

# Notice, Receive, Inquire, Imagine

*Four practices to re-direct our attention, stimulate our right brain capability and enable us to work effectively with uncertainty, conflict and complexity.*

**By Dr Nelisha Wickremasinghe**

*Stretching and expanding our consciousness – what we are aware of or perceive – is how we acquire greater maturity and wisdom and how we can learn to respond effectively to the conflicts and uncertainties that are part of being human.*

*Perception practices stretch and expand our consciousness by strengthening our imaginal capability. They help us to notice and regulate our emotional reactions, to become more receptive to – and curious about – our experiences, and to use our imagination to surface unconscious knowing. These practices grow consciousness by bringing new insight or ‘content’ into awareness, and by providing our rational, logical mind with the raw material it needs to innovate, create and solve.*

*Collaboration between our rational and imaginal capabilities is a powerful combination that supports complex thinking and deeper understanding.*

## The rational and imaginal capabilities

Our rational capability, through the faculty of intellect, helps us work well with the contents of our *conscious* mind. However, it is our imaginal capability, through the faculty of imagination, which brings forth material and intelligence from our *unconscious* mind, and in doing so helps to expand consciousness, which is our aim if we are to develop more mature, effective and complex responses to life experience.

Our rational (left-brain) capability operates as a closed system, which the neuroscientist, Ian McGilchrist, suggests, “cannot reach outside itself to whatever it is that exists apart from itself.” It needs the suggestive inspirations of the intuitive and imaginal (right-brain) to provide new content and stimulation.

If, as we seek to discover and understand, we nurture the *relationship* between logical, left-brain approaches and intuitive right-brain approaches, the resulting cooperation is powerful. Logical reasoning (left) can render explicit that which intuitive reasoning (right) has to leave implicit or ‘folded in’ and when the relationship is working well – when both kinds of knowing are valued -

*...the right sphere delivers something to the left hemisphere, which the left hemisphere unfolds and gives back to the right hemisphere in an enhanced form.<sup>1</sup>*

The physicist and philosopher, Henri Bortoft, suggests that what is needed for the relationship between these ways of knowing to flourish is,

*...the cultivation of a new habit, a different quality of attention, which sees things comprehensively instead of*

*selectively....understanding something is not the same as explaining it, even though these are often confused.<sup>2</sup>*

## A different quality of attention

|                   | Imaginal Capability            | Rational Capability             |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Language:         | Feeling/meaning                | Power/action                    |
| Faculty:          | Imagination                    | Intellect                       |
| Brain hemisphere: | Right                          | Left                            |
| Reasoning:        | Intuitive                      | Logical                         |
| Attention:        | Open                           | Closed                          |
| Focus:            | Wholes<br>Emotions<br>Feelings | Parts<br>Thoughts<br>Behaviours |

Figure 1: The imaginal and the rational capabilities compared.

The rational *left* hemisphere is responsible for narrow, focused attention, is concerned with me and my needs, and sees things abstracted from context and in *parts*, enabling me to use or take the ‘bits’ that are relevant to me and manipulate the world for my ends. The imaginal *right* hemisphere, brings open, vigilant attention, is concerned with the ‘bigger picture’ – me *in relation* to the world. It sees *wholes* and offers breadth and flexibility of attention, enabling me to notice and understand the wider context in which I live.

We need *both* forms of attention. We need to *experience* the world widely and fully in all its unpredictable, ever changing ‘newness’ (right) *and*, at some point, we need to

<sup>1</sup> (McGilchrist, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> (Bortoft, 1996)

reflect on experience and *make sense* of it (left). Experience without sense or sense without experience limits our capacity to fully participate in the world. The problem is that at this moment in our history our hemispheres are not working well together.<sup>3</sup> Complementarity and collaboration have been sacrificed as left hemisphere functions dominate the way in which we attend to, process and make sense of the world. As Western culture in particular gives increasing priority to the rational and logical, our emotions and our bodies become ‘handmaidens to reason’, when in actuality they are, *‘the irreducible core of the experience of ourselves’*.<sup>4</sup>

There have, of course, been many helpful consequences of developing our rational capabilities – modern humans are capable of brilliant thinking, invention and problem solving. Yet rationalism and science have not solved all the problems they set out to. Humans still perpetuate evil, governments are corrupt, religions are at war, social inequality and poverty are rife and we are swept with epidemics of unhappiness, disease and discontent.

