

# A GUIDE TO THE ATTENTION CYCLE

## INTRODUCTION

Whenever we direct our attention to anything, we will experience the different phases of what we call the Attention Cycle. These phases arise as a natural consequence of the way the focus of the attention is influenced by automatic and conscious processes.

When we choose to direct the attention towards something; some point, usually in a few seconds, we will inevitably find the attention has been whisked off somewhere else by automatic systems in the brain. After a time we realise the attention has shifted away from where we were directing it and we may also notice what it has been directed towards. We can then choose to return the attention back to what we were originally directing the attention towards before it was whisked off. In the sections below we will explore each of these phases in more detail.

When we do Friendly Focusing we aim to really notice what we are experiencing at every stage of the Attention Cycle with warm curiosity.

Friendly Focusing also aims to maximise the resources we have available to make the best decisions about what matter to us. These resources are limited and become scarce when the **Survival Brain** is active.

The Survival Brain is the in-built protection system that aims to keep us safe and it has evolved to operate on a 'better safe than sorry' principle. This means that the Survival Brain is on a hair trigger and when anything threatening or unfamiliar is detected it goes onto high alert and set off self-protective reactions. The trouble is that these reactions are all about surviving the next moment and they are basic, habitual and instinctual. We have all probably experienced the Survival Brain in action then regretted the behaviours it triggered. Perhaps someone says something that we think is an attack and we have fired off a defensive or attacking remark before we have checked out what they actually meant.

When the Survival Brain is active it takes resources away from the wiser and more creative systems of the brain: in fact when the Survival Brain is on highest alert the Survival Brain can shut down the wiser and creative circuits. This is why making decisions in the middle of high emotion may not work out so well. The Survival Brain also tends to get caught in self-activating loops. For example, if we get stressed about something then the Survival Brain will make our body tense up for self-protection and readiness to run or to fight. However, when the body is tense this tension also makes the Survival Brain more sensitive and so things that normally might not cause stress now bother us. This further activates the Survival Brain. In this way feeling stressed and getting tense makes us more likely to experience even more stress and get even more tense.

By standing down the Survival Brain when it is on high alert mode we allow the wiser and creative systems to receive more resources and so we will tend to make responses, choices and actions that are better for us and the people we care about.

Friendly Focusing offers a very simple but powerfully effective way of standing down the Survival Brain.

Initially, Friendly Focusing helps us introduce moments in our daily routines where we can interrupt any loops the Survival Brain is getting caught up in. This is like pressing a pause button and allowing the Survival Brain to stand down from whatever level of alert it is on. As you get familiar with using Friendly Focusing you will begin to find you can use it in the midst of stressful or upsetting situations with the result that the Survival Brain doesn't get so caught up in unhelpful loops and you can keep your cool in situations that previously would have really wound you up or overwhelmed you. While this ability to use

Friendly Focusing in situations of high alert can take some time to develop, the great thing is that the practice you do in everyday low stress situations will tend to reduce the level of activation of the Survival Brain when it does get triggered. In addition, the practice in low-intensity situations is all the training that is needed to gradually build up the inner 'mental muscles' that will enable you to use them easily and naturally in high-intensity situations.

The other important way Friendly Focusing stands down the activity of the Survival Brain is by directing the attention to a bodily sensation or something we can sense in our surroundings. Unless you are in very unfamiliar settings or there is something physically threatening occurring nearby, there is very little that you encounter in daily experience that your Survival Brain has not met before and gained some familiarity with. Familiarity allows the Survival Brain to make predictions about how things will behave in the next moment – and if it knows from experience that something this moment and next moment is not threatening then it will stand down from high alert.

From the perspective of the Survival Brain then, most everyday situations we encounter in the world are pretty familiar, predictable and so not very disturbing. The main exception is the behaviour of other people – humans are so complex the Survival Brain can never be absolutely sure anyone's behaviour is predictable. This generally makes sensations linked to the activities of our fellow humans (such as the sound of talking or looking at a face) not very good Focusing Anchors for Friendly Focusing, at least initially.

The other source of major unpredictability for the Survival Brain are the thoughts, images, memories and fantasies in our own mind. The Survival Brain can't tell the difference between what is happening inside our minds and what is happening in the outside world. Generally, the outside world is relatively predictable but the mind is so fast and unpredictable it can be a very scary place for the Survival Brain. This is why inner experiences in the mind do not make helpful Focusing Anchors for Friendly Focusing.

