What is Sensory Awareness?
by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

This article is based on the opening talk for the Sensory Awareness Conference at Mt. Madonna Center, Watsonville, CA, held last October.

What is Sensory Awareness? I am using this question as a title for my opening talk to this conference, realizing very well that I cannot really give an answer but rather I want to use it as a tool for an exploration in what I see as important about our work at this time. If you explore this question, you will find different “answers” as I am finding different answers at different times. Asking questions is a crucial tool in our work. They help us to explore life – and ourselves, which, of course, are not two separate things. You will notice that in the course of my exploration today I will often talk about one thing and then jump to its opposite. In preparing my talk, these polarities kept calling for my attention.

A curious and confusing dichotomy runs (through) our lives. I call myself an “individual”, a whole that cannot be divided, even though this organism I call “I” houses countless tiny organisms, bacteria, etc., without which I would not be me. I am this whole only in the context of a web of life inside and out, in which countless “individuals” are inseparably interwoven. Life as we know it manifests in individual organ-
The Delight of Breathing
by Ruth Denison (edited by Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt)
This article is based on Ruth Denison’s keynote address at the recent Sensory Awareness Conference.

In one of my favorite quotes of the Buddha we hear him saying to his disciples: “As you breathe in, oh monks, breathe in with the whole body. As you breathe out, oh monks, breathe out with the whole body.” This is from the Satipatthana Sutta (the teaching on the Foundations of Mindfulness). When I hear this, it always touches me so deeply because I know what that means. We are touched when we experience the truth of something and live it, when we know how much it is needed – and when we see the stupidity of us human beings seemingly incapable of grasping that truth.

So let's look at breathing in the light of the many similarities between Sensory Awareness, the Buddha Dharma and, in fact, many humanistic practices: one thing we have in common is that we don't teach anything. We don't – yet we do teach, but everybody already has what we teach. So, it's not a teaching, it is rather a confirmation of what is already in us. You recognize something in yourself and pull it out of your storage. For we all have it not willfully buried but we have forgotten it. And even if we learn new ways, open up, have great openings and we know how to do it - tomorrow we have forgotten it. It is a very strange malady we all suffer from. That is why the Buddha always repeated his teachings: Breathe in with your whole body. Breathe out with your whole body, and so on. It is a kind of sickness, this forgetfulness we all suffer from.

I invite you to this contemplation of breathing: Breath is with us all our life - isn't that a big revelation? Yeah, but to live this truthfully can move a lot in us. It's very simple. From our first inhalation to our last exhalation breath does not leave us, and if it does for more than a few moments we become anxious, for our life is at stake. When breath departs, as it inevitably does when we bid the world goodbye, with our final exhalation the life force departs as well. Without breath there can be no life. Any hindrance to it, any interference with its full natural expression, puts a limit on our experience in that moment.

Ordinarily, when we think of breath, we think of it as something we do and we have to make sure that we get enough and are sufficiently supplied with oxygen. In truth, however, breath is not something we do – as much of our practice is about not doing – it is something that is done to us (This may sound like a bad thing to many). Breath breathes us. You can verify that. While we can thwart and manipulate its fullness, we can never totally, as long as our heart is beating, block this breathing. We can restrict it, we can do quite a lot but we cannot really block it as long as there is a heart beat. Both these processes are essential, but about the breath we can talk more for we have a direct access to it. It is always available and reminds us of its activity. Like the gravitational field of the earth, the rhythmic action of the breath is a force immeasurably more powerful than we are. We cannot breath it, it breathes us! To really grasp that would bring many things in our lives into order; things we don't like, where we overstep, where we do a little bit too much - or not enough.

It is therefore much better that we offer our bodies now as channels for the breath’s rhythmic play or interplay than to attempt to resist or restrict its mighty force. We don't do this consciously but through the ways we behave and relate to life. We restrict this force tremendously and have the sense we have control of it. Maybe we live without any awareness of this aspect. By sacrificing our willful holding, our habitual patterns (the fire of our dukkha, dissatisfaction, in Buddhist terms) that keep the fullest expression of our breath contained, we directly align ourselves with the deepest, most powerful energies available to us.

