualization was not real and it made me very uncomfortable how real it was in my head.

Applying systems theory to pedagogy, we use two terms, *single-loop* and *double-loop learning*, to describe an organization or individual's ability to analyze, understand, reflect upon, and adapt behavior to a system pattern. In this case, the students are invited to pay attention to environmental stimuli triggering a particular sensory organ. We can see that the first loop of learning involves reflecting on their degree of aversion or attraction to the specific stimulus in each experiment. The second level is reflected in their capacity to see that judging a stimuli by its relative degree of attractiveness or aversion produces a splitting of consciousness. We encourage SAT practitioners to shift their response to a neutral position and observe any differences in how the sensory, affective, and mental systems function. This is a sophisticated self-awareness skill. Of course, as a novice SAT practitioner, one can easily fall into the trap of getting hooked by the stimulus and reacting to it. This discriminatory, attraction-aversion, reaction cycle is an automatic behavioral mechanism on the part of the mind and creates the impression that the sensation is the cause of the attraction or aversion, when in fact it is the mind itself that assigns the positive or negative valence to the stimulus. When this happens, we subconsciously assign the power of our reaction to the object rather than to ourselves and then vociferously deny that we have produced our own ghost.

Recall that Figure 1 provides a visual summary of how students generally responded—whether positively or negatively— at the single-loop

level of understanding. If it was relatively pleasant, they wrote positive things about the experience. If it was unpleasant, they wrote about their reactions, sometimes telling vivid stories to go with their evaluations of the experience. Very few were able to rise above this single-loop level in the first few weeks of practice, although we saw emerging signs of this capacity toward the end of the six weeks of training, and you see a bit of it expressed by the last respondent as an aspiration. We have found progressive improvements in our students' capacities to be present to stimuli without engaging the discriminatory, attraction-aversion, reaction cycle.

A science of self-awareness is capable of using external aids in the form of biofeedback mechanisms and particular forms of environmental enhancement via auditory, visual, tactile, olfactory, or mental stimulation. However, all forms of sensory stimulation or manipulation require one factor in common for progress in the training: attention by the participant. Attention requires a particular focusing of one's mental energies on an object within one's awareness.

Attention and awareness are complimentary processes. Without attention, self-awareness is not possible. However, excessive effort at sustaining attention produces strain, and strain cannot be long sustained. The kind of attention we seek to cultivate is very much like that of a cat before a mouse hole. The cat is completely relaxed, very still, and at the same time highly aware of, and interested in, any possible movement in the vicinity of the mouse-hole. This analogy breaks down, however, since the cat has an agenda. She is not a neutral observer of the mouse hole. A much more subtle form of attention holds awareness both on the mouse hole and the wider environment—with an open focus—and does so with a curiosity that is impartial. Perhaps a more appropriate example would be to have the exquisitely relaxed attention of a vegetarian cat before a mouse hole with no interest in eating mice but still very curious about what might come out of that hole. Most SAT naturally turns our attention on our self. We begin with the physical self and progressively move to emotions and thoughts, and finally to thoughtless self-awareness at very advanced stages.

One of the first things we discover when we turn our attention inward and begin to directly experience the body is the shockingly diverse and noisy world of our inner physical life. The brain screens out most of this feedback because it distracts one's attention from the outer world where the first order of business is survival. (For this reason, a safe, quiet, clean environment is very helpful for beginning practice.)

If we have never done this kind of training previously, we are introduced to a world of sensations: a gurgling stomach, the pressures and movements of gaseous bowels, respiratory noises, heartbeats, pulsing

blood, aching muscles, itching skin, heat, cold, and even sensory dead zones where we have no apparent awareness. This plethora of sensations (or lack of sensations) can be utterly overwhelming in the first few days of training, especially if one begins self-awareness practice in an intensive retreat environment lasting several days or weeks.

