



1.3 Subtle Sensing and the Body

Working together

We shape our self
to fit this world,
and by the world
are shaped again.
The visible and the invisible
working together
in common cause

to produce
the miraculous.

I am thinking of the way
the intangible air

passed at speed
round a shaped wing

easily
holds our weight.

So may we, in this life
trust

to those elements
we have yet to see

or imagine,
and look for the true

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shape of our own self,
by forming it well

to the great
intangibles about us.

- David Whyte, *The House of Belonging*

Experience: body sensations, reflections and subtle sensing

It was Julio Olalla who pointed out to me that, overall, in the West we lack distinctions for describing what is going on in our interior. Being trained as an emotional body-worker, I have spent many years in the ongoing practice of fine-tuning my inner senses, and many times I am perplexed at how little people feel or notice about what is going on inside them. Olalla posits that we need to challenge our deeply held assumptions: we are so attached to what we 'know' that we don't want to give it up even when it doesn't bring us the expected outcomes. When we expand our observation to include, not only our thoughts and opinions, but also our inner states and feelings, our whole perception of reality changes, resulting in different actions, feelings and interventions.

When we practice noticing our inner, subtle senses we eventually reach a point where we can experience everything that arises within us with equanimity and compassion — indeed, this becomes second nature. Held with compassion, the unknown parts of our self become less ugly, hostile or weird, and reveal their charms and hitherto unsuspected strengths. This in turn eventually enhances our capacity to sense what is happening in other people, and beyond.

Let me begin by sharing some of the assumptions that underpin my way of looking at things. Our lives are made up of our *experiences*. These includes everything you can think of, everything that you have ever... well, experienced. Your experiences might be comparable to those of your sister or your colleague, but quite unlike those of someone of another gender or generation, let alone from another culture, climate or social class. In the manifest world, experiences can be narrowed down to what we experience through our senses, our physical sensations, since these can be shared, measured, recorded and replicated. This has always been the domain of our mainstream sciences.

But our daily experiences are by no means restricted to our bodily sensations. Alongside everything that can be measured and replicated, we also experience ideas and beliefs and, most of the time, a plethora of

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emotions too, whether conscious or not. This complex mesh of sensations, ideas and emotions is what I mean when I speak of experiences.

As humans, we also have the capacity to *reflect on our experiences* and to witness what is happening both inside and outside of us. This is the world of consciousness and awareness. It is our capacity to stand outside our experience and notice what is happening. This is mindfulness, witnessing; sometimes called a meta-capacity because it is like standing on the balcony and observing at a distance.

Not all our experiences are based on physical sensations, emotions or ideas, however. We have all had one or more experiences like this one... When I was almost eighteen, I went to enroll at the local university. I was best at, and most interested in, the sciences – maths, physics and chemistry. But out of the blue — I enrolled for psychology. I never uncovered any rationale or other cognitive explanation for this. Looking back over my life, after living more than half a century of it, it makes a lot of sense. At that moment, though, I experienced it, and was somehow aware of it, as 'something' – a subtle sensing - that was not conscious in my discursive mind. So where did it come from? Today, my answer would be that my soul was pointing me in a certain direction. Luckily, I was sensitive enough at the time to register it and act on it, although not at all consciously. This sensing, this *subtle perception* is not something you can measure, and therefore this inner knowing – to use another name for it – has not received much attention in our Western world. Psychology comes closest to it, indeed, but still...

Many people see this inner knowing or subtle perception as something that you either have or you don't. My conviction, and my experience, is that you can learn it, we can teach it; everybody has it and does it. In fact, throughout history – even in the history of science - and in so many different cultures, this way of knowing has been essential to the human endeavour. When paying more attention to the subtle in our selves - and in others and in our surroundings as well – these perceptions seem to become more palpable, even more understandable. We begin to recognize that they are omnipresent. We become more able to speak about this dimension of ourselves and the world, and to articulate what we are noticing. Like any other

Synchronizing mind and body is not a concept or a random technique someone thought up for self-improvement. Rather, it is a basic principle of how to be a human being and how to use your sense perceptions, your mind and body together. - Chogyam Trungpa, *Shambala, The Sacred Path of the Warrior*

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practice, when we bring our intention and attention to bear on it, we become better at it.

