Awareness through the BODY

Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research
Auroville
To work for your perfection, the first step is to become conscious of your self, of the different parts of your being and their respective activities.

On Education

The Mother

Our visible life and the actions of that life are no more than a series of significant expressions, but that which it tries to express is not on the surface; our existence is something much larger than this apparent frontal being which we suppose our self to be and which we offer to the world around us. This frontal and external being is a confused amalgam of mind-formations, life-movements, physical functionings of which even an exhaustive analysis to its component parts and machinery fails to reveal the whole secret. It is only when we go behind, below, above into the hidden stretches of our being that we can know it; ...

The Synthesis of Yoga

Sri Aurobindo
Awareness through the BODY

Expansion of consciousness

‘Awareness through the Body’ aims to provide tools for children to expand their consciousness, discover their inner self, and eventually their psychic being, so that they can figure out by themselves how to steer their life, make out their own navigation charts, and create their own ‘owner’s manual’.

We want to give individuals the possibility of refining and internalising the senses and using them in a more complete way, detached from judgment and preconceived ideas so that each individual becomes aware of his/her own perceptions with as little outside interference as possible.

We think that the way to achieve this large goal is to discover and explore the body, and through the body awaken the consciousness of the entire being and all the parts that form it.

Parts and planes of the being

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo describe the being as formed by several parts. Some of these, which are important for Awareness through the Body, are as follows:

- The physical, our visible body, is formed by matter.
- The vital plane contains all the forces of life and movement, which cover the whole range of human feelings; what we call the emotional body belongs to this plane.
- The mind is the gradation of the being that corresponds to the present stage of evolution, a transitional stage. It is not a faculty of knowledge; it is a faculty for the seeking of knowledge. It is there that ideas and principles work to establish themselves. Above the mind are higher levels of consciousness, which are often expressed in religion and spirituality, and to which we can have access by special gifts or disciplines.
• The psychic or soul, a very important element in the gradations of being, is supporting all the other gradations. The psychic is essentially divine or the Divine. It is this psychic being which takes up the gradations mentioned above when it incarnates as a human entity.

**Exploring parts of the being**

We address the physical body by working with the senses and through exercises that promote fluidity, space and expansion in joints and tissues of the body. By helping the children to internalise the senses we open access to all the richness of the child’s inner world and to their subtle body.

We work the vital being through games and exercises that help to differentiate and control energy, and, with older groups, through exploration of emotions and attitudes.

We approach the mental being through attention, concentration, relaxation exercises, and debriefings on the exercises that have been done, although attention, concentration and relaxation are always part of whatever activity we do.

**Developing full potential**

These gradations form a whole within the divine unity of being with many intermediary shades that run into each other. The parts of the being are interwoven and cannot be separated. There are also, we may say, two beings in us: one on the surface, our ordinary exterior mind, vital, body consciousness, and another behind the veil, constituting the inner self formed by an inner mind, inner vital, an inner physical consciousness. The psychic being is the inmost being of all and quite distinct from the inner self. This means that we need to develop ways to bring children into an awareness that not only acknowledges each of these parts, but experiences them as integrally linked. This creates opportunities for the children to unfold and to develop all the potential that is in them.

---

**Awareness of the inner and outer being**

**Witness attitude**

Normally we live on the surface of our feelings, thoughts and emotions without being aware of the depths of our being. To become aware of the inner self we need to separate ourselves from the surface and become an impartial observer or witness who looks at all that happens as a spectator without active interest or preference, being neither pleased nor repulsed. By developing an awareness of the inner being in all parts and actions of our personality, our consciousness begins to become an instrument of our soul rather than remaining primarily in the domain of our physical body, mind and emotions.

**Developing an awareness of the witness attitude - the observer within - stands central in all our work with Awareness through the Body.** It is a never-ending process, a theme that resurfaces and grows. It is this witness attitude along with a deep sincerity that opens access to the psychic being.

**The ‘use’ of oneself**

In all of the exercises we do with children, we put the focus on what is done and how it is done, what is happening and how it is happening, and we give special importance to the concept of the use of oneself. Use of oneself conveys the possibility of feeling, acting and thinking without identifying oneself with the actions, as if the thinker, doer and feeler were not oneself but tools of the self.
The key word in this concept is use. Generally speaking, we learn to use many outer things or instruments, we learn to do things, but we do not often learn to evaluate how we use ourselves in everything we do. This concept allows children to consider what they do, how they act, feel and think. Instead of just reacting to situations, they can reevaluate and assess several options to achieve their aims in a more precise and effective way. This concept helps to reduce the stress produced by conflicts that they may have in relating to themselves or with the environment. It brings the possibility of overcoming habits and limitations, and gives a sense of inner freedom. This concept also feeds the witness attitude.

Objectives

The key aim of Awareness through the Body is to help children discover themselves as described above. In the course of our work, we have identified objectives that serve as indicators so that both the teachers and the children can assess our progress. It is our aim that children will:

- Become aware of the witness attitude and begin to cultivate it.
- Understand the use of oneself, and develop acceptance of one's own limits and those of others.
- Develop children's awareness of their physical structure, so individuals will be able to more effectively use themselves.
- Enhance their concentration and focus, and their capacity for being present.
- Learn how to explore, understand, and manage their emotions.
- Refine their senses, internalize them, and develop the kinesthetic sense.
- Develop subjective sensorial landmarks.
- Develop a heightened sense of respect, responsibility, trust, self-confidence, patience, concern and awareness for one's own and others' timing or pace.
- Develop an awareness of the inner and outer space.
- Become aware of breathing patterns, their affect on the various bodies, and how the breath can be used to effect change within the self.
- Improve the children's capacity to adapt and be flexible.
- Develop a sense of how to better collaborate with others.

