

**Harmonic Mind
8 Week Meditation Program**

**Week 1 Supplemental Reading
Alpha State: Attention & Noticing**

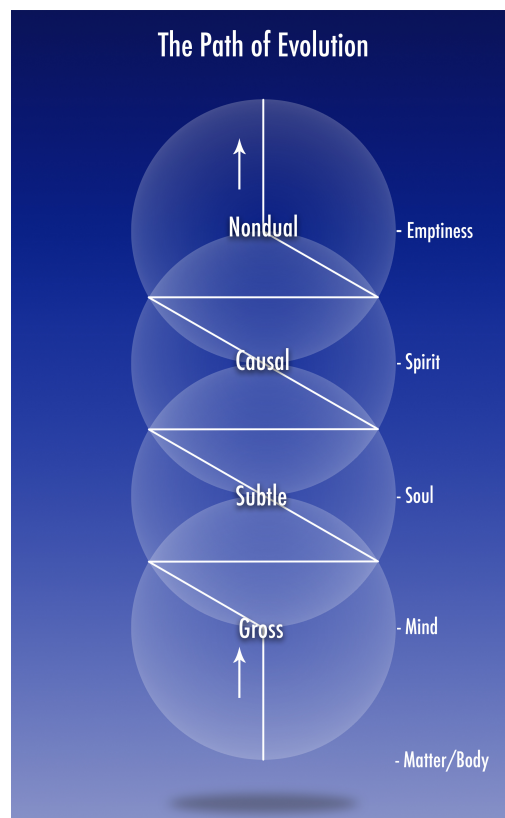
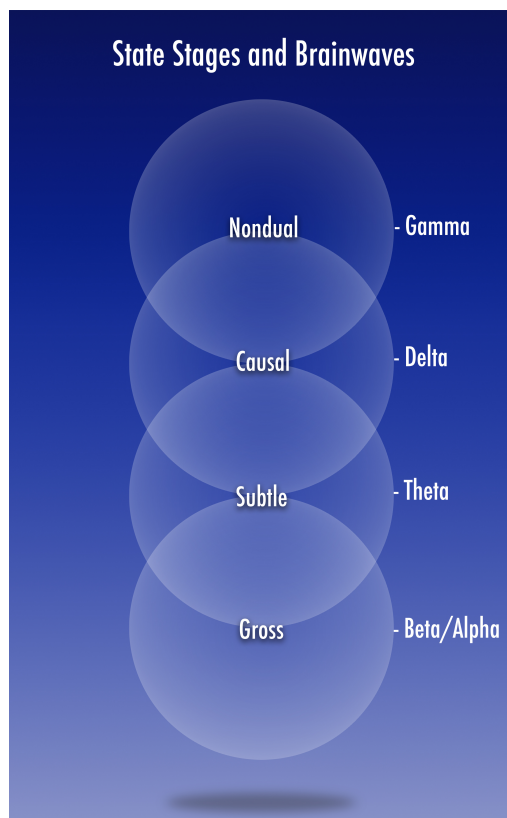
15 minute read

In the coming weeks we will examine the four major brainwave states and their corresponding subjective experiences in greater detail.

These subjective states are gross, subtle, causal and non-dual which roughly correspond with the alpha band (gross), the theta band (subtle), the delta band (causal) and non-dual (gamma), or more precisely – stacked harmonic states with gamma as the mediator.

In the first two weeks of Harmonic Mind, we are focusing on the alpha band and the gross state of awareness, between 7-12hz roughly (we can include beta up to 36hz or so as well but we're just focusing on alpha here.) **Gross** is a word meaning, coarse, material or physical. The **gross** state of consciousness is awareness that's present to the material world and the physical body. It is made up of our physical sensory data: hearing, seeing, touch, taste and smell. It's typically what we experience as our day-to-day, ordinary consciousness.

In this state we are aware of the body, our environment, and use concrete operational thought to navigate our tasks and activities. During alpha or gross state training we are developing our capacities of observation, concentration, and sensory acuity.



Typically, much of the information that's available to us doesn't get registered as conscious observation. Of the millions of bits of information reaching our senses, only the smallest fraction of that data is able to be encoded into conscious experience. The rest of it passes beyond the threshold of awareness into the unconscious mind. The unconscious mind then scans the data coming in and selects from the full spectrum only those bits of information it considers essential or relevant for the conscious mind to use.

How it selects what is "relevant" is determined by the values, beliefs, memories and meta-programs that are held within the unconscious mind. These values, beliefs, memories and meta-programs are automatic filters of perception, if you will, and are responsible for ordering, coding and giving meaning to each of our experiences. They determine for us what we consider worth paying attention to, what things mean and ultimately how to respond to whatever seems to be happening.

Let's take a look at the *threat detection system*. This is one of the oldest and most long-standing filters we've had as human beings with over 100,000 years of use in our evolutionary process biologically – even longer if you count our pre-hominid ancestry. The threat detection system, which is based neurologically in the amygdala, the oldest part of the brain, was developed to keep us alive. It worked rather well as you can see. It's so deeply embedded that it's an automatic and unconscious function of the mind.

