

GATEWAYS OF EMPATHY

The Pentagon Model

The Danish Society for The Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children

The Danish Society for the Promotion of Life Wisdom in Children works to promote childrens' possibilities for maintaining and developing contact with themselves and their own inner sense of judgment in the context of their busy and outwardly oriented daily lives in which they are met with many demands and impressions. We collaborate with professionals – primarily teachers and pedagogues – who are together with children on a daily basis. And we operate on the basis of the knowledge now available in psychology and pedagogy regarding the significance of relationships for a good environment for learning and development. We also draw on the knowledge and experience gathered over centuries through contemplative practice about the significance of remaining in contact with the innate competences – the heart, consciousness, the body, the breath and creativity – in order to be able to keep one's balance in a busy life.

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Contact between people

Our well-being and the possibility to experience our life as meaningful is closely linked with our sense of connectedness with others.

It is possible to train this sense of connectedness. This short piece is about this training.

There is a mutual relationship between our experience of being connected to others and the experience of the connection to your own essence.

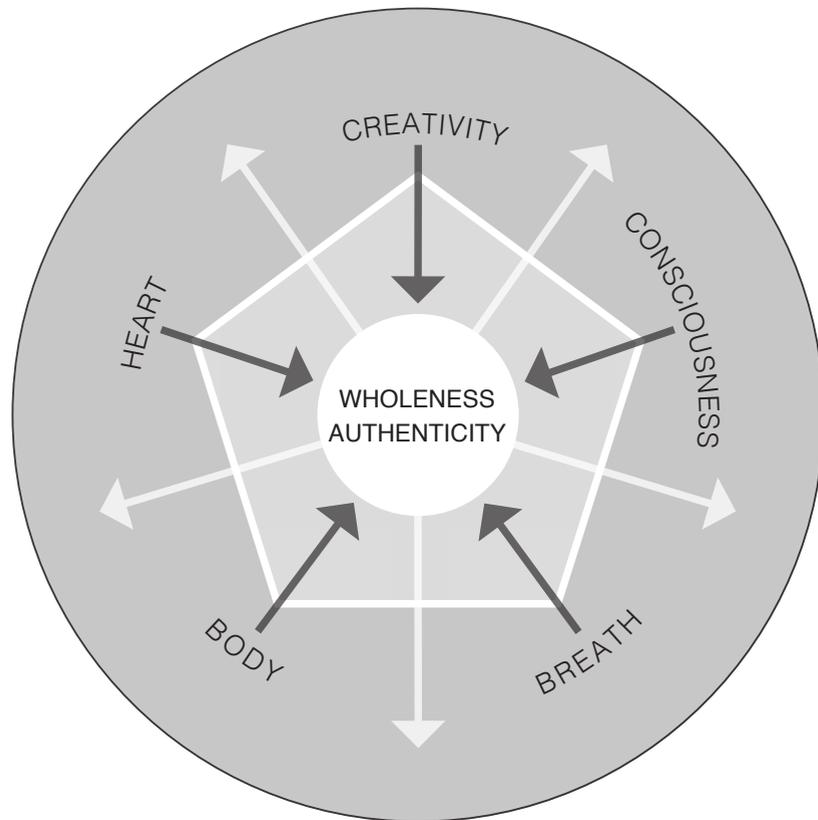
Training contact between people therefore has two aspects: practicing your own ability to sense and understand yourself more deeply. And training in communicating with others from as profound a place in yourself as possible.

Below, we will provide examples of so-called *inner exercises* that can help you to approach your own essence.

Recent advances in knowledge about and training in relational competences can help to improve contact to others.

These two movements – inward towards oneself and outward towards others – support and fertilize one another. If you move inward towards your own essence in a balanced way, also when you are alone, you will meet in yourself your connectedness with others. And being together with others in a more profound way provides an opportunity to simultaneously come into deeper contact with yourself.

The outer directed and inner directed training in relational competence is summarized here in the shape of a pentacle.



THE PENTAGON MODEL
gateways of empathy

The five areas represented in the illustration – awareness of the body, the empathic feelings of the heart, basic creativity, consciousness as such, and the breath – constitute a map of essential elements of the whole human being. These five domains are initially trained one at a time and subsequently in combination so that at least three are being activated simultaneously. The darker arrows indicate the inward movements, the entire register of inner exercises. The lighter arrows represent the training of contact with other people which achieves greater depth, kindness and precision as the ability to communicate from an ever deeper place within oneself develops.

