

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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### Sequel Article

Pierre Grimes

*Philosophical Counseling and Philosophy*

### Articles

Shanti Jones

*Reclaiming an Essential Practice For Western Philosophy*

Jörn Kroll

*Self, Other, and No-Self:*

*Non-Dual Awareness as Catalyst for Deconstructing Life Stories*

Zhiyuan Wang

*On Happiness: Based on Roemer's General Theory of Exploitation*

### Reviews

*Virtue as Identity*

reviewed by Sean Butler

*Ultimate Questions*

reviewed by Robert J. Parmach

*Creatures of a Day*

reviewed by Lou Marinoff

### Biographies of Contributors

## Reclaiming an Essential Practice For Western Philosophy

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### Abstract

At the beginning of western civilization, philosophy was a way of life involving analytic and synthetic methods aimed at guiding and training people so they could learn how to live consciously and happily. Theoretical knowledge was insufficient for this task. Philosophy was to be practiced at all times and places so it could become a matter of course. The emphasis was on practice. The most foundational philosophical practices were centered on the development of an individual's capacity to pay attention and to perceive. These exercises enabled him to live consciously in reality. However, once western philosophy and its practices were Christianized and confined to Orthodox monasteries, these exercises, as originally practiced, were essentially lost.

Beginning in the mid 19th century, the importance of attention and perception as vehicles for knowing the truth was seriously written about once again, this time by a group of philosophers called phenomenologists. They offered deep and convincing outlooks on why perception is so fundamentally important to philosophy. At the same time, they lacked clear directions on how those essential capacities could be used wisely in everyday life. This renders their writings brilliant, but less than practical for the individual who wants to improve his life through the study of western philosophy. The aim of this paper is to re-establish the importance of attention and perception and to present a method born out of the western philosophical tradition that will enable any person who wants to practice Western philosophy to do so.

**Keywords:** *attention, perception, descriptive psychology, noticing, phenomenology, sensing exercise, spiritual exercises, summum bonum.*

### Introduction

At the beginning of western civilization, philosophy was a way of life practiced in groups and centered around the care of one's self and one's soul. The ultimate aim was to help the individual to achieve happiness through living the summum bonum, or good life. In order to accomplish this task, it was understood that certain spiritual exercises had to be practiced, not just talked or thought about. The most important and basic ones had to do with the development of the person's attention and perception.

Attention is defined as the notice taken of someone or something. Perception is the awareness one has of physical sensations which get interpreted in the light of experience. Together they give the person the capacity to comprehend what is happening around him and to live in reality. In the west today, perception is mainly of interest to psychologists who study it scientifically, and to Buddhist and mindfulness practitioners, who come from other traditions and who have often popularized the concepts. However, for much of western philosophy's history, attention and perception were known as the vehicle for knowing the truth. This was the truest in ancient Greece, where spiritual

exercises enabled a person to concentrate and extend his ability to pay attention and to perceive situations he was in more clearly and objectively. This kind of attention, obtained only by habit and perseverance, enabled him to achieve self-mastery and self-control, and to know himself and the truth.

At the time of Christ, most of the philosophical groups that supported philosophy as a way of life became Christianized. Their essential practices, thought to be too rigorous for the average individual, were confined to Orthodox monasteries. Exercises originally meant to develop a person's attention and perception became a means for diverting attention to God. The importance of developing postures of openness and attention for their own sake was virtually lost.

It wasn't until the phenomenologists appeared on the philosophical scene in the late 1800's that the importance of attention and perception was seriously taken up again. The problem was, these concepts reappeared without any concrete ways to develop them in practice. Without specific practices, to it is almost impossible to make practical use of these concepts. This was unfortunate, because most people need to be able to attend and to perceive better than they do, not only for better philosophizing, but also for better functioning and well-being.

In this paper, I want to re-establish the importance of attention and perception, not only as an idea but as a practice. To this end, I will re-count what some of has been left to us by the ancient Greeks, by the phenomenologists and by the ascetic philosopher, Simone Weil. In order to illustrate that attention and perception are important not only in the West, but also in the East, I will also include ideas about attention and perception that come from Chinese and Indian philosophies. Lastly, I will convey the relevant teachings of George I. Gurdjieff, an Armenian who lived for a time in Orthodox monasteries. There he learned the Christianized ancient Greek exercises, originally meant to develop attention and perception. He later restored them to their original use and taught them to his students. In the last section, I will describe the sensing exercise as they were taught by Gurdjieff and are still practiced today.

