



Awareness

The Science and Practice of Presence

by **Daniel J. Siegel, MD**

CIMBA has had a long and beneficial relationship with Dr. Dan Siegel. His insights on a variety of issues have served to clarify our thinking and direct our attention toward more productive processes and procedures. He was one of the very first scientists to encourage us to look to mindfulness as an important tool for supporting the personal development efforts of our student and executive participants. He has also had important impacts on our coaching function, in many ways liberating us from some of the “theoretical” constraints initially imposed by the traditional coaching “profession.” His book ***Aware: The Science and Practice of Presence*** is yet another important addition to the long list of contributions Dan has made to our development system. Let me begin with a little background information to assist you in seeing some of the fundamental linkages that are both developed and elaborated on in this book.

In developing our personal development system, we have made every effort to stay true to the science, ultimately building a model we have called the **6–Columns**. One of the benefits of having a science-based development system is that it provides a logical foundation against which new incoming research can be evaluated. In the absence of such a system, “tools and techniques” are often linked together anecdotally, ignoring or avoiding any scientific basis. Little attention is placed on the relevancy of inputs to processes and to the applicability of the output to other forthcoming, dependent processes. Relevancy seemingly becomes based on the success of the “tool or technique” on a case-by-case basis. With such a limited range of applicability, success more often than not becomes an artifact of anecdotally-observed correlation, not empirically-observed causation.

An express system provides a basis upon which to gauge the validity of new research, an important characteristic in this day and age where so much published research, sadly, has been found to be not replicable. In addition, it provides a basis for comparison with other systems. If two systems based on interpretations of the applicable science, come to similar conclusions, but use different terminology in describing its core tenets, we can have confidence both in the science upon which they are based and in the integrity of the systems themselves. While we have created our development system independent of Dr. Dan Siegel's, we have relied on much of the same science and found our core conclusions to be quite consistent. I have been fortunate to be able to explore these interrelationships and consistencies with Dan in long walks through various parts of Europe and Asia over the past several years.

In large measure, this serves to explain my frustration with other reviews of ***Aware***. While those reviews are very positive, I have found myself a bit disappointed in the often limited perspective those reviewers took. While the Wheel of Awareness is undoubtedly an important advance in the functional use of mindfulness as a development tool, the book goes far beyond that important, singular notion. For those familiar with our system, who have taken LIFE and engaged in our **6–Columns** development approach with your coach, you are fully aware of our emphasis on the application of relevant science to your development journey. This book represents in large measure the ***science behind that science***. What makes this book particularly interesting is

that Dan reaches beyond the demonstrated science (the part upon which we rely), to explore what the science behind the science might be suggesting. In my opinion, without a system (whether implicit or explicit), without some basis of comparison, or without a concerted effort to grasp this intent, much of the richness of his thinking is lost or under appreciated. The most significant loss is in the enhanced confidence we could all have in the application of the demonstrated science by a deeper appreciation of the science upon which it is most likely based.

Let me use our LIFE program as an illustration. In conversations with Dan about the Wheel of Awareness and how it affects those who engage it, I sensed a strong connection to LIFE as expressed by those who have experienced it. Professor William James, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Experience*, stated that life-changing or life-altering events can be recognized by four key “marks:”

1. The experience defies expression; it is difficult to put into words;
2. The experience yields more answers than questions, and those answers have remarkable sturdiness and durability;
3. Although the experience is transient in nature, its traces persist and recur, bringing about a sense of continuous development of inner importance; and,
4. The experience elicits a sense of being moved away from “me” and toward “we”—trust, letting go, openness, and being present.

In the days after their LIFE experience, it is not uncommon for participants to express a greater sense of presence, of being in the moment, that yields a deeper sense of well-being and a greater ease in connecting compassionately with others. In our more technical description, we often state that LIFE guides you down a path of trust, mutual trust, and vulnerability, toward a sense of psychological safety where you can be yourself without concern about how others are going to judge you. Participants have shared a sense of a renewed or revealed importance of those around them, a more confident sense of how they comfortably fit in, and the important contribution in the lives of others they can make. Many participants describe a comfortable feeling of being a part of something bigger than themselves. One participant described it as being drawn to a quiet comfort in the center of a room surrounded by supportive others as opposed to the sensed need to cower in a corner overwhelmed by a need for self-protection that described his pre-LIFE existence. All of this is consistent with James’ insight.

