

# **the brief embodied cognition exercise:** **background information**

*(This handout, with web links, was posted on [www.stressedtozest.com](http://www.stressedtozest.com) on 26 & 28/12/12)*

*"But the future is the future, the past is the past; now we should work on something new."*

*"To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living."*

Shunryu Suzuki

**Suzuki & zen meditation:** In 1970 I started to learn meditation with the Cambridge Buddhist Society. It was the year that Shunryu Suzuki's great book *"Zen mind, beginner's mind"* was published. I was deeply intrigued. So much of his writing was challenging: *"... when you do something, you should do it with your whole body and mind; you should be concentrated on what you do. You should do it completely, like a good bonfire. You should not be a smoky fire. You should burn yourself completely. If you do not burn yourself completely, a trace of yourself will be left in what you do ... Zen activity is activity which is completely burned out, with nothing remaining but ashes. This is the goal of our practice ... So our practice is not a matter of one hour or two hours, or one day or one year. If you practice zazen with your whole body and mind, even for a moment, that is zazen. So moment after moment you should devote yourself to your practice ... When Buddha transmitted our practice to Maha Kashyapa, he just picked up a flower with a smile ... Our life can be seen as a crossing of a river. The goal of our life's effort is to reach the other shore, Nirvana ... the true wisdom of life, is that in each step of the way, the other shore is actually reached. To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living."*

**Kahneman & associative thinking:** There is so much beauty and wisdom here, and it echoes into many aspects of current cutting edge research. See, for example, the post (and handout) on Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman's work *"Our minds work associatively: this is of central importance for psychotherapy and for life in general"* with its comment *"The events that took place as a result of your seeing the words happened by a process called associative activation: ideas that have been evoked trigger many other ideas, in a spreading cascade of activity in your brain. The essential feature of this complex set of mental events is its coherence. Each element is connected, and each supports and strengthens the others ... All this happens quickly and all at once, yielding a self-reinforcing pattern of cognitive, emotional, and physical responses that is both diverse and integrated – it has been called 'associatively coherent'."* The point I want to highlight here is that the mind (and the emotions, physical state, and quality of attention) can reach a particular state pretty much *"all at once"*. Yes it's important that we gradually & consistently work to nourish & improve our lives, our health, our wellbeing over weeks, months and years. But also we can *"be here, now"*; and there's truth in the challenge *"To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living"*. This ties in so fascinatingly as well with our increasing understanding of *"embodied cognition"* ... that within just a couple of minutes of positioning our body in a particular way we already significantly shift our emotional state, our readiness to act, and our internal biochemistry. I have written extensively about this in a series of previous blog posts (and handouts) - see the three-part sequence beginning with *"Embodied cognition: posture & feelings"* & the pair of posts on *"Power objects, power postures, power clothes, power prayers: all ways to facilitate change"*.

**Value-directed activity:** And it links as well with *"The bus driver metaphor"* and the acknowledgement that *"We live or don't live our values right now, today. Values (unlike goals) [Cont.]*

are not some destination that we're travelling towards. Values are the way that we are travelling, the way we make our journey. If my key values are to live with determination and courage, or with love and kindness – this is the direction, the way I want to travel. It's like saying "I've decided to travel North-West. This is the compass bearing I'm going to follow." I can start to follow the compass of my values right now. If I'm heading North-West right now, then I'm doing it. It's not something I have to wait for or work towards. It's now. As the Christian mystic Angelus Silesius put it (possibly rather over-bluntly) "'In good time we shall see God and his light' you say. Fool, you shall never see what you not see today!" While the founder of Soto Zen, Dogen, said "If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?" and the poet T. S. Eliot wrote "And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Yes, so much beauty and wisdom here. What are your key values? Is it important to you to be kind, to love, to wonder at the extraordinary miracle of this world, to live with courage, to step forward into life? What deeply matters to you? What are you about ... really about? How would you most want people to remember you when you die?

**Identifying our values:** Personal values are important for our health. This point is well made in the post (and associated handouts) "*Purpose in life: reduces dementia risk, increases life expectancy, treats depression and builds wellbeing*" and then extended in "*Purpose in life: reconnecting to meaning & values*". Values (unlike goals) aren't something I intend to work towards in the future ... they are about how I want to live right now ... more like a compass bearing I use to direct my journey by than like a destination that I have to travel towards to reach. So how can we clarify what our key values are? It may be we simply know already, or we become clear very quickly once we start to think about it. A fun, helpful approach I often use here is "*The respected figures*" exercise (see handout). Do try it if you haven't already come across it ... or even if you have, it can be well worth repeating occasionally. And it makes lots of sense to write (or speak) more fully about the most important personal values that emerge. See the post (and handout) "*Therapeutic writing and speaking: inspiration from values (specific instructions)*" and the very real benefits in increased resilience & wellbeing that are associated with this kind of reconnection. It's likely to be very helpful to remind ourselves regularly of our values. There are so many useful ways that we can do this ... through meditation or prayer, through reading, writing, pictures, inspiring quotations, music, through objects we carry ... see for example ideas from the posts/handout on "*Boosting self-compassion & self-encouragement ...*" and from those on "*Power objects, power postures, power clothes, power prayers: all ways to facilitate change*".