Epicurus once said, "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal the suffering of man." Without an essential practice to support the development of conscious attention and perception, two of western philosophy's fundamental ways to know truth, much of it seems like just that – words which could heal the suffering of man, but don't. My hope is that with the resurrection of the sensing exercises, philosophy will be helped to restore one of its original purposes – to help people solve the problems of their lives, not only theoretically, but practically.

### **Attention and Perception as Considered by the Ancient Greeks**

For the ancient Greeks, philosophy was a way of life. From the time of the Stoics until a half century after the death of Christ, it was practiced within communities where the members supported one another in maintaining a fundamental spiritual attitude directed towards achieving happiness and taking care of themselves and their souls. This attitude required presence of mind and full awareness. It was continuous and vigilant and enabled the person to immerse himself in a way of life that was philosophical and achieved the highest good.

For the many today who see philosophy primarily as something that is studied and practiced within the confines of the university, it must be almost inconceivable what ‘philosophy as a way of life’ could mean. Perhaps the closest approximations of philosophy as a way of life would be communities of Christians, Buddhists, and Muslims who gather together in order to strengthen their faith and to grow in understanding and wisdom. In a similar way, ancient Greeks had their own communities in which essential practices supported their aims of knowing themselves and living consciously in the world.

The practices were called spiritual exercises, and they were to be cultivated throughout a person’s life. They were considered exercises because they were practical, required effort and training, and were lived. They were considered spiritual because, rather than solely engaging a person’s intellect, they involved one’s whole being. The ones considered the most basic and important were designed to develop a person’s attention and perception. (Hadot, 2008.)

The ancient Greeks understood that attention and perception, when developed, gave a person the ability to live in reality and to know the truth. When he learned to place his complete attention in the present moment, he found that nothing in reality existed outside of it, which made his life more manageable. In addition, because passions are fueled by thoughts of the past and future, it was understood that the person who is in the moment is free of them. Other benefits to the individual included the ability to respond immediately and with clarity and to have access to cosmic consciousness and its universal laws. Above all, the development of attention and perception allowed philosophy to be a true spiritual exercise involving a unique way of seeing and being in the world, which led to true happiness and the good life.

By the 5th century A.D., philosophy as a way of life was usurped by Christian ascetic communities, which ‘won out’ by virtue of the advantage of having the “word of God.” Like the ancient philosophical communities, they showed a central concern for knowledge of oneself, but they Christianized many of the original practices, which thus became directed towards God rather than hovering evenly between the individual and his world. In the Middle Ages, the practice of Christianized Ancient Greek philosophical exercises remained confined to a few Orthodox monasteries, while philosophy became confined to the universities without the practices which had made it a way of life (Hadot, 1995.)

### **Brentano on the Importance of ‘Noticing’**

The importance of attention and perception returned to the western philosophical scene through the work of Franz Brentano (1838-1917), an influential German philosopher and psychologist. He utilized Aristotle’s theories of being and knowledge to form the point of departure for his “descriptive psychology” and his doctrine of human experience. He concentrated on knowledge directly accessible by natural means (Brentano, 1995.)

The task of the descriptive psychologist is to investigate the elements of human consciousness and attempt to determine, as exhaustively as possible, their modes of combination. He must learn to notice what is there, to fix his attention upon what he has noticed, retain it, and then describe, as accurately as possible, just what it was that he had noticed. Brentano called this process which requires developed capacities of attention and perception, “noticing.”

There is a difference between an experience that is noticed or consciously perceived and an experience that isn't. For example, a sense experience comprises a multiplicity of parts, some of which may be "noticed," and some not. In addition, it is not only the sense impressions of outer phenomena that are included, but also the awareness of the person himself as a thinking, judging, desiring, inferring, planning, remembering, and endeavoring human being. In that way, no matter what is being noticed, every observation may be said to be an observation of himself.

Noticing well enables a person to see situations clearly in their entirety, giving him access to truths comprised of intelligent reason. His judgments become amplifications of what he knows rather than explanations of what he thinks. Since he draws from his own direct conscious experience, his knowledge of reality is increased.