### Reviving the imaginal capability

Our imaginal capability includes the ability to *notice* our emotions and to stay open and receptive to what they might mean. This means allowing, for example, intuitions, dream images and strange sensations to take shape in us and linger a while. Meaning making in the imaginal

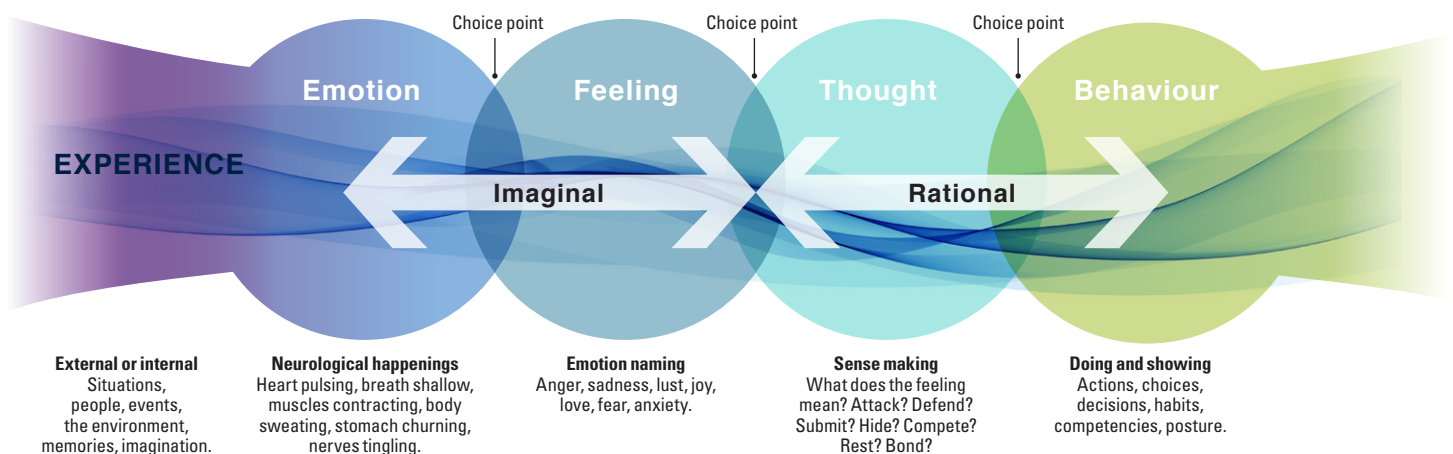
realm is different to that within the rational realm. Using our imaginal capability we might, for example, paint our meaning or express it in poetry. We may see it in nature, speak it in drama, discover it in a dance or ‘understand’ it in music. As we make meanings in these ways we produce new ‘data’ for our conscious, rational mind to sort, order, analyse, judge and make richer sense of feelings and thoughts in order to ascertain the most effective response to take.

In figure 2 we see the process that follows an experience – which could be internal, such as remembering something, or external, such as meeting my new neighbour or queuing for the coffee machine.

Whenever we have an experience our body is the first to notice – and it does this by producing *emotions*, which are physical responses such as changes in heart rate, breathing, body heat and digestive function. Then we automatically and habitually ‘name’ these emotions as feeling states - for example, ‘hungry’, ‘angry’, ‘bored’, ‘calm’. These feeling states direct our thoughts – ‘I must eat now’, ‘I need to check my phone’, ‘I want to go for a walk’ - and these thoughts, as we can see, direct our actions.

The automatic and habitual process of moving from experience to emotion to feeling to thought to behaviour can be interrupted if we pay attention to the intelligence

Figure 2: The Imaginal and the Rational Capabilities.



©The Dialogue Space Ltd, all rights reserved

<sup>3</sup> McGilchrist argues that the left/right split has not always been so pronounced and explores points in our history when reason and emotion have worked well together

<sup>4</sup> (McGilchrist, 2009)

provided by our imaginal capability which, if we are attuned to it, provides alternative possibilities. For example what our rational mind interprets as hunger our imaginal may sense and process as anxiety. Or, when we ‘think’ we are angry the feeling may actually be one of sadness. The point is that the imaginal makes meaning of experience *differently* and it is the incorporation of this difference that enables the rational capability – and consciousness – to stretch and expand.

Automatic processing of experience *can* be a good thing because it enables us to go about our day without having to notice and reflect on *everything* that happens. However, if we only or mostly pay attention to our rational, thinking mind we will fail to perceive the ‘bigger picture’, which is given to us by the imaginal and revealed to us, for example in patterns, hunches, gut instincts and dream images. Our rational, left-brain, remember, can only produce limited ‘understanding’ and behaviour which draws only on our *established* mental models, including our core beliefs, biases and prejudices.

