Choiceless Attention

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Over these last days, we've been offering progressive instructions that encourage us to open up to the entirety of our experience. While giving some preference to an anchor, we have still explored when the attention is drawn to other experience—attending to aspects of physical experience, breath, body sensations, sounds, aspects of mental experience, emotions, moods, feeling tones, thoughts, and the subtle impulse about to move, about to think, about to have an emotion: the intention. And in the in-between times we're also exploring the other physical senses—seeing, tasting. Nothing left out. We can be mindful of anything.

How we are mindful is crucial: curious about experience as experience, rather than as something about me or something to do something with. Just, what's this experience? How is this felt as a human being? What is it like to be a human being experiencing this? That kind of curiosity, with kindness—wise attention.

We've encouraged using an anchor for the attention, a place to settle the attention, and have given some preference to the anchor. Unless the attention is strongly pulled to something else, we've been giving some sense of preference to collecting the attention with the anchor, which can support a stability of mind and a continuity of mindfulness—to have that place to return to.

As the momentum of mindfulness strengthens, we might explore a less directed form of practice, one where we're not choosing anything in preference to anything else. A form of practice sometimes called choiceless attention, open awareness, receptive awareness, which opens more widely to the flow of our experience moment to moment, without preferring any particular aspect of experience, without giving preference to an anchor.

This shift—from giving preference to an anchor to letting go of that preference—highlights a factor of the mind called attention. Attention is different than mindfulness. Mindfulness is a receptive quality of the mind that knows what is happening in the present moment while it's happening. Attention is a factor of experience that happens in every moment, choosing something to attend to.

This factor of attention is interesting. It is amenable to conscious choice. We can consciously choose what we would like to pay attention to, and this is how the anchor practice works—we prefer attending to the breath, and we can choose. Right now perhaps I could suggest: attend to the sensations of your hands. A form of my words directing your attention perhaps. Or you might notice a breath in this moment. So the factor of attention is amenable to choice.

And yet, if we are not consciously choosing what to attend to, attention will naturally choose something out of the range of experience to attend to—a natural unfolding of attention, a conditioned unfolding of attention, but not our entering in with some sense of "I'm going to pay attention to this."

Attention and mindfulness are different. I used to think earlier in my practice, when I first learned the directed form of mindfulness practice, that if I wasn't choosing what to pay attention to it meant I wasn't being mindful. But mindfulness is more just that basic aware quality, that we-know quality, or self-reflective capacity of our minds to know that we know. Attention is pulling particular features or experiences out of the field to attend to.

So we can be mindful, be aware, settle back, relax, and simply let go of any preference for what to attend to, and see: what is attention interested in attending to?

It's often helpful to begin with relaxation, relaxing that part of the mind that has such a habit of doing and choosing. So let's start there: allowing the body to relax. You might explore this consciously, scanning through the body and relaxing various parts. And yet at times it can be interesting to explore just dropping in a request, an expression of wishing: maybe the body can relax. Or, body, can you show me how to relax? Rather than trying to do it, it's like an intention, dropping in a request. May the body relax. And see—how does that request land in your system?

Sometimes our system knows ways to relax that we don't consciously know how to do.

So arriving with yourself here in your body—may the body relax. See what happens. I even find sometimes, dropping in that request a few times, a deeper relaxation might happen. May the body relax. May the body relax. May the mind relax. We don't even have to actually know what that means—just dropping that request into the system and seeing what happens. May the mind relax.

We'll begin this exploration of a more open, receptive awareness by choosing a field: the field of hearing. Starting with hearing can sometimes remind us of how it feels to settle back and let experience come to us. Because we never know what the next sound will be. It's pretty clear we're not in charge of doing the sounds. So we can connect to the field of hearing and receiving. Perhaps the sound of my voice. The silence between the sound of my voice. Small rustlings, poppings in the room. Maybe receiving, hearing, noticing this quiet hum of some machine—relaxing and receiving the sounds.

Exploring the possibility of settling back. Not having the attention going out and looking or listening for sounds, but settling back to just hear what comes to the ear naturally, easefully, in this moment. And in this moment. If it doesn't seem that there's much in the way of sound, you can just recognize the silence. Receiving an alternation of sound and silence.

And now expanding, or allowing, the field of awareness to receive from all aspects of our experience. Perhaps body sensations—often a very obvious field of experience—and attention can gravitate towards what's most obvious in a moment. Perhaps there's a recognition of the pressure of the contact points,

hardness, softness, coolness, heat, the breath—interwoven with hearing. Relaxing and not trying to control where the attention is, but rather just letting the attention naturally shift from experience to experience.