Noticing everything one ought to notice is not easy. First of all, there are various aspects of his personality he must observe and overcome, such as his own passions, anxieties, and anger. These can be distracting and distorting. In addition, any prejudices he has about the subject matter being investigated should not be allowed to exert their influence. These, too will prevent him from noticing what is there to be noticed, with the result that "noticing" is suspended.

Brentano enjoins us to practice noticing. We must not allow ourselves to get into the habit of not noticing. Not noticing will cause us to miss what is there. One cannot even speak of "noticing well," because for him, noticing is a matter simply of what is evident; there are no degrees. Noticing is, therefore, an achievement (McAllister, L., 1976.)

There is a reason why most people haven't turned to him in order to learn how to attend better and to perceive well. Like Aristotle and Kant, Brentano's writing style is dense. In addition, if the person tried to follow his instructions for how to actually DO noticing, he would never succeed. The situation he will find himself in is analogous to the one in which a person who wants to learn how to have good sex has only a physiology textbook to help him. Both the person who wants to know something about having sex and the person who wants to understand how to practice noticing are bound to be turned off before they even begin! Brentano was missing the most important thing which would enable a person to understand and to be turned on to his teachings – the practice.

### **Husserl on the Phenomenological Reduction**

The German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) conceived of phenomenology as a universal philosophical science. Its fundamental methodological principle was what he called the phenomenological reduction, which focuses a person's attention on basic, un-interpreted experience of his perceptions. What is immediately given to him, Husserl said, will thus be free of pre-conceptions and will provide him with an opportunity for an interface of his consciousness with reality (Husserl, 2012.)

The phenomenological reduction is unambiguously explicit and direct. Immediate sensory awareness, external realities, and corresponding intuitions all combine equally in a reflection in which everything has meaning. Nothing such as myth, religion or science is added on top of direct experience. The person can then use the reliable knowledge he has gained from his conscious and accurate perceptions for such things as cooking meals, building bridges, or constructing his world in a rational and reliable manner (Smith, B., and Smith, D. eds., 1995.)

Husserl's teachings on attention and perception are brilliant. The problem is, once again, that for the person who wants to practice philosophy, they just aren't that helpful. Though Husserl knows how to go about it himself, he gave very little clear direction about what to implement. If a person wanted to get better at the practice of perceiving after reading Husserl, he wouldn't actually know what to do based on what he had read. He would have a hard time understanding how to go about doing it himself. Perhaps all Husserl needed, in addition to his thousands of pages of expositions, was one simple exercise which would ensure that generations of philosophers to come would be able know the truth that can be obtained for themselves, rather than just read about it.

### **Merleau- Ponty - Perception Defined as our Access to Truth**

The French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) also went to great length to show how seeing, hearing and sensing – perception- is a human being's access to truth. He wanted the person to understand how his sensible life, his life in his body, intermingles with his knowledge, how they are tied together in his experience of his inside and outside worlds. He posited that when the person experiences himself and his world in this way, he then realigns his understanding with the things he is familiar with. This realignment gives him direct access to the truth, which enables him to philosophize, not just theorize (Merleau-Ponty, M., 1968.)

This philosophical way of life requires, first and foremost, that the person who practices it develop his abilities to pay attention and to perceive. With developed attention, he can harmonize things and find an intelligible structure for them. Developed perception enables his awareness to reach out to things beyond himself. It is essentially an embodied apprehension of the world he is embedded in.

Merleau-Ponty's concept of what it means to perceive includes not only the relationship of the person to his world around him, but also the contents of his inner life with its vast array of assumptions, memories, associations and sensory experiences. A person's perceptions enable him to deal with his environment and to find his way around in it, to be involved in a process in which his world is not copied, but constituted. This is what he meant when he said that our perceptions give us our access to the truth (Merleau-Ponty, 2012.)

When the average person who wants to make practical use of these ideas asks how to do what Merleau-Ponty calls on him to do, the embarrassing moment is reached. At times, Merleau-Ponty's words seem like conceptual engineering, and could even be considered one of the reasons why western philosophy is accused of "hiding the ball." I maintain that without a practice itself to support the words, it's virtually impossible to apply them.

### **Simone Weil on the Importance of Attention**

Simone Weil (1909-1943), a French philosopher and mystic, borrowed her viewpoint on the importance of attention from the ancient Greeks. She insisted that the formation of the faculty of attention should be the true goal and unique interest of all studies a person undertakes. It leads the person to know himself better, to live closer to reality, and to achieve the summum bonum.

