

Mind & Development:
Some Baha'i inspired Reflections on Mind
and the Harvests of Human Thought

Michael Penn

The Oneness of Existence

“...know ye that the world of existence is a single world, although its stations are various and distinct. For example, the mineral life occupieth its own plane, but a mineral entity is without any awareness at all of the vegetable kingdom...In the same way, a vegetable entity knoweth nothing of the animal world, remaining completely heedless and ignorant thereof...all this while animal, vegetable, and mineral dwell together in the one world. In the same way the animal remaineth totally unaware of that power of the human mind which graspeth universal ideas and layeth bare the secrets of creation...Of this power of discovery which belongeth to the human mind, this power which can grasp abstract and universal ideas, the animal remaineth totally ignorant...In the same way, the denizens of this earth are completely unaware of the world of the kingdom and deny the existence thereof...”

General Principle: *Reality is one but all minds do not have equal access to reality... Some aspects of reality are available or unavailable to us because of: a) the limitations of our senses; b) our location in space and time (consider the child in the womb who is in this world but unaware of it); c) because of the kinds of minds we possess or the particular stage of the mind's development; d) other aspects of reality are closed to us because we lack the concepts and experiences necessary to engage them.*



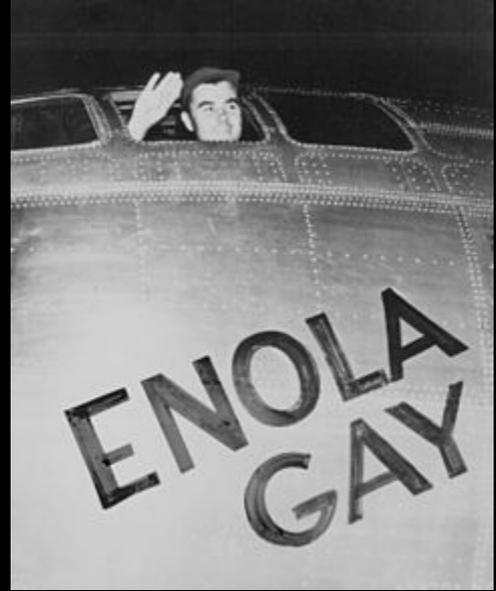
*At a time when the sombre night of ignorance ...
had overspread the earth, a bright morning
dawned and a rising light lit up the eastern sky.
Then rose the Sun of Truth and the splendours of
the Kingdom were shed over east and west.
Those who had eyes to see rejoiced at the glad
tidings and cried out: 'O blessed, blessed are we!',
and they witnessed the inner reality of all things,
and uncovered the mysteries of the Kingdom.*

– 'Abdul-Bahá

Preamble

*A Preliminary Word About the
World We've Inherited...*

- *LET US ACKNOWLEDGE AT THE OUTSET the magnitude of the ruin that the human race has brought upon itself during the period of history under review. The loss of life alone has been beyond counting. The disintegration of basic institutions of social order, the violation — indeed, the abandonment — of standards of decency, the betrayal of the life of the mind through surrender to ideologies as squalid as they have been empty, the invention and deployment of monstrous weapons of mass annihilation, the bankrupting of entire nations and the reduction of masses of human beings to hopeless poverty, the reckless destruction of the environment of the planet — such are only the more obvious in a catalogue of horrors unknown to even the darkest of ages past.* — *Century of Light, p. 1*





The Eradication of Small Pox

“...the unity of all mankind can in this day be achieved. Verily this is none other but one of the wonders of this wondrous age.”

– Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 32

Remarks at Columbia University

“As material and physical sciences are taught here and are constantly unfolding in wider vistas of attainment, I am hopeful that spiritual development may also follow...”

Remarks at Columbia University

“... As material knowledge is illuminating those within the walls of this great temple of learning, so also may the light of the spirit, the inner and divine light of the real philosophy glorify this institution. The most important principle of divine philosophy is the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of mankind, the bond conjoining East and West, the tie of love which blends human hearts.”

“Therefore, it is our duty to put forth our greatest efforts and summon all our energies in order that the bonds of unity and accord may be established among mankind. For thousands of years we have had bloodshed and strife. It is enough; it is sufficient. Now is the time to associate together in love and harmony. For thousands of years we have tried the sword and warfare; let mankind for a time at least live in peace.” – 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 19 April, 1912

How might this be accomplished?

“In the world of existence the animal is a captive of nature. Its actions are according to the exigencies and requirements of nature. It has no consideration or consciousness of good and evil. It simply follows its natural instinct and inclination. The Prophets of God have come to show man the way of righteousness in order that he may not follow his own natural impulse but govern his action by the light of Their precept and example. According to Their teachings he should do that which is found to be praise-worthy by the standard of reason and judgment of intellect, even though it be opposed to his natural human inclination; and he should not do that which is found to be unworthy by that same standard, even though it be in the direction of his natural impulse and desire.”

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 21 April, 1912

“All the powers and attributes of man are human and hereditary in origin, outcomes of nature’s processes, except the intellect, which is supernatural.”