Breath and body are two sides of the same coin and the condition of one directly affects the condition of the other. If the breath is shallow or constricted, sensations are weak and dull and indistinct, because we have no access to our life force. When the breath becomes full or fluid, or we can say deep, sensations become once again vibrant and present. By sensations I mean aliveness; we feel light, we feel vibrant and energetic. Breathing activates all this and it comes to us as experience, as sensation. It is a sensory experience, a tactile experience. It is important that what the breath does is not just breathing air. It is an active force coming in with motion and touching us. Not that we cannot activate sensations by scratching and massage and all, but when breath comes in, it activates that which we are on a very cellular level.

We are energy, or the interplay, on one level, of the classical elements. For example, I got up this morning and complained: ‘it's so cold, so cold,’ until I realized: well, this is the element of fire at play. Why do I complain? I am in a place where it is cold. Now, why do I use up my language and my

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SAF Co-President’s Letter

Dear Friends of the Sensory Awareness Foundation,

This newsletter is mostly dedicated to the recent Sensory Awareness Conference *In a Heartbeat*, which took place at Mt. Madonna Center in Watsonville CA. The conference, as well as the preceding Leaders Meeting, provided chances to reconnect for many long-time students of Charlotte Selver. They were also opportunities for people new to the work to get a taste of Sensory Awareness from a variety of leaders.

Rather than offering a report from the conference, this newsletter contains photographs and edited transcripts of the two presentations that were given as talks. Sensory Awareness is a nonverbal work and most of the presentations were offered as classes focusing on direct experience.

Those of you who attended the conference know that in 13 workshops leaders presented their own unique ways of offering Sensory Awareness, all exploring different aspects of living. I wish I could share this rich experience with all of you who were not there, but that seems impossible.

What struck me most about both events was the love we have for each other. In spite of all our differences, and even though Charlotte in a way did not encourage community, there was a palpable sense of deep care among all the participants. I never thought about this work being about love – and curiously I feel almost like breaking a taboo writing this – but during these days it occurred to me that Charlotte and Charles, consciously or not, planted seeds of deep love among us that continue to flourish years after they have passed away. It even seemed to me that coming together and reconnecting as a community was as important as what we actually “worked on”. I believe and very much hope that newcomers felt fully included this sharing. Events like this conference help to nourish and deepen our bond, and for that I am very grateful. The two poems in this issue from friends who were not at the conference confirm that this bond reaches well beyond the conference attendees.

We now need to build on this renewed energy. The Sensory Awareness Foundation will be going through a crucial transition in the months to come. At the heart of this transition will be creating a new funding structure, so that we can continue to offer high quality “products” such as the conference. For that we are seeking new board members or advisors willing and able to share their financial expertise with us. If you have such skills and would like to help create a future for Sensory Awareness, please contact us.

We also need your support as a regular member of the Foundation. Please join us or renew your membership for 2007. Every membership helps to build energy for the future of Sensory Awareness. Donations at all levels are welcome. For a contribution of $100 or more you will receive a complimentary copy of our new book, *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence*.

In the first months of 2007 you will see what we have been able to accomplish in the months past, thanks to your generosity. In February, we expect to receive the first copies of *Reclaiming Vitality and Presence*, a combination of Charles Brooks’ writing from his book Sensory Awareness and excerpts from Charlotte Selver’s workshops. Published by North Atlantic Books, this is the result of some years of effort by members of the Sensory Awareness Foundation. We are also in the final stages of producing a DVD that will present Charlotte Selver reflecting on Sensory Awareness in one of her last workshops in Santa Barbara.

I wish you all a very happy and fulfilling New Year.

Sincerely,

Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt

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If you have such skills and would like to help creating a future for Sensory Awareness, please contact us.