Where else do we find ourselves enjoying such experiences? As Dan eludes to, it can arise in those moments that fill us with a sense of awe. As described by UC-Berkley professor, Dacher Keltner, whose research focuses on the power of awe, “Awe promotes a sense of the “small self” that directs our attention away from the individual to the group and the greater good.” In Dan’s words: “When we experience awe, we have a sense of being faced with something beyond what we can initially understand, and what emerges is a feeling of being a part of a larger whole, a part of something bigger than the body in which we reside.” Many of us can have the experience when we encounter mental novelty—in travel, art, museums, or nature. In the words of Harvard Professor Michael Pollan:

Habits are undeniably useful tools, relieving us of the need to run a complex mental operation every time we are confronted with a new task or situation. Yet they also relieve us of the need to stay awake to the world: to attend, feel, think, and then act in a deliberate manner. If you need to be reminded how completely mental habit blinds us to experience, just take a trip to an unfamiliar country. Suddenly you wake up! And the algorithms of everyday life all but start over, as if from scratch.

I experienced this upon my return from a trip to Japan to walk the Nakasendo Way (with Dan and Caroline Welch, his business partner and wife, who also has a very interesting book about to be released). In a personal experience that lasted several weeks, I found myself much more aware of my surroundings. I found myself seeing rather than merely looking, listening rather than merely hearing, tasting rather than merely eating, feeling rather than merely acting. Columbia University

professor Abraham Maslow, best known for creating Maslow's hierarchy of needs, believed you achieved self-actualization through a “peak experience” much like that described by Professor James. He experienced it through a form of personal introspection. As Dan makes clear, you can also experience it through a concerted mindfulness practice, here through his Wheel of Awareness.

This brings me back to my disappointment with many of the other reviews. Any of the above experiences, LIFE, an awe-inspiring experience, a mental novelty experience, or a Maslow “peak experience” all could very likely have replaced the Wheel of Awareness in Dan’s book. They all have demonstrated science in support of them. However, his is the only book that makes an effort to guide us in understanding the science upon which that demonstrated science might actually be based. The manner in which Dan leads us into a compelling argument for a basis in quantum physics (yes, you read that correctly), is unique and rewarding. As to my readers, if you make your intention in reading this wonderful book to walk away with “more answers than questions” regarding the science behind the science you might find yourself enjoying a James’ experience.

In closing, if you have familiarity with our **6-Columns**, you are going to find innumerable gems in this book. You are going to enjoy the way Dan manages a concept important to those of us who must confront the mass-learning academic approach to learning and development—individual differences. His unique model provides a strong science behind the science explanation for why we differ in our experiences and how those experiences affect the way we interact, or perhaps more appropriately, do not interact. As an example of another gem, we make effective use of the concept Social Brain. Dan's fundamental notion is that the interrelationship between the mind, the embodied brain, and social interactions give purpose and meaning to our lives. While it is relatively easy to grasp the science upon which our notion of the Social Brain is based, our approach relieves us of the burden of managing the mind explicitly. I am confident that after many of you have read this book you are going to be pressing me to change that to the Social Mind. And lastly, I am confident you are going to become practitioners of the Wheel of Awareness. The integration of your five senses, bodily sensations, mental activities, and social interactions as an active, purposeful part of your mindfulness experience is a concept I found to be irresistibly compelling. Those of you who have worked with me closely over the years have witnessed my strong advocacy for mindfulness and my frustration with the fact that most approaches, and particularly how they were explained, will eventually cause new users to quit and become mindfulness skeptics thereafter. There is much to be learned from the Wheel, and I encourage you to embrace that part of the book and to make use of the many support materials that Dan provides on his [website](#). We are also very pleased that Dan has taken a moment out of his busy schedule to explain the Wheel of Awareness to you personally in the video.