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations, p. 60

“All the existing nations had a divine foundation of truth or reality originally, which was intended to be conducive to the unity and accord of mankind, but the light of that reality gradually became obscured.”

– ‘Abdu’l Bahá Promulgation, 21 April 1912

*“Something there is without form and complete,
Born before heaven and earth,
Solitary and vast,
Standing alone without change,
Everywhere pervading all things,
Mothering all beneath heaven.
I don’t know its name;
I style it Tao.
And for want of a name call it great.”*

– Lao-tzu, Tao-te-Ching, Ch. 25

Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the wind, whose breath gives life to all the world. Hear me; I need your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in beauty, and make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset. Make my hands respect the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice make me wise so that I may understand the things you have taught my people.

Help me to remain calm and strong in the face of all that comes towards me. Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock. Help me seek pure thoughts and act with the intention of helping others...Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes. So when life fades, as the fading sunset, my spirit may come to you without shame.

– Native American Prayer

Verse 70

*My teachings are very easy to understand
and very easy to practice
Yet so few in this world understand
and so few are able to practice*

*My words arise from that ancient source
My actions are those of the universe itself
If people do not know these
how can they know me?*

*Those who follow my ways are rare
and so I treasure them
Even if they wear the clothes of a beggar
they carry a priceless gem within*

“You ask an explanation of what happens to us after we leave this world: This is a question which none of the Prophets have ever answered in detail, for the very simple reason that you cannot convey to a person’s mind something entirely different from everything they have ever experienced.”

– Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings on Spiritual Reality, p. 110, 21.4

While mind is an impenetrable mystery, it can be known, in part, by its signs...

“Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp and whose mystery, no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel.”

– Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, p. 159

All life depends upon signal detection and the movement of information between systems of various kinds. The human mind has the capacity to receive and use energy and information that is both physical and abstract – in the same way that seeds may use the physical energy of the sun as well as the special information that is associated with sunlight for development into plants. 'Abdu'l-Bahá once said:

“Consider: this flower had life in the beginning like the life of the mineral; but by the coming of the season of spring, of the bounty of the clouds of the springtime, and of the heat of the glowing sun, it attained to another life of the utmost freshness, delicacy and fragrance. The first life of the flower, in comparison to the second life, is death.”

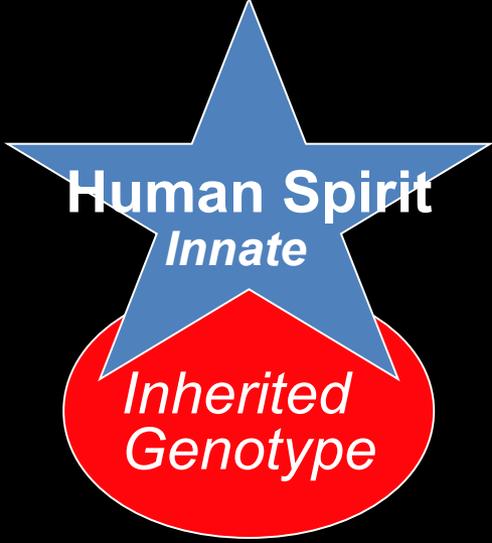
- Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings on Spiritual Reality, p. 109, 21.3.

Both the physical and the abstract information that the mind detects it uses to facilitate survival and development. Other animals do not have the capacity to detect abstract information. Ideas are to the mind a kind of information that is like sensory information is to animals -- but this information has no physical dimensions...It does not simply carry knowledge of things, it carries “signs” of forces that are hidden from the senses. The rational faculty perceives these signs and uses this information to guide development. When the mind has “true” beliefs about those aspects of reality that are often hidden from the senses, this is called “knowledge”. Knowledge cannot be sensed but it can be known...

*...the mind proveth the existence
of an unseen Reality that embraceth
all beings...*

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablet to August Forel

The Unseen Realm



(Capacities)



The Moment of Fertilization



Phenotype

(Capabilities)

Nature



Acquired

Development



*Innate, Inherited, and
(Soul) (Genetic Endowment)*

*Acquired
(Learning)*



Human Capabilities

***Physical & Spiritual
Capacities***

The Personality of the Soul

“The personality of the rational soul is from its beginning; it is not due to the instrumentality of the body, but the state and the personality of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world; it will make progress and will attain to the degrees of perfection, or it will remain in the lowest abyss of ignorance...”

– Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings on Spiritual Reality, p. 80, 16.7

Four Kinds of Human Learning

- *Classical Conditioning (Unconscious & Automatic)*
- *Instrumental (Governed by Reward & Punishment)*
- *Moral (Governed by Attraction to an Ethical Principle)*
- *Spiritual (Governed by a Consciousness of the Sacred)*

“The tasks call for levels of capacity far beyond anything the human race has so far been able to muster...the challenge is the empowerment of humankind through a vast increase in access to knowledge...”