Whatever we direct the attention towards is automatically magnified and intensified so that it fills the foreground of the attention. Whatever is in the foreground of the attention has the greatest impact on the Survival Brain. This is why we recommend using a familiar and predictable sensation in the body or surroundings as a Focusing Anchor. The 'Focusing' part of Friendly Focusing fills the foreground of the attention with the Focusing Anchor and this means that the Survival Brain is receiving a flood of impressions from something familiar and predictable, giving them a strong message to stand down from high alert.

So, whatever we direct the attention to fills the foreground of the attention and has an intensified impact on the Survival Brain. This also means that everything else that is outside the beam of the attention enters the background and is diminished and so has less impact on the Survival Brain. This means using a familiar and predictable Focusing Anchor encourages the Survival Brain to stand down because what is dominating in the foreground is the soothing Focusing Anchor and anything that is threatening is diminished in the background.

Returning to the unsettling quality of thoughts, images and memories for the Survival Brain, when the attention is directed to the contents of the mind this will magnify and intensify the unsettling quality of any disturbing thoughts, images or memories. However, if we fill the foreground with something we can physically sense we are directing the attention away from the mind and so the contents of the mind will recede into the background and have a diminished effect.

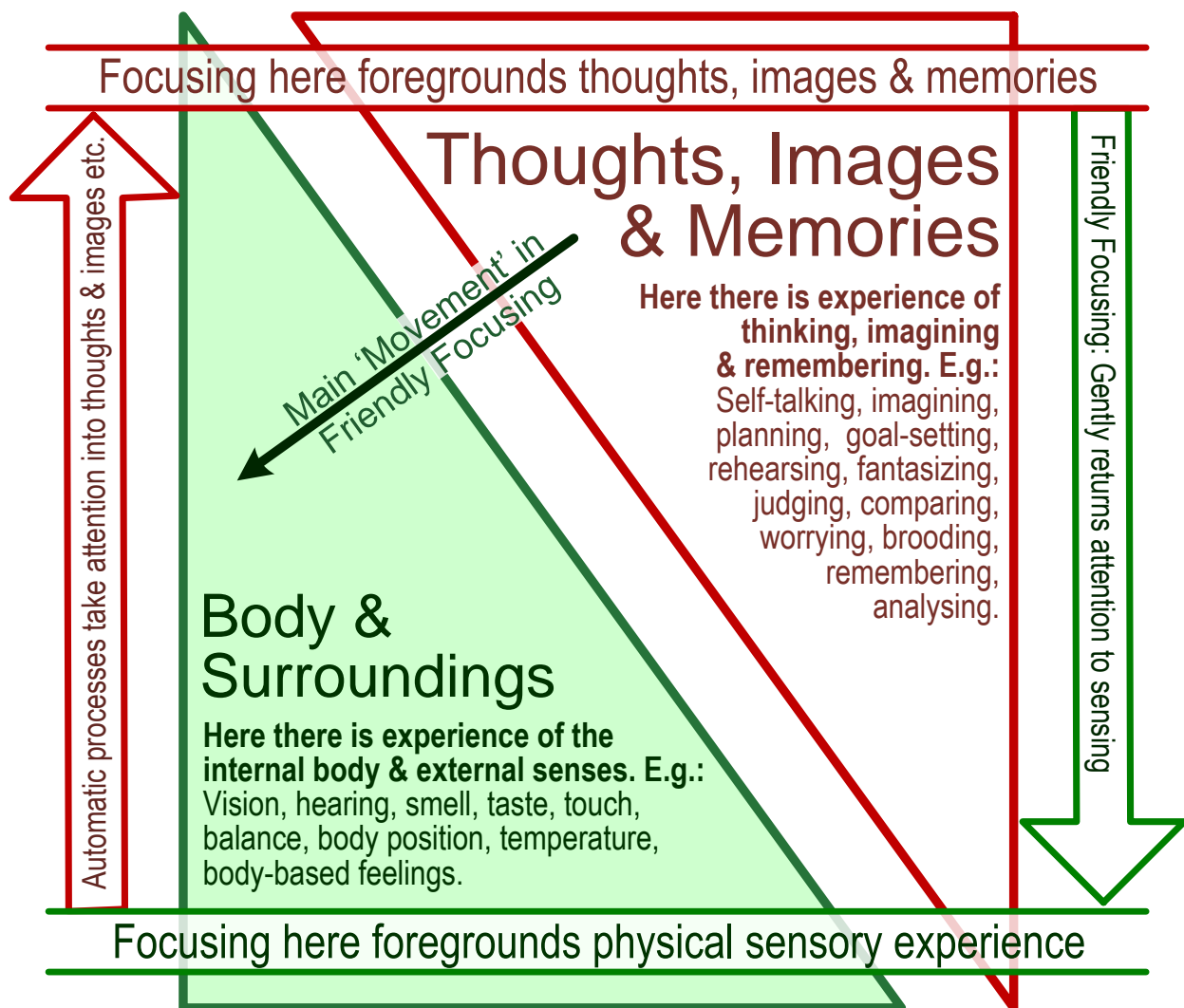
Finally, the Survival Brain learns from how we consciously react to the threats that the Survival Brain detects and whisks the attention towards. If we avoid, reject or back away from whatever the Survival Brain directs the attention towards then this confirms for the Survival Brain that whatever it is really is a threat. This will make it more alert for this

