

# Eating Reality

.... the reality with which we deal is something we process—we ingest it and pass it through our system.

— Majjhima Nikāya, I.261.<sup>1</sup>

We do not perceive the object in front of our eyes until the brain has made unconscious inferences about what that object may be. We are not aware of the action we are about to perform until the brain has made an unconscious choice about what that action should be.

— Chris Frith<sup>2</sup>

Here's how complex it is:

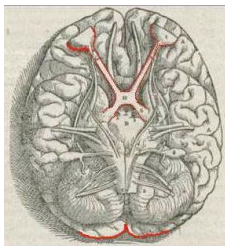


Fig. 1. Information flow from the eyes (top), crossing at the optic chiasma, joining left and right eye information in the optic tract, and layering left and right visual stimuli in the lateral geniculate nucleus. V1 in red at bottom of image.

— Image from Andreas Vesalius' Fabrica<sup>3</sup>

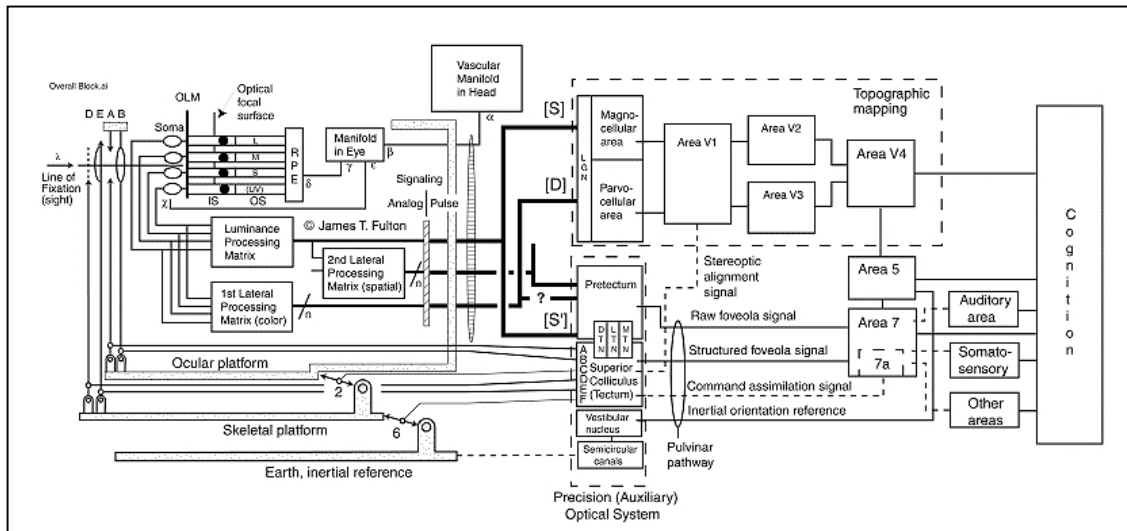


Fig. 2 Overall Block Diagram of Animal Vision<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Majjhima Nikāya*, edited by Treckner & Chalmers, PTS. Oxford Univ. Press, Geoffrey Cumberlege, 1948-51. Translated by I. B. Horner as *Middle Length Sayings*, PTS. London: Luzac & Co., 1954-59. Quoted in Macy, Joanna (1991) *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. pg 58.

<sup>2</sup> Frith, Chris (2007) *Making Up The Mind, How the Brain Creates our Mental World* Wiley. pg. 68. ISBN-10: 1405160225, ISBN-13: 978-1405160223

<sup>3</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:1543%2CVesalius%27Fabrica%2CVisualSystem%2CV1.jpg>

<sup>4</sup> <http://4colorvision.com/files/overallblock.htm>

Through all these stages and neural centers, our perceptions, our visual reality is created. And all our realities, from all the senses on up to the most abstract thinking we do, is created the same way. As you can see—no pun intended—it’s complicated. A lot happens before anything appears in consciousness. A lot of processing goes on. The system “ingests” it and “processes” it before we become aware. Our memories, our beliefs, our adaptations, our habits, our prejudices and biases, our cultural rules and regulations, our state of mind, our feelings, the context, the time and place itself, all, without our conscious knowledge, mold and shape everything we ever will or could experience. That’s just the way it works! What we need to do is to realize this.

Some of that processing which normally would be happening outside of consciousness, can become available to consciousness. As practitioners of the Hakomi Method, we are sometimes able to help a person bring some of that hidden processing into awareness. The method is designed to help that happen. We assist people who are working to discover what they automatically and unconsciously occurs when their habits create their experiences. When the method works, that’s what happens.