BIC, The Prosperity of Humankind

- *“As the days roll by, as the perturbations of an imperiled civilization are more alarmingly manifested...valor and heroism...are more widely and convincingly demonstrated.”*

— *Shoghi Effendi, Messages to America, p. 18*

“In this present cycle there will be an evolution in civilization unparalleled in the history of the world...the intellectual faculty will reveal itself in infinite degrees of perfection.”

– 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, p. 51

Mind & the Phenomenology of Spirituality

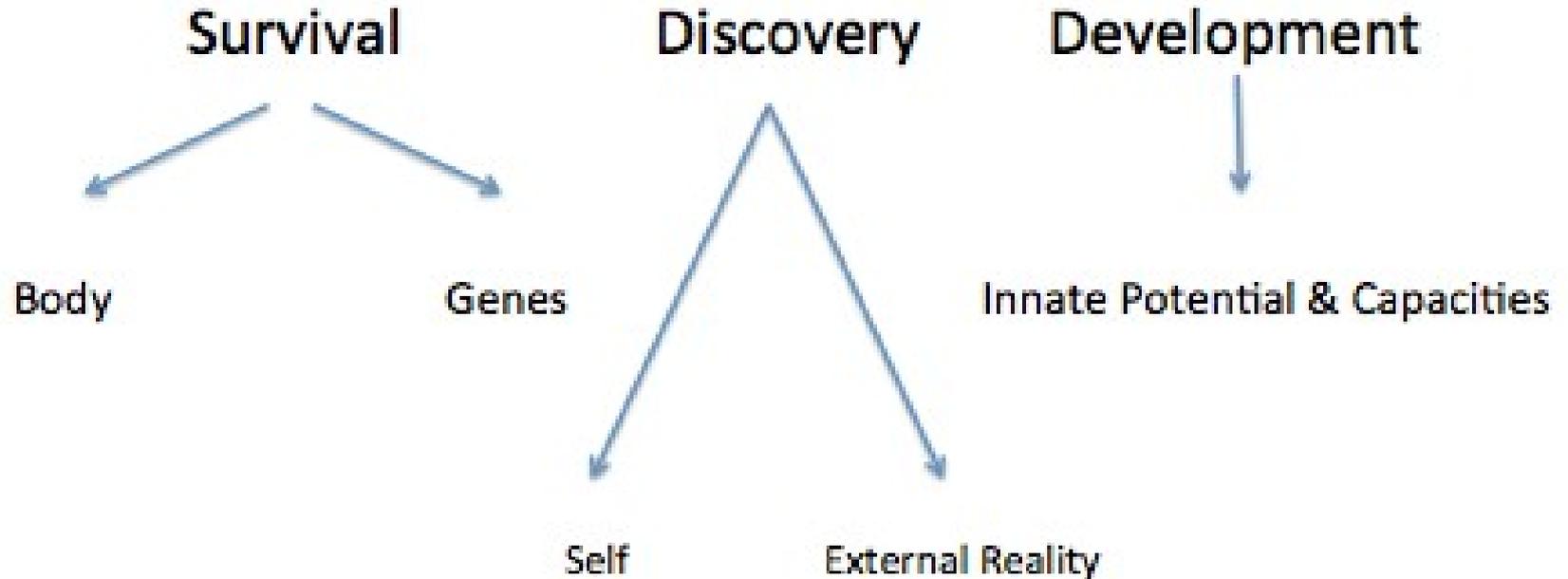
- *Consciousness of the Sacred (e.g., awe, humility and wonder)*
- *Attraction to that which is True, Beautiful and Good.*
- *Attunement to Spiritual Forces (states of prayer and meditation)*
- *Compassion for other living beings.*