SAF Newsletter

Editing & Design: Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt
Send your comments to: S. Laeng-Gilliatt, 2300 W Alameda St. A3, Santa Fe, NM 87507; email: stelaeng@comcast.net
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955 Vernal Ave., Mill Valley, CA 94941
www.sensoryawareness.org
At first I wondered what she taught, for I was still entombed in thought. It seemed exotic (par for then), a new-age con called ‘Western zen.’ What gall to teach us how to breathe, and charge for it! It made me seethe. Despite all that (I now can see) she introduced myself to me. I watched and tried to understand, to figure out this foreign land of bare sensations without thought. I flopped upon the shore, fresh-caught, a soi-disant philosopher to whom such things did not occur—yet, silent and unknown to me, I’d just been ‘bitten by the flea.’

It’s passing strange to wonder why it matters where we cast our eye, but where attention’s eye alights forever molds those very sites: wherever drifting focus lands defines the bounds of our demands. (You scoff, but merely being blends each moment with our private ends.)

[“So tell me, fella, where’s this place, this oh-so-special ‘inner’ space?”
“I touch your arm—-you feel my touch? Don’t pull away, for feeling such you know it’s you, the one within who knows exactly where you’ve been.” (So simple, that, and yet no doubt the heart of what it’s all about.)]

The secret wrapped in sensing lore consists of this, and little more: to give up effort serves us best (a strange commandment in the West!). “Attend instead to what’s at hand, ignoring what was duly planned and feeling how each moment’s text awakens you for what comes next.”

[“Cease all effort? I’m not buying! Only cowards give up trying! Plunge ahead with nothing showing? How’d I know where I was going? You sure must be the Devil’s tool to think that I’d be such a fool! (Of course, I’d like a moment’s peace, but inner pressures never cease.)”]

Thus, withdrawing, people shrink from trusting how their bodies think, and I, reluctant like the rest, stayed skeptical and played the guest. But as the years of classes passed the twig was bent and I, at last, could let myself relax and be the guy that’s simply only me. However much this inner source became my private guiding force my teacher knew how doggedly I shunned her mantra, “Let it be!”, so now I take the greatest care to be sensorily aware so that her not-so-patient ghost won’t want to turn me into toast.

Poem by Bill Littlewood
energy because it is cold? Then I could laugh about myself. When we laugh about ourselves, we have much more fun and we can master our lives. This is right understanding. If you get this right away, you have the best medicine against suffering.

Back to the breath: Breath is the food on which sensations live – on which aliveness lives. When the sensations are fed they come out of their dullness. It’s not simply the air, it is the force of movement. Breath is the switch that turns on the lights of the sensations. When they come to life, they flicker and they shine, just like the stars at night. Now, you can be a romantic about it. I hate it actually. We get so quickly into these superlatives. But there is some truth in this. In traditional mindfulness practices, breath is presented as the preeminent object on which to focus our attention. For 2,600 years the Buddha’s teachings – and other teachings, the Hindus were very advanced too – have been focusing their attention on breathing. Breath and sensations, these oceanic forces, hammer away at the flimsy breakwaters of our resistance. The posture of meditation turns the body into a channel or conduit through which these forces can run freely. Breathing is a joyous and precious event, therefore. It is here for the taking, free to all of us that have a hunger for nourishment. Every breath you take could be a joyous act, a deep surrender to the mystery of life in all its potency and force. Let breath become an act of surrender to the urgency of the life force just as giving the weight of our body and mind is an act of surrender to the potent pull of gravity. You don’t have to force deep and full breathing to activate an awareness of the whole body. All you need to do is surrender to this most powerful bellows. Breath wants you. Breath wants to breathe you.

Rejoice in coming to your breath and allowing it to touch you all the way through. When it is not interfered with a thought or with any comment, when it is left alone in its natural rhythm, then you are in good hands and you are sure to attain and actualize the dream of your lifetime.