It is of course in and through the body that we register and identify our physical sensations, and that we are in relationship with what is all around us. But thinking and reflecting, on the one hand, and subtle sensing on the other, also only become possible *through the body* – because this is where you become conscious of them. Nonetheless, neither is happening *in* the physical body in the same way as our physical senses can be tracked; rather, both are both beyond, or perhaps implied or enfolded. Instead, our physical sensations are happening *in the body*, through our five senses.

These days it is being ever more recognized that thoughts, intentions and beliefs can be seen as forms of energy that have a certain influence on the plane of matter. I see inner knowing or subtle sensing in the same way. We cannot register them with our five senses, but still they ‘do’ something! There isn’t really that much difference between thoughts and subtle sensing in this regard, which makes it all the more curious that thoughts and ideas have been ascribed so much value over time, while subtle sensing has been seen as unreal and unreliable.



If you want to be able to deal with the greater complexity and uncertainty of life in today’s world in a relaxed way, and enjoy a more emergent quality in your life, then you need to develop this capacity to sense the subtle dimensions of yourself, the others and the environment. This subtle way of knowing allows you to notice shifts in energy, in vitality, in life

force – like weak signals pointing into the future – before ever anything becomes visible or manifest, if indeed anything ever does. It hints at where life wants to flow.

The capacity for subtle sensing is dependent on the ability to be present and mindful in your experiences. By ‘being present’ we mean being *open to what is* in the moment, which is a doorway to being *open to what wants to happen* in the future. Basically this means being the master of your attention: being able to guide it and let it rest where you want it to be. This capacity is not usually part of the mainstream school curriculum, and so it is barely present in our Western culture in general. It can however be cultivated through many different practices, whenever people conceive the intention to do so.

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Subtle Intelligence

Collective Presencing, the new human capacity described in this book, implies a lot of awareness. Building up that capacity is a process of alignment, both inner and outer. It is about integrating into our awareness more of the unconscious and unrecognized elements of life, in our selves, in others and all around. If we are to become aware of these so-called blind spots (you can't see what you can't see!), it behooves us to develop our subtle intelligence. Many would name this area of knowing 'intuition'. But that term is rather vague and too general, and so not adequate for our purpose here. We need more clarity in this domain of subtle intelligence, and so we must resist the temptation to simplify or generalise.

Scharmer¹, in his work on Presencing, says: "We need to learn from the future." Collective Presencing builds on that, but in order to "learn from the future" we need to be able to distinguish between actually sensing something from the future and wishful thinking and/or emotional projection. We will see that quite some emotional intelligence is needed to be able to discern what is what.

My own premise is that if we notice or perceive something — however vague or subtle it may be — we are also able to become conscious of that perception, right in this moment, provided we allow it time and space in which to unfold. We need only to slow down and let our subtle sensing reach our consciousness; or perhaps it is the other way round: we can let our attention and awareness reach out to our subtle sensing. Or better still: let our subtle sensing and our awareness synchronise, or come into coherence. In this way even really novel thinking can emerge.

Experiencing is a thick, bodily-felt flow of situational events; it never has just one form or 'propositional content' which might be compared to words.
- Gendlin,
Authenticity after
Postmodernism
1995.

Philosopher Eugene Gendlin² has named this kind of inner subtle sense the 'felt sense', and has developed a process for attending to it, called Focusing. This process guides your attention to the vague feeling, which itself knows quite exactly what words or expressions fit or fail to express its essence. Based on this Focusing practice, Gendlin developed a 20+ step methodology called 'Thinking at the edge', specifically for the purpose of achieving new, theoretical insights based on this felt sense. While we do not follow his defined steps, we do invite everyone to become aware of their felt sense

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and take the time and effort to (learn to) articulate it for the benefit of others.