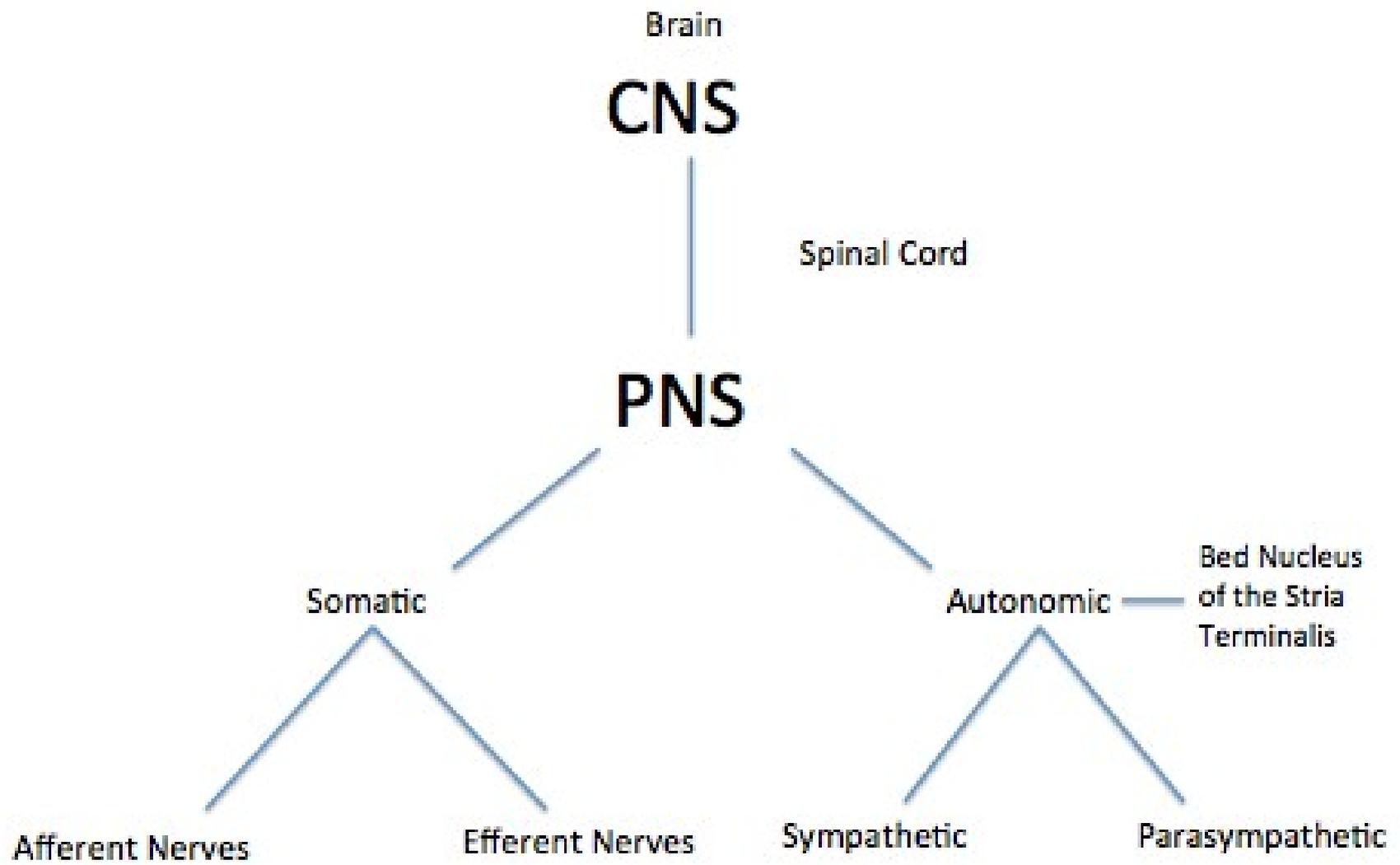
Paths to Spirituality

- *Meditation*
- *Prayer*
- *Principle-Governed life*
- *Respect for the sacred dimensions of relationships*
- *Service to others*

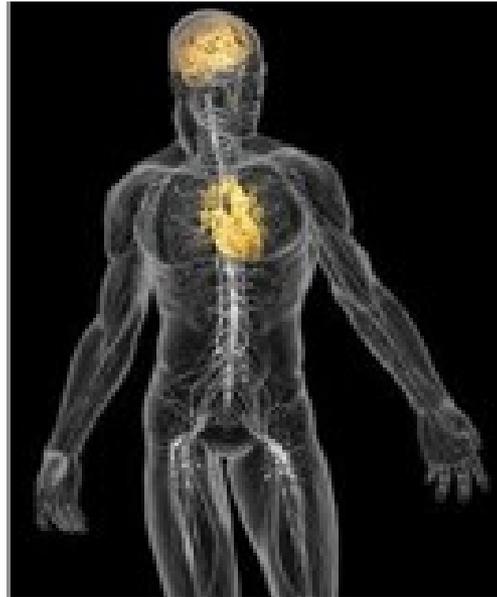
“The powers of the sympathetic nerve are neither entirely physical nor spiritual, but are between the two. The nerve is connected with both. Its phenomena shall be perfect when its spiritual and physical relations are normal.”

Human Brain's 3 Purposes

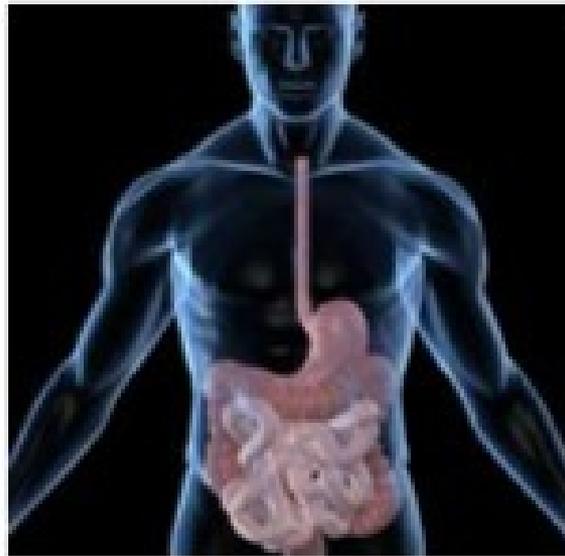




Heart Brain



A complex, independent nervous system lines the gastrointestinal tract.



$$\begin{aligned} & \textit{Right Desires} \\ & \quad + \\ \textit{Virtue} = & \quad \textit{Right Beliefs} \\ & \quad + \\ & \quad \textit{Right Behavior} \end{aligned}$$

The Nature of Meditation

It is an axiomatic fact that while you meditate you are speaking with your own spirit. In that state of mind you put certain questions to your spirit and the spirit answers: the light breaks forth and the reality is revealed.

