Awareness of Awareness

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 47:39

Are you aware?

Relaxation supports our capacity to be aware, to recognize that we're aware. What is awareness receiving? Experience is already awareness, already aware. Awareness receiving whatever is arising in our bodies, in our minds. Awareness can meet any arising experience.

Often we are more interested in, or just the habit of our minds is more interested in, what is being received than it is in recognizing that we are aware. We can know awareness, recognize its functioning. Awareness receives. Awareness shines a light on what's happening. We know awareness is working through how it is experiencing, through how it is receiving experience.

It doesn't feel like a turning around to look at awareness. It feels more like an opening, a broadening, a stepping back. The objects, the experience, don't disappear when we recognize that we're aware.

Are you aware?

The simplest way of recognizing this is just knowing that you're aware. The question "aware?" supports a curiosity about what it is to be aware. We can begin to have a sense, a felt sense, of what it means to be aware. And yet even without that felt sense, we can sometimes simply know that we're aware, and that's enough. That's a place to begin this recognition.

Are you aware?

The feeling of awareness is not always the same. The feeling shifts sometimes depending on how awareness is receiving experience. This is a key thing that awareness does: to receive.

Sometimes it feels like awareness is receiving very clear, specific experience, one moment after another. We recognize the shifting of attention and that awareness is receiving the objects that attention is shifting between. Sometimes it can feel like the attention is moving and the awareness is kind of following the attention. And sometimes it can feel like the awareness is very still, and objects are appearing in awareness.

Sometimes the quality of the receiving can feel like a flowing, smooth shifting. Sometimes it can feel jumpy, almost like popcorn—one object appears, another object appears. Sometimes awareness will be receiving a very broad, diffuse, non-specific experience. At other times, very focused, precise, a lot of what we would usually call clarity. Sometimes it can feel like awareness is receiving many, many things at the

same time.

Let go of any concepts or ideas you have about awareness and experience what is happening. What is the feeling of being aware? There's not a right way or a best way to know the awareness. And it can shift and change from moment to moment, how awareness is receiving.

Are you aware?

Sometimes it can feel like awareness and the experience are separate, as if the awareness is observing the experience from a distance. And sometimes it can feel like the awareness is right inside the experience. Just notice how it is.

Aware? How is awareness receiving?

At times the attention will be more curious about the experience of the object too. We don't have to try to do awareness of awareness. And yet it is something that is possible, the recognition of awareness itself.

Are you aware?

When I was practicing with Sayadaw at his retreat center in Burma, he talked about recognizing awareness a lot. I think that's part of the condition that helped us to begin to recognize it. The pointing that it's possible—the mind begins to open to that possibility to recognize it.

With that conversation in the field, what can happen is that we kind of stumble into recognizing, "Oh, this is what it means. This is what it means to be aware of awareness."

Initially, I don't know—I would say it was very cool. "Wow, I can actually know that. I can see that. Wow." And so there's a tendency to try to do that, to create it, to put the mind into that space. And yeah, I gave myself a headache trying to do that.

So I went and reported this to Sayadaw, what was going on. And he said, "You know, don't try to be aware of awareness. Just notice. Sometimes there's the clarity of recognizing being aware, and sometimes the clarity of recognizing the objects. It will kind of naturally shift between those. So you don't have to make it happen—it will happen."

It's a subtler recognition than the recognition of objects. We are trained through our school, our parents all telling us, "Pay attention, pay attention to things, pay attention to objects." We're really trained to notice what's happening in experience. I don't think I ever heard my parents or my teachers in grade school ask me to notice that I was aware. That's not where our training has been. Objects tend to be more obvious than recognizing awareness. It's a subtler kind of experience, a subtler kind of recognition.

And yet it's quite natural—our minds have this capacity to know that we're aware. They have this capacity. And it will happen. This is what I mean by stumbling into it. We stumble into that recognition.

Another interesting piece around that stumbling is that whatever that first way we really kind of stumble into recognizing, "Oh, this is what it means to be aware of awareness"—where there's a felt sense or a feeling of that—then we think that's what it means to be aware of awareness. But there are many ways that it feels. If you're looking for one particular flavor, you may miss that other flavors could be happening.

It can feel very different: this sense of awareness following the attention, almost feeling like awareness is moving, versus the sense of awareness being still when objects either just appear in awareness or come into awareness—these things can feel different.

Often I'd say that initial or first taste of being aware of awareness does kind of feel like the objects might be a little distant. There's less clarity about the objects. And that's okay. If the interest is more in knowing the awareness, sometimes the detail of the experiences is less precise or less clear to us.

And yet there's also another flavor of being aware of awareness that I stumbled into at one point—again, it was just a stumbling into it—which was a clarity of awareness and a clarity of objects where they were both equally clear. Sometimes it can feel like we're knowing the object, the attention more picking up the texture of the experience itself. Sometimes we're more aware of the awareness, where the interest is more in what it feels like to be aware. And then there was this thing where it was just equal clarity about awareness and the objects.

Boy, did I cling to that one. "That's what I'm supposed to be doing." But it's just another way it can feel.

So just notice the relationship to when you're noticing this or not noticing it.

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