For Charlotte

Don’t use your eyes like forks, Charlotte used to say, wisely sweeping past one hundred years to stir a century and more in her probing, sensitive hands. Through her, my eyes became bowls and the world, food. There is no need for utensils when there’s nothing to pick apart.

Poem by Cathy Edget

(continued from page 2)

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For more about Ruth Denison, see our Fall 2005 newsletter.
isms - from the tiniest bacteria, to redwood trees, to the elabo-
rate organisms we call humans, all interlinked as we share this
planet that gave birth to us.

We all share a strong sense of individuality – manifesting
in our modern world often as isolation – and with it comes a
sense of permanence. However, being part of this web, we are
subject to change – often without notice – and often without that change being noticed.

This is where the practice of Sensory Awareness comes in. One answer to our initial question could be that Sensory Awareness is about learning to notice and allow change – or should I say stopping to resist it? Life is change and resisting the change leads to discomfort and disease. But life is also form, stability. Let us not disregard that. We are all formed, if only temporarily, and we rightly cherish this form. Sensory Awareness is also about recognizing the form we are, impermanent as it may be.

In this work we often hear about the importance of the present moment. Now, it is crucial to live in the moment, because in a way this is all we have – but life is also history. Without a history we would not be here today, without it we wouldn’t even recognize each other. We come into this present moment with a history and part of our work of Sensory Awareness is to understand and integrate it in a healthful way. When I say that, I don’t mean to intellectually explore it but to recognize and understand that we have grown from something, that we come here not from nowhere but from somewhere.

The now ubiquitous word mindfulness is a modern translation of the Pali word sati. Its original meaning was memory. To hear this for the first time not too long ago was a surprising revelation for me, especially because it came from a Buddhist teacher, Jason Siff, who proceeded to say: “there is no present without a past.”

The practice we call Sensory Awareness has a very rich history too. It is interwoven with the history of Charlotte Selver, who was a teacher and very important person in many of our lives; it is interwoven with her teachers Elsa Gindler and Heinrich Jacoby who, influenced by their times and history, passed down to us something very precious. What they gave us is not easily described.

To me, what is so precious about this work is that we are given authority to learn in a manner that respects our own experience and builds on it, rather than being taught how things should be. I would even go so far as to say that offering space for discovery is the very foundation of this work.

We are hard pressed to find related teachings that give students as much authority to inquire and find solutions based upon their own experience.

Now, of course, as leaders we come with our own history, with our own background, with our own understanding and we will bring in our own being. But as much as possible we need to and we want to open a space for discovery.

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Here is another interesting aspect of our work: those of you new to Sensory Awareness will soon notice that in our classes you are exposed to a never-ending stream of questions. Knowing how to ask questions is very crucial for students of Sensory Awareness (and when I say students I mean all of us who are involved with this work, especially those of us who are engaged in what we call leading). Maybe the most important thing we so-called leaders can “teach” is how to ask questions. This method has history. “Zweck-mässige Fragestellung” – let me translate this as “skillful questioning” – has from the very beginning been a central tool in our work. Those questions will ultimately not be posed by a teacher but emerge in the student.

Sensory Awareness is coming into alignment with the forces of nature. Especially, it is communion with gravity. It is opening up in each cell to what always affects us, every cell, everything that exists on earth, namely the mutual attraction of everything that has mass. Being exposed to gravity, being open to gravity, gives us direction in space. When we know up and down we can orient ourselves in all directions. Sensory Awareness is also opening up to the support of the ground – not that it isn’t there always anyway but the question is: are we responsive to it?

This brings us to another polarity, that of 
*motion* (the pull of gravity) and 
*stability*, *form* (that which stops us from falling down, namely the firm surface of the earth). Now, we could easily be crushed by these forces but in fact life as we know it has emerged thanks to them and is completely interwoven with these forces. Yet we feel challenged by them – in our joints, in our hips, in our shoulders. We struggle, we fight. Why? Because we are creatures of history, creatures of habit. But change is both possible and ultimately inevitable – in the present. That is where sensory awareness is necessary.