You cannot apply the name 'man' to any being void of this faculty of meditation; without it he would be a mere animal...

Through the faculty of meditation man attains to eternal life; through it he receives the breath of the Holy Spirit -- the bestowal of the Spirit is given in reflection and meditation.

The spirit of man is itself informed and strengthened during meditation; through it affairs of which man knew nothing are unfolded before his view. Through it he receives Divine inspiration, through it he receives heavenly food.

Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves. To illustrate this, think of man as endowed with two kinds of sight; when the power of insight is being used the outward power of vision does not see.

This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts. Through the meditative faculty inventions are made possible, colossal undertakings are carried out; through it governments can run smoothly. Through this faculty man enters into the very Kingdom of God.

The meditative faculty is akin to the mirror; if you put it before earthly objects it will reflect them. Therefore if the spirit of man is contemplating earthly subjects he will be informed of these.

But if you turn the mirror of your spirits heavenwards, the heavenly constellations and the rays of the Sun of Reality will be reflected in your hearts, and the virtues of the Kingdom will be obtained.

May we indeed become mirrors reflecting the heavenly realities, and may we become so pure as to reflect the stars of heaven.

– 'Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, p. 175

- the unity of mankind requires the development of capacities that are presently rare;*
- it requires that this goal be pursued over many generations;*
- it requires a kind of power that is not simply technical, intellectual, political or economic;*
- it requires the emergence of new ways of seeing reality; new ways of responding to the immaturity, ignorance, or illness of others.*

Stress & Spiritual Development

Stress is Paradoxical

- It is necessary for individual and collective development;*
- It can also make individuals angry, ill, or apathetic...*



Threat

Anxiety
Stress

Anger

Fear

Perception of Stress:

- Uncontrollable
- Unpredictable
- Unremitting or Meaningless
- Unjust

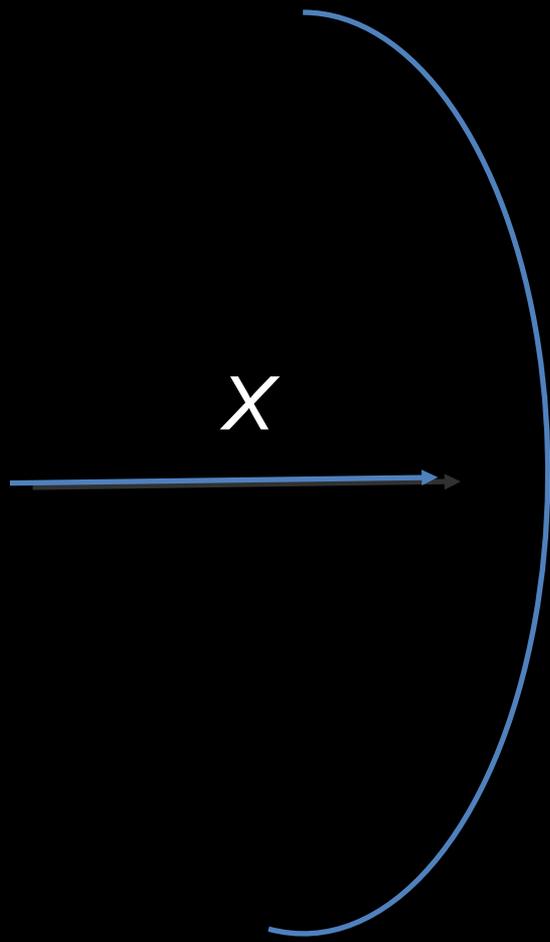
Hostility, Demoralization, Withdrawal

Challenge

Coping Response

Mobilization
of Psychological, Social
&/or Spiritual
Resources

Development of
Inner Resources

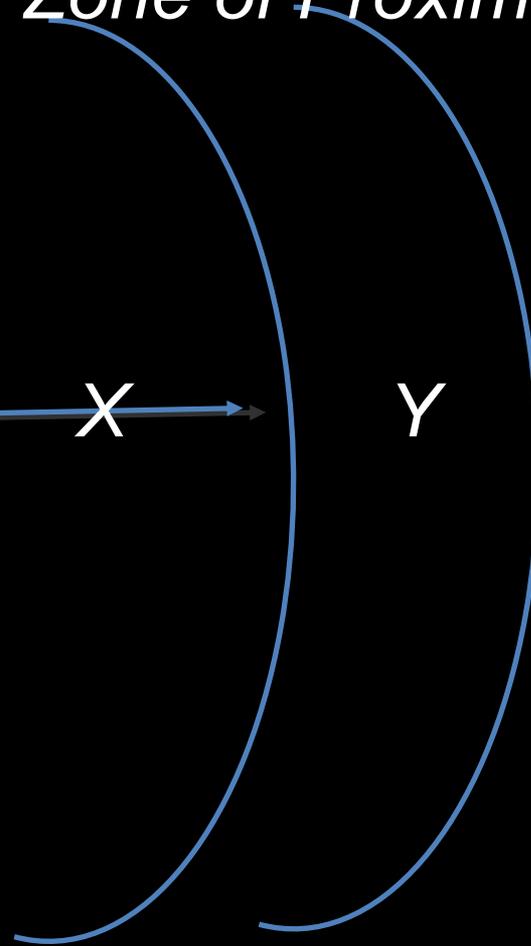


Zone of Proximal Development

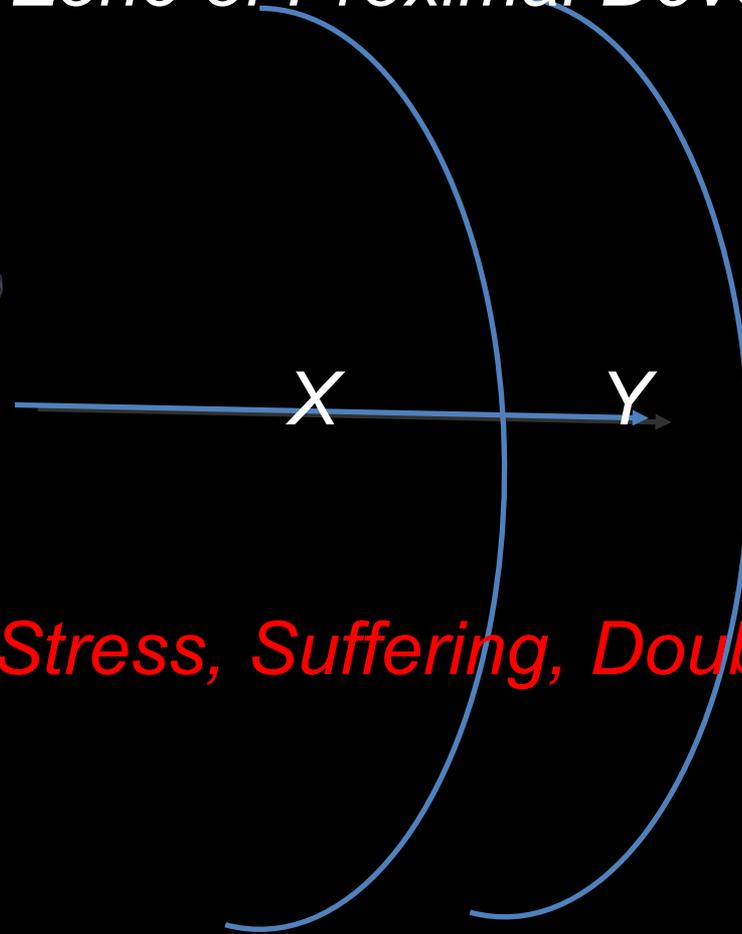


X

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Zone of Proximal Development



Stress, Suffering, Doubt, Difficulties

Two Aspects of Development

- *Development of favorable Social Conditions*
- *Cultivation of Humanity*

Steven Pinker

THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE

WHY VIOLENCE
HAS DECLINED



“The Civilizing Process”

In 1939 Norbert Elias examined the experience of everyday life in medieval Europe by examining manuscripts of etiquette. His research revealed how animalistic and violent the Europeans had been in the Middle Ages with respect to their tendencies toward extreme forms of violence for relatively minor assaults to their reputation or status.

As social etiquette became part of common discourse, there was a corresponding decline in the homicide rate among Europeans. In exploring this work, Pinker notes that while today we think of etiquette books as “sources of handy tips for avoiding embarrassing peccadilloes”, they were once “serious guides to moral conduct, written by the leading thinkers of the day.”

Over a span of several hundred years, beginning in the 11th or 12th centuries and maturing in the 17th and 18th centuries, Europeans increasingly inhibited their impulses, anticipated the long-term consequences of their actions, and took other people's thoughts and feelings into consideration.

A culture of honor – the readiness to take revenge – gave way to a culture of dignity – the readiness to control one's emotions.” In other words, violence in Europe began to decline, in part, as a function of a conscious effort to advance what has long been described as the “humanizing” process.

The Humanitarian Revolution

A second trend -- the “Humanitarian Revolution.”

The humanitarian revolution was associated with the European Enlightenment whose ideas and ideals reduced humanity’s appetite for state sponsored violence and torture and opened human hearts so that “people began to sympathize with more of their fellow humans, and were no longer indifferent to their suffering.” Commensurate with this view, in her important book, Inventing Human Rights: A History, the historian Lynn Hunt noted that as people began, for example, to read novels that captured the lives and experiences of everyday people the sphere of human compassion began to widen and people began to “imagine” human equality.