Even worse is when we leap from emotion to action not paying much attention to *either* capability - which produces reactive or ‘mindless’ behaviour of the most limited kind. Often we label this behaviour as ‘over-emotional’ which has unhelpfully branded our emotions as unreliable and untrustworthy sources of intelligence. However, as we have learned, emotion and feeling are at the *source* of our behaviour and unless we pay attention and take time to make sense of them through, for example, the perception practices described later, our actions are likely to be mis-directed and less effective.

In sum, emotions, feelings and thoughts are arising all the time and it is our imaginal capability that notices, makes intuitive sense of them and offers them to our rational self to process further. However, if our imaginal capability is under-developed or de-valued, we are less able to ‘hear’ or receive its intelligence. Novelty, nuance, insight and originality is sensed and given to us by the imaginal and emerges from the unconscious which, though difficult to define in rational terms, is *felt*, relied upon and spoken of by everyone who has experienced insights, epiphanies, ‘aha moments’, enlightenment and clarity. Without the imaginal capability our creativity and ability to innovate through complexity and uncertainty diminishes.

The imaginal capability, unfortunately, is not one that is especially valued in our culture, and children are not taught to use the faculty of their imagination (which supports this capability) as well as they are taught to use their intellect.<sup>5</sup> If we *were* taught early, and consistently, into adolescence, how to develop our imaginal capability we would develop far greater resilience and equilibrium when dealing with the inner and outer threats that are an inevitable part of human life.

Fortunately, the imaginal capability can be developed through practice and technique. As we do so we become more able to recognise and soothe the emotions that for many of us have become overwhelming or problematically habitual. Too often when we experience an emotion we send it straight to the intellect and attempt to rationalise and do something with it. An imaginal approach to our emotions allows us to spend time doing ‘no thing’ and, instead, wait, listen and inquire into their significance and meaning.

The material which flows through our imagination can take many forms, from the frivolous to the visionary, just as the material that flows through our intellect can range from the foolish to the ingenious. What distinguishes fantasy from imagination is the *attitude* we take towards these images. We don’t accept everything that pops into our head and neither do we reject or ignore it. In many ways we approach our *inner* experience just as an ingenious, empirical scientist might approach *external* experience. We notice, gather ‘data’, make connections, ponder meaning, and apply our critical faculties to question and test our emerging theories. The perception practices we explore next cultivate this approach.

## Perception Practices

Perception practices re-direct the flow of our attention and cultivate a *quality* of attention that supports deeper understanding. They engage the intuitive, right hemisphere of our brain and support the growth of consciousness by opening up the way we attend to our world and by helping us to become more receptive to the meaning and message of our experiences. These practices offer an alternative to the more common strategies of denial, repression, avoidance, quick fixes and simplistic solutions that many of us resort to when we feel conflicted, stressed or uncertain.

<sup>5</sup> The imagination is the image-making faculty of the mind which serves the imaginal realm of knowing by “*clothing the beings of the inner world in imagery so that we can see them*” (Johnson, 1986). The intellect, on the other hand, can be understood as the ordering, sequencing and categorising faculty of the mind which, mainly through words and language, serves the rational realm.

Perception practices don't involve self-deception or heroic action and often they don't feel, in the first instance, as if they are solving our problems. This is partly because practices like these *don't* solve our problems in the sense of making them go away, but instead help us experience greater freedom to live *with* the challenges that are part of our human condition.

Perception practices require patient repetition over time, and as we live in cultures where we prefer fast fixes, instant success and immediate results, the need for practice often creates frustration, scepticism and self-doubt. 'I tried it a few times and it didn't work', 'I don't have the time to practise', 'I started to practise but got distracted', 'I'm always getting interrupted', 'this won't work in the real world' are common reasons people offer when returning to their habitual patterns. Unlike rationalisations, distractions and defences, perception practices rarely flood our bodies with instant feel-good emotions, and sometimes, when we begin, they can make us feel worse. Nevertheless, with perseverance and self-compassion – for giving up and starting again is the rhythm of learning and change – we can all get closer to the wisdom of our inner experiences and the growth in consciousness that they inspire.

Perception practices can also be understood as *movements* that flex and stretch our attention.