According to Weil, attention consists in a person suspending his thoughts and letting his mind become available and empty while he remains highly aware. With his inner world empty of all its own contents, the person can then receive all of his perceptions, just as they are. Weil instructed the person to then retain his perceptions in order to be able to utilize the relevant knowledge he gains from them

Attention is an effort, perhaps the greatest of all efforts. Weil said this could easily be missed because, by itself, attention does not involve fatigue. Conversely, when a person is fatigued, attention is impossible to maintain. Also, despite appearances, maintaining one's attention is difficult. This is especially true when a person directs part of his attention within, where he is likely to find things he would rather avoid. Though it may seem easy, the development of attention requires a true desire on the part of the person undertaking it.

A person can develop his capacity to pay attention in school but there are limitations. First, developing the students' faculty of attention is rarely part of the curriculum. How many teachers go beyond the admonition, "pay attention"? Also, if the student doesn't like the subject matter, it is less likely he will seriously attend to it. Western education primarily focuses on intellectual knowing, which does not include other ways people personally attend to and perceive the world, such as with their bodies and their emotions. (Weil, S., 2012.)

This brings me back to why it is important that western philosophy once again place the development of attention and perception at the forefront of its practical education. Although today there are many self-help books written based on the premise that the person who develops his capacity to pay attention is likely to be more successful than the one who doesn't, that kind of reasoning is less than satisfying compared to that offered by Weil, for whom attention leads to knowledge of ultimate reality. With a practice, western philosophy's best and most developed arguments for attention and perception become relevant and useful for a person wanting to know the truth.

### **Classic Chinese and Indian Philosophical Views on Attention and Perception**

For classic Chinese and Indian thinkers, attention and perception were also important matters. In classical Chinese philosophy, the center of perception is called *xin*. Translated as "heart/mind," it includes emotions, understanding, intuition and rational thought. Each person's awareness, based upon this heart/mind understanding of the world, is structured as an interactive relationship between humanity and nature. Any kind of comprehension originates with the consciousness that one's being is organically embedded and interwoven with rational cosmic structures. These one comes to know through his heart/mind.

The heart/mind is thought of as a principal sense organ, responsible for selecting and interpreting sensations transmitted to it by other sense organs. It is seen as continuously integrated with the phenomena of the external world and as a product of coherent, structurally ordered and complementary interactions between itself, things, and events. It enables the comprehension of external reality.

In this worldview, the human mind is structured in accordance with this all-embracing organic system. A person's recognition and thought are therefore not coincidental or arbitrary, but follow this

dynamic structure. All they have to do is to pay attention and to perceive them. (Phillips, Stephen, 2017.)

In classical Indian philosophy, *pali* is the term used for perception. It can be defined as grasping at the distinguishing features or characteristics of things and includes processes such as recognition, assimilation, and conceptualization. Perception, attained through the five senses, the mind, self-consciousness and the practice of yoga enables one to know particular things. It is also always purely non-conceptual and non-linguistic. (Gunaratana, B. 2014.)

Dharmakīrti (7th c. A.D.), an Indian Buddhist philosopher and logician, was very interested in perception and its importance. According to him, perception enables a person to become conscious of the qualities of an object. General inclusion, one of its attributes, stimulates the person to note the things he perceives in order to recognize and remember them. Once the qualities are recognized, the person interprets the object by way of the features he has perceived and makes inferences from his interpretations

As in Western philosophy, perception is a person's fundamental contact with the world. His conceptual cognition rests upon it. Without perception, cognition can think whatever it wants about whatever it chooses. This is why perception, unerring and distinguished, is understood as the unequivocal path to the truth. (Rošker, J., 2017.)

Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism form the basis for classic Chinese and Indian philosophy. Each system offers teachings about the importance of going beyond ordinary, superficial perceptions and mindless pre-conceptions. Mindfulness and concentration meditation techniques are taught in order to help a person can become calm and centered, while insight meditation enables him to see more clearly what and how he perceives of the contents of his body and mind. The techniques aim to help a person to cultivate a more purified perception which will lead to a more enlightened perspective (Goleman, D.,1977).