Subtle sensing is not only a sensing into objects of substance, distinct and separate elements; it is also a sensing of connections, of atmosphere, of relationships, of that which is in between — some would call it energy. For our Western mind, this involves withdrawing somewhat from our default way of seeing, taking distance from objects, from matter, and instead looking with a broader view and softer focus, and noticing what is happening in the relationships and energy exchange.

Some people use the word *etheric sensing*, a form of perception based on sensing the energetics of people, places, animals, plants and so on. They see it as a resonance in the etheric levels, and therefore primarily related to life force. This is probably also the reason why people can more easily access or notice their subtle sensing when in nature. My explanation for this is that nature has no agenda, it *just is*. There is only the life force present; no thinking/ideas and none of the big emotions that humans tend to have, which might block the flow of life. In nature, the predominant presence is the subtle life force so that is what we resonate with.

Embodiment

All experiences happen in real time and our bodies are always involved: pleasant and unpleasant experiences; small and big events; ordinary and exceptional things, even (day) dreaming or a sudden insight. None of this could have any effect on us if our bodies were not involved.

Expression is a big part of our embodiment. To express my perspective in this book, I must speak it or write it down. I could even try to dance or draw it — regardless of the medium I chose, it will always involve my body in some way. Experience and expression are inextricably linked with our physical bodies. I say it again: experience and expression *always* involve our physical bodies. This ineluctable truth seems often to be forgotten in the mental discourse on so many topics. The process that we are – we are not a clearly defined thing but a process that is ongoing – happens in and through our bodies. It is our very physicality that makes all of our experiences, indeed, our whole life possible: the sensations, the emotions, the thoughts, the subtle feelings, the inner knowing. All of it.

To be human, to be alive, is to be in a physical body. It cannot be otherwise. That's essential - at the core. Somehow it must have some deep value for life itself. The body makes it possible to learn from experiences, because something has in-form-ed the matter of the body, and the

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learning has made an imprint. It seems we are now at time where we are invited to learn more from the subtle experiences we have too.

Our thinking, our body's intelligence, our inner knowing, our emotional intelligence... let's be clear that these aren't separate. They live in a constant dance of mutual influence: from the inner lived experience or from the so-called observer outside, they are one big flow. This constantly changing interplay actually constitutes the whole of who we are. It is only for the sake of clarity that we separate them out and make distinctions — the reason why science came into being in the first place. But never forget that it is 'for the sake of clarity' and *not* because 'it is' like that. Don't mistake the map for the territory!



Subtle sensing is a finely tuned noticing of bodily perceptions, it is a perception of energy flows streaming or blocking. It can take the form of an experience in your body, when you suddenly realise that you 'know', because it is something you can sense, you have *received* it in your whole body, thinking, feeling, sensing all included. If you are not embodied — not present in your body — you will miss some or all of the ongoing subtle sensing about your self and your environment. It doesn't mean you can't have any subtle sensing. Many people who are good at sensing energies outside themselves, in the environment, aren't good at sensing what is going on for themselves.

Although there are many differences in people's capacity to sense into the subtle, we can generalise that most people need some silence, some slowing down, some standing still to be able to perceive what is happening on this subtle level. If your attention is not focused on your subtle experience, then you are basically moving too fast (as is the norm in Western society) — and this is not a natural rhythm. In nature, there is time for speeding up and time for slowing down. Our culture, in the industrialised world, seems to be constantly in springtime energy, where fast growing happens with no time to harvest the fruits, let alone to be in the deep rest of winter, waiting for the next thing to be born.

