

## Witnessing Mental Objects: SIFTing experience (Dr. Dan Siegel) and Patterns of The Mind (Outline)

### Before beginning the practice

*Place, posture, eyes, duration:*

- Quiet, comfortable place to sit free from distractions. Try to use the same place everyday
- Hands comfortably stacked in the lap or on each thigh. Do not roll the shoulders forward
- Erect and comfortable posture. Eyes either closed or partially closed and gazing 2-3 feet forward
- Timer: try starting at 10-15 minutes. Increase time as you become more comfortable

*The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:*

- Object of attention: the thing you place your attention on (stream of thought)
- 5 things that hinder attention that we can also learn from (desire/liking, aversion/disliking, distraction, frustration, and sleepiness)
- When you notice mind wandering, use the 3 attention-regulating skills: Monitor, Disengage, Redirect
- Show yourself kindness as you are distracted – the mind is built to wander!

### Beginning – During the practice

*SIFTing the stream of thought:*

- Non-judgmental observation of all *sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts*
- These may also take form as memories, views, beliefs, attitudes, intuitions, planning, intentions, etc.
- Also look for patterns in the stream of thought

*Developing a non-reactive stance:*

- Treat objects in the stream of thought as though you were a spectator at a play, movie theatre, or museum
- Watching for identification (monitoring) allows you to *dis-identify* (disengage), which grants you the *proximity* to *choose* what you prefer (redirect)
- Familiarize yourself with the feeling of different degrees of proximity between your “observer perspective” and the objects within the stream of thought

*Preparing for the next step:*

- This practice fits nicely when done after the *breath-focused attention* practice and the *bodily awareness* practice
- Try noticing particularly high emotional reactivity (maybe even write them down) – this will inform your next practice: *Emotion Regulation*
- You can vary the time spent on each of these practices
- Be discerning about how you spend your time and keep yourself accountable. Notice if you skip a portion of one or more of the practices because it is painful or uncomfortable – this can be a set-back in progress and can lead to more intense pain and discomfort

### Ending the practice

*Take a moment:*

- When the timer goes off, notice your overall physical, mental, and emotional state. Is it different? How? What was easy? What was more difficult or what did you feel stuck on? Try to avoid assessing your “performance” as good or bad
- Make note of what you will try to work through and what you will need to adjust for next time
- Before getting up, take several deep breaths (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each)

## Witnessing Mental Objects: SIFTing experience (Dr. Dan Siegel) and Patterns of The Mind (Detail)

### Before beginning the practice

#### *Place, posture, eyes, duration:*

Find a quiet, comfortable place to sit. It should be a place free of most distractions (although any noises you hear can be incorporated into the practice) and not too bright or dark lest you feel over-stimulated or become sleepy. You may want to choose a spot you can use everyday at the same time everyday – this may help your progress. You can choose to sit on the floor or in a chair. Sit with your back comfortably (not rigidly) straight – imagine you are a marionette puppet and there is a string attached to the very top of your head holding up your body (another image is to think of your head as a floating balloon and your spine as the string). This type of posture will aid in maintaining alertness, comfort, and clarity. Set your hands either palms-up in your lap (one on top of the other – e.g. the left hand holding the back of the right hand with both palms facing up) or palms-down on either thigh. Whichever you choose, attempt to stay there throughout the session. This practice is typically done with eyes closed but may be done with eyes slightly open with the gaze angled in the direction of a spot on the floor about 5 feet in front of you. If eyes are kept open, try to keep the visual focus in the air about 2 feet away from you (about the distance of reading a book). Try to set a timer for the session. Choose a duration you think you could manage with only some difficulty (if you don't think you will struggle with 10 minutes, try 15; if you could easily sit for 20, try 30). Remember, the difficulty of concentration practice is what we use to improve our concentration – bringing the attention back after it wanders is the way attention gets stronger. Using a timer will allow you to focus completely on your skill practice instead of wondering how long you have left.

#### *The objects of attention, the “teachers” of attention, and the 3 Regulative Skills:*

The object of attention for this practice is the stream of thought in the mind. Because of its fluctuating nature, there may be more difficulty maintaining concentration than usual. This is where the attention-building practice comes in! Just as before, desire (liking/wanting), aversion (disliking/not-wanting), distraction, frustration, and/or sleepiness may hinder this process. Desire and aversion can be particularly tricky in this practice – I mean tricky in the sense that it may even seem at times like your mind is trying to trick you into following a stream of thought rather than simply observing it pass. You may find yourself playing out a pleasant daydream or trying to force an image or feeling that you dislike out of your mind. As you notice this occurring, to protect the practice from fragmenting into cycles of distraction and frustration, handle it skillfully: recognize these difficulties as the “teachers” of the skill, show yourself compassion, patience, and kindness, and use the 3 regulative skills (*Monitor*, *Disengage*, and *Redirect*) to set yourself back to continue “SIFTing” your experience.

I will not mention this throughout the description of the skill practices, but, just as before, whenever the mind wanders (as it inevitably will), recognize the wandering as a result of one of the 5 *hindrances of attention objectivity and clarity*, utilize the 3 *regulative skills*, and guide the attention back to the chosen object of attention with self-compassion (self-kindness, patience, unconditional self-acceptance, and even self-forgiveness).

