Aware of Awareness (Online Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 47:01

Good afternoon, or evening for some perhaps, or maybe even morning, wherever you are in the world.

For this time, I thought of starting with a period of sitting together and offering some reflections in the sitting, then at the end having some time for further reflections and perhaps some questions.

Just continuing your practice, aware of experience, encouraging relaxation. Recognizing awareness. Is there awareness? What is obvious?

Awareness of the objects of experience—awareness of what's happening in our experience—is often our most familiar way of being aware, of knowing that we're aware. We know that we're aware because we know there are objects. We may recognize some specific qualities of those experiences, body sensations. We might recognize or know heat, pressure, coolness, vibration, movement, hardness or softness. We might recognize mind states, aware of emotions, thoughts.

Often in practicing, our attention more familiarly does seem to gravitate towards attending to the objects of experience. We're not as accustomed to noticing awareness itself.

At one point Sayadaw, in a group that I was in, said that he'd been reflecting on how to talk about being aware of awareness. He said, for those of you who wear glasses, this may be a kind of analogy that resonates more than for others perhaps. But if you wear glasses, the whole way that you see the world is through the glasses. The glasses let us see the objects in the world. But we don't often recognize that we are wearing glasses and that the glasses are the whole way that we're able to see the world. We can become aware of the glasses through recognizing that we are seeing the world more clearly.

Similarly, we know that we are aware partly through being aware that the mind is knowing experience. We know awareness is working through how it experiences objects.

Becoming aware of awareness doesn't mean that we turn back and look at awareness. Objects don't disappear. It's more of a stepping back, a sense of broadening or opening and being aware of the awareness that we are aware of.

Are you aware?

The mind has a capacity to recognize awareness. The simplest way is just knowing that you're aware. You may not quite know how you know you're aware, and that's okay. Just knowing, yes, there is awareness. If

you're aware of objects, you can acknowledge to yourself: yes, there is awareness. This is awareness.

Is there awareness? This question—you can ask that question to yourself. Aware? But then you don't have to try to find the answer. Asking that question can spark the mind's interest, spark the curiosity of what is awareness anyway. But it's not something to do, to try to figure out. If you remember to ask the question, "Is there awareness?" you get to answer yes, you are aware. Just take in that experience. This is awareness.

And that awareness will be aware of something. So what is obvious?

Relax.

Again, this isn't something to try to do. Sometimes the mind is more interested or attuned to the objects of experience, and sometimes it can become more interested in the experience of being aware. The mind has the capacity to do both and also to be aware that we're aware and know the experience as well—knowing the awareness and the experience together.

Are you aware? Which is obvious.

You also might become aware, or there might be an interest in noticing how awareness receives experience. It's not always the same. Sometimes awareness might notice experience in succession—one object after another. It might feel like the attention is shifting from experience to experience, like the mind is moving from object to object. Or it might feel more like the awareness is still, and those experiences are coming into awareness.

It might be that the experience feels like a flow from one experience to another. Or it might feel more jumpy—one thing pops in and then another thing pops in. Just different ways that awareness can receive experience. It might be that awareness is receiving many experiences at the same time, more like the awareness is broad, knowing many things together. Sometimes awareness recognizes experiences that are diffuse, not very precise. And sometimes awareness is very precise, noticing a very clear, focused experience.

There's no right way for awareness to work. There are many ways. Just notice how it is for you in this moment. Are you aware? How is awareness receiving experience?

And from time to time, checking the relationship, the attitude. There can be attitudes about how awareness is working. Sometimes we like it, sometimes we don't like it. Sometimes it's confusing. Sometimes it's simply allowing just this.

Are you aware?

When I was practicing with Sayadaw in Burma, he talked about awareness a lot. At the beginning especially, I wasn't so clear about what it meant to be aware of awareness. And yet he kept talking about

it, and I kept being with my experience and checking in: Am I aware? Yes, I am aware, but I have no idea how I know I'm aware.

That kind of curiosity, the encouragement to notice awareness—it's like the first thing we explore. Am I aware? That begins to encourage the mind to get curious about that experience. So we are aware, we know that we're aware, but we don't know how we know we're aware. There's not quite the felt sense of knowing that we're aware.

What I've seen in my own experience and in working with others is that this continued curiosity about "Am I aware?" begins to help the mind touch into that felt sense—that sense of a clarity of knowing that you're aware. We know that we know that we're aware. We may not be able to describe it, as my vague language speaks to. It's not easy to talk about what the experience of being aware of awareness is. But there can be a kind of sense of, "Yeah, I know that I'm aware," and there's that understanding. It's not just the knowing. There's a sense or a feeling that we have. We know that we're aware. There's no question about it anymore.