Principles of work

In the course of our work eight basic principles have emerged:

- All aspects of our being are interrelated.
- Teaching is a dialogue.
- When the children initiate something productive, continue with it.
- Do not take anything for granted.
- Enable individuals to become responsible for themselves and their actions as long as it is within their capacity.
Learning, and growth, is done at different rates depending on the situation and our own inner patterns, therefore we need to acknowledge and respect our own timing.

- Cultivate awareness of oneself, the group, and oneself within the group.
- Enable the children to find their own subjective reference points.

**Themes and activities**

We have found through trial and error many themes and activities that are particularly useful in reaching our goal. By theme we mean: a set of interrelated exercises that help to explore an aspect of life or an aspect of the being; by activities we mean sets of interrelated exercises that open fields of exploration to several aspects of life, or several aspects of the being simultaneously. Examples of themes are: breathing, balance, relaxation, physical structure, subtle body, concentration, and sensory awareness. Examples of activities are Structures setting, Plates, Sticks, Flying clothes, Games, Form and Space. There is a constant flow and interaction between all.

**Example: do not take anything for granted**

One example of how a principle is applied in exploring a theme is given here. Children get used to exercises that have been useful for a while and they make a routine out of them. When this happens, the awareness is gone and there is only an outer form that may give the wrong impression of what is happening in the child if the leader is not attentive. One day, during the concentration time in a mixed class of first and second graders, one of the children suggested as a concentration exercise doing a mudra (position of the hands that has an effect on the breath and the energy flow of the body). We said that it would be good if everyone found the exercise that helped them to achieve better concentration. We were surprised to see these children doing not only the mudra, but several exercises of concentration that we had given them during the year. For several classes thereafter they repeated their own exercise during concentration time, and for several days what was happening was true, until one day we observed and sensed that the children were no longer aware of what they were doing even though they were immobile and very quiet. It had become a routine. Because we had not taken it for granted that they were concentrating we could feel the change, swap exercise, and help them to a real concentration.

We do not take for granted that an exercise works by itself because it is a good one or that a principle is unchangeable because we have been working with it. We always assess what is happening when we propose the exercises or when we apply a principle. We decide whether to continue or make changes according to the moment and the reaction in the class. An exercise will always become slightly different depending on who is doing it. These differences need to be addressed.
Photos of different themes and activities

Breathing

Different types of 'Breathometers'

Physical structure

Labyrinth: while the child is developing awareness of the feet, there is an increase in capacity to concentrate and experience quietness.
Sensory awareness

Refinement and internalizing of the senses through explorations of the Elements.

Exploring the
Water element.

Exploring Air,
Fire and Water

Relaxation

After a 'soft' Structures setting, children practice relaxation in different places and in different positions.
Structure setting

Structures setting allows multiple fields of exploration that touch on every theme and objective in our work. For example, it offers an excuse to explore emotions in a safe manner because individual attitudes encountered in life are mirrored so they can be recognised and worked out in a safe way. Structures setting also provides children with an opportunity to work on ambition: "there is no need to show anything to the others; whatever I do, I do it to explore myself with all my awareness." And, it makes it possible to work on body contact, and the fears and inhibitions that can come with it.

Combination of hard and soft landscape

Unstable landscape
**Sticks**

This activity, like structures setting, touches on every theme and objective in our work. It especially opens the peripheral vision and requires from the children coordination, quick reflexes, and above all to be fully present in their being.

**Games**

Games offer opportunities to work on awareness of emotions; on interactions between individuals and the group; on awareness of the vital energy, and how to express it and channel it. It also offers possibilities to work out many other qualities depending on the focus or direction the leader gives to the game or to the debriefing following the game.

*Sticks coordination pattern*

*Crossing the swamp*
Plates

An aluminium plate on top of a stick becomes a field of exploration for balance, concentration, relaxation, breathing, awareness of the physical structure and its interrelation with gravity, perception of unnecessary tensions, awareness of the use of oneself, interaction between mind, emotion and body, and the interaction between the group and the individual.

The work also shows how the mood of one individual can affect others, and how the mood of the group can affect the individual, making evident the web that links all the individuals who form a group. For example, when a child is nervous and drops his plate, very often other children lose their concentration and drop their plates as well. Plates are a field of exploration for attitudes and qualities like gentleness, care, giving and receiving, and for the pre-set attitudes with which we do things. Plates also create the habit of self-observation and introspection. This type of work feeds the witness attitude.

Different explorations with Plates
Contributions in support can be made to SAIER and are tax exempt under Sec. 80G and Sec. 35(i)(iii) of the Income Tax Act.
SAIER, Bharat Nivas, Auroville - 605 101, Tamil Nadu, India. Tel: (0413) 622210 or 622982
E-mail: saier@auroville.org.in