'threat' in the future and direct the attention towards it more vigorously when the Survival Brain detects it.

This is why the 'Friendly' part of Friendly Focusing is so important. Even if we can only do it for a brief moment, offering some friendly interest to whatever the Survival Brain takes the attention to gives a very powerful message to the Survival Brain that that 'threat' now is ok. Little-by-little the Survival Brain learns to be less reactive to what it previously tagged as a threat.

The diagram below aims to represent the 'Focusing' aspect of Friendly Focusing. It shows how Friendly Focusing directs the attention towards objects and sensations in the body and surroundings. The Connection Practice is primarily based on this process.

In particular it shows the main movement of directing the attention towards the body and surroundings and returning it to the body and surroundings when the attention has been taken into thoughts, images or memories.



As we shall see in the discussion of each part of the Attention Cycle, although Friendly Focusing is very simple, it has powerful effects on the Survival Brain so that it tends not to get caught up in unhelpful self-sustaining loops. Even when the Survival Brain is active, Friendly Focusing allows us to notice its activity and, through acknowledging it even if just for a few moments, gives the Survival Brain the clear message that we are in charge and it is safe to stand down from high alert.

## THE PHASES OF THE ATTENTION CYCLE IN DETAIL

We can become aware of the Attention Cycle at any point – so there is not a starting place as such but for the discussion below we will start with Focusing.

### *FOCUSING*

This is where we direct the attention to a chosen sensation or set of sensations that we are experiencing in the body or surroundings right now. We call the chosen focus we rest the attention on the **Focusing Anchor**.

At this phase of the Attention Cycle we can explore really noticing the fine detail of what we are experiencing each moment and how these fine details are changing moment-by-moment. The focus is gently – we are noticing with warm, friendly curiosity. This is not about straining to concentrate. The quality of the attention is like soft sunlight.

If the sensations in our feet as we are walking are the chosen Focusing Anchor then we would be noticing the way we have waves of different sensations arising in each foot during the time the foot is in contact with the ground and when it is in the air.

At times we can narrow our attention in to a fine beam or broaden it out – noticing how our experience changes. The Focusing Anchor is in the foreground of the attention – but we can be aware of how the background has changing impressions coming in from all our other senses as well as awareness of thoughts, images, memories and emotions. We can explore allowing these to be in the periphery of our awareness while the Focusing Anchor is in the foreground.

### *SHIFTING AND DRIFTING*

As discussed above, we have an in-built Survival Brain that is continually scanning for anything threatening or rewarding. It even does this when we are asleep. The Survival Brain operates at such high speed that, when activated, we cannot stop it from grabbing the attention and centring the attention on the threat or reward it has identified. We often think we should be in complete control of the attention. It can be a relief to know that we are not – when the Survival Brain is triggered, you absolutely cannot stop the attention being taken off to the threat or reward. You often will not even know it has happened – it happens so effortlessly and easily. One moment the attention is on the focusing anchor, the next moment it has been whisked off elsewhere and we may not even notice.

So you may be focusing on your feet as you walk as a Focusing Anchor and suddenly the attention has been whisked off to a smell of coffee or to a job you need to do today.