And what I found at some point—in Burma this happened—there was a kind of real recognition. At one point that clarity was like, "Oh, this is what he means to be aware of awareness. Oh, I get it. This is what that's like." It wasn't an unfamiliar experience, I think, because we do touch into this. This is something our minds have the capacity to know. It wasn't unfamiliar, but it wasn't clearly known in the same way. So there was a real recognition in that moment.

That was exciting, and it was very cool. That particular experience that felt so cool was the awareness of the awareness and the objects at the same time. I knew the awareness, and I knew the objects.

And I thought, "That's what I was supposed to be doing. I figured it out. This is what Sayadaw has been talking about. This is how I'm supposed to be practicing." And so I spent the next few hours trying to make it happen—and gave myself a huge headache.

So that's a warning. It's easy, as we first get the sense or flavor of what this is like, to think we're supposed to do that, to make it happen. I went back and reported to Sayadaw this experience of having given myself a headache trying to notice the awareness of awareness. And he said, "Well, don't try to do that." He said, "Just notice when it happens. Notice when awareness is aware of itself, when there's awareness of awareness, and when the awareness is more interested in the objects."

The attention will go back and forth. Sometimes it will be more interested in the texture of feelings or sensations or sounds—the sense of the objects may be where the interest is. And at other times it begins to gravitate toward interest in the awareness itself, in the quality of being aware. So he encouraged me to just notice that shift. And that was very helpful. That was really helpful.

Sometimes we can know that we're aware but not know what the object is—not have a sense of what awareness knows. That can be a little odd at first. In my experience from prior practice, if I didn't know

what the object was, I thought it wasn't awareness. I wasn't being mindful. If I didn't know what the object was, then I wasn't practicing properly.

But this practice began to attune me to the awareness itself. And it's like, "Yeah, I know I'm aware, but I have no clue what the object is." I know there's seeing happening, but that doesn't really seem like what awareness is attuning to. So there can be these times where we know that we're aware, but there's not a lot of clarity about the object of awareness—and that's okay. You can sort of hover in that space of, "Well, I know I'm aware."

There is an object there. It's not that there's not an object. Sometimes what's happening in that kind of experience is that awareness is attuning to something we're not so familiar with. This can happen as the meditation goes on. As mindfulness becomes stronger, it may begin to gravitate toward objects that we know nothing about, that we can't articulate, that we're unfamiliar with. And so if we can trust that "I know I'm aware" and just hold the space, perhaps the experience or the object will slowly reveal itself—or not.

Sometimes in that kind of experience, the object may be what I might call diffuse. These aren't very specific or precise experiences. The first kinds of objects that we become really clear about are usually very defined: this contact with the body, this pressure, that sight, that sound. They're very clear. We can almost name them, identify them. It's almost like we can draw a circle around them. "Yes, that's what I'm aware of." They seem almost delimited. This pressure, that itch, the sound that arises, that smell. Even emotions can have this quality of, "Yeah, I know this is anger. I've felt this many times." Or, "Oh yeah, this is irritation." We know the texture and shape of even our emotions.

But there are other experiences that the mind can know that are not so precise, that are more vague. There are many experiences like this. Exhaustion is like this. Several of you have mentioned this in the past few days in our meetings.

You can't really put your finger on exhaustion. There are qualities within the experience that may be more precise, like a feeling of heaviness in the body. But the quality in the mind of exhaustion or low energy—that's much more diffuse. The quality of joy and delight is also diffuse in this way. The mind knows how to take in diffuse experience.

In all of our sense experience, actually—I'll give you an analogy. If you're out walking and it starts to rain, you might feel the drops of water on your skin. That's a pretty precise experience. You know that sense of the drops landing on your skin. That's one way objects can be received.

Another time you're out walking, you might notice the experience of humidity. Not a precise experience at all. How do you describe humidity? We know it, but it's more of a gestalt kind of experience. We know it based on—well, we say, "Feel the air." We just say, "Feel how the air feels." And we know what we're talking about. It's a broader kind of sense, that experience of humidity. It's not precise, but we know it.

The same kind of awareness around precise experience and diffuse experience can happen with mind states as well, with mental objects. Sometimes that place where we feel like we're aware but don't know what the awareness is aware of—it may be that the awareness is taking in a diffuse experience. Maybe that's what's happening.

At one point I was meditating and noticed this quality of, "Wow, I notice that I'm aware. I have no idea what the object is." But what I did know was that the mind was really interested. That's what I could know—interest was present. I didn't know what the mind was interested in, but there was awareness and there was interest. Interest is kind of a diffuse experience too at times, depending on what the interest is connecting to.

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