Without gravity – and without the supporting ground – we would not have the form we have; we wouldn’t have this marvelous muscle/skeleton system that allows us to move around on the earth; we wouldn’t have developed this brain. All of our millions of cells are affected by gravity, every single one finds its orientation in space through gravity. I believe the closing off from this pull is a main source of discomfort. When we hold on more than we need to – or let go too much, for that matter – we cannot feel the pull and we become (or parts of us become) isolated; on the other hand, when we come into balance with that pull, we find orientation and connection.

So, we come here to work with a particular practice which we call Sensory Awareness, but really it is the practice of living and of experiencing. It is not a teaching in the sense that we tell you – or ourselves – what’s right or wrong, but we find out what is called for in the moment.

To close this talk, I would like to say something about right and wrong: Very often, I hear that there is no right or wrong in this practice. I dare to disagree. There is right and wrong – but it is not the teachers’ right and wrong, our parents right or wrong or our cultures’ right or wrong. It is the right and wrong that we come to through our own experiencing as we connect again more fully with the world of which we are but a part.
1) A TASTE OF SENSORY AWARENESS, by Charlotte Selver. An overview of the work, with an edited transcript of a session from the 1987 NY Open Center workshop. 38 pages.

5) ELSA GINDLER, Vol. 1. Memorial to the originator of the work we know as Sensory Awareness. Excerpts from Gindler’s letters, an article by her, and reports from her students; including Ch. Selver. 44 pages, with photos (1978).

6) ELSA GINDLER, Vol. 2. Memories from Gindler students and an article about Heinrich Jacoby, innovative educator and colleague of Gindler. 44 pages, with photos.

8) ELFRIEDE HENGSTENBERG. This issue embraces her own studies with Gindler and Jacoby, her work with children, and biographical notes. She was closely involved with Emmi Pikler’s discoveries. 46 pages, with photos.

9) HEINRICH JACOBY. The Work and influence of Gindler’s longtime collaborator, summaries of his books, interviews with his students, including his editor and colleague Sophie Ludwig. 46 pages with photos.

10) EMMI PIKLER. Dr. Emmi Pikler, Hungarian pediatrician, whose revolutionary practice and philosophy about earliest childhood upbringing has been very influential in Europe. Contains extensive selections from Dr. Pikler’s first book, Peaceful Babies - Contented Mothers, and a paper by Judith Falk, M.D., then director of the Emmi Pikler Methodological Institute for Residential Nurseries. 48 pages, with many photos of young children.

11) CHARLOTTE SELVER, Vol. 1. Sensory Awareness And Our Attitude Toward Life. Collected lectures and texts. Containing: Sensory Awareness And Our Attitude Toward Life; Sensory Awareness & Total Functioning; Report on Work in Sensory Awareness & Total Functioning; To See Without Eyes...; On Breathing; On Being in Touch With Oneself.

We would like to let you know about this special event:

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0, a student of Lotte Kristeller (who was a student of Elsa Gindler) in Israel, studied visual art, music and dance. He also studied the F. M. Alexander Method and with Moshe Feldenkrais. He was the coordinator of the Movement Section of the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance, where he could establish a “Movement Department”. He spent a year in Berlin, Germany at the invitation of the “Wissenschaftskolleg”, the Institute for Advanced Study. In 1999 he received the Jerusalem award for his achievements in dance and movement education.