We also are inundated by feelings. Feelings are our reactions to our sensations. We have feelings stored in our body, and many of them have been pushed down into the body because we have not had sufficient space or time in our lives to experience and process them naturally. Some of us who first approach SAT spend a good deal of time witnessing the bursting floodgates of stored emotions. Somewhat like freshly opened champagne, there can be a good deal of gushing and messiness in the beginning, but for most practitioners, things calm down once this initial psychosomatic pressure is released. (When we are not sufficiently emotionally or mentally stable to take on SAT training at a given moment in our lives, structured therapy may be the wiser course of action.)³

And then we come to mental phenomena. Thoughts zoom in and out. The basic inanity of the human mind is exposed in all its glory. Here is a sample of stream of consciousness:

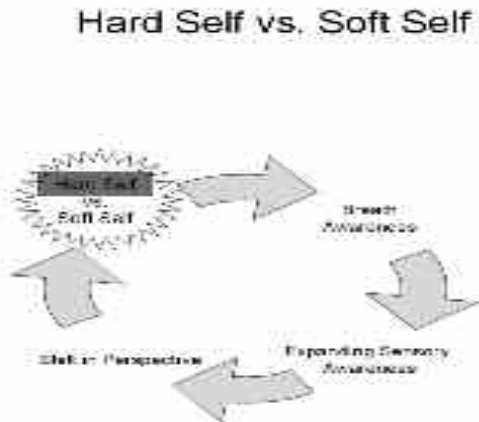
I wonder why she was looking at me that way today. Did I do something to offend her? I saw her with Peter yesterday. . . I wonder if he said something to her about me. . . I know I still owe him the 20 dollars. I have the money, I've just not really had an opportunity to return it. . . I seem to be working harder and harder but we're still in debt and the taxes are due. . . I wonder if our tax accountant is really competent. We might be paying thousands of dollars in extra taxes. . .

This stream-of-consciousness moment from a journal entry observing my own mental flotsam and jetsam—and anxieties about money—is not pretty, but it is fairly typical. The contents of the mind can range from anger to peace, lust to equanimity, jealousy to joy, and ultimately, even bliss. Most often, however, it is simply a mechanical process. It often takes repeated sessions of practice to realize that much of what is going on in the mind during SAT more resembles the random firing of popcorn than rational inner discourse.

Eventually, we begin to learn experientially that content of the mind is relatively less important than the degree of clarity and equanimity that we can maintain irrespective of the content. It deserves repeating that this capacity is developed only when we can witness our own experience with equanimity, and it is a requirement for the development of insight and personal growth—and certainly for effective leadership.

As time goes by and our practice deepens, we can maintain a very relaxed attention with a wide and nonspecific focus, remaining extremely alert to all the internal movements of sensations, feelings, and consciousness as our body interacts with itself and the environment, without getting lost in them. The hard edges of the boundary between self and other become fuzzy. Where we end and the environment begins becomes a shared space. It is not so much that we become fuzzy as we become aware, through heightened self-awareness, that we already exist in a state of shared being with all of life: It's less a change in reality than a change in perspective. The "fuzzy edge" metaphor is practitioner language for a sensation that is roughly opposite the sensation of a "hard edge." This fuzziness has a counterintuitive quality of both heightened lucidity and openness. For those of you who like visual images, the following graph (Figure 2) might help you to understand what I mean by openness. With every turn around the loop, "selfness" loosens its grip, and the body feels wider, lighter, more expansive, less tense, and less sharply edged. This shift in perspective weakens the feeling of isolation and lessens the distance between self and others—subject and object. As concentration deepens and stabilizes, a level shift occurs where the distance between the object of concentration and the subject collapses.

Figure 2. Hard self versus soft self



This experience is labeled differently, but it is often accompanied by a feeling of rapture and joy and deep appreciation for the object of focus. It might be helpful to see these experiences as a continuum from very hard self (I, against the world!) at one pole and universal awareness (all is one!) at the other. In this case, the soft self would be positioned

midway between the two. The soft self should not be confused with the highest (describable stage), which sees the entire continuum of experience itself as a conceptual whole within an even more inclusive consciousness.

Another word sometimes used to explain the experience of softening is *decentering*. Decentering occurs when the normally tight focus we maintain on our own needs, wants, and interests loosens sufficiently so that we are capable of experiencing phenomena from the viewpoint of another. Typically, our experiences “orbit” around us (we are at the center of our universe). When we manage to decenter, we can view experiences as if we were watching them from outside our own emotional solar system. With sufficient practice, we can actually experience a happy person from his or her point of view. When we do this wholeheartedly, isn’t it the case that we enter into the person’s happiness with him or her and experience it as our own? Even soldiers can spontaneously laugh with the children of their enemies. Think about the implications for children, teachers, and schools if we were to develop our capacity to appreciate the happiness and good fortune of others. Also, consider how it might improve our decision-making to be able to decenter sufficiently to see things from the parent’s or teacher’s perspective when he or she is unhappy or suffering. The following section describes the feedback loop that operates during the attention, distraction, and reaction cycle, and options that students have available to them when such a cycle enters into their awareness.