Attention may also receive thoughts, or emotions, or moods. Our practice here, in this form, is simply checking in: What's happening now? What's obvious now? And how about now? The breath, hearing, tingling, moisture, thinking, breathing—relaxing and allowing experience to come to you. Settling back.

It can be helpful to use the noting practice in this form. Gently acknowledging what is most obvious now. Maybe about once every second or two, naming that. Hearing. Contraction. Hearing. Thinking. Just a gentle, steady, relaxed connection, acknowledging what attention has already touched.

If you use the noting about once every second or two, it's pretty likely there'll be a lot of things you notice in between what you're actually noting. And that's okay. The noticing is the most important part.

Sometimes in a shift from the more directed practice to a more receptive practice, the mind can get a little confused or uncomfortable about not directing the attention. That can just be something else that we notice. Oh, uncomfortable—that's what's obvious right now. Confusion is happening. Or sometimes there's the experience of searching for something to notice. Searching is happening.

Relax. Allowing. Relaxation. Receiving what is obvious in this moment, and in this moment, and this moment.

The habit of directing the attention might arise, almost without you doing it. You could notice that too. Directing. Directing is happening. And then explore the possibility of receiving again.

Sometimes with this form of practice the mind can get a little drifty.

When you notice drifty mind, the first thing to explore is simply noticing: "Oh, drifty mind." If the mind continues to be very drifty, you could reconnect consciously with your anchor—refreshing, reminding yourself what it's like to be connecting and knowing experience in the present moment. Then, when attention naturally notices some other experience besides the anchor, let that be the place where you begin receiving again, letting go of the preference for the anchor at that point.

What's happening now? What's obvious? What's already here, already being known? How about now? And now?

You are welcome to explore this form of practice. You might play with it a few times during the day, or for some of you it may feel quite easeful and supportive for your mindfulness practice—you're welcome to do it as your main practice, just letting go of the anchor. There are also times when it's supportive to come back to the anchor, allowing the mind to settle and collect, and then open again. Or if you're cultivating concentration, simply staying with the anchor.

There are many different conditions out here in your minds, and we offer these tools as a support for your practice. What supports you to be mindful, to be present with experience?

I would say that with open awareness practice, in shifting from directed attention to open or receptive awareness, it can feel uncomfortable at first. When I first received this instruction, it felt so chaotic—like objects just spinning around me. I thought, "How do I notice all of these things?" It was so uncomfortable.

So I began with what I described to my teacher as an "anchored open awareness practice." I stayed in touch with the anchor and yet noted or noticed a lot of other things: "Oh, there's breath... and hearing... and breath... and body sensation... and breath... and thought... and breath." Practicing with the anchor let me get more comfortable with the wide variety of experience. I felt like I needed to tether just a little bit.

What I would say is that I initially thought this open awareness practice was not my practice, but that was mostly because I had so much habit around directing attention. When I finally began to let go of that aiming—there was a little bit of control in there, wanting to be in charge of what I was paying attention to—when that began to soften, I found that this receptive awareness practice is very natural for this mind. Very easeful. And so it is now my primary practice.

Even if it doesn't feel natural, even if this is your first time exploring open awareness practice—for some of you it may be, while many of you are already familiar with it—give it a chance. Several times. Many times. Perhaps like me, there's a little bit of holding on to what's familiar. When we open into open awareness, sometimes we step into less familiar territory, and it can take some time to be relaxed and easeful there. So give yourself permission to play with it for a while, then perhaps go back to the anchor, then play with it again.

In sitting practice, a particular experience can happen as we shift to open or receptive awareness, where it feels like you know that you're aware, and you are aware of distant experiences—sounds, body sensations—but it almost feels like you're surrounded by cotton balls. None of those experiences really feels like what attention is paying attention to.

In that experience, there is always something that attention is attending to, but sometimes it's an object or experience that's a little less familiar to us. I have found at times that what the mind is attending to in that place is a sense of spaciousness. That's what attention is interested in—spaciousness itself, not the specific experiences happening within the spaciousness.

Attention can have this quality of being very precise, noticing very specific sensations like the pressure on your hand, a sight, a sound, a particular body sensation, the arising of a thought. And attention can also be very broad. Attention can take in spaciousness. Attention can take in calm, which also has a very diffuse quality at times. We don't know calm by looking for some particular part of experience—calm is a very diffuse kind of experience. Attention can meet diffuse experience as well as precise experience.