## Beginning – During the practice

During this session, the goal will be to focus the attention toward the stream of thought. This will be more of an open-ended skill than practiced before which may make concentration more difficult. The idea is basically to non-judgmentally observe or witness *sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts* come and go: “SIFTing”. All of these may take the form of other objects like memories, views, beliefs, attitudes, intuitions, planning, intentions, etc. and may arise and pass at different paces and intensities. As you “SIFT”, also notice any *patterns* of what you observe such as: repetitive emotional responses to thoughts, themed or heavily symbolic images, hyper- or hypo-sensitive areas of the body (interior and exterior), or compulsive-obsessive common ideas. These patterns are simply to be noted and allowed to play out as they do. Think of watching TV, attending a play, or viewing items at a museum exhibit – all the objects of attention are simply to be viewed, not altered. Maintaining a non-judgmental stance with respect to these objects is essential. When a judgment is made on a mental event (like a thought or image), that event is altered; it changes by our interaction with it. Make it your goal *not* to interact or interfere with what is occurring in your mind. Be a spectator; a dispassionate observer. The result of this non-reactive stance within the skill-building practice will be a breaking-up of the identification that you may have made with the objects in the stream of thought. This *dis-identification* can lead to more *proximity* between you and the objects of your mind, and proximity is space within which *choice* can be made. These key features – dis-identification, proximity, and choice – are elements of freedom within the mind that mirror the 3 regulative skills: watching for identification (monitoring) allows you to *dis-identify* (disengage), which grants you the *proximity to choose* what you prefer (redirect). After some practice, you should be able to feel out the proximity of different objects. You will begin to notice the feeling, for instance, of a passing image that has little affect on your feelings versus a thought that seems to swallow you up; a thought that you only notice as it spits you out and you think “what just happened?” In others words you will begin to gauge your level of identification with your stream of thought. This process is profoundly helped if you maintain an “observer perspective”. If you lose that perspective and *become a part* of the stream of thought by following a line of thinking, being absorbed in a feeling or sensation, or “tuning out” in the face of a mental image, you will begin to define yourself by that object. This is identifying yourself *as* your experience – doing this lowers proximity and limits choice.

This practice fits very well after a period of establishing an “observer perspective” through *breath-focused attention* and after experiencing the sensations of the body through *bodily awareness* practice. Of particular importance may be to notice your emotional responses (especially direct and visceral aversive reactions) to what you observe while “SIFTing”. Keeping a short journal of what emotional responses you notice can help inform the next skill: *Emotional Regulation*.

You can spend a variety of time periods “SIFTing”. You may want to spend more time establishing the “observer perspective” with the breath or witnessing the sensations of the interior or exterior of the body. Conversely, you may want to only spend a brief period watching the breath and move straight to observing the stream of thought after a short body scan. This is up to you. Be careful, however, to keep check of your intentions behind these decisions. If you are choosing to skip something or spend less time observing a certain part of these practices, you may be doing yourself a disservice. Try to exercise discernment and come up with good reasons why you spend this time the way you do. Skipping painful or uncomfortable aspects of this skill-building practice can be easier, but doing so may result in a surprisingly powerful return of those pains and discomforts at another time. Ignoring strong reactivity in an effort to take a non-judgmental stance can be very counterproductive to the overall progress of your practice time.

## Ending the practice

### *Take a moment:*

After the timer has gone off and you have opened your eyes, notice your physical and mental response to what you just experienced. Notice any differences in your body, stress level, emotional feelings, pace and quality of thinking (racing thoughts, clear mind, or “spacey” brain), memories, and overall states of mind (well-being, anxiety, neutral feelings). Try to avoid assessing your “performance”. Being “good at” or “bad at” this skill is not important – the key is to maintain an attitude that allows you to continually return to the object of attention with non-judgment.

This time after you finish your session can inform you for the next time. Try to be discerning about what to try to work through and what to adjust during your next session. An example of something you might want to work through may be continual feelings of frustration – while “SIFTing”, frustration just becomes a part of the stream of thought you are observing. As you notice the feeling of frustration, become familiar with what it is like to see it coming, note how it feels to fall into frustration (to “become” frustrated), and how it feels to observe frustration dissipate or how it feels for frustration to leave your mind. Remember, being caught in the stream of thought is not a bad thing here: responding skillfully when you are swept away in sensations, images, feelings, or thoughts will lead to improved ability to return to the “observer perspective” in the future. On the other hand, if you want to adjust something for next session, simply note what it is you want to change (maybe even write it down), visualize that change (imagine how it will be when you change it to what you want), then leave it there for next time while recognizing your progress thus far. Your mind is not going anywhere, so the possibility for that change to take place will be waiting for you the next time you sit to practice.

Whatever you do, remember that this practice is to be used as a tool to strengthen certain mental skills, not to judge how “good” you currently are at them. Even thinking about how “good” you may become at them can be restrictive. The attitude (and the driving force) of these skills is to non-judgmentally be with your mind *as it is* in the present moment. Indeed, each time you return the wandering attention, you strengthen it; the more attention you place on the body, the more self-aware, empathic, and compassionate you can become; and the more comfortable you become observing the stream of thought, the more responsive choice you will have... All of this can be true – but without present-focused non-judgment, the intrusion of frustration, desire/liking, aversion/disliking, lethargy, and doubt in your ability to cultivate these skills will overpower the possibility of personal growth. Before getting up and continuing your day, breathe in deeply a few times (breathe in, hold, breathe out, hold, etc. 3-5 seconds each), notice the condition of your body and your current state of mind, and briefly contemplate what it is to *be* in this singularly present moment.