The whole point of Friendly Focusing is to bring friendly interest to all parts of the Attention Cycle. So the more times we Shift the better as we have more opportunities to explore each part of the cycle. Without the Shift we would just stay with the Focusing Anchor and that is not the point of Friendly Focusing at all. As most people find the attention is being pulled away every few moments we get many opportunities to experience the whole cycle.

In time we may start to notice how the Survival Brain begins to tug at the attention and we may find we can include this feeling of the attention being tugged in the periphery of our awareness. The less we struggle the less the Survival Brain is activated and so the weaker its pull. But it is inevitable that, however long you have been practicing Friendly Focusing, the Survival Brain will keep whisking off the attention somewhere else. This is a fundamentally a good thing – the Survival Brain is doing its job, looking out for threats and identifying potential rewards. Without an active Survival Brain our ancestors would certainly not have survived the harsh conditions of earlier times and we still need an active

Survival Brain to protect us from the everyday dangers we encounter such as a car swerving and almost running us over. We can explore honouring the motivation of Survival Brain as it is doing its best for us when it shifts the attention away from the Focusing Anchor.

## NOTICING

At some point we realise the attention has been taken away from the Focusing Anchor and something else is occupying the attention. This is one of the most important phases of the Attention Cycle as we are doing something very special at this point. When we realise that the attention is no longer on the Focusing Anchor we are holding a number of things in our awareness at the same time:

- We are holding the memory of having intended to rest the attention on the Focusing Anchor.
- We are holding our awareness of something else such as a thought or an image being in the foreground of the attention right now.
- We are holding the understanding that this means the attention has been taken off from the Focusing Anchor and directed somewhere else.
- We are also able to be aware of what thoughts and emotional reactions have been triggered by realising that the attention has been shifted. Because of past experiences, thoughts are often very critical, producing a stream of self-talk or images that are full of 'shoulds' 'musts' 'oughts' or 'have-tos'.
- With time we may also realise we are holding an awareness of attention itself. This can seem odd when we first consider it. The attention is like a torch, sending out a beam that intensifies and magnifies whatever it is directed at. When we use a torch for real, most of the time our attention is drawn to what the torch beam is illuminating – we move the torch itself without really thinking about it. However, we can choose to notice how we are moving the torch. The inner attention is like that torch and torch beam. We usually just notice what is being intensified and magnified when the 'beam' of the attention rests on it. We do not usually notice that we are directing the attention in the same way that we are often oblivious to an actual torch we are holding. But if we choose to, we can begin to be aware of both what the inner attention is being directed at **and** that we are actively choosing to direct the beam of that attention.

Phew! There is a lot going on at this point. The aim of Friendly Focusing is just to notice whatever is there to be noticed with as much warm curiosity as is available. We are just savouring how it is. If there are self-critical thoughts or images that are full of blame or scorn for the attention having shifted, then we have an opportunity, even just for a moment or two, to simply notice that these thoughts or images are present and give them room and space to just do what they are doing.

We may want to get into an argument with them saying to them that there is no point blaming or being scornful because no-one can stop the attention being shifted away by the Survival Brain. But if such arguments start to arise – just notice these too for a moment or two with warm friendly interest.

This phase, Noticing, is a chance to do just that: step back a little, linger for a few moments and notice whatever is happening and however it is.

The more we Shift the more opportunity we have to Notice: and with practice we will

find we become aware of having Shifted more and more rapidly and we can also offer more and more friendly interest to whatever the attention was taken to.

Returning to our example of using sensations of walking as the Focusing Anchor, at some point it is inevitable that the Survival Brain will shift the attention somewhere else. At some point, perhaps after a few steps, we will realise that the attention has been shifted perhaps to a meeting we have today. At that moment we can practice Notice and for a few moments rest into the awareness that the attention has been shifted.

## ACKNOWLEDGING

Noticing and Acknowledging are quite overlapping. In the first moments when we Notice that the attention has been Shifted, we can Acknowledge whatever the attention is now resting on.

More often than not the attention has been taken to thoughts or images. But it can be taken to anything – perhaps something sensed in our surrounding such as a siren passing by or it could be a sensation in our body such as an itch or a pain. When the attention has been taken to something that is quite intense, we may notice that there are emotional reactions to what is now in the foreground of the attention. There can be pleasure, irritation, humour, anxiety, frustration, sadness, contentment – any of the whole range of emotions.