In opening to open awareness, the attention will naturally be drawn to some of these experiences we're

not so familiar with being aware of. In that place where you may know that you're aware, but not really be clear about what awareness is aware of, or what attention is connecting with in that moment, it can be helpful simply to recognize: "Well, I know that I'm aware. Not clear what the object is. That's okay. Not clear what the object is."

Sometimes it can take time for the mind to begin to really understand certain kinds of experiences—like calm, like equanimity, like spaciousness. What is that experience? Attention can land there and know that other things are happening, but it feels like attention is not really going to those other experiences. There is a little bit of attention that meets those experiences, that they are being known even in the distance—there is a little bit of attention there. But it can be useful, rather than trying to make those be where the attention is more focused, to open to a kind of sense of being aware and knowing that you're aware. And there's something there that the attention is connected with.

At one point in Burma, I was practicing the Mahasi technique—what we've been instructing you in, in a kind of modified form over these days. I had shifted to the open awareness practice, which is the direction that this practice heads. The mind was just noticing all kinds of different things, and at some point it was like it was riveted. There was clear awareness. I knew that I was aware. I had no idea what the mind was so riveted to. There was a strong sense of interest—I could tell the mind was really interested—but I had no idea what it was interested in. I just noticed that there was awareness and interest. And I recognized the recognition: "Don't know. Don't know what it's interested in." That was the experience. I didn't have to make it something else. We don't have to change our experience. Just notice what it is.

We have just a few minutes for questions.

Question: It was my understanding that choiceless awareness is one of the goals, per se. Is that not the case? And also, I find that it's not something that I make happen—it kind of happens on its own.

I would say there are many forms of practice. The kind of arc of what we've been exploring here heads in the direction of open awareness. I wouldn't say it's the goal of the practice. The goal, the aim—if we have to say an aim of the practice—is to meet our experience, to understand how greed, aversion, and delusion work in the mind so that wisdom can grow and release greed, aversion, and delusion. The Buddha points to ānāpānasati, mindfulness of breathing, as being a complete practice in and of itself.

And as you noticed, sometimes when we start with something like ānāpānasati, there can be a natural movement toward opening up to more and more experience. So I wouldn't say that choiceless awareness or choiceless attention is the goal of the practice. It is a useful meditative tool for understanding our minds, and it's particularly supportive for helping us see the impermanent and conditioned nature of experience. Because we're not controlling what we're attending to, the uncontrollable nature of experience becomes very obvious. The changing nature of experience, that we're not doing

experience—this becomes very obvious. So it's a support for seeing the truths of impermanent, unreliable, not-self. And there are many, many meditation practices.

Question: I just wanted to say that my particular construct of a person has its share of anxiety, like I'm sure a lot of people have. And five years ago I lost the vision in my right eye, so that upped my anxiety. We all go through our day noticing things, and for my own protection, I notice more—I'm trying to notice more for myself.

For a variety of reasons—safety, embarrassment, whatever it might be—I notice more. And during this practice, I noticed what a relief it was to let the noticing come to me. I just felt, "Oh, I can let go. I can let go of some work." I've been looking for that, wanting to let go and not really knowing how. And what you said about anger—going back to that a little bit—that's probably where I'll be for a while because there's a certain comfort there. But it just feels like a relief, like I can let out a sigh.

Yes, it can feel that way. As I described from my own practice, it didn't initially feel that way, but definitely for me at this point, it's such a relief not to have to choose. I appreciate that—the sense of release. There's a release in knowing that it's okay not to control experience, to just let experience arise and be known.

I want to mention for some of you who may not be having that experience: that's okay. You can also simply recognize, "Oh, there's confusion," or "There's a sense of not knowing where to land, how to notice all this stuff." You can notice that too.

But if you are experiencing something like relief, this may be a practice that's a little more organic for you, a little more natural. You're welcome to continue playing with it and heading in this direction, because this too is a complete practice in and of itself.

The concentration in this practice develops through the continuity of mindfulness rather than through focus on a particular object. It's not that we develop concentration and then open up, and then the concentration dissipates in the opening, requiring us to return to one object and focus again. Concentration can continue developing in the moment-to-moment noticing.

We could say that a simple definition of concentration is moment-to-moment mindfulness. Focused or one-pointed concentration is moment-to-moment mindfulness on one object. This other kind of concentration—sometimes called momentary concentration or moment-to-moment concentration—is continuity of mindfulness on changing objects. So we're not letting go of cultivating concentration here. And it can be very restful this way.

Thank you.

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