

RECOVERING SENSATION

These exercises make use of the **Felt Sense** to awaken, or put more accurately, to recover, the natural ability to be "present in the body." Recovery of sensation enhances our feeling and experience of being present in the world.

Reflection, awareness and attention to what we are experiencing in our body with all its qualities while moving through the world is like being aware of the smells, colors and beauty of a forest as we travel through it. This can awaken or bring to life our feelings of "hamd" (praise) and "shukr" (thankfulness), to experience life less in a realm of abstract thought or ideas and more as an experiential reality.

Grounding our experiences and ourselves in the world by sensation enables us to automatically carry an awareness of a physical boundary, of how and where we actually are at all times in relation to all things around us. We then unconsciously carry with us a sense of that subtle limit of where we end and the rest of the world begins. To always have this awareness can bring more to our lives than we may realize.

Allah subhana wa ta'ala has placed us in our bodies and in this physical world, and while we may be aware of the world to come and live with that in our hearts and minds, we also accept that we do this, by Allah subhana wa ta'ala's design, while being present in the world around us.

Being present in our bodies was more natural when we were children, and for most of us this "being present" was gradually programmed out of our consciousness or shut down by trauma, feelings that were overwhelming, or by a lifestyle in which we learned to live outside of ourselves altogether. Placing a three year old in front of a TV, finding something that will "occupy" her so that mom can get on with all the work she has to do, or so she can find a moment to talk with her friends, is an example of the kind of foundational training that teaches us to live outside ourselves. Success with occupying a child in this way is a prime way to teach her to avoid personal, live contact or action in the world in favor of abstract and seemingly "real" distraction. Most children will feel some sense of loss or separation in this reoriented focus, but they will eventually learn to "live" in this artificial world rather than the actual one. At the same time, many children object strongly to this and begin to act out their displeasure at being left alone. Abandonment to television becomes one of the most compelling foundations for behavior in our world today, the hypnotic trance-like state, the pain and false pleasure embedded in it helps account for much of the energy that drives the industry itself.

From these kinds of foundations, we begin to learn and develop more elaborate systems of distraction derived from feelings of separation, and become addicted to their use when facing overwhelming events, or even the very simple events of everyday life. In the case of most men, as a result of their particular training and upbringing, distraction is used as a strategy for avoidance and survival in the face of any feeling at all. Our addiction to distraction and avoidance takes us from the act of fully experiencing pleasure or pain and eventually from the real experience of life itself.

For those people who have experienced or are experiencing severe trauma, abuse and more obvious neglect these needs of distraction are even more compelling. The abstraction from experiencing life on a feeling level takes us further and further from the ability to know what our actual needs are. We become lost in superficial experience and lost in superficial remedies as well.

Western and American culture and society is rife with many more such examples. Our modern age from the turn of the 20th century onward is marked by an enormous proliferation of images and the development of a plethora of abstract experiences outside ourselves. Photo albums have replaced the

extended family, movies and TV have replaced adventure and friendship. All this has created a narcissistic culture in which we live in the space of an image of how we are supposed to live and not how we actually feel. All of this entails being divorced from sensation and feeling. Eventually whole parts and layers of our being become senseless and abstracted until we no longer really able to care about things very much at all. We continue to go through the motions and postures of "caring," since we think and believe this is our responsibility, yet somewhere inside us we know how things really are, even if we are no longer able to embody this in our lives. This creates a terrible disconnect and feeds the sense of hopelessness.

All this in turn impacts our physical emotional and spiritual well being. These widespread needs to be distracted from being fully present are no more dramatically represented than they are by the largest growth industry in the world, illicit drugs, and the other enormous industries that supply prescription mind-and-emotion altering drugs, as well as the legal drug world of alcohol and tobacco. TV, of course, fulfills this same need on a massive and profound scale. The list goes on and on of popular distractions that enable us to feel we can survive in a state of separation from our feelings, but just surviving means not living our lives to their fullest. The irony of this is that our need for connection, the loss of which is assuaged by distraction, ends up creating even more separation.

