



## INFO SHEET: The Primary Role of Sensations

### 1. The Body: staying alive

*Homeostasis - The ability of an organism or cell to regulate its internal conditions, usually by a system of feedback controls, so as to stabilize health and functioning, regardless of outside changing conditions (e.g. keeping your body temperature within a range consistent with life as it gets hotter or colder outside).*

First and foremost, your nervous system is responsible for keeping your body alive – maintaining homeostasis – managing this through the above mentioned “feedback controls”.

The brain maintains a constant, real-time map of the body (‘Body Map’) (imagine countless thermostats in your brain monitoring the state of every cell, making adjustments as necessary). The data constituting this map, and triggering the thermostats, are sensations (mainly chemical / electro-chemical based). At the deepest level, the brain monitors and manages the body via the medium of sensations.

This level is a closed system with no awareness of You or the world.

### 2. The Mind: developing consciousness

*Consciousness involves a cast of three characters: Body, Object and Reaction.*

In addition to the ‘Body Map’, the brain maintains a ‘Contact Map’ of everything that comes into contact with the body (via sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and thought). This ‘Contact Map’ includes sensational (the state of the body when apprehending the object) as well sensory data of the object itself. A third map arises with the brain observing the body being changed by the object (leading to a new Body Map). To put it another way, this third map is an awareness of the body’s reaction to the object, and is the first point at which awareness, knowing or experiencing arises. Mapping this change/reaction is the first flicker of consciousness, lasting only as long as any discrete reaction, which is to say, only for an instant. Given that we are constantly coming into contact with objects, these insubstantial pulses of consciousness appear to have continuity (like the still frames of an animated movie) and allow our complex selves to develop (along with civilization and culture). Who we think we are is rooted in our reactions to sensations – in what we feel. With apologies to Descartes, it would be more accurate to say, “It reacts, therefore I am, therefore I think” (Reagit ergo sum ergo cogito).



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To summarize thus far, sensations play a fundamental role in both the life of our bodies and the life of our minds.

### **3. Body & Mind: stress in your life**

A Mindfulness-based definition of stress: not getting what you want / getting what you don't want. To put it another way, when you are stressed, you are actively wanting things to be different from the way they are – you are fighting what is. The old yogis would say that you are fighting nature, and that you are bound to lose, because you won't always get what you want. Initially, your stress will apparently be caused by some worldly circumstance. However, as you come to understand the cause of stress, you'll realize that your stress is 100% your choice and responsibility. (Understand though, that simply knowing this fact will not relieve your stress. The power to choose takes concentration and resilience, and developing these skills takes consistent practice. In other words, be patient and kind with yourself:)

*Picture two families, each with a child in the hospital diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. One family rages and rails at the calamity and unfairness of life, while the other family calmly accepts the situation, focusing on the best way to proceed. The drama in the first family is entirely created and is unhealthy for all concerned, adding to their suffering and stress. The second family has their share of pain, but by accepting the situation as it is, they avoid making things worse, and are far more able to support their child and themselves, and make good decisions going forward.*

### **4. Stress: the cause & cure**

*An ancient analogy: If you are sick and go to the doctor, and she treats your symptoms without ever discovering the cause of your sickness, you may experience some temporary relief, but you will not be cured, and your sickness will return. If, on the other hand, the doctor is able to find the root cause of your sickness and is able to treat it, you can expect a full and permanent recovery.*

Fundamentally, the experience of being is feeling body sensations, which come in three types: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. Towards the pleasant, we react with craving (I like/want it). Towards the unpleasant, we react with aversion (I don't like/want it). And towards the neutral we are unaware or indifferent. The input of sensations is constant, therefore our reactions to them are constant. Reactions are the seeds of emotions. Every emotion is a collection of countless reactions to sensations, and is reducible to either I like it



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or I don't like it. Out of the prevailing emotion, saturated with its particular flavor, comes our thoughts, words, and actions.

The chain of events looks like:

### **Body + Object Sensation Reaction Emotion Thought / Speech / Action**

As a default, stress is part and parcel of our Reactions. "I don't like these sensations...", and if they continue, you're stressed. "I like these sensations...", and if they don't continue, you're stressed. Stress lives in the space between 'what is' and 'what you want'. Although it may seem like you're stressed about some issue in your life, in fact, your stress is caused by reacting to sensations.

There are two steps to unraveling the stress habit (you'll recognize them as the two mindfulness practices):

1. Become aware of and closely observe the root cause of stress – body sensations. The difficulty being that by default we are not aware of our body sensations (or our reactions, emotions, and most of our thoughts, for that matter). Becoming aware takes deliberate concentration.
2. Build your resilience to stress by accepting/tolerating the body sensations you're aware of, thereby diffusing your unconscious reactions.