All of these can trigger their own flare of associated thoughts, images and memories. We may also experience strong impulses. If we experience an itch, we may have an impulse to immediately scratch it. If the phone goes, we may have an impulse to immediately answer it.

The opportunity in the Acknowledge phase is to notice whatever is present and to also acknowledge the reactions and impulses that arise to whatever is there. We can explore giving some room and space to just let all that is happening just happen. For just a moment or two just let it all be however it is.

It is easy to get into a struggle when in the Acknowledge phase because the pull to get carried along in whatever the attention has been taken to can seem so strong and almost impossible to resist. If such a sense of struggle arises, we have the opportunity to notice and acknowledge that struggle with kindness to ourselves as we would to a friend.

Many times we will just get carried away with a train of thought or a series of images. This presents us with the opportunity to practice Notice and Acknowledge when we realise at some point we have been carried away.

The key point here is that we are offering friendly interest to whatever we are experiencing and that this is the whole point of Friendly Focusing – to generate many opportunities to Notice and Acknowledge with warm curiosity. Every time we realise we have got completely carried away is another perfect opportunity to offer warm curiosity to whatever is present. This is why you can't get Friendly Focusing wrong – everything is an opportunity to practice it.

## Labelling

Some people find labelling what they are acknowledging helpful. Usually quite general labels are more helpful than very specific ones. If we try to be too specific we start generating analytical thoughts and images. So, if the attention has been taken to some worrying thoughts about bills, then we could silently label these thoughts: 'Worrying thoughts.' or 'There are worrying thoughts.'. We can offer similar labels to 'Planning thoughts.', 'Sad thoughts.', 'Happy thoughts' etc. Or, if the attention has been taken to a

feeling of anxiety about a forthcoming meeting we could label this 'Anxious feeling.' A siren going by could be labelled 'Loud sound'. Sometimes we may not be sure what is present – we could label this 'Don't know feeling' or 'Vague thoughts.'

Some people find such labels really helpful, others find they seem to clutter things up. This is something to experiment with.

Related to this, some people find an encouraging phrase useful to bring to mind during Acknowledge – especially when just starting to do Friendly Focusing. Phrase people have used include: 'I can't get this wrong.', 'All is well.', 'I'm fine / I'm ok / I'm all right.', 'Right here, right now.' They don't have to make any sense to anyone else. They can stay totally private. The point is to evoke a sense that, even for just this moment, you can explore acknowledging with friendly interest whatever is present, however it is; offering room and space for it all to be as it is and do what it is doing.

So, with the walking as a Focusing Anchor example, we may have noticed during Acknowledge that the attention has been shifted to thoughts about a meeting. For a few moments we can explore acknowledging these thoughts are present, perhaps labelling them 'Planning thoughts'. We may also acknowledge a flare of irritation that the attention has been shifted away from the feet. We can explore giving room and space to these thoughts and feelings for a moment or two. We may have a sense that though we may not like these thoughts and feelings, we are still fundamentally all right when they are present.

## RETURNING

We absolutely cannot stop the Survival Brain shifting the attention away from the Focusing Anchor, but we **can** choose to return it to the Focusing Anchor and this is what this phase of Return is all about.

We can approach Return with friendly interest as we can with the other phases. Goal-oriented habits run very deep in many of us. So there can be an impulse to rush back to the Focusing Anchor as if paying attention to the Focusing Anchor is what Friendly Focusing is really about. As we have been discovering, Friendly Focusing is about exploring each phase of the Attention Cycle with warm interest towards whatever is present.

If we notice a feeling of wanting to rush back to the Focusing Anchor, we can explore allowing this wanting to rush to be there, perhaps for a moment or two, before making our leisurely return to the Focusing Anchor.

As we explore gently escorting the attention back to the Focusing Anchor, we may notice a reluctance to leave behind a pleasant experience that the attention had been shifted to. We can acknowledge this reluctance and explore what it is like to return the attention with this reluctance as a companion.

Other times, the Survival Brain can direct the attention so strongly to worrying or distressing thoughts or images that it can feel like an impossibility to lift the attention away from these thoughts and images and return it to the Focusing Anchor. The key here is to remember that Friendly Focusing is all about noticing, with friendly interest, whatever is happening right now. So, if there is a sense of the attention being stuck to certain thoughts and images or that it is impossible to lift the attention away, then what we can do is explore these feelings of impossibility or stuckness with warm interest. Can we allow these feelings, even just for a moment, to have some room and space – to acknowledge them? If we do, we will often discover that what felt completely stuck now has some give, some room for manoeuvre. We may then find that we can gently return the attention to the Focusing Anchor with the sense of 'this is impossible' following along as a companion.