The Rights Revolution

Last, Pinker associates the decreases in violence around the world to what he calls the “rights revolution” – a revolution in the mid and late 20th century that touched many parts of the world and that involved the successive rise of movements to advance civil rights, women’s rights, children’s rights, gay rights, and animal rights. These movements were responsible for dramatic decreases in state sponsored violence, lynchings, hate crimes, battering and gender-based assaults of various kinds.

“The Prophets and Chosen Ones have all been commissioned...to nurture the trees of human existence with the living waters of uprightness and understanding, that there may appear from them that which God hath deposited within their inmost selves... The purpose of these Educators, in all they said and taught, was to preserve man’s exalted station.”

– Baha’u’llah

“The Faith of Baha’u’llah constitutes...the stage of maturity in the development of mankind. His appearance has released such spiritual forces which will continue to animate, for many long years to come, the world in its development.”

Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 473

“...there is reassurance in the knowledge that, amidst the disintegration, a new kind of collective life is taking shape which gives practical expression to all that is heavenly in human beings.”

– Universal House of Justice, Ridvan 2015

Cynicism

*An attitude of scornful or jaded negativity,
especially a general distrust of the
essential decency or motives of others...*

Grit

*“The steadfast unyielding embodiment
of the human spirit...”*

– Briahna Jackson, a first year college student in America

“The Faith of Bahá’u’lláh has assimilated, by virtue of its creative, its regulative and ennobling energies, the varied races, nationalities, creeds and classes that have sought its shadow, and have pledged unswerving fealty to its cause. It has changed the hearts of its adherents, burned away their prejudices, stilled their passions, exalted their conceptions, ennobled their motives, coordinated their efforts, and transformed their outlook. While preserving their patriotism and safeguarding their lesser loyalties, it has made them lovers of mankind, and the determined upholders of its best and truest interests. While maintaining intact their belief in the Divine origin of their respective religions, it has enabled them to visualize the underlying purpose of these religions, to discover their merits, to recognize their sequence, their interdependence, their wholeness and unity, and to acknowledge the bond that vitally links them to itself.

Appendix

*Some notes on the practice of
meditation...*

The Goals of Meditation

Meditation can serve us at many levels. It can help us to face serious illness, it can help us avoid or metabolize stress, it can help us envision and realize personal growth.

Meditation Owes its Usefulness to the fact that Achievement comes easiest to Those Capable of:

- *Concentration*
- *Relaxation*
- *Clarity of Thought*

One May Choose to Focus Concentration on:

- *Elements of the Sacred or the Human Soul*
- *One's Own Body or Breath*
- *Visualization of a Goal or Desired State*
- *A Sound or Movement*

Steps to Meditation

- *Meditation is, in part, an act of acceptance. It is a state in which we turn consciousness inward toward the human spirit. In this way we become mindful of our selves.*

Meditation is Based on the Idea that:

- *We have the power to create within ourselves “peace of mind” in most circumstances.*
- *We have the ability to “transcend” suffering and to become more relaxed and in harmony with ourselves and others.*
- *We have the power to quiet the restless mind and to focus the powers of the mind.*

Positive Mind/Negative Mind and Neutral Mind

- *One of the Goals of Meditation is to Develop the “Neutral” mind.*
- *The Neutral Mind is a state of “detachment” and “openness.”*

Attachment is Often an Obstacle to Peace of Mind

- *The Positive and Negative Mind tend to categorize things, events and people as good or bad. This is natural. But this judgment is often egocentric in nature.*
- *Thus we put lots of energy into avoiding those parts of the world we don't like and pursuing what we do.*
- *We are thus driven by our desires and fears.*

Developing the Neutral Mind of Meditation Consists of:

- *Suspending judgments and assuming an attitude of detachment from our desires and fears.*
- *A passive return to the object of our focus when we become distracted by anything else.*

The Mechanics of Meditation (One View)

- *Focus your eyes on a single object; or, with your eyes closed, focus on the space between your eyes on your forehead; or focus on a place in your imagination.*
- *Allow your breathing to be deep, extending from your abdomen and filling your lungs from the bottom up.*
- *Breath out from the top of your lungs down.*

The Use of Mantras May Help Because the Mind Must Think

- *You may choose to use a one word Mantra.*
- *You may choose to use a phrase as a mantra:
“I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved.”*
- *You may wish to use a sound as a mantra
“Alláh’u’Abhá”.*
- *The critical thing is to focus the energy of the
mind so that it is like a laser.*

Relaxation

Both mind and body need periods of relaxation. Relaxation is one of the central objectives of meditation. It is the conscious letting go of tension.

Affirmations

We may encourage ourselves during periods of meditation.

We may speak to ourselves with words of encouragement.

We may ask ourselves questions and await answers.

Practice

With practice, we generally find that it is easier to enter into a state of meditation. We learn to gain control over our minds in the same way that disciplined movement can give us greater control over our bodies.