No one can deny the value that eastern meditation techniques offer, nor could any rational person contest the value of the philosophies that lie behind them. However, a person who was not born into the culture that supports these techniques and philosophies would have a difficult time understanding them well enough to utilize them as absolute sources of truth. It is also widely known that fixed attention meditation techniques can be risky. In putting something in the foreground while putting all that is peculiarly "me" in the background, a person can lose touch with his own sense of self and become ungrounded. (Speeth, 1982.) Also, like Christianity, parts of Buddhism got diverted into what the followers of the Buddha said he wanted, distorting them. Even the Dalai Lama discourages Westerners from taking up Buddhism as their primary path to enlightenment. He understands that we have equivalent philosophies born out of our own culture, and he encourages us to use them.

### **Gurdjieff: There is no God but Reality**

George I. Gurdjieff (1870-1949) was born in Armenia. In his early adult years, he spent time in Orthodox Monasteries, which is where he learned, among other things, practices that develop attention and perception. He also lived in Sufi communities and traveled in Asia and Africa, searching



for the truth, which he suspected lay hidden within religious traditions and myths. As a result of his search, he was able to impart teachings he had learned, and he adapted them for use by the modern western man. His was neither a philosophy nor a religion, but rather a practical teaching that enabled a person to become conscious, to live in reality, and to find his true place as a human being.

Gurdjieff observed that human beings lack the ability to concentrate. In addition, they exhibit behaviors that are far too automatic. They are, he taught, asleep to what they could be – entranced, in a kind of dream state, caught in illusions while thinking they are perceiving reality. As a result, they need to awaken in order to discover their authentic selves, as well as the reality of the world. This would enable them to be more effective, and to be at peace. (Speeth, K., 1976.)

According to Gurdjieff, consciousness, which the person normally experiences as his mind, is an enormously elaborate system of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Its primary function is the simulation of the environment. In other words, it is a tool for knowing reality. Therefore, it is important that the simulation be accurate. The degree to which the simulation is a poor representation of reality, and the degree to which a person mistakenly identifies the simulation of experienced reality with actual reality itself, is the degree to which he is not enlightened. (Tart, 1984.)

In order to be enlightened, a person must be able to focus his attention as desired and needed while maintaining an undistorted perception of reality. There is not any one state of consciousness that offers a totally unlimited or undistorted perception of the world, nor are there modes of thinking or feeling that are optimal for all situations. The important thing is for a person to recognize the state he is in, to know its advantages and disadvantages, and to utilize it optimally.

According to Gurdjieff, much of a person's suffering is useless - unknowingly created through un-enlightened, unintelligent use of his capacities. Just by misperceiving the external world and his own deeper nature, he acts in ways inconsistent with the realities of his situation, and then he reaps the unpleasant consequences. By way of contrast, when he assumes an attitude of attentive consciousness, he is led to a more realistic perception of himself and the world. Consequently, he engages in effective action and eliminates useless suffering.

The path an individual need follow, then, in order to obtain an enlightened consciousness that can know the truth requires that he develop his powers of attention and perception. It is a matter of dropping all a priori beliefs, of physically, emotionally, and intellectually paying attention to everything, of noticing all that happens inside and outside of himself, and of being open-mindedly curious. This is hard work that requires will and patience. But this work is the purest pleasure, for it nourishes a person's deepest desire – to know himself, and to know the truth. (Tracol, H., 1976.)

Gurdjieff established communities in France and the United States which were dedicated to the harmonious development of the person. The primary tool he taught was the sensing exercise, which I will describe in the following section. He learned this exercise while residing in Orthodox monasteries and then de-Christianized it. I believe the exercise is a very close facsimile of one used to develop attention and perception in ancient times. This is the exercise which I believe can add an essential practice to western philosophy, making it practical and invaluable to people as in those times.

## **The Sensing Exercise – A Practice to Develop Attention and Perception**

The sensing exercise is a practice of self-observation in which one pays sustained attention to everything in and around himself, while being open-mindedly curious about everything he notices. “Everything” is a mixture of perceptions of external events and one’s internal reactions to them. One drops all a priori beliefs about what he should be interested in, and about what is important and not important. Whatever is in his world in a particular moment is an appropriate focus for observation.

This open-minded attention is more than just intellectual attention. It includes emotional and bodily perceptions as well. What feelings are aroused in oneself by what is going on? What effects, if any, does this world have on what he senses in his body? Perhaps he will find that there are only one or two things to notice. However many there are, he should strive to be open to all of them all of the time.