The first practice is to *notice* and *soothe* our threatened emotions, for insight is dimmed by the powerful pulsations of *our threat brain*<sup>6</sup>. *Safe brain*<sup>7</sup> practices such as rhythmic breathing, cultivating self-compassion, and making time for rest and appreciative reflection will help.

The second practice is to *receive*. Here we learn not to dismiss, ignore or scoff at the unusual, strange, synchronous, mysterious, or contradictory experiences that occur in our lives. In this practice we start by softening the voice of our inner critic which blocks our ability to receive.

The third practice is to *inquire*. We cultivate a *curious and questioning* response to our inner experiences which develops our ability to interpret and understand them.

The fourth practice involves a more profound shift in the way we attend to experience, one which enhances and sustains the previous practices of noticing/soothing, receptivity and inquiry/ understanding. In the fourth movement we increasingly draw upon our ability to *imagine*, *exploring our unconscious processes* and focusing more deeply on our inner life than on outer life.

Perception practices one to three will enable us to turn towards the source of our conflicts and uncertainties and begin to make new meaning out of our experience. Practice four takes us much further, sometimes towards experiences that are not directly our own, but which are carried within our collective unconscious or ancestral memory.<sup>8</sup>

Most of us will discover insight and possibility in practices one to three and will have no need or desire to voyage further. Practice four is held as an invitation to those who *do* wish to go deeper and are interested – or feel compelled – to explore the further reaches of their unconscious. If engaging in practice four, which uses methods such as active imagination and 'shadow work',<sup>9</sup> I would strongly recommend you have the support and assistance of an experienced 'guide'<sup>10</sup> for the unconscious is a vast and mostly undiscovered landscape from which some travellers have not returned.<sup>11</sup>

Perception practices help us to become more receptive to, and curious about, our experiences, and they generate richer 'data' from which we can more deeply understand the *meaning* of our emotions and feelings. By drawing upon our imaginal – and not just our rational – capability we gain access to different versions of truth and reality that emerge from our unconscious knowing. Perception practices give us a method (but not a detailed map) for venturing into the depths of our unconscious experience. And it is from these depths that we draw forth the material that enables us to add to and grow consciousness.

Some of our greatest literature, mechanical and technological inventions, medical breakthroughs and understanding of the universe has come from those who understand the beauty and importance of *both* the imaginal and rational way of knowing, but in particular

<sup>6</sup> The part of our emotion system that is alert to and responds to danger.

<sup>7</sup> The part of our emotion system which enables us to rest, bond and care for others, recuperate, reflect deeply and feel calm.

<sup>8</sup> (Jung, 2001)

<sup>9</sup> (Wickremasinghe, 2021)

<sup>10</sup> An experienced and compassionate psychodynamic or depth practitioner/therapist.

<sup>11</sup> There are many examples throughout human history of people who have entered this landscape (sober or drugged) and not been able to cope with the experience or their discoveries. Madness, psychosis, depression and paranoia have been associated with misadventures of this kind.

the expansive and infinite possibilities of imaginal knowing. And what is common to those who engage both the rational and imaginal to explore and understand their world is an absence of cynicism or contempt for the different, the absurd and the unintelligible.

Perception practices soothe our threatened brains and enable us to move towards the strange, the different and the new. In doing so we increase the creative flow between our imaginal and rational capabilities which cultivates the maturity and wisdom we need in order to respond effectively to life challenges.

## References

- Johnson, R. A. (1986). *Inner Work: using dreams and active imagination for personal growth*. New York: HarperOne.
- Jung, C. (2001). *On the Nature of the Psyche*. Oxford: Routledge.
- McGilchrist, I. (2009). *The Master and his Emissary: the divided brain and the making of the western world*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wickremasinghe, N. (2021). *Being with Others: curses, spells and scintillations*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.

*“Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.”*

Albert Einstein

## Author Information

Dr Nelisha Wickremasinghe is the founding director and lead practitioner at the Dialogue Space, and an Associate Fellow at Oxford University, Saïd Business School. Nelisha works as a psychologist, family therapist, educator and organisational change consultant, and has worked across diverse contexts of human development for 30 years. She is the author of two books, *Beyond Threat* and *Being with Others* and is a regular contributor to Psychology Today.

For more information: [www.thedialoguespace.co.uk](http://www.thedialoguespace.co.uk)

Contact: [nelisha@thedialoguespace.co.uk](mailto:nelisha@thedialoguespace.co.uk)

For reprints contact: [info@thedialoguespace.co.uk](mailto:info@thedialoguespace.co.uk)  
[www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/spellbound](http://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/spellbound)

