

# Mindfulness & the Categories of Sensory Experience ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 This is how I like to classify basic sensory experience.

00:00:13 When I have people learn mindfulness techniques, I have them note their experience based on

00:00:21 these categories.

00:00:23 This system was designed with two goals in mind.

00:00:28 One is that it would tend to lead to insights in meditators because they can see how these

00:00:38 different sensory systems interrelate.

00:00:43 So that's sort of a pragmatic point of view that it's convenient for people having aha

00:00:50 experiences when they track their sensory events.

00:00:56 The other goal was to create a system based on contrasts that would be convenient for

00:01:03 study with what's called fMRI, that's functional magnetic resonance imaging.

00:01:10 When you study the neural correlates of experience with fMRI, you can't actually image an experience.

00:01:21 All that you can do is image two contrasting states.

00:01:26 So I gave a lot of consideration as to what would be the most useful contrasts, both in

00:01:33 terms of image studying that scientists might want to do and in terms of what's likely to

00:01:42 bring about insight experiences for the meditators who are being studied by those scientists.

00:01:49 So with those two goals in mind, I created this system.

00:01:54 I call it the basic states.

00:01:57 The right-left gives you a contrast between a more objective side of experience versus

00:02:06 a more subjective side of experience.

00:02:09 For example, there are external physical sounds in the world, but there's also the internal

00:02:14 sound of your self-talk.

00:02:18 Sometimes when external sound expands, internal talk might go away.

00:02:24 And by watching that contrast, you can see some interesting interactions.

00:02:30 So this would be in an auditory domain.

00:02:33 I'll get to these guys in a minute.

00:02:36 Analogously, there are external sites in the world, but there's also the internal visual

00:02:40 experience of your mental images.

00:02:44 When you're thinking of people, places, physical objects, when you have memory, plan, fantasy,

00:02:50 or your eyes are closed and you think about where you are or how your body appears, you're

00:02:57 having visual thoughts.

00:03:00 So image is the more subjective side, and the external sites are the more objective

00:03:06 side of visual experience.

00:03:10 Then there's somatic experience, in other words, body experience.

00:03:15 I believe that it's very important that people develop the ability to detect when their body

00:03:27 has emotional-type sensations.

00:03:30 When a person experiences anger, fear, sadness, embarrassment, impatience, disgust, interest,

00:03:37 joy, love, gratitude, humor, smile, and so forth, there are usually body sensations,  
00:03:44 distinctive body sensations associated with that.  
00:03:47 So the real juice of emotional experience, I would claim, is not so much in the internal  
00:03:55 talk and mental image, although that of course is important, but it's the emotional-type  
00:04:02 sensations that give the strong valence or coloration or power to emotional experiences.  
00:04:12 So I think it's good that we have a word in English that means body sensation that seems  
00:04:19 emotional to a given individual at a given time.  
00:04:23 There is no such word that has that meaning in English, neither is there any such word  
00:04:29 in any language that I'm familiar with.  
00:04:32 So I arbitrarily assigned the word feel to mean affective somesthesia.  
00:04:39 That would be a very fancy way of saying emotional body sensations.  
00:04:45 Affective is a Latin phrase meaning emotional.  
00:04:48 Somesthesia is body sensation, body experience.  
00:04:52 So I use feel for that.  
00:04:54 That would represent a somewhat subjective side of the body relative to touch, which  
00:05:02 is everything else, all the other ordinary experiences in the body, itches and aches,  
00:05:07 pressures and pains, sleepy sensations, ordinary breathing, ordinary pulse, that kind of thing,  
00:05:14 is more of an it.  
00:05:16 If you have pain, take that as a touch.  
00:05:20 If the pain causes anger, fear, sadness, those reactions, those body sensations I would call  
00:05:28 feel.  
00:05:29 And in point of fact, feel, image, talk represent a reactive system.  
00:05:36 They can react to touch, sight, sound.  
00:05:40 They're also a proactive system.  
00:05:42 They can go off on their own and spin memory, plan, fantasy and so forth.  
00:05:48 You have a fundamental contrast between auditory, visual and somatic.  
00:05:56 And then across here you have a somewhat more objective side and a somewhat more subjective  
00:06:02 side.  
00:06:03 Now a third level of contrast is between the ordinary sensory activity, touch, sight, sound,  
00:06:11 feel, image, talk, and corresponding restful states.  
00:06:16 For example, when you're focusing on external sound, it might happen that there's not any  
00:06:22 sound.  
00:06:23 That's an interesting experience.  
00:06:24 That's a restful state and you can note that as silence.  
00:06:29 What's even more interesting is if you happen to be focusing on internal talk and it goes  
00:06:33 away, well, I have a term for that experience.  
00:06:38 I call that quiet.  
00:06:40 So you have some restful states here.  
00:06:44 If you don't have any images, you can be aware of mental blank.  
00:06:49 Or even if you have images, there's a way that I teach people to focus on a background  
00:06:55 of blank.  
00:06:57 You can defocus your external sight.

00:06:59 Your eyes are still open, but you're just sort of letting light in.

00:07:04 That's a restful state corresponding to external sight that's used by many different people.

00:07:12 Samurai, for example, used to intentionally soft focus their eyes in practicing martial

00:07:19 arts.

00:07:20 So that's another restful state.

00:07:22 The contrast with sight, I call that light.

00:07:25 And then contrasting with touch is the physical relaxation of the body.

00:07:30 And contrasting with feel is its absence, which I call emotional peace.

00:07:36 So this gives us a contrast between somatic visual auditory, a contrast between subjective

00:07:48 reactive proactive versus objective experience, and then a contrast between ordinary experience

00:07:58 and corresponding pleasant restful states.

00:08:03 So these are the basic states.

00:08:06 And I build different mindfulness systems based on these states.