As a loner on the chaotically expanding forefront of movement arts, Hetz rigorously avoids the trend toward ever more intricate extravagances in the search for so-called "originality". His interests, background, history, and vision as a mover and body-philosopher instead bring him to focus on the origins of movement, creativity, and the ability to learn. *(From the workshop write-up)*

A new book, **Working With Elsa Gindler** (available in German only), documents the experiences of a student in Elsa Gindler’s workshops in the 50s. Here’s some information for our German readers:

**Arbeiten bei Elsa Gindler**


Bestelladresse: Heinrich-Jacoby/Elsa-Gindler-Stiftung, Teplitzer Str. 9, 14193 Berlin, Tel. +49 (0)30 89 72 96 05, info@jgstiftung.de

We are very happy to announce our new book, due to be published in February 2007 by North Atlantic Books:

**Reclaiming Vitality and Presence**

Sensory Awareness As A Practice For Life

A combination of Charles Brooks’ writing from his book *Sensory Awareness* and excerpts from Charlotte Selver’s workshops, no other publication so completely captures the essence of Charlotte and Charles’ work. Here is an invitation to wake up and experience life firsthand again, with the freshness and wonder we once had as children—to come to our senses, and regain the richness of our own lived experience.

The book can be pre-ordered through our office in Mill Valley at info@sensoryawareness.org or (415) 383-1961. Once published, it will also be available in a bookstore near you.
**Recent Books**

12) EVERY MOMENT IS A MOMENT. A Journal with Words of Charlotte Selver from her 102 years of living and over 75 years of offering the work of Sensory Awareness. (125 pages, with many color and black-and-white pictures.)

13) WAKING UP: THE WORK OF CHARLOTTE SELVER, by William C. Littlewood with Mary Alice Roche. Talks about Sensory Awareness, Reports, Experiments, and Exchanges with Her Students. 140 pages.

* Available in German translation.

**Audio Tapes from Workshops with Charlotte Selver**

T6 TR EXPLORING THE STRUCTURE OF THE HEAD. Leaders Study Group 1990, class 7-3-90 p.m.
T7 TR BECOMING READY - BEING TUNED IN. Leaders Study Group 1990, class 7-19-90
T8 TR FINDING MOVEMENT THAT IS TRUE. Green Gulch Study Group 1993, class 4-1-93.
T9 TR LEARNING TO RECEIVE. Green Gulch Study Group 1993, class 3-31-93
T10 TR LEARNING THROUGH SENSING. Green Gulch, 11-14-77.
T11 TR FREEING THE EYES - BEING OPEN FOR SEEING. Green Gulch Study Group 1993, class 3-31-93
T12 TR WAKING UP - BECOMING RESPONS-ABLE. Green Gulch Study Group 1988, class 5-2-88
T13 TR PERMITTING INNER ACTIVITIES. Monhegan Island, 7-31-80.
T14 TR BREATHING AND FULL REACTIVITY. Monhegan Island, 7-28-92
T16 TR CHARLOTTE SELVER TALKS ABOUT HER EARLY LIFE AND STUDY. Green Gulch, 12-5-99.
T17 TR ALAN WATTS ON THE WORK OF CHARLOTTE SELVER. Green Gulch 12-4-99.
T18 TR HIP JOINTS AND LEGS. Santa Barbara, 4-1-00
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T20 TR BREATHING AND THE DIAPHRAGM. Study Period, Green Gulch, 5-12-00
T21 TR GIVING UP DOING. Barra de Navidad, Mexico, 1-19-01
T22 TR BEING FULLY PRESENT. Monhegan, 8-16-01
T23 TR ARE YOU TUNED IN? Monhegan, 8-6-01
T24 TR BREATH AND HEARTBEAT. Monhegan, 8-13-01
T25 TR NATURAL OR PERFORMED? -- A TIGHTROPE WALK Monhegan, 8-3-01

**Audio Tape in German**

G1 TR VOM NACKEN ZUM GANZEN MENSCHEN. St. Ulrich, 10.7.01

Check our web site for a complete list of publications.

Each tape is of an actual class in the Sensory Awareness Work, and is intended for people wishing to experiment along with the work as it unfolds during the class.

For faster mail service to Europe for the above publications, and/or for a list of German publications related to Sensory Awareness, (including several translations of SAF publications), write to:

Wege der Entfaltung e. V., Mauerkircherstrasse 11
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