Deep inside, below the surface of our conscious awareness, the body-mind is constantly scanning the environment for threats, ready to spring into action if need be. For many aeons of evolution there was a constant possibility that a predator could jump out at any moment, and so part of our attention needed to be available to the outside world, the rustling in the bushes, a nearby growl, or even a person nearby who means to do us harm.

One example of the presence of the threat detection program that I think all of us are familiar with is the occasion where we happen upon a stick on the ground that for a moment gives us a start. Snake!!! Has this ever happened to you? As you look more closely, you can see that it's just a stick, but it takes a minute for the cortisol and adrenaline to settle down and the higher brain functions to kick back in. If we were to see an EEG reading in that moment, we'd also see a spike in the beta bandwidth. This is a very helpful adaptation to keep us alive in the wilderness. Nowadays, it's perhaps not as useful but in many ways it's still here. It's been

tempered, covered over or mediated with other higher brain functions, but it's absolutely still a part of our automatic consciousness.

You may have noticed at times your awareness scanning the field to detect threats, perhaps social threats, or perhaps errors that could lead to harm like a nail sticking out of a board in a construction site, or problems that could arise at work that could bring the boss down on you. Mothers are especially attuned to this filter looking to anything in the environment that could be a hazard to little ones.



Photo by [C Schneider](#)

But besides the threat detection program, there's also scanning for opportunities to exploit for personal gain. This *opportunity detection system* can be seen in evolutionary biology. Fruits, for example, evolved to ripened into bright colors so that they could jump out of the green foliage and attract humans and animals to come eat them. If a fruit is carried far away from the tree its genetics will have a better time propagating. The rods and cones of the eye actually co-evolved with plants to help both creatures and plants to exploit each other. This win-win situation continues to be a successful and deeply rewarding relationship.

The threat detection system and opportunity detection system are in effect two aspects of the same system of meta-programs that function automatically in the subconscious. What we subconsciously consider to be a threat or an opportunity can vary widely and is largely based in our values sphere, especially when we look at the more modern and complex aspects of human life. Oftentimes our past experiences or our wounds play a significant role in what we consider to be a

threat or an opportunity that's worth paying attention to and how we should behave as a result.

When I was young, my brother and I were walking to school in a rough part of Riverside, California where we lived when some local thugs came out of nowhere and cold cocked my brother in the face, nearly knocking him out. They must have thought I was too young to come after so they didn't get me. Luckily he made it out of there without too many bruises, but for many months afterward, any sudden movements would cause him to jump. People would stick out a hand to shake it, or give him a high five or go to hug him, and he'd flinch.

Consciously he knew that his friends weren't planning to hurt him, but subconsciously his mind had decided any sudden movements should cause him to spring into action, to either fight or flee. It took quite a long time to re-associate his body-mind and be able to relax in the presence of sudden movements.

Wherever we've been shocked, hurt or traumatized, the unconscious mind can be especially interested in that particular area of life, hoping to protect the self from further injury.

It will have the tendency to react rather than respond, often incorrectly. It will scan the environment, people's facial expressions and words intending to identify any information that would warrant a reaction. You can see how this would be a problem if the priorities directing this unconscious attention contain errors. If we are not conscious of what we are looking for in our environment we are much more likely to make a mistake in our interpretation and our reaction will likely be less than ideal. Most, if not all, of the trouble we get into is the result of mistaken perceptions and their correlated unresourceful reactions.

Moreover, what we choose to pay attention to largely determines what we experience, since what we look for, what we focus on, becomes the centerpiece of our experience. If we look for beauty, everywhere we see beauty, and in fact life itself is beautiful.

Developing a keen interest in what is beautiful actually enchants our whole mind and being and changes the appearance of the world, our loved ones and ourselves. It is an actual fact that wherever eyes look, beauty is there, not only in the object we see, but in the seer. As we train with the gross, material state of consciousness then, we are learning to collect more conscious awareness to apply toward making increasingly accurate and comprehensive observations of ourselves and the world around us.



Photo by [Michael Dziedzic](#)

Our morning alpha meditations are a kind of concentrated period of time where we are training the mind and brain to cultivate a more coherent and stronger capacity for attentiveness. Yet we should also consider that every moment of our waking state is an opportunity to practice attentiveness as well. And in some ways, our day to day activity is a more powerful opportunity than sitting meditation, especially because it's in our day to day activities that our errors in perception and interpretation can be seen and corrected by better observations.

Throughout the day, we periodically go on autopilot. There are many tasks, habits and routines that we do each day that really don't require that much focus. A common example is driving. Can you remember how much concentration was needed at the beginning when you were learning how to drive? The gas pedal, the brake pedal, the steering wheel each required our conscious focus to manipulate, but after a while the mechanics became automatic. Now we can drive without thinking about the mechanics at all. We can just watch the road, have conversations with passengers, day dream and other things while still operating the vehicle. *(No texting though!)*

There are many such skills and behaviors that are performed largely by the unconscious mind. Some of them we are unaware that we are even unaware of. In particular, we are unaware of the process of perception itself. We are so subjectively embedded in our perceptions that we don't observe the mechanism of perception itself. This is an interesting situation and one that state training is particularly useful to address.

