Morning Instructions: Objects, Space, and Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 42:57

So this morning we're going to take the leap into the awareness practices. You ready? Lift off.

I want to say a few words before we go into any formal instructions. We'll be giving different instructions through the days of awareness practice, and we're just beginning today with an introduction. But I want to explain what I mean by the word awareness, or how we're going to be using it, because it means different things to different people.

In this retreat, we're going to use it synonymously with consciousness—the fifth aggregate, more or less. We'll clarify the finer distinctions as we go, but mostly we mean it's synonymous with consciousness.

I need to explain the meaning of this term consciousness. It's the fifth aggregate, vijñāna in Pali. It is the most basic capacity of knowing that we have. It is what makes us a sentient being.

As you are awake in this moment, you are having conscious experience through the sense doors of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects—mostly thoughts and emotions. That conscious experience is ongoing. It happens naturally in any moment that you're awake because we have sense organs, we have sense doors that bring the world into our conscious experience, our human experience. This is what it means to be a sentient being.

Can you turn that faculty off? If I say, "Don't hear this sound," can you stop hearing? If your eyes are open, can you stop seeing? If your body's sitting, can you stop feeling sensations? No.

This is the nature of consciousness: just to reveal, or you could say display, or illuminate, or put forward these bare sense experiences for us to know. Consciousness doesn't take any smarts. You can be on the verge of sleep and you'll still be knowing objects. Dogs have consciousness. Ants have consciousness. Every sentient being has this knowing of their immediate environment.

It's just the bare revealing of—for us—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. That's what consciousness is. It's this faculty of knowing in a very simple and primitive way.

Now on top of consciousness we can layer other kinds of knowing that get more intelligent and more sophisticated. This is referred to in the study guide as the five kinds of knowing. We can know through perception, we can know through conceptual thought, we can know through mindfulness, we can know through insight. These are all higher level functionings that require concepts. Consciousness doesn't

require concepts.

I don't think ants have too much verbal facility, but they have consciousness. They experience the world.

This is what we're going to use as the meaning of awareness for now. We'll refine it later, but for now, we're investigating consciousness. That's mostly what these days of practice will be about—investigating consciousness. With that as our prelude, awareness will be used synonymously with consciousness.

With that, we can go into the meditation. Please come into the present moment. Feel your body in sitting. Let your attention rest in the heart center.

First let us carry forward this idea of metta in its boundless form, extending to all beings everywhere and pervading the space around us. As you sit, let yourself become aware of the space in front of you, to your right, behind you, to your left. We can include above and below. Have a sense that your care for all beings can extend outward in all six directions from your heart center. Wish for all beings to be well, happy and peaceful.

With that sense of the vastness of metta, extending to all beings in a wordless way, let go of any phrases that you may have been using in the practice of metta or the other brahmaviharas. Just sit quietly with this awareness of space.

Sometimes it might feel a little awkward in turning the corner from metta to what we will now undertake as vipassana. In metta we've been concerned with the phrases, the image, the metta feeling, the heart center. Now we're changing our field of focus.

So as you relax into this open space, grounded in the body, just notice what's here. What's showing up in this openness? What sense objects are making an appearance for you right now?

You'll notice sensations in the body. You'll notice the impact of breathing. There will be sounds from time to time. Thoughts will come and go. And there's some mood or emotion that's present—could be a strongly felt emotion like joy or impatience, wanting or compassion. Could be a subtler mood, a bit of longing, a touch of aversion.

And then notice also the visual field. With eyes closed, there's probably not much going on, but there's the sense of grayness or darkness of the visual field, or perhaps some flickering pixels, or perhaps some light. So we notice that these are the phenomena that constitute our experience through the six sense doors, and they will continue to arise as long as we're awake.

So the objects of the senses are the first things that we want to notice in the meditation this morning. Sally talked last night about the six-limbed equanimity, and these are the six limbs of experience that we can notice in our meditation.

If you're feeling somewhat calm and settled, coming out of the concentration practice of metta, then you

don't need to go searching for these objects, but you can have the sense of resting—just resting in the center of everything and letting the phenomena reveal themselves to you. Now a sensation, now a sound, now a thought, now an in-breath. Receptive attention, but alert, awake, ready for the next contact.

And now we want to move a little further into the exploration of the second territory, which is that of space. Bringing your attention into the body, noticing that you may feel sensations from the head through the shoulders and back, down the arms, chest and belly, and the hips and legs and feet.

As you connect with the head, the middle of the body, and the feet, you'll notice that the sensations spread out in this way create a sense of distance. Sense of distance is an immediate part of our experience of the body. So there's a separation or a space between the head and the feet, which we can directly experience.

As you feel the sensations that take place between the head and the feet, ask and investigate: Is this whole space full with sensations? Or are there some parts of the body as experienced from within that don't particularly have sensations? In other words, is there some space between some of the sensations in the body? Or is every cubic inch dense with sensation?