The practice of self-observation, as learned through the sensing exercise, is a practice of being curious while doing one’s best to observe and to learn, regardless of his preferences or fears. He learns to observe himself and his world with complete objectivity. He discovers and controls the mechanisms of distortion and learns to be more objective. This is a continual process that does not carry a guarantee that one will ever be perfectly objective. However, he will certainly have the experience of pronounced movement from deep subjectivity toward more objectivity, which is the best we can get. It is certainly worth the effort. (Tart, 2001.)

Here is the specific practice which will enable you to develop your ability to attend and to perceive.

### **The Sensing Exercise**

Start by sitting upright in a comfortable chair. Be sure your legs are not crossed, and then place your hands on your knees. Release any noticeable tension in your body. Take a few, deep cleansing breaths, allowing your belly to expand.

Now, when you are ready, focus your attention on your right foot. When you are fully in touch with your right foot, keep paying attention to it for about a half a minute. Then shift your attention to the lower half of your right leg. Now pay open attention to the stream of sensations coming from your lower right leg for about 30 seconds.

Next, shift your focus of awareness to your upper right leg and sense it, again maintaining your awareness there for about a half a minute. Proceed onward in the same manner with your right hand, right lower and upper arm, and your right shoulder. Then proceed to your left shoulder, and sense your left shoulder. Take the time to sense each body part as completely as you are able, including even the sensations coming from your nervous system and blood vessels. Don’t go on to another part of your body until you’ve gotten at least some contact with each preceding part. Move on down your left arm to your left hand, and then down your left leg in the same manner, until you finally come to your left foot.

Once you have sensed your left foot for a half minute or so, broaden your focus of attention. Bring your attention completely into both of your legs at the same time, sensing them as deeply as you can. Then add your arms, so that you are sensing both your arms and your legs at the same time. Then, when you are ready, without losing sensation in your arms and legs, add listening, so that you are sensing your body and listening at the same time. Lastly, open your eyes while maintaining awareness of sensing your body, listening to the sounds around you, and add looking at all there is to see, all at the same time.

As your awareness of your emotions, your body, and your intellect are brought into play, don't ignore other perceptual sensations, such as smell or touch. This systematic practice of self-observation is done with all of your faculties.

When you leave your chair, continue to remember sensing, looking and listening. The goal is to become so proficient that you can maintain this practice of self-awareness without cease. This clarity, the feeling of being more alive and present to the reality of the moment is what it means to remember yourself.

### **The Author's Personal Experience with the Sensing Exercise**

I began practicing the sensing exercise forty years ago when I learned it from my first Gurdjieff teacher. Because of its many positive practical effects, I have maintained a daily practice of it ever since then. When I was younger, I thought that learning to attend and to perceive were the most valuable faculties a person could have in life. Now that I am older, I know that they are. Though every aspect of my life has improved directly as a result of practicing the sensing exercise, I want to talk here about how it directly impacts the quality of my work as a counselor.

Attention of the finest quality is the fundamental instrument of my work. Given its basic importance, I was disappointed to find that many training programs provided a conceptual framework which assumed that the student was already adept in the use of their attention. For example, as counselors, we are expected to carry out attentional maneuvers, such as maintaining unconditional positive regard, monitoring counter-transference, sustaining a complementary relationship, being authentic, or refraining from solving the client's problems for him. However, without further training, such requirements are about as easy to follow as "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Fortunately, my Gurdjieff teacher, Dr. Kathleen Speeth, a clinical psychologist who spent many years learning attentional technologies from various sacred traditions, including the Gurdjieff work, understood that counselors need to apply themselves diligently to the exacting art of paying attention. The sensing exercise was the main tool she used to help her students tame, direct, and master their own attention.

From her I learned that, for the counselor, there are two main attentional and perceptual things going on. First are the things that the counselor can see, hear, or otherwise sense outside himself, such as the client's words, postures, gestures, patterns of breathing, etc. The second are those things which go on inside the counselor, such as his own proprioceptive sensations, feelings, thoughts, associations, hunches, and intuitions, etc.