This is a bit like putting a hand in the air above the head and thinking: 'My arm is stuck

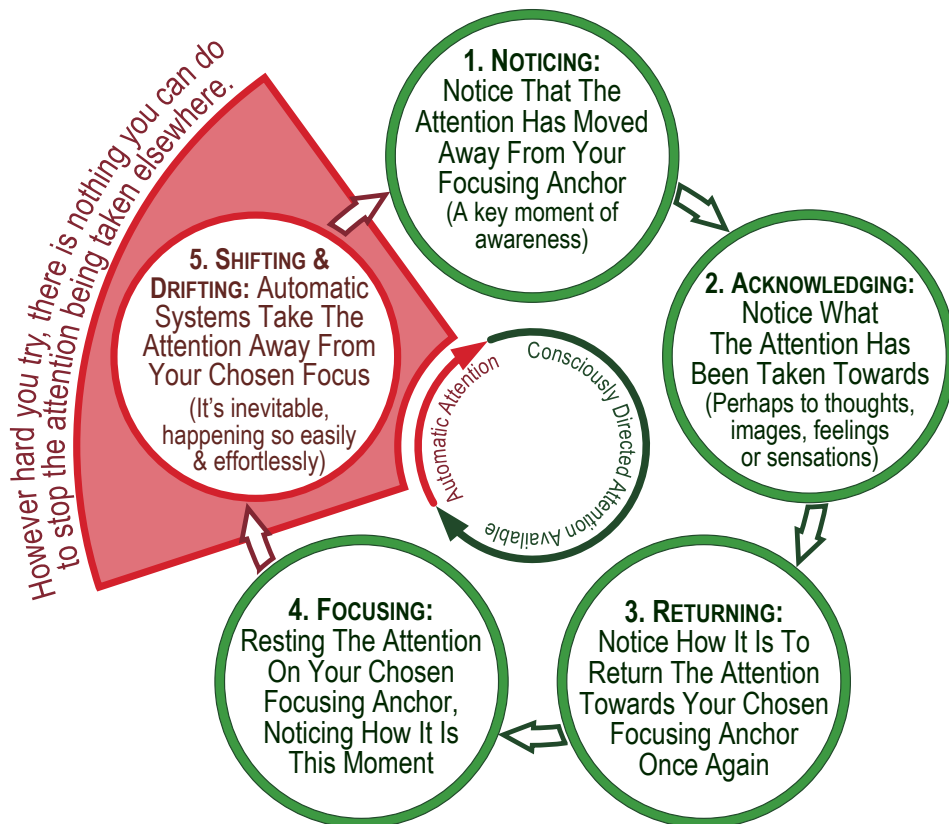
in this position.’. We can carry on thinking with all our might: ‘My arm is stuck’ as we relax the arm muscles and the arm drops down to rest showing that physical reality can be very different to mental reality. Sometimes we can do an action even while the mind is saying that we can’t do that action.

When we return the attention to the Focusing Anchor, we can once again begin to notice the fine detail of what is present this moment, and this moment... until once more the Survival Brain shifts the attention away.

So, with the example of using walking as a Focusing Anchor; the attention had been taken to a forthcoming meeting that we noticed and acknowledged. Now we are exploring returning the attention back to the sensations of walking. Perhaps we notice a feeling of wanting to complete thinking about the meeting before returning to the Focusing Anchor. Can we allow these feelings of reluctance to be present as we gently escort the attention back to the Focusing Anchor?

*We are now ready to experience another round of the Attention Cycle: something that takes moments to do and is really very simple and yet takes eight pages to describe!*

## SUMMARY DIAGRAM OF THE PHASES OF THE ATTENTION CYCLE



*Why do the numbers start at Noticing?*

It is because our minds can all too easily decide the only point of the practice is to keep the attention on the Focusing Anchor. However, the main point of placing the attention deliberately on the Focusing Anchor is that it allows us to notice when it has been shifted. It is the Noticing, Acknowledging and Returning phases that are the heart of the practice – not what we choose as the Focusing Anchor. This way of numbering acknowledges this.