It's often the case that we simply are our experience.

It's not that we are having an experience, and objectively noticing it, we *are* it. Take for instance a food that you dislike. For me it was brussel sprouts. I had hated them ever since childhood. To me they were absolutely disgusting. I didn't know why, they were just the grossest thing. I was subjectively embedded into my experience of aversion to brussel sprouts. In my early 20s after practicing some amount of meditation, I had an opportunity to revisit my experience of them. I was at a restaurant with a friend who ordered them as a side. She offered me a bite and I said "*no way! I hate brussel sprouts*". This surprised me because at that moment I realized I actually didn't know if I liked them or not. I realized it was my childhood self that didn't like them so I gave them a try.

Practicing attentiveness, I very slowly observed my experience. First, I looked at them, noticing the color to see the contrast of hues from green to white. There are quite a few different colors in a brussel sprout, from olive green to moss green to shamrock green. Then, I looked carefully at the pattern of the little leaves and their surface texture. Who knew that they were actually miniature cabbages with neatly folded pedals all nested together in a rather brilliant order – they're quite cute! Then, I smelled them and they had a rich earthy texture that reminded me of many things in nature that I find pleasant. Just then an image flashed before my mind's eye of my childhood brussel sprout experiences: a smooshed mealy, muted color brussel sprout that had a somewhat putrid smell. They had been boiled and probably came from a can. This brussel, in my present moment, was very different. It had life in it. It was firm, vibrant and large. I could notice right away that my memory had given me a misleading association.

So I kept making careful observations of my sensory experience. I could see the sheen of the olive oil reflecting light off the surface and little flecks of pepper and spice clinging to it. My mouth started to water, and when I bit into it, it was full of earthiness, musky sweetness; it had a firm almost crisp texture and an aftertaste that rang in the high notes. From then on, brussels sprouts were one of my favorite vegetables. It turns out I just didn't like boiled canned lifeless vegetables. This kind of detailed observation of the sensory experience truly reveals the wonders of everything. Literally everything to which we apply this type of attention reveals its otherwise hidden qualities and draws out more of its innate loveliness.

Many of the likes and dislikes, attractions and aversions we have are, in fact, not our present moment experiences. They are past experiences held within our memory and are being superimposed on our experience of now. Going into

autopilot as we often do prevents us from experiencing the full detail and richness of our direct, present moment experience. A full, present moment awareness will even increase the pleasure each experience can have for us. And, to the extent that we are not observing in detail, we are much more prone to the errors in perception that would have us interpret dangers that don't exist, insults or injuries that aren't really there, or exploit opportunities that are unable to produce worthwhile experiences.

If we can think of each waking moment as an opportunity to practice collecting more attentiveness to apply to each of our day to day, mundane experiences, we will gradually begin to not only correct many of the errors in our perceptions, but we will also come to experience heightened levels of pleasure and satisfaction from each sensation. Gradually, detailed observations become easier and more automatic and acute, providing us with more empathy, wisdom and self knowledge. Since we can see more deeply, we can see more deeply into everything, more deeply into ourselves and into other people, into nature, civilization, and the world as a whole.

Rather than being exclusively embedded into our subjective states, our perceptions, our opinions, preferences, dislikes and even our sense of self or identity, we can begin to observe everything objectively. We can begin to differentiate ourselves from our experiences and start to see them as objects within our awareness. This will gradually happen more and more as we see that the thoughts that arise in meditation are objects in awareness, now that you notice them. You can see them as things, rather than true realities or subjective experiences. You can see that they may or may not be true – doesn't matter that much, and that you can either follow them and entertain them or you can let them go – also doesn't matter that much. Either way, they are not you, they are just occurring inside of you. So let's practice making more detailed observations of our experiences throughout our day to day routines.

NOTICING PRACTICE:

Pick or a food or something you don't like, sit down with it and notice every detail that you can: sights, sounds, smells, tastes and feeling. Look into it and try to see something you haven't noticed before. Keep some awareness focused internally at the same time so that you can notice the unconscious associations that have been connected to the thing. Take notes on your experience.

Next pick a food or thing you like a lot, something you adore. Notice every detail you can find. Try to find details that you didn't notice before. Take notes on your experience.

Repeat this practice as often as you think of it. Do it while shopping in the grocery store, notice the quality of lighting, the temperature of the air, the smells, the other customers. Notice the UPS driver's gate and posture as he or she delivers your next package, can you get a sense of their mood? Notice the feeling you get as you remember what's in the package. Practice noticing things, inner and outer, with extraordinary detail moment to moment, as best you are able.

You will find that the quality of your attention, its duration and depth will drastically improve in just a short period of time providing you with greater pleasure, more accurate information, and more choice in how you respond.