There are countless ways to explore and awaken the felt sense, and there are many that we can discover directly for ourselves. Remember, these are exercises to recover that which is innate within us by Allah subhana wa ta'ala's design at the inception of our creation, and something that was at one time more easily and naturally available to us-something original in us that was intact and fully operative. But we recognize that the ability to shut down feelings when things are too much for us to handle emotionally is also a Mercy from God to us, enabling us to continue functioning even if it may be on a less conscious level.

THE EXERCISES

(If you have difficulty with any of these exercises and find them to be too much, consider finding a well informed somatic therapist for additional work and support. These kinds of exercises, if practiced regularly and explored in various ways, eventually become natural and do not have to be done as exercises at all. Your body is a complex whole system that has memory on many levels. By reprogramming your system towards its natural state, your nervous system will gradually begin to remember and the experience of feeling grounded in your sensations will naturally increase.)

There's a lot here so take your time with each one, one at a time.

1. Recall the last time you felt a strong emotion. Was it anger, joy, sorrow? How did you know you were angry or sad? We don't think sadness or anger, we feel sad or angry. We feel with our body, a simple truth often overlooked. Recall the experience of that strong emotion and pay attention to your felt sense, to what you feel in your body. Can you recall where in your body you felt angry or sad? What was the sensation that you interpreted as sad or angry? What do you feel now in your body?
2. Using both hands, begin slapping your skin, alternating each hand using a rhythm as in clapping hands, right, left, right, left. Moving from neck to legs, cover as much of your body as you can. Slap hard enough to elicit some warmth and even some tingling without it being painful. Do this for about three minutes. Cover as much of the surface of your body as you can. Stop slapping and pay

attention to the overall sensations and experience what you are feeling. Take some time in simply observing. See what you can discover. Doing this daily can bring about surprising results.

3. When in the shower, pay attention to the sensation of the water as it strikes your body. Focus on the physical sensations you experience. Examine them closely. Do the same in the wind, rain. Eventually you might notice carefully the feeling of different cloth materials on your body as you move.

Try walking barefoot and observing what your feet are experiencing on different surfaces.

4. Observe your sensations in different settings. When you enter a room or step into the outdoors, when you are in traffic, in a crowd or alone, or in the forest, overlooking a vast landscape or any other environment, closely observe differences in the sensations of your body. Compare the differences in relation to the different settings. Notice where the sensations are mostly taking place: chest, arms, head, neck, etc. Observe and explore the quality of your sensations. If the sensations are pleasant, see if you can identify specifically what it is you are actually physically feeling that enables you to consider it "pleasant." If unpleasant, do the same. Make note of the two kinds of sensations if you can. Then, compare them and recognize that these different sensations all occur in YOUR BODY with specific physical qualities. Recognize that these sensations occur as physical experiences, with specific qualities, although they may also be associated with a judgment, memory, analysis or thought. Simply doing this is a big step toward grounding our experiences in bodily sensation.
5. Look at some old photos, one at a time. Spend some time to see if your body experiences differing sensations from different photos from different times and of different people. Observe what the sensations are, where they occur and what the qualities of the sensations are.
6. When you are passing time such as waiting, observe what sensations are present in your body. Experiment with shifting attention to various parts of your body and observe the differences and how the part you are attending to may come into and out of focus. Note the strength of the sensory experience.
7. After some practice with the above, try observing your sensations in various circumstances, meeting an old friend, dealing with a difficult person or an old problem, when some good news comes to you. Notice if paying attention to the physical experience makes it any easier to manage a difficult experience or to make a pleasant experience more so. With some practice you will find that chronically difficult exchanges or experiences are almost always made easier by being "grounded in your body." This grounding will make it easier to have a choice in how you react in different circumstances.

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