

PRESENCE PRACTICE #3

Rational awareness: Be for, not against

The great poet John Milton wrote in *Paradise Lost*, “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.”

Our minds are active, attempting to make sense of our world. The sense-making work we do can either help or hurt our most important purposes. The more aware we are, the more we have presence of mind.

There are many practices for improving presence of mind. What follows are a tried-and-true few.

Most people move through congested areas with their attention on what is in the way. The next time you are in a crowded airport, train station, or shopping mall, focus your mind on a simple thought: “Where are the open spaces?” You will find yourself easily slipping into them.

This simple exercise illustrates the power of focusing on what you are for (open spaces) versus what you are against (people in your way). If we focus only on what we are against, survivalist emotions dominate as we

give our attention to what we don’t want versus what we do. Tension rises and mental agility declines. In the presence of what we are for, our minds are fully engaged, relaxed vigilance is easier, tension goes down, and our mental agility goes up.

In an agile mind, what we are against simply informs what we are for rather than distracts from it. For instance, the people in our way in a crowd serve to help us see open spaces rather than present themselves as obstacles.