THE ATTENTION-DISTRACTION-REACTION FEEDBACK LOOP

It has already been established that the pedagogy of self-awareness requires both attention and insight. First, we choose a focal point for our attention, for example, “the feeling of the breath passing in and out of our nostrils.” Shortly, a distracter arises in awareness and competes with our intended focus. Ironically, the distracter is always “more interesting,” or it wouldn’t be effective as a distracter. Here is one student’s comment:

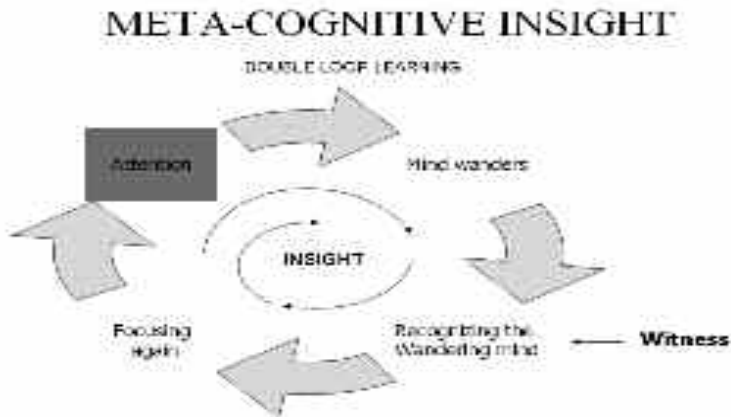
BB: At first, I generally have had difficulty “tuning out” the things at the forefront of my mind (I’m tired, I’m hungry, I have too much work to do, I don’t get it, etc. . . .). On the second day I wrote that the thoughts were coming too fast and seemed superficial, and that it was hard not to have them the whole time.

Here we can see the typical kind of bubbling up of distracting thoughts and feelings a practitioner will experience. And here is that same student’s experience as “listening practice” continued during the week:

BB: As the minutes in each session passed, and the days, I have had an easier time letting go of some of that and dealing with the task at hand. The most exciting moment (“maybe I get it!”) was on Thursday morning. We were again listening to ourselves on the inside. At first, I thought I was wandering, having trouble staying focused, and maybe having trouble staying awake. But, when you directed us to again become aware of the sounds around us, the noise all of a sudden rushed in around me. It was almost as if all the movement around me had been paused, and at that moment was un-paused and began rushing around again. It was a different feeling from waking up from sleep, because it was more distinct and not groggy or confusing.

Figure 3 provides a useful visual heuristic for understanding the cyclical nature of attention, distraction, and reaction, and the role that the witness plays in developing our concentration. First, we choose an object of attention, such as the breath, and commit to keeping it as the object. After a few minutes (or seconds), a distracter enters into our awareness that is pleasant or unpleasant. If we fail to recognize the distraction and “get hooked,” then we might go on for some time lost in the story of that distraction. If the “witness” capacity of self-awareness is strong, we will notice quickly that we’ve lost awareness of our breath and return quickly to the breath without further comment or reaction. This simple three-step process of SAT—(1) focus on the object, (2) notice that the mind has wandered, (3) return to focus on the object—is a profoundly challenging practice to maintain, even for a few minutes. However, even a few

Figure 3. Metacognitive insight



weeks of daily practice will lead to observable improvements. A few years of practice will vastly improve our capacity for self-awareness.

In the moment of the distraction, a very skilled practitioner returns to the object of attention by releasing the distraction. If one is less skilled, he or she will react to the distraction with a feeling of aversion or attraction, but either way, it has an emotional hook. One may spend the entire rest of the training period in a fantasy world of projections and reactions to this initial distracter, telling a rich and complex story, typically one that makes us feel better about the situation and serves to reinforce the “I-perspective” as synonymous with “the Truth.”