### “Digesting” Experience

*A picture has emerged of a set of pervasive, adaptive, sophisticated mental processes that occur largely out of view. Indeed, some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that the unconscious mind does virtually all the work and that conscious will may be an illusion.*

— Timothy Wilson<sup>5</sup>

*Every creature with a brain has myriad predictions encoded in what it has learned.*

— John Holland<sup>6</sup>

*All living organisms from the humble amoeba to the human are born with devices designed to solve automatically, no proper reasoning required, the basic problems of life.*

— Antonio Damasio<sup>7</sup>

### Procedural Memory and Implicit Beliefs

The one thing we most want to help clients discover and change is the habitual ways they create unnecessary suffering for themselves and others. The logic is this:

- (1) Experience is organized by habits controlled by the adaptive unconscious which function outside of consciousness.
- (2) The most significant of these organizing habits are those that were learned early in life as formative experiences, developed in reaction to intense situations<sup>8</sup>
- (3) Such habits are stored in implicit memory and may not be easily accessible to consciousness.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wilson, Timothy D. (2004). *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard University Press. pg. 5

<sup>6</sup> John Holland, quoted in the book *Complexity* by Michael Waldrop, page 147

<sup>7</sup> Damasio, Antonio. (2003). *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. New York: Harcourt.

<sup>8</sup> The book to read is Sue Gerhardt’s book, *Why Love Matters* and, for the relevant research, read Schore, A. (1994) *Affect Regulation and the Self: The Neurobiology of Affective Development*. Oxford Press, and the *Handbook of Attachment* (1999), Eds. Cassidy, J. and Shaver, P.R., New York, The Guilford Press

<sup>9</sup> Implicit memory, sometimes called *procedural memory*, sometimes, *emotional memory*, involves parts of the brain that do not require conscious processing during encoding or retrieval. When implicit memory is retrieved, the neural net profiles that are reactivated involve circuits in the brain that are a fundamental part of our everyday experience of life: behaviors, emotions, and images. These implicit elements form part of the foundation for our subjective sense of ourselves: We act, feel, and imagine without recognition of the influence of past experience on our present reality. — Daniel Siegel from *The Developing Mind*, pg. 29.

They are automated procedures, triggered by perceptions of internal and external realities, perceptions which themselves are influenced by organizing habits. (Given all this, it's easy to see how the whole system can regress so easily into unsupported virtualities.)

- (4) They are the functionally equivalent to *implicit* beliefs<sup>10</sup>
- (5) These implicit predictions and beliefs exert a profound influence over everyday life without any simple, direct way to modify them. They influence all behavior and experience however it originates. They do so by producing habitual reactions. They help shape all manner of experience: perception, mood, thought, feeling, craving, impulse and behavior.
- (6) Thus, present experience is a reliable, immediate expression of nonconscious habits and beliefs. For that reason, we focus on present experiences and use them to bring what is normally unconscious into consciousness.

When Reality Cannot Be Digested.

Pierre Janet had a theory that certain experiences, at certain times, can overwhelm a person and that these experiences are left "undigested" in the unconscious. Here's the whole idea.<sup>11</sup>

*During these periods of abaissement,<sup>12</sup> Janet found, our psyche seems to lose some of its capacity to synthesize reality into a meaningful whole. If we encounter a traumatic or strong emotional event during these periods, the mind lacks its usual ability to make sense of it and fit it properly into a meaningful, secure whole (Ellenberger, 1970, p.380, Rossi and Smith, 1990). During abaissement, we tend to be emotionally vulnerable and easily overwhelmed; we can register the life experiences, but we cannot properly "digest" them. The emotional experience floats in our unconscious, unassimilated, in effect, jamming the gears of the mind. Janet hypothesized that such unassimilated experiences could become the seed of psychological or psychosomatic illness, obsessive thought patterns, phobias — all sorts of behavioral problems. Many chronic problems, he believed, were the result of the mind-body's continuing, frustrated effort to make sense of the original disturbing experience.*

*Janet believed that there was an underlying physiological source of the abaissements during the day that was somehow associated with stress and exhaustion.*

*A strong emotional event that remains unassimilated, jamming the gears of the mind, requires some very specific support to finally become assimilated. First of all, the event must be returned to consciousness. The initial procedures of the method, loving presence, the client's commitment, mindfulness, experiments, are designed to do this. Once the event and its associated feelings have been activated, the procedures focus on completing the unfinished experience and integrated it. That means allowing the emotions to be felt and supported by caring and understanding. It means making sense of it all, resolving the pain and mystery of it. That is the essence of emotional healing processes.*

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Also, to at least one great neuroscientist: "The brain is a virtual reality machine." "Consider, that the waking state is dreamlike, in exactly the same sense that dreams are wakelike." — Rodolfo R. Llinás, *i of the vortex: From Neuron to Self*.