In ordinary life, one's attention is divided, invested either on the inside or the outside. Dr. Speeth taught me that I must learn to maintain my attention in both directions. Both my inner and outer worlds have to be sensitively known for counseling to be real counseling and not just a conversation. From her, I learned to develop an impartial observing self who could witness, as if from above, how focused my attention is, moment by moment. I can notice how much investment, cathexis, or fascination there is with any particular element going on in any particular moment, whether inner or outer. I can also notice when my attention is not caught by anything specific, but is instead broadly focused on the entire panorama of the experience.

This voluntary control of attention enables me to interrupt any involuntary states of identification while maintaining empathy with my clients. As a result, I have part of my consciousness available for watching the entire process impartially. Because I feel confident in domains beneath the rational strata of the mind, I can allow my clients to regress into archaic forms of thinking and feeling if they need to. Attending fully allows me to be relatively free of my own theoretical admonitions, so all information can be considered more or less equally.

Being able to hold my attention without conditions has also enabled me to have greater self-acceptance. Being mindful of my own inner process without becoming immersed in any one aspect enables me to acknowledge whatever arises in my mind without editing, judging, or getting unduly alarmed. In holding myself without conditions, I at the same time hold myself in unconditional positive regard so that whatever arises from the depths of me will not jeopardize my sense of worth and goodness. As it fortuitously turns out, all the aspects of learning to attend and perceive that I learned in my training as a counselor have also turned out to be wholesome and necessary component of my personal life, as well.

## **Conclusion**

Kant defined man's emergence from his inability to use his own understanding without another's guidance as enlightenment. It is an individual, personal act which requires an ethos, a philosophical life in which is found the critique of who we are. There are many paths to enlightenment, but the ones without philosophical understanding tend to lack depth. Though many people are intimidated by western philosophy, it has provided us with tools that can help people become enlightened.

One of these tools is the sensing exercise. It was born out of the ancient Greeks' understanding of the roles attention and perception play in enabling people to know themselves and reality. In the Christian era, the attention that was directed towards knowing oneself became directed towards knowing Christ. With the Enlightenment, the idea of the self was re-interpreted and became more philosophical and psychological, and it was posited that reality could be known without an intervening god.

Soon after, attention and perception as tools for knowing reality came to the forefront again. Phenomenologists in the 1800's first thought of them as scientific tools, but with the birth of existentialism in the mid 1900's, they also became vehicles for knowing oneself. However, without the exercises that could be used to support these notions as relevant and practical for everyday life, their writings and those of the Existentialists are somewhat hollow, abstract, and incomprehensible and therefore almost useless for the person who wants to know how to know himself and reality better through the practice of western philosophy.

Today, many people are more comfortable with Asian philosophies of mindfulness, which also teach how to develop their attention and perception, to maintain non-judgmental awareness and to be in the moment. Though many benefits can be derived from these practices, its overly popular manifestations often amount to little more than another way of getting down time. In addition, mindfulness alone leaves out important parts of philosophy, and it belongs to a tradition that is not of the West. Though I agree that East and West can and should inform one another, a practice that belongs within the western philosophical tradition can expand and deepen the awareness of those people who come from it in a way a foreign tradition alone cannot.

Current efforts to naturalize moral psychology offer various dual-process hypotheses of decision making in which judging a situation and deciding upon a course of action is not a simple cost-benefit analysis but a context dependent mixture of rational and affective processes. If people are to be moral then, they must have a way to practice attending to both (Damasio, A., 1999.) The sensing exercise, born out of the western philosophical tradition, does exactly that. Although it is constant work and one always has to bring oneself back to it, the practice of it is additive and synergistic, and enables one to get from the particulars to universal, moral truths as well as to have empathy.

The sensing exercise, a practice that comes from western philosophy and that was lost and is now resurrected, can help contribute to its future development. It provides excellent groundwork for the next step of making western philosophy practical and relevant to the betterment of people's daily lives. The sensing exercise restores the possibility of philosophy for practical living on a larger scale than ever before. It will enable people to look inside, to describe their own experience, and to use philosophy for achieving good in their lives.

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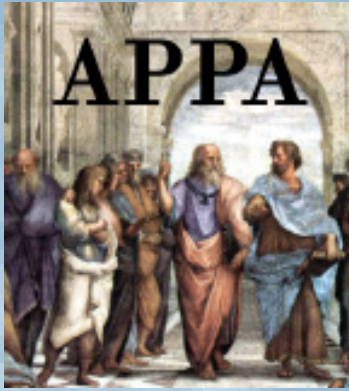
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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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