The other side of the hypercritical syndrome is even more difficult. This scenario is the exact opposite of the former one. We sit down. We begin practicing, feeling the sensations of our breath. We relax. We feel a nice glow coming on. We have a pleasant thought about that trip we took to Vancouver . . . session’s over. “Wow! Where did the time go? Hey, this SAT stuff isn’t so bad after all!” It takes a very skillful teacher to point out to you that you are simply daydreaming, not practicing self-awareness. What causes daydreaming is complex but understandable. Almost everyone I meet in my professional world is to some degree sleep deprived. Also, especially in urban environments, the level of background noise is high and relentless: garbage trucks, sirens, construction, traffic, cell phones, television—and elevator music. In New York City at least, it seems that silence is equated with death. Beginning a new SAT practice allows our body to relax. Relaxation in turn activates our interrupted dream cycle, and the mind seeks to use the downtime to integrate the overworked experiential world of our daily lives. In itself, this is fine. We are subjected to larger environmental stressors of which we are probably not aware. However, if daydreaming persists too long, we are simply training the mind in daydreaming, not SAT. The solution is to rebalance our lives, not to find a “trick” to ignore the body’s cry for help. This example also serves to point out how a simple practice starts including wider parts of our life within its own realm of awareness and calls for corrective action. Blaming the practice, when it is we who are out of balance, is just another form of aversion to change.

Perhaps it is now clearer that the cycle of wandering and returning is an important practice in itself for establishing mental stability of the observer. Over days, months, and years, the percentage of time spent holding our attention on an object will increase. At some point, we will develop the capacity to hold our attention on whatever task or object we wish for extended periods of time—even an entire minute! One consequence of noting the pattern of wandering attention and returning to awareness, as we practice, is that the depth of our practice increases.

Depth is one of those words that have special meaning for practitioners of self-awareness. It signifies a sharply altered state of consciousness. For example, if we are attending to the sensation of the breath as it passes in and out over the edges of the nostrils, we start to notice that the surface sensations of the air molecules and the skin molecules commingle. The separation between what is solid (flesh) and what is subtle (air) evaporates. This is a peculiar experience, and it may shock you the first few times you have it—almost certainly knocking you right out of the experience. After such an experience, again we spend the rest of our meditation going, “Wow! Was that cool or what?” and then thinking, “Who can I tell about this? Who will believe me . . . Oh oh, I’ve totally forgotten about my practice again.” And so it goes. Just as the Inuit people of the Arctic can identify more than 50 types of snow, a practitioner of self-awareness develops an acute sensitivity to the varieties of the moments of the mind, seeing ever more deeply into the nature of mind. Skillfulness results from keeping the same equanimity and poise no matter how dramatic the nature of the observation becomes.

If, at some point, we recognize that we’ve lost the thread of attention, we can either return calmly and nonjudgmentally to the keeping of attention (indicated by the dashed arrows in Figure 3), or we can react to our reaction (a second-order loss of witness) and feel frustration or a sense of failure, or even ultimately reject the practice itself as meaningless, too difficult, or not for us. Let us listen to this student (KT) from the same class who begins practice with very competitive expectations about his performance:

KT: Thus far, I’ve had a difficult time focusing my thoughts during our time together. Each morning, as you’ve suggested a focus for our thoughts, I’ve initially felt comfortable going in that direction. However, after a few minutes, my mind has begun to race, instead branching off in a seemingly sporadic network of thoughts.

For this student, his racing mind was a new and discomfiting experience, one he was only aware of when, for the first time, he turned his attention inward. It is often the case that novice students of SAT “blame the method” or “shoot the messenger” rather than see this discomfort as new information that is helpful to understanding their own mental processes.

IN: Ironically, though, the more that I attempted to follow the directions, the more my mind rebelled and ushered forth vivid images of my father who recently passed away, recollections of

family vacations, thoughts on the readings, or my frustrations with the technological challenges that I experienced daily, leaving me feeling anxious. Therefore, the last thing that I could do, or even subconsciously wished to do, was to “return to breath.”

We can see that both students—and these two are simply exemplars of a common pattern—start out noticing how difficult the task of attending to a specific sensation is. If we are able to persist in returning to the practice, we begin to observe subtler states of sensation as the sensory reinforcement of attention to the movement of air past the nostrils awakens the nerves and starts to amplify neural feedback. These subtle impressions and their growing complexity will become psychologically interesting and provide positive feedback on the practice.