<sup>10</sup>"Prediction is the ultimate and most pervasive of all brain functions" — Rodolfo R. Llinás, *ibid*.

"Fitness constrains regulation to be efficient, which implies preventing errors and minimizing costs. Both needs are best accomplished by using prior information to predict demand and then adjusting all parameters to meet it." — Peter Sterling from his paper: *Principles of allostasis: optimal design, predictive regulation, pathophysiology and rational therapeutics*.

<sup>11</sup> from *The Symptom Path to Enlightenment* by Ernst Rossi, pg 125

<sup>12</sup> the word *abaissement* is French for *lowering*.

*Often an important element of an emotional event that is being assimilated is the presence of a sympathetic, caring person who supports the individual through the pain and confusion of the event. For a child, that's usually a parent, a caretaker or an older sibling. For the client, it's the therapist or when I work, it can be my assistants.*

When you hold a client during the time of emotional expression and integration, you could be supplying exactly what was missing during the original event. Maybe the people who were there were actually causing the problem and the pain. Or they were too disturbed themselves to be able to offer what was needed. Maybe no one was there to offer comfort or — as Al Pessso once told me — to bear witness. It always needs someone to be there. A small child in an emotionally painful situation may not have the “*capacity to synthesize reality into a meaningful whole*”. In many situations, that's true also of many adults. At the time of those events the person needs someone to help. The best person for that would be calm, sympathetic, patient and understanding. It would be someone who can care for a *soul in pain*. When a client is reliving an old painful event, your silent presence and your kindness can provide the support needed for healing.

Let's look at what the practitioner must be able to do in such situations:

The Hakomi Method Practitioner's Task: *Being at One With*

... he [Brian Arthur] linked these to a different way in which action arises, through a process he called a “different sort of knowing.” “You observe and observe and let this experience well up into something appropriate. In a sense, there's no decision making, he said. “What to do just becomes obvious. You can't rush it. Much of it depends on where you're coming from and who you are as a person. All you can do is position yourself according to your unfolding vision of what is coming. A totally different set of rules applies. You need to ‘feel out’ what to do. You hang back, you observe. You're more like a surfer or a really good race car driver. You don't act out of deduction, you act out of an inner feel, making sense as you go. You're not even thinking. You're at one with the situation.

— C. Otto Scharmer<sup>13</sup>

This quote is central to my thinking about the relation of practitioner and client. It describes in poetic language the nature of the practitioner's state of mind, the way that action is taken, and the personal qualities required to bring oneself into the deepest alignment with a situation or another being. Because I feel it is so important, I will write about it in detail.

Here's Scharmer, one phrase at a time:

1. *a different sort of knowing*

*Children learn a mental grammar by listening to a language (deaf children by observing sign language). They are acquisitive of associations as well as new words, and one fancy set of associations constitutes the mental grammar of a particular language. Starting at about eighteen months of age, children start to figure out the local rules and eventually begin using them in their own sentences. They may not be able to describe the parts of speech, or diagram a sentence, but their “language machine” seems to know all about such matters after a year's experience.*

— William H. Calvin<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Quoting the economist, Brian Arthur, in the book, *Presence: An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society* by P. Senge, Scharmer, J. Jaworski, and B. S. Flowers

<sup>14</sup> Calvin, William H. (2001). *How Brains Think: Evolving Intelligence, Then and Now*. New York: Basic Books.