Healing Effects of Meditation

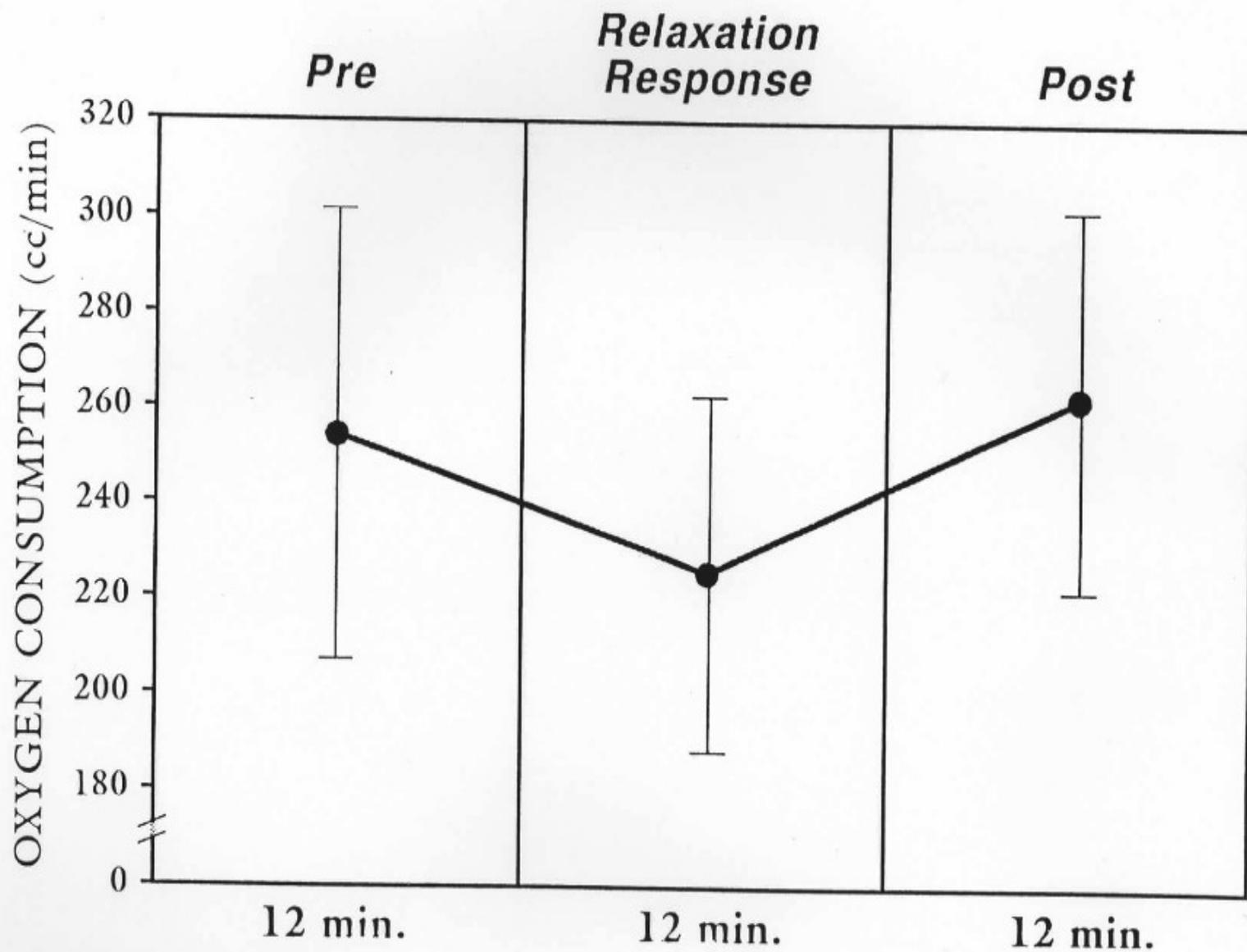
- *For more than 25 years laboratories at the Harvard Medical School have systematically explored the benefits of mind/body interactions in inducing favorable health outcomes among populations at risk for life threatening cardiovascular disease, for depression, anxiety, hypertension, and excessive anger and hostility.*
- *The research has shown that when a patient repeats a word, phrase, sound or movement while disregarding other intrusive thoughts, a specific set of physiologic changes ensue. There is decreased metabolism, heart rate, rate of breathing, and distinctive slower brain waves. These changes are the opposite of those induced by stress and have been labeled the “relaxation response.”*

Two Basic Steps Necessary to Elicit The Relaxation Response

- *The repetition of a word, sound, phrase, thought or muscular activity;*
- *The passive return to the repetition when other thoughts intrude*

Conditions in Which the Relaxation Response Has Been Effective

- *Hypertension*
- *Cardiac Arrhythmias*
- *Chronic Pain*
- *Insomnia*
- *PTSD*
- *Anxiety*
- *Hostility*
- *Depression*
- *Preparation for Surgery*



O₂ Consumption During Sleep and the Relaxation Response