Persistence, until these subtler forms of sensation develop, is an essential aspect of developing a positive attitude in the practice for most students. Of course, the sensations can also later become subtle forms of distraction as one begins to fantasize about their meaning and significance, and how great we are for noticing them! To the extent we can keep the *judge, critic, evaluator, interpreter, and controller*—all elements of our own ego formation—quiet and stay close to the experience without “adding anything extra,” our SAT practice quickly deepens. One might imagine that the kind of SAT we are talking about is a practice unique to the Eastern traditions. It is certainly the case that the pan-Asian and Indo-Himalayan sages have developed introspection into a fine art and have also come to understand subtle mind-states that we can barely appreciate, but this has more to do with the choices made by the dominant stream of materialist philosophy and science in Western civilization than any intrinsic capacity. In fact, we do have important introspective traditions within the West as well.

One of my personal favorites is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Best recognized for his excellent poetry and plays (e.g., *Faustus*), he was also a naturalist of some reputation, producing scientific studies of plants, clouds, geological formations, and weather patterns. His method, however, was very radical and emphasized an intimacy of experience in nature between the student and the object of study. Although Goethe’s focus was on the external environment, his method draws one inexorably into a relationship that leads to an experience of the “other” in nature as an enlarged subjectivity, as if the other were within one’s self. It was not until the advent of Western phenomenology in the 20th century that we have been able to develop a language to describe the method practiced by Goethe. One bit of terminology that Goethe used to explain his method was *delicate empiricism*—an effort to

understand the meaning of something by prolonged, empathic observation grounded in direct experience.⁴ The words *delicate* and *empathic* ring particularly strongly for me. Goethe was less interested in tearing apart the objects of study than he was in meeting them on their own ground, and doing so with such presence and gentleness that the plant offered up its secrets. Over time, Goethe believed this method would produce qualitative and affective understandings (what we today call emotional intelligence), and these understandings would profoundly deepen our awareness of life and nature—and respect for it.

Like all scientists—and laypersons for that matter—his empiricism had presuppositions. For Goethe, it was self-evident that nature is alive and intelligent (after all, how could we be here to inquire if that were not so?), and he met nature's various forms of life (including his own) from the perspective of an empathic equal. Most important for our purposes, he wrote of his discoveries that this was accomplished not by any great spiritual or mental gifts, but by systematic training and effort.

SAT uses a similar delicate empiricism to uncover hidden patterns in the physical, emotional, and mental structures of our own being. It takes discipline, sustained effort, and acute observation—and yes, it takes a delicate touch with considerable self-empathy. These two together—proper empirical method and proper regard—are the two fundamental conditions for successfully expanding self-awareness. Perhaps no one put it more directly than J. Krishnamurti (1991) when he wrote, “If you are lucky enough and find out how to listen, how to see, then you will find for yourself that there is a benediction in the very act of seeing, in the very act of listening—a benediction that comes only when you know how to love” (130).

At some point in our practice of self-awareness, we can gain access to the subconscious activities of our own body processes. We can acquire an exquisite sensitivity to the nuances of movement in our sensations. As these very subtle worlds of sensation become more familiar and we become more practiced at experiencing them, we can elect to experience very sublime states of consciousness.

However, we can also elect to enlighten our very own evolutionary history by choosing to explore downward through examining the unconscious impulses and automatic feedback loops functioning below the radar screen and influencing all aspects of our lives. One of these, familiar to most of us, is the fight-flight response that originates perhaps as early as the amoeba's irritation and flight when bumping into another amoeba or an unfavorable nutritional environment. When we experience the fight-flight response as modern 21st-century humans in our daily work settings or family life, it can produce havoc in our relationships and

in our bodies. Gaining access to this biological feedback loop and rewiring it—something advanced practitioners of SAT have demonstrated they can do—is definitely an evolutionary advance for human beings.⁵

OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Allow me to now suggest a few tentative observations and reflections. First, SAT selects one of six senses—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, bodily sensations, plus thinking—as its primary mode of practice. Second, the attention, distraction, reaction cycle is a fundamental feature of mental conditioning. The more we fight with it, the more frustrated we will become, and the more deeply we become enmeshed in single-loop feedback. Third, the practice of self-awareness is about noticing when we have wandered away from our object of attention and gently bringing our awareness back to it without adding negative self-talk or reacting in any way. This “noticing” strengthens our concentration and capacity for witnessing our experiences. Fourth, over time, we can develop a strong “witness-awareness” and begin to shift our attention from physical, emotional, and mental content to the gestalt within which the content arises. This widening of focus is synonymous with a decentering of awareness that is more inclusive and encourages a self-understanding that is less immune to including others. Fifth, it is not enough to experience self-awareness to learn it—or at least it is a very hit-and-miss method. Creating a structure for journaling, reflection, and sharing is equally important and necessary to provide the metacognitive insights that lead to a deepening of our understanding and further evolution of our world view. These metacognitive capacities are well discussed in the literature on adult development and especially clear in Kegan’s (Kegan 1982; Kegan and Lahey 2009) and Drago-Severson’s (2004) approaches.⁶

