



The Druid Network

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Using the Senses

by Magpie / Jamie Wiseman

Awareness plays an important part in modern Druidry, and the most fundamental forms of awareness are with the five physical senses. In my training, senses were among the first methods introduced to my practice, as a sound way to establish a link with my body, and with my presence in the world. It is not by mastering a mystical super-sensory or magical awareness that is somehow 'other' than the physical senses that one develops an awareness of spirit, but by deepening the senses already available to you. Refining and sensitising them to the world.

The main premise for this exercise is to flex the muscles of your senses, as it were. To practice using them so that in future, one is better enabled to receive sensory experience, without it being a conscious effort. While each sense is tied to a specific function, it is all senses combined that creates our experience of the world. Like an orchestra being made of specific instruments and melodies, the senses overlay each other to create an incredibly varied and rich song. A greater awareness of this song of experience is what I'd hope to achieve by sharing this exercise.



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For the purposes of this exercise, I treat the senses as four, since taste and smell are almost the same sense – the same sensory organs being used in slightly different ways. Combining them in this instance seems to make sense, to me.

Touch

So we begin with touch. This does not have to be done with eyes closed, nor be a formalised ‘ritual’ – the purpose of this meditation is to practice the experience. First, be aware of what you do touch – what you touch with. If you’re sitting down, the most obvious thing is that you’re touching a surface – this is where the most pressure will be. But your entire body is capable of registering touch, and we touch with it the whole time. So where are your clothes touching? What do they feel like? Where is your skin exposed to the air? Can you feel the air? As your breathing moves, so does your skin, which creates more sensation. How does that work? How deeply into you do you feel?

The next variation on this is to start to purposefully deepen the experience of touch. For this, you need to find something to play with. It can be a natural object, like bark, a stone, a feather.. or anything else you happen to like playing with. Maybe a favourite stuffed toy. First, we can start by touching in



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regular ways – for most adult humans, we touch primarily with our fingers. We learn to do this as children, since we differentiate between different parts of our body as being suitable or specialised for different tasks – and fingers are good for touching with. Throwing a new spin on this, though, how does it feel when we touch with other parts of ourselves? Does the same object feel the same when brushed on your face? Your lips? Your tummy? Your feet? In playing with the sensation, we can begin to deepen the experience, by understanding how it is we feel and use touch.

The final variation is to throw your attention into the experience. A cycle of attention lasts roughly fifteen to twenty minutes. See how long you can hold your attention on touching your object. Let it speak to you through contours and texture, through temperature. Aim for half an hour, to see if you can break through the usual attention cycle.

Taste/Smell

The next part of the exercise should be taken in isolation, if possible. Taste and Smell are the next sense to form while we are still in the womb, perhaps even before we could be considered an individual being. Taking the senses in the order in which they occur can help in our development of them, once we're outside the womb. In terms of complexity, taste and smell are not far removed from touch – differing in that molecules of something outside of



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ourselves enter us. So rather than just making contact, here we're internalising a substance. This is a powerful awareness in itself. When working with taste and smell, we can focus on how internalising a thing affects us. We can work on the physical olfactory part of the sense. We can also see how memories are triggered by these senses, or how strong emotions can be worked free by certain tastes or smells. (The same can be said for other sensations, but smell is very strongly tied to our memories).

For this part of the exercise, obviously, we need to consider how to focus the mind on experiencing taste and smell. Smell can be simpler, perhaps because we spend less time actively doing so than we do eating – although both play a part. Again, none of this needs to be done with eyes closed, but you may find that doing so can deepen your experience. Smell and taste are both very localised senses – we do them both with specific organs, so playing in the same way as suggested with touch is perhaps not as easy, although playing with food is certainly a good start. Exploring tastes and smells, and combining them with other sensations you cannot avoid (such as texture in the mouth) can be a good way of heightening your awareness.

Following on from this, it's easy to see how integral food can be to our experience of taste and smell. Anticipation plays a keen part in this, as does intent and attention. So as a part of exploring, play with the consciousness of food, and preparing food. Try eating meals in silence – either alone or with other people. Give your awareness a chance to embrace the experience of



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eating without distraction. Eat slowly, and pause before you start eating, making sure you can smell the food, and identify the different parts that made it. Fasting is also interesting to play with, as it heightens your sense of taste and smell – try preparing a meal without eating any of the ingredients – I find that almost tortuous in increasing anticipation!

Hearing

Extending further out from ourselves, hearing is the next sense on in terms of complexity and expansiveness. When we move into an awareness of hearing, we cross the border at the edge of ourselves, and really throw our awareness into what's outside of us, for the first time. Finding silence is a good place to start with this, gently and gradually flexing our awareness further and further outwards until it is taking in as much as is comfortable.

To begin, then, start by letting your hearing sense become passive. Try to actively lose the focus of your hearing on any one thing, and just absorb all the sounds going on around you at once. Don't take it in as specific notes or sounds, just as a background tapestry of noises. Then, start to focus on specific things in the spectrum of sounds you can hear – perhaps beginning with the noises you can hear closest to you – your breathing, maybe. Expanding out gradually away from you, can you identify each individual sound? Can you say for certain where each came from? What is the quality of



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each? What is the message each sound conveys – if there is one? How does each sound make your body react? With what parts of your body do you hear sound? Can you hear the song of a tree through your fingertips?

Moving on from pinpointed sounds, can you let two or three or four sounds combine? Can you build your awareness of the sound as an orchestra builds its song – in layers? And what of the spaces between the sounds? What do you hear in those? To finish, bring your awareness back inwards, and listen to the sounds your body makes.

Vision

Quite probably the most complicated sense we have access to, vision is a remarkable tool, and possibly our best utilised sense. In exploring vision, vibrancy is the keyword I have used to find deeper levels of experience with it. Often, it's easy to think of vision as a 'pushing out' of a sense, since so much of our consciousness can reside in visual stimulus. It can feel like we project consciousness through our vision. But this exercise takes the opposite approach.

The first step is to remember or acknowledge that the eyes are designed for receiving light. They are vessels for sensory experience – the stimulus comes in, through them. With this in mind, open them. Really open them up to



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feeling the vision you take in – drink the vibrancy and depth of colour that you can see – watch for the changes and play of light that movement can bring. What is your attention drawn to? Can you follow it? Like with sound, can you broaden your attention span out, so that you are perceiving more widely – a whole tapestry of vision? Can you then focus on a specific colour or detail? Can you feel the colour in the things you experience? Can you see the life in them?

Conclusion

The fun bit about these exercises is in combining them. Gradually building up your exercise into layers of active sensory awareness can be a fantastic way to work these little subexercises into a daily practice. Perhaps beginning with just touch, expanding into hearing, and finally, after having spent time with these senses, opening your eyes into an explosion of vision...