This kind of learning is stored in procedural, sometime called implicit<sup>15, 16</sup> memory. This is learning through doing and experience, like riding a bicycle. It may not involve thinking at all. This kind of knowing is often seen as *intuitive*. It's behavior that has become habit, with or without planning or conscious will. It involves impulses, which are the function of the adaptive unconscious.<sup>17</sup>

2. *a different way in which action arises.... You observe and observe and let this experience well up into something appropriate.*

*For the cognitive system the ability to cope involves adaptation, not just to things as they are, but as they are coming to be.*

— Joanna Macy<sup>18</sup>

As the situation unfolds, something within you will find a way to respond, not simply react. Something in you will recognize the pattern that's emerging. It will have dealt with similar situations before. It will find a way to enter into the situation. If you have learned to adapt in a helpful ways, your adaptive unconscious will do so again. If you have a tendency to react quickly in unhelpful ways to the kind of situation that's emerging, you'll probably do that. Responding, in contrast to reacting, needs time. You have to be patient. You have to allow for all the searching and decision making that goes on, even when it's going on outside of consciousness.

The key word in the quote is *let*. You let something *arise*. You wait for it. That's very different from *reacting*. It's a special kind of response, one that welcomes support from the whole self and the whole situation one is immersed in. It takes practice, the kind that meditation fosters. It is a kind of stepping back and a kind of non-interfering. It is a way of being with ones self. It is patient.

One thing that interferes with this way of knowing and doing is a lack of confidence, of faith in oneself, the other and the process. Often there is and unconscious belief that one has to control what happens, is the cause of what happens, is responsible and must not make mistakes. Even more damaging is the expectation that the other will resist and one must prevail over this resistance.

All this suggests the influence of what is, in common parlance, called *the ego*. Dietrich Dörner, in his prize-winning book, *The Logic of Failure*<sup>19</sup> notes the following tendencies as factors contributing to failure:

*The slowness of our thinking and the small amount of information we can process at any one time, our tendency to protect our sense of our competence, the limited inflow capacity of our memory, and the tendency to focus only on immediately pressing problems — these are the simple causes of the mistakes we make in dealing with complex systems. But because they are comprehensible stumbling blocks, we should be able to find ways to avoid them most of the time.*

We are limited and unavoidably bound to accept the uncertainty our limits impose.<sup>20</sup> Better to hold our agendas loosely. Better to join into and gently influence the unfolding process than to try to impose your will upon it. This is the meaning of *All you can do is position yourself according to your unfolding vision of what is coming.*

3. *observe and observe*

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<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procedural\\_memory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Procedural_memory)

<sup>16</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Implicit\\_memory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Implicit_memory)

<sup>17</sup> The adaptive unconscious is discussed at length in Wilson's book, *Strangers to Ourselves*.

<sup>18</sup> Macy, Joanna (1991) *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pg. 85

<sup>19</sup> Dörner, Dietrich (Author), Kimber, Rita (Translator), Kimber, Robert (Translator), (1997) *The Logic of Failure: Recognizing and Avoiding Error in Complex Situation*. Perseus Books Group

<sup>20</sup> In his book, *The Meaning of It All*, Richard Feynman discusses uncertainty at great length. Feynman, Richard P. (1999) *Meaning of It All: Thoughts of a Citizen Scientist* Perseus Books Group ISBN-10: 0738201669

Stay present! Continuously be studying what's happening in each present moment, until the pattern of those moments emerges for you. Once trained, your adaptive unconscious will be able to make sense of it and you will be doing so without effort. The habit of giving this process the time it needs is crucial. Then ...

4. *you let this experience well up into something appropriate.... no decision making....What to do just becomes obvious.*

Suzuki Roshi once answered the question: "what is enlightenment?" by replying: "an appropriate response." When Scharmer says, *No decision making*, he's telling us that we're not consciously figuring out what is appropriate, the response is being handled by the adaptive unconscious. And, since *obvious* is an emergent property of that process, we can surmise that it's the outcome of the brain processing a complex interaction of multiple factors. One of the main factors is, *the properties of that moment of mind.*<sup>21</sup>

The properties of the moment of mind that influence the emergent "appropriate" response include presence, calm, warmth, the wish to be helpful, the habits one has developed through many similar situations, including faith in oneself, the other and the process.

*....the personality or cognitive system consists of internally experienced mental events. These events, be they perceptions, thoughts, or volitions, manifest a flow of information which both transforms and is transformed by the system's organization.*

— Joanna Macy<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *In this model, what is seen as primary in shaping experience is not external reality—not what is cognized, not the object of awareness—but rather the properties of that moment of mind itself.* —Daniel Goleman. In *Tibetan and Western Models of Mental Health*, In: H.H. Dali Lama. (1991) *MindScience—An East-West Dialogue*, Boston: Wisdom Publications.

<sup>22</sup> Macy, Joanna (1991) *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pg 82