One final point on pedagogy: Resistance and aversion are a form of attachment. I returned from a 10-day meditation retreat over the holidays a couple of years ago reflecting not only on my own experiences but also on the experience of one young man who, near the end, shared his frustrations in our group interview. He realized that he was so fundamentally competitive that he could not even start to practice or think about practice without comparing every moment of his own experiences against the imagined or shared experiences of others. He described himself as being angry and in open rebellion, sitting at the back of the meditation hall slouched in a chair with his eyes open and leg on his knee, practicing, as he put it, “antimeditation.” Yet, as his description made obvious—and he

was completely unaware of this—he was working with the same competitive diligence in antimeditation as he was in failing to meditate earlier. He did not, for example, choose to leave the retreat. He was very clearly the “best” antimediator among us, and he was feeding his sense of satisfaction with this stance. I felt a great deal of compassion for him. He was stuck in his single-loop feedback system, and the teacher either could not or would not point this out to him.

Rebellious young adults very often mimic this very same highly skilled antiestablishment work ethic, where the definition of self becomes elaborated and positively reinforced by mastering all the skills that are disliked by the dominant culture because one has more opportunity to become better at them and sees more possibilities for self-validation than one does in the “success culture” from which one experiences exclusion. Our materialist society has become ever more adept at commercializing and integrating “antimainstream” cultural movements into the marketplace, such as tattoos, hip-hop, and punk. I invite you to type any of these three words into your computer’s Web browser and see what happens.

This capacity to see into the systemic patterns of our feedback loops is a critical self-awareness skill, and it requires some conceptual knowledge and pedagogical understanding both to teach well and to practice well. At the same time, I will be the first to admit that the mere presence of a master of self-awareness is sufficient to catalyze a profound change in one’s ability to be self-aware. This form of *pedagogy of being* is the highest form of instruction. I have been fortunate to meet and study with more than my fair share of such teachers, and I can say that each of them also offered a wide variety of skillful developmental strategies for the many different kinds of students who came to them for help. At the same time, I’ve not found teachers who would explicate the pedagogical principles that were at work in building self-awareness from a developmental perspective.

The model of SAT we use is only one of many approaches available, but it has the advantage of being relatively easily taught, easily learned, and appropriate for students of all ages and education levels with some adaptation. SAT provides an opportunity to rise above the fray of the many sides of our self that compete for our attention, and find a calm and focused vantage point within ourselves from which we can gain new perspectives on our own physical, emotional, and mental processes.

Mindful attention means attending to everything. It means recalling your original intention to feel the breath flowing past your nostrils, noticing when the mind wanders, noticing your reactions to the wandering, and noticing your decision to return to your intended object of self-awareness as calmly and quickly as you can.

The small incremental steps we take in our practice accumulate. These accumulations, at some point, result in unexpected qualitative transformations in our self-perceptions, our habits of mind, and our behavior. Ultimately, we are capable of creating the conditions for the emergent properties of higher order adult development that lead to self-actualizing behaviors and the peak experiences that reinforce and sustain them. These progressions in turn lay the foundation for insights and experiences that expand our capacity to understand those around us and improve our ability to work with them toward compassionate goals on behalf of those we serve. Is it too much to believe that these experiences and their self-conscious integration into our lives can collectively set the stage for the next step in our evolution? Perhaps, if you will allow me a bit of irony at the end, education will become as powerful an evolutionary strategy as genetics.

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Notes

1. Very recently, the research on the positive effects of self-awareness training, also known as mindfulness training, has been forthcoming. I recommend the work of Daniel Goleman, Annie McKee, and Richard Boyatzis (2002) and B. Alan Wallace (2007) for a review of that work. Its relationship to emotional intelligence can be found in Bar-On (2001), Ferrari and Sternberg (1998), and Gardner (1993). Also see the works listed in the appendix.

2. Interactional expertise arises in a community of experts who have tacit knowledge and a shared vocabulary. See Harry Collins's (2007) article, "Who Is Wearing Their True Colours?"