Once we connect with the distance in the body, we can also find space—space within, between, among all the various sensations. So tuning in now to the quality of space within the body.

And as you sit in the hall, can you also get a sense of the space around you? The space that you're sitting in. It extends to the front and behind, to your right and left. And can you feel it extending beyond the walls and windows to outdoors?

Sometimes sound is a way to evoke space. A bird sound. A bell sound. We can feel the distance between us and the sound that arises. So we can be in touch with the space outside. We can be in touch with the space inside the body. Are these two different things? Or is there just one space? It's both inside and outside.

So connecting with this sense of space inside and outside, you might investigate: how far does it extend? Or can you find an edge to it? If you hear the bird outside, do you get a sense the space extends that far?

When you hear my voice, do you get a sense the space extends that far? This is the second element that we'll look at in the meditation this morning—the sense of space.

The third element that we'll bring in is the quality of awareness. As you're in touch with appearances, sensations, sounds, breath, thoughts, mood, those are all being known because they're part of your direct experience. There's a knowing of these arisings that is your human consciousness. Sounds are known. Sensations are known. Thoughts are known.

Is space also known? When you're in touch with a sense of space, is there knowing of space? Is there some consciousness of the space around you and inside you? As far as the sense of space extends, does your knowing go with it? However wide space is, is awareness also that wide?

Now asking, can I be in touch with the sense of knowing? When the bird calls, can I sense the knowing of that sound? When a sensation arises, can I sense the knowing of that sensation? That sense consciousness is taking place—can I feel that happening? When there's the perception of space, and I feel the knowing of that, the awareness of space—is the knowing as wide as the space is? Is there any boundary or edge to awareness?

Sometimes the quality of awareness can seem really elusive. It's very subtle. It's formless. It can't be grasped. It can be intuited. It can be sensed. But sometimes it's so subtle, it's hard to sense it. So if that happens, you might just ask this simple question: am I aware? And if the answer is yes, just stay with that sense—awareness.

So there are the elements of the objects, of space, and of awareness or consciousness. Let's put these together with specific experiences at the sense doors. As you're sitting, simply resting in the middle of space, some object will arise that you'll notice—a sensation, a breath, a sound, a thought. As you connect with that object, ask if you can also notice the space around it. First we notice the object, and then we see if we can notice the space that it's happening in, the space surrounding it. It can be a big sense of space, it can be just a small sense of space, but notice that it is happening within space.

So we notice the object, then we notice the space. Is there any shift in inner feeling, any shift in mood when you go from noticing the object to noticing the space around it? And then after you've noticed the object and the space, notice the quality of awareness or knowing. There's knowing of the object, there's knowing of the space. Can you feel that activity of knowing taking place?

So for this last section of the sitting, practicing in this way, connecting with an object as it arises, noticing it, and noticing the space around it, and then noticing the knowing of the object and of the space. This can become a kind of choiceless attention, knowing objects arising at the six sense doors, contemplating in your direct experience the object, the space, and the awareness.

If the element of awareness is not so apparent, don't worry about it. It's kind of elusive, may come and go. Just be with the knowing of the object and the space.

For the last minute of the sitting, returning to our old friend, the breath. Bringing the attention into the body, feeling the breath wherever it's been comfortable for you. Connecting with the in-breath and the out-breath. Recognizing it in the field of sensations. As you connect with the breath wherever you're feeling it, notice the space around it. How does it feel to move from knowing the sensations of breath to notice the space? And then, can you feel the awareness of the breath, the awareness of the space? Knowing both the arising object and the space it's arising in.

So was that space or was that spaced out? Any comments, questions on the meditation?

When Jane asks about which sense door we use when connecting with space, I regard it as manifesting on the physical level - through the physical sense door connected with sensation and the body.

Don raises an interesting point about interoception, which refers to our ability to sense internal bodily signals. This eighth sense, as some researchers call it, encompasses our awareness of heartbeat, breathing, hunger, thirst, and other internal states. It's distinct from the traditional five senses and even from proprioception, which tracks our body's position in space.

Interoception could indeed be relevant here. When we're sensing space around the breath, we might be tapping into this capacity for internal bodily awareness. It's that subtle sensing that doesn't quite fit into the neat categories of sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch, yet is undeniably a form of knowing.

This highlights something important about meditation practice - we're often working with forms of awareness that don't map perfectly onto conventional categories. The space around the breath, the felt sense of openness, the quality of awareness itself - these experiences invite us to expand our understanding of how we know what we know.

Whether we call it the body sense door, interoception, or simply awareness itself, what matters is that we're cultivating a more refined and subtle capacity for knowing. We're learning to recognize not just the obvious objects of experience, but also the context in which they arise - the space, the awareness, the knowing quality itself.

This kind of practice gradually develops what we might call "meta-awareness" - awareness of awareness itself. We begin to recognize not just what we're experiencing, but the very capacity for experience. This is where meditation starts to reveal the deeper structures of consciousness, the very ground of our being.

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