**Embodied cognition:** I have already written about "*power postures*", saying "*Of course it's obvious that how we feel affects our facial expression, our posture, our movement. Now, there's a wealth of current and emerging research showing that how we hold our face, how we position our body, how we move, powerfully affects how we think, feel & act. It even rapidly affects our biochemistry - see, for example, the 2010 paper "Power posing: Brief nonverbal displays affect neuroendocrine levels and risk tolerance" with its abstract reading "Humans and other animals express power through open, expansive postures, and they express powerlessness through closed, contractive postures. But can these postures actually cause power? The results of this study confirmed our prediction that posing in high-power nonverbal displays (as opposed to low-power nonverbal displays) would cause neuroendocrine and behavioral changes for both male and female participants: High-power posers experienced elevations in testosterone, decreases in cortisol, and increased feelings of power and tolerance for risk; low-power posers exhibited the opposite pattern. In short, posing in displays of power caused advantaged and adaptive psychological, physiological, and behavioral changes, and these findings suggest that embodiment extends beyond mere thinking and feeling, to physiology and subsequent behavioral choices. That a person can, by assuming two simple 1-min poses, embody power and instantly [Cont.]*

*become more powerful has real-world, actionable implications (for a fuller description see <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/6461.html>).*"

In subsequent work, the research has underlined how embodied warmth & caring are often more important than embodied competence & power ... but both personally chosen compassion and personally chosen power are crucial. Visit Harvard Business School's website to get access to the full text of researcher Amy Cuddy's papers. I find the quite long 2011 overview – *"The dynamics of warmth & competence judgments, and their outcomes in organizations"* – particularly interesting. Do look at section 4 in this paper (pages 42 to 49)) with its very helpful advice about body posture, movement & facial expressions involved in warmth and competence. For warmth & caring, the paper discusses eye contact, nodding, body orientation, openness, touch, relaxation and particularly smiling. The great meditation teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has written quite extensively about smiling. He has commented *"Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy."* You might enjoy his short article *"Remember to smile"* with its gentle suggestions for relaxation, smiling, mindfulness & appreciation. Possibly surprisingly, it may be worth checking out your smile in a mirror. Very recent research – *"Facial self-imitation: Objective measurement reveals no improvement without visual feedback"* – underlines the helpfulness of linking visual input (*"This is what it looks like"*) with proprioceptive feedback (*"This is what it feels like"*).

I have written extensively about this – see the handouts *"Embodied cognition: posture & feelings"*, *"Embodied cognition: muscle & willpower"* and *"Embodied cognition: what to do"* with its comment: *"Do it now! We can respond constructively to this increasing understanding of body-mind connections right now! How we hold our bodies now is affecting how we feel. Our facial expression now affects our thinking. How we move changes how we experience ourselves. How do I want to be at the moment – determined & strong? Friendly & interested? Happy & appreciative? Peaceful & relaxed? We can start right now by allowing our posture, our face, our movement to have these qualities. Emotional states are complex interconnections of feelings, thoughts, images, memories, body states, impulses and behaviours. Altering one aspect of this mix has knock-on effects on all other aspects. Our bodies are a great, easily alterable doorway into this whole interlinked system – and wherever we are, we have our bodies. Wherever we are, we can make choices that affect how we want to feel, think and act ... The research findings detailed in "Embodied cognition: posture & feelings" and "Embodied cognition: muscle & willpower" (and in subsequently emerging publications) open up a whole, exciting avenue of applications – in therapy, in work environments, in our personal lives – both to combat psychological distress more effectively and also to grow our wellbeing & how we function in the world."*

***The brief embodied cognition exercise:*** And we can usefully link this as well to visualisation exercises, for example using *"Implementation intentions"* to take work on values and embodied cognition forward into our thoughts, feelings & behaviours during our daily lives. In the next post (and handout) – *"To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing": a brief embodied cognition meditation exercise* – I detail a twelve breath practice that can be fun, centering and surprisingly helpful.

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