We know from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) that different people have different preferences in the use of the physical senses in perceiving the world. They either habitually rely on visual cues, or auditory, or kinaesthetic (external touch and inner feel), taste or smell. The same is going on at the subtle level. Some people 'see' on the subtle level and are inspired or learn through imagining or holding a vision, others 'hear' some

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truth ringing or only dissonance, while others 'know' for sure that something is not aligned. It is good to know which kind of channel or subtle sensing has your preference, and not to fall into the common trap of believing that 'seeing' – as our culture is so visual – has more value or holds more truth than the other (subtle) senses.

Full embodiment, so needed to be flexible and in flow, can be inhibited or blocked as a result of past experiences (mostly in childhood). Your characteristic way of doing things, the frequently recurring themes in your life, the things that you hate or always fall in love with, are like stuck patterns that developed for the purpose of survival. They prevent you from being flexible in your response to what is happening in and around you. What many people don't realise is that *not* expressing, holding back, withdrawing — when it is a habitual response — is also a survival pattern. It influences the body and its capacity to express freely.

In all these cases, the body blocks free expression and falls into a habit, not from a consciously made choice but as a 'remnant' of past experiences. Because there was too much pain for the body to process or for the mind to make meaning of, and no context or support to hold it all, the emotion and its spontaneous, bodily expression (like laughter, crying, anger, dancing, reaching out etc.) retreated underground, into what we call the unconscious, beyond the reach of our normal, daily mind. Once these past experiences are brought back to the surface, restored to the world of current time-and-space, our understanding of who we are (mind) changes and expands, and the flexibility and breadth of our channels of expression (body) grow. Some painful experiences from early childhood (trauma) can be accessed and healed only through the body (in trauma healing where resonance and trust provide a safe context to do so), because no mind or memory had yet developed at the time when the painful event(s) took place. In such cases, working through the emotions, as in regular therapy, is not sufficient.

The practice of sensing in daily life

As I had been trained in Emotional Bodywork and gone on to become a trainer myself, I had learned a lot of where I was blocked in my own expressions and how to become free and flexible again. It was a huge clearing of the emotional baggage still stored in my body. As I approached ever closer to the world of subtle sensing – while trying to distance myself from all the new age hype around it – I made up some exercises that I did a lot, and still do. Paying it attention and constantly training, my capacity for subtle sensing grew enormously, especially in relation to the environment and the future.

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One of these exercises was 'sensing my place'. Entering a big room full of chairs, whether at a workshop, a conference or a restaurant, I would try to use my subtle senses to choose my chair. I tried not to think about it, or search for familiar faces, but totally go with an inner sense. Sometimes this led to fascinating encounters!

Another exercise is 'what is next?' I am a keen gardener, but I don't plan my work. I go with whatever I have energy for. Of course, this is guided by what the seasons require, but it often happens that the one thing that my mind was sure I was going to do that day while I was still in bed, didn't get done until the following weekend or even later, when my energy was finally aligned with just that task. I have learned to trust this so deeply that, for instance, after nearly 3 years in my current home, I gave up pushing myself to buy and plant fruit trees — normally something you do at the beginning of tending to a new property. Instead, I just trusted that there was a reason why my energy wasn't taking me there. It finally dawned on me that this probably had to do with building up more compost in our heavy clay soil so that the saplings would have a better habitat to start in. Now that the trees are finally in and thriving, my suspicions have been confirmed.

This exercise of 'what is next?' is a good preparation for what we will later describe as following your soul's calling. It is following your energy, but on a greater scale than a project like your garden. Now you start applying this subtle sensing to your professional life and your life as a whole! It becomes an exercise in 'what is mine to do?' and 'what is the minimal, elegant, next step?'

All these little exercises — and you can invent your own — help us to be more embodied, more present with what is really there. All in all it helps us to be more in the flow and to sense whether we are in or out of alignment, both inner and outer.

¹ Scharmer, O. Theory U. Leading from the Future as it Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing. Society for Organizational Learning: Boston, MA. 2007

² Gendlin, Eugene; *Focusing*. Bantam Books, New York, 2007.