The Pentagon Model

– the innate competences

The pentagon model is a map of essential elements of the whole human being. And it is a description of how it is possible to move inward towards deeper contact with oneself and outward towards better contact with one's fellow human beings.

The map, also called *gateways of empathy*, covers five landscapes which we have the innate capacity to develop and explore. These natural competences are consciousness of:

1. **THE BODY**
2. **THE BREATH** and the energetic movements associated with respiration.
3. **THE HEART**, in the sense of empathic feelings reflected in the region around the physical heart, such as trust, love, sense of connectedness, compassion and gratitude.
4. **THE BASIC CREATIVITY**, i.e. the fact that our environment, body and mind are experienced as being in uninterrupted creative movement.
5. **CONCIOUSNESS** as such.

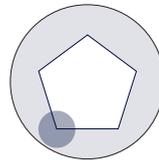
These five domains are initially trained one at a time and subsequently in combination so that at least three are being activated simultaneously. Together the five competences constitute the most direct way inward, towards the essence of human being. And outward towards contact with others.

The idea is to practice both on your own and in contact with others. That you – ideally on a daily basis – create a kind of laboratory situation where you practice on your own moving towards your essence in the ways described below.

And that you experiment with carrying this deepened contact out into the world so that you very concretely, anonymously, remember your inner exercises or elements of them while you are in contact with others.

The point is, in a way, to cast the light of kindness and awareness upon your contact with others and on your own way of being in contact.

Essentially, this training does not aim at learning something new, but rather at discovering and giving more space to that which has not been learned. That each one has an innate possibility to be and to be capable of.



Consciousness of the BODY

Consciousness of the body consists simply of the ability to sense one's entire body. The ability to spread one's attention evenly over and throughout the whole body.

Experience shows that people who work on this continue to return to two images that have proven particularly useful:

The first is the image of completely filling out one's body. That the body is a form that consciousness can settle into and fill in as comfortably and completely as possible.

This means that you first scan yourself, like a radar. As a result, on the radar screen those areas will light up of which that you have not yet entirely taken hold. Areas that feel less alive, less pervaded by life than others.

One now relaxes those areas and fills them in.

The other useful image of relaxation is to sense one's weight. To bring to consciousness the effect of gravity on your body. Initially by registering where the body presses against the support, then by sensing, as it were, the weight of all the cells. Sensing the constant work being done by the large muscles in the back, legs, and lower body, a muscular labour which is closely connected with the sense of being awake and which keeps us upright or standing up throughout the day, hour by hour.

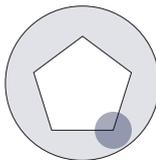
For most people it is easiest at first to sense the body more completely when it is relaxed and at rest. But in time it will be important to train dynamically, that is to say, to maintain contact with the body also when you are on the move.

The five gateways of the pentagon are common – they are based on innate possibilities. But they are simultaneously individual. Over time each person's training in self-reliance – by becoming familiar with the gateways and their interplay – will become individualised.

The same is true for the gateways when they open outward.

Someone who turns towards the world with physical kindness and openness shows others an open, relaxed and confident body. What that means differs from one person to the next. When they communicate with a younger child, many adults will inadvertently try to meet the child by squatting down, a common gesture in the interaction between children and adults. But if one's age or physical condition prevents this or if kneeling down is too culturally laden a gesture, bodily kindness and openness can be signalled in other ways.

Consciousness of the BREATH



Consciousness of the breath is trained by simply sensing that you are actually breathing right now. And by dwelling with this for a moment.

Let it be a game: try and follow the breath attentively for a few minutes without interfering with it.

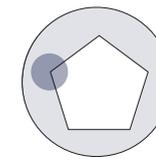
This is a basic exercise. But there are others.

It is possible to take breath awareness training out into the world by trying to remember your breathing in situations where you are under pressure. This makes it possible to begin to explore one of the secrets of the star of empathy: every time you move your attention from a difficult – or positive – situation to one of the five domains or gateways of the star, you have remembered and established contact with deeper aspects of yourself, and thereby you have taken an important step towards maintaining your balance in the situation.

Our experience suggests that children have a special capacity to understand and exploit the natural competences. For example, we have often witnessed that a child is immediately able to understand the usefulness of being able to centre itself by remembering the breath when a situation is challenging.

When the gateway of the breath opens outward – when you remember your breathing as you enter into contact with others – you will discover that the calmness that is associated with a calm respiration will spread towards your entire system and can help make the entire situation more harmonious.