3. My colleagues and I have been experimenting with focusing as a partner-based self-awareness practice and are now introducing it to our students for the first time this year with the assistance of David Rome, senior fellow at the Garrison Institute. It has a very productive track record in therapeutic settings as well. For more information on focusing, go to www.focusing.org.

4. I am indebted to David Seamon and Arthur Zajonc (1998) for a wonderful edited volume entitled *Goethe's Way of Science: A Phenomenology of Nature*.

5. At the time of this writing, you can find a examples of mind control over brain states on YouTube from Ken Wilber and at www.mindmodulations.com/mindmods/. For more detailed research, see Hankey's study (2006) comparing TM with advanced Tibetan meditators.

6. I highly recommend Robert Kegan's early book, *The Evolving Self* (1982), and his latest work (with Lisa Laskow Lahey), *Immunity to Change* (2009).

APPENDIX

Resources and Selected References

In this appendix, you will find summarized a few resources that I have found to be reliable and helpful, particularly if you want to develop the practice of self-awareness as a skill. For those of you interested in the research literature, a selected bibliography is provided. Where feasible, I have also included Web sites.

Resources

The Center for Mindfulness—This famous stress-reduction clinic in Massachusetts was founded by John Cabot Zinn, MD, author of several books on mindfulness. For someone who wants a technique that is purely technical, no (religious) strings attached, the CFM approach will appeal. These initiatives include the renowned Stress Reduction Program—the oldest and largest academic medical center-based stress reduction program in the country—as well as a range of professional training programs and corporate workshops, courses, and retreats. During the past 28 years, they have worked with groups as diverse as clinical patients, health care professionals, corporate employees, CEOs, educators, attorneys, judges, correctional staff, prison inmates, members of the clergy, and Olympic and professional athletes. The e-mail address is: mindfulness@umassmed.edu.

The Insight Meditation Society— The Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, was founded by Susan Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and, Joseph Goldstein in 1976. IMS is a wonderful retreat setting with excellent facilities and highly trained meditation experts. The program is very rigorous, yet still allows for a little wiggle room to pursue individual interests. It has a yoga room, an extensive series of well-marked forest walking trails, and good vegetarian food. The primary tradition at IMS is mindfulness meditation. However, you can learn Chi Kung, yoga, and Tibetan meditation practices there as well. You can attend for a weekend, a week, a 9-day retreat, or even extended retreats for up to 1 year, which are in a special forest preserve away from the main campus and off limits

to short-term visitors. This is highly recommended for introductory to intensive training. The training is explicitly Buddhist, but I have met practitioners there from all religious backgrounds over the years. The Web site is www.dharma.org/ims.

Eckert Tolle was a Cambridge University graduate student who had a “sudden” awakening and now lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. His most popular book, *The Power of Now*, has been published and translated widely. It is readily available in bookstores. I highly recommend his audio CDs for those of you who use iPods or CD players if you want to get a “taste” of presence. I have a number of his CDs on my iPod and I listen to him often because of his special attention to the practice of presence. The Web site is www.eckharttolle.com.

The Integral Institute—Ken Wilber is a prolific and sophisticated philosopher in the original sense of the word. His books are among the most thought-provoking you will read, addressing spirituality in the post-modern world. He critically evaluates issues like feminism, boomeritis, and deconstructivism and goes on to propose a “theory of everything.” The June–August 2006 issue of *What Is Enlightenment?* reviews the most recent thinking in his latest book, *Integral Spirituality*. This magazine is widely available in bookstores. It is glossy and sophisticated and very popular among college students and those in their 30s. The magazine is the brainchild of Andrew Cohen and Ken Wilber, both highly visible advocates for an evolutionary and integral perspective on enlightenment. The Web site is www.integralinstitute.org.

The Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies—B. Alan Wallace, president of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies, is a prolific and thoughtful author on self-awareness and meditation. He is currently conducting research on the effects of such training on mind states and emotions. The institute offers lectures and training. The Web site is www.sbinstitute.com.

The Summer Principals Academy, Teachers College, Columbia University—The Summer Principals Academy offers a graduate degree and New York State Principal’s Certification. The program admits approximately 100 students each year nationally. The curriculum, in addition to the traditional content areas in leadership, management, curriculum, and adult development, focuses on developing self-awareness and emotional, social, and intercultural intelligence. The Web site is www.tc.columbia.edu/summerprincipal.

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