Consciousness of the HEART



We know that our heart beats. But we forget it.

So first, you remind yourself of your physical heart. Put a hand on it. Feel its pulse in your chest.

Next, you contact the empathic feelings of the region of the heart, by recalling a person you cares about. Perhaps a child, a loved one, a friend. Perhaps a parent.

This may be experienced as if something – a feeling, energy or a vibration – flows out from your heart towards that person.

This is the basic exercise. Like all the exercises we mention here, it is quite anonymous. All of the training described by the pentagon is unremarkable. It concerns becoming aware of some of the most basic conditions for human life and therefore it has – and must have – a sense of steadiness. In this context, slowness is a sign of health, a wisdom. None of us can change our foundation in a drastic manner or quickly.

You may move on from the feeling of love for a specific other human being to gently letting go of the image of that concrete person you were using to awaken the feeling. To sense for a moment that love can remain as an atmosphere for some time also without being directed at a specific other. Where it tells or whispers about our capacity for affection, our readiness to risk opening our empathic ability in a sensitive inclusion of a greater number of our fellow human beings than merely those people to whom we are closest.

From here we remember or listen into our own innermost being. Not in order to find anything in particular, but to maintain the movement this concerns, dynamically, the movement towards finding home in oneself.

Situations where a human being listens to another are foundational for our existence.

You become a better listener if you anonymously open your body to the one who is speaking by continuously relaxing your muscles.

In the same way you open empathetically towards what is being said by remembering your heart. This does not mean uncritical acceptance or subordination, but it is a precondition for initially understanding more deeply with your entire being what the person who is speaking means to say.

Finally, you relax your thought activity by letting go of the thoughts that continuously manifest in the space of awareness while you are listening, in a manner not unlike how we let go of tensions in the space of the body. This allows us to open our attention in the most optimal way to what is being said and to the person who is speaking.

In our outer-directed training of empathy, tolerance and respect it can be useful to make ourselves aware of how widespread negative assessments – and their counterpart, praise – are in our culture. The family therapist Walther Kempler often used the example of a child showing a drawing to an adult. The adult says: How beautiful! But, as Kempler points out, the child didn't ask for this. It asked to be seen. It asked for empathic attention. Instead, it received an evaluation.

In the same way it is important to become aware of how conflicts escalate.

The spiral or stairway of conflict – the fact we are all familiar with that disagreement has a tendency to escalate of its own accord – unfolds because of an oversight:

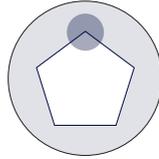
We forget that we turn away from part of our share of the responsibility for the situation. We experience that the aggression, the disagreement, the lack of understanding, stems from our counterpart. Thus we lose contact with our own anger which in a certain sense can be said to be behind us and from where it now radiates out towards the one with whom we disagree. Who has also lost touch with their anger, and now experiences us as the aggressor.

To discover this, that one always has one's part in a conflict, to see that part and to accept that this right now belongs to one's own system, and to try and relieve it, that is a first and decisive step towards solving a given disagreement. And to do this again and again is to take steps towards being on better terms with the world.

This attitude initially does not take a position on whether you yourself or your counterpart in some objective sense – if there is such a thing in conflicts – is right. This training concerns discovering one's own anger and to reduce that by relaxing and connecting to deeper and more stable levels in oneself, which are always present behind or underneath the anger. In order to bring from this quieter position, together with your now less threatened counterpart, greater clarity and tolerance to whatever the disagreement was about and how it might be solved.

The better one is in touch with one's own core of friendly stability, the greater the possibility for navigation in emotionally turbulent waters.

Consciousness of the BASIC CREATIVITY



Many people find that cultivated creativity – singing, dancing, drawing, and poetry, for example – activates or is connected with the region of the throat. Most likely, among other things, because speech is formed here.

However, what we mean here with basic creativity is something more comprehensive. It is the very fact that our entire external and internal reality, bodily impulses, mental content and sensations can be experienced to be uninterruptedly undergoing change and renewal.

In a way this is so self-evident that it is easily overlooked.

This spontaneous, uninterrupted, self-renewing changing of our outer and inner reality constitutes the existential, basic creativity.

It is an unavoidable and fundamental part of our lives, and to bring it to consciousness is helpful when you are oriented towards the core of your being.

This basic creativity cannot be located physically. Unlike the breath or the feelings of the heart, it does not have a specific physical centre. It is a characteristic of practically everything we experience.

This means that when you are sensing towards the core of yourself and of being, what you are sensing is a process of change rather than a fixed form.

Try to sense this constant movement. The mere consciousness and registration of change brings about a loosening of automatism. If we accept that basic creativity is beyond our control, it can bring forth a kind of humorous surrender.

From this feeling of acceptance of the changing nature of everything: sense inwardly.

The so-called emotions, the register of feelings encompassing, e.g., anger, pride, possessiveness, desire, competitiveness, jealousy, envy and triumph are reflected around the solar plexus, and comprise one of life's many necessary and natural creative expressions.

In contrast to the empathic register of the feelings of the heart, the emotions of the solar plexus concern the marking of boundaries and desire. Not to put oneself in another person's place, but to wish for something with others, to attract them towards oneself or to push them away.

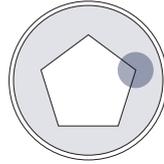
Developing an understanding of the dynamics of emotions is an unavoidable element in the training of relational competence. Becoming familiar with your own negative feelings and blind spots, to learn to express them, first one at a time and then more complexly and with ever greater nuance, so that they do not overwhelm you like a storm.

Yet it is also important to realize that this understanding only has an effect in more demanding situations, when the bonfire of feelings is ablaze, if your self-reliance and self-knowledge are anchored behind the emotions themselves – that is, beyond language, deep within the body and the heart and consciousness.

This anchoring is premised upon deepening your contact through the five gateways, being able to sense them simultaneously, and thereby being in touch with your own essence.

Only in this way it is possible eventually to truly lower the primary stress of your emotions and to raise the temperature of your life.

CONSCIOUSNESS as such



Consciousness ordinarily appears to us with a content. To a certain degree, you can come to doubt – and many have been convinced and are convinced that it is impossible even to imagine, let alone experience – contentless consciousness.

It is useful to realize that the contents of consciousness always stem from one or more of three sources: from the senses (the environment), from the mind, or from the body (mind and body together can be referred to as the inner world).

It is not possible to force the stream of impulses from these three sources to become calm.

But it is possible to relax this flow. Like we did with the body, we can scan our consciousness, notice it for example as a space, and then relax this space.

This is a brief movement. It is like an exhalation of consciousness. For a moment, you leave sense impressions and thoughts to themselves and let them do as they please.

Any and all content of consciousness is connected with a – perhaps minute – tension. It is the sum of these tensions of which you now begin to let go.

On closer inspection, this release of tension has three parts: presence, neutrality, and an intention to relax.

First, you make it clear to yourself that it is possible to make yourself aware, to become cognizant of the content of consciousness. This cognizance is a presence.

Next, you accept that by far the most of the content of which you presently are trying to be cognizant, to comprehend with presence, is beyond your control. So there is no reason to fight against your own mind. No reason to hold on to something.

For a moment, you try to leave consciousness to itself. To let it be just as it is.

This combination of presence and letting be without judgement is what is referred to as neutral observation. It is a state, initially usually very brief, in time perhaps of longer duration. A state that is without judgment and without attachment and without rejection, without both yes and no.

Neutral observation is the same as witness meditation, and as mindfulness in the sense in which it is used by the molecular biologist and stress researcher Jon Kabat-Zinn.

From this relaxed inclusivity you lean in towards your own innermost core, which is the best place from which to move out towards the environment and fellow human beings.

The deeper and more completely you have met yourself, the deeper and more completely you can meet another person.

And the more you can see the other – and yourself – as he or she truly is. With empathy, tolerance and respect. And perhaps with a little of the friendly, humorous indulgence that we all need.

Authenticity is a keyword for both the inward and outward oriented training.

Authenticity cannot be learned as a skill. Although different communication skills can support us in finding our own authenticity.

Genuine, authentic, is that person who is in touch with her or his own essence, and who meets others from there with natural kindness and precision.

Moving inward towards our own essence is to discover that we human beings ultimately wish each other well. To move outwards with empathy is to allow others to share in this discovery.

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The Pentagon Model, as it is presented here, was originally formulated by Jes Bertelsen, for example in his book "An Essay On Inner Freedom" (Et essay om indre frihed, Copenhagen 2010). There, the author stresses that it is not his invention, but rather that he regards it as a representation of a kind of natural law of consciousness that has been discovered by all the great spiritual training systems, all of which have formulated it in ways that were suitable for the time and culture in which it was applied.