# Awareness: Turn, Recognize, Rest

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 52:39

So good morning, everyone. Would you believe we're almost to summer? It's chilly. So I'm glad people have exercised wisdom and discretion in closing the windows on the side. Feel free to do that with temperatures like they are today.

This morning, I'm going to introduce two important things, so pay attention. First, I want to unveil the central meditation instruction that will accompany us for the rest of this retreat, this section on awareness. It's really the key pointing to how we suggest that you practice when you're doing the awareness practices from here on in. We've wanted to give a little bit of time for your intuition about awareness to build up and offering some various ways in. Today I want to put it into the context of a specific instruction for meditation.

The second thing is that I want to introduce the way of recognizing or finding awareness that has been most helpful for me in all the years that I've been practicing this. So these two things I'll cover this morning.

Let me do the meditation instruction first and then I'll get to the specific approach. I want to refer back to our practice of mindfulness of breathing, which we did for ten days together. The instruction was, once you got settled in your body, to direct the attention to the breath, connect there to see what your experience was, and to sustain the attention for at least half a breath, whatever was comfortable for you, without straining and striving.

So there were these three pieces. We intend to go to the breath, we would connect with vitaka, and then we would sustain with vichara. And vitaka and vichara specifically were the factors that developed the concentration in relation to our chosen focus of breath. Okay, we're all on the same page? Good.

Our chosen focus of attention in this section of the retreat is awareness. You could say consciousness, but whichever. And we talked very early on about how what we're really doing is practicing mindfulness of consciousness, mindfulness of awareness. That is our chosen focus. If it's an element in our experience, we can become mindful of it because we can notice it. So that's our intention, is to direct our knowing to awareness.

The second part is how to connect with it. And this we've given you a few ways already. Asking the question, "Am I aware?" is a way of connecting with the faculty of awareness and just see what comes. Sally led us in choiceless attention and then turning toward the knowing. That was the second way in. I did the meditation on body, space, boundless consciousness. That's the third avenue in. Sally led a

meditation on loving kindness, moving to boundless or pervading loving kindness, and then turning toward awareness. And this morning I'm going to introduce one more. And then future days will give other ways that hopefully will lead you to the experience of awareness as a real thing, not just conceptual, but as a real thing in your meditation.

So this part of connecting, the vitaka part with awareness, is a lot trickier than connecting with the sensations of breath. Those things are really obvious and physical and tangible and solid and so forth. Connecting with awareness is a more subtle undertaking. And that's why we have to give a lot of different ways in. I can just tell you, "Feel the sensations of your breath" and you're there, right? But if I tell you, "Notice the broad space of awareness right now," you might connect or you might not. So we offer a bunch of different ways to do that connecting piece.

So this connecting piece is the most subtle, elusive, hard to gain confidence in, in the beginning. Once you've been working with it for a while, then the recognition comes really simply, really easily. But in the beginning, it can be hard to be sure: Is this what they're talking about? Am I really in touch with awareness in this way? So the connecting piece is subtle, sometimes elusive.

And then sustaining—what we've suggested is once you connect with awareness, just hang out there. So in the sustaining, there's not making an effort in any direction. Once you connect, just rest. Rest.

So I'm going to summarize these three steps, which are basically intention, intention toward mindfulness, vitaka and vichara in our normal terms. In relation to awareness, I'm going to sum them up by saying you turn your attention toward awareness using any of these cues that are helpful to you. You recognize it. And this is the moment that's a little tricky and sometimes elusive, but it will come with more and more confidence.

And the third step, in terms of sustaining, you don't do anything to sustain—you simply rest. These are the three words of the meditation instruction that we're going to use repeatedly: turn, recognize, and rest.

This approach is very analogous to what we've done in developing samatha with breathing. Turn is the intention to direct. Recognize is connect. Rest is sustain, but without effort. You sustain just as long as it naturally lasts. It's out of your control, and that's perfectly fine. However long it lasts, that's the right amount.

What did you do when you got distracted from the breathing? Eventually you'd wake up, have the intention of mindfulness, connect, and sustain again. That's exactly what we're going to do with awareness. When you get distracted and wander off into fantasy land, thinking land, planning land—whatever it may be—at some point you'll realize that. You'll come back into the present. At that point: intention for mindfulness, turn, recognize, rest.

In this way, meditation on awareness can become as systematic as mindfulness of breathing. The more we approach it with this pattern—turn, recognize, rest—the more we will stabilize attention in awareness,

just as attention eventually stabilized in the breath. It wasn't stabilized all day. It may not even have been stabilized for an hour or ten minutes, but for periods, it became stable. The same thing can happen with attention on awareness.

As we practice this again and again—turn, recognize, rest—the resting will naturally get longer, but you cannot make it longer. If you try to make it longer, you're fussing with it.

There's an important piece here that's different from mindfulness of breathing. Once you have recognized, you stop doing. You stop all volitional activity. Why? Because that takes the self out of it. When we're engaged in deliberate volitional activity, we're introducing a motive. There's a wanting at work.

In mindfulness of breathing, you've all reached points where that volitional activity goes away and you can just rest in the stillness. It may not last very long—for some of you it does—but you've all reached those points where the stillness is self-sustaining and the effort can go out of mindfulness of breathing. There's a joy and delight in resting in that way.

This is a kind of surrendering—any attempt to control, any attempt to influence—and just letting things be as they are. There's immediate freedom in that. Whether you've reached it through concentration on the breath and that factor of stillness comes through, or in this case through the recognition of awareness and the ability to rest in that experience, there's a sense of freedom.

Learn to become familiar with that sense of freedom that is based on non-efforting, non-doing, resting. This becomes a great source of faith—the faith that you don't have to do anything to make things all right. Things are already all right, and you can trust in them the way they are. This is the beauty of resting. This is the beauty of stillness.

When do you need to do something again? Only when you've become distracted. Then attention needs to be recollected, intention toward mindfulness returns. Turn, recognize, rest. Connect with awareness again and sustain by resting, however long it lasts.

Not how long you make it last—however long it lasts.

This completes the first part I wanted to cover: the basic meditation instruction we'll work with for most of the remaining retreat. Turn, recognize, rest.

The second element I wanted to introduce concerns the means of turning and recognizing that has proven most effective in my practice. We've already explored several techniques—body space awareness, metta pervading awareness, the inquiry "am I aware?" These are all methods for turning. But I want to share with you the approach that has worked most powerfully for me.

One of my first teachers in this area was Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, a Tibetan Dzogchen master who had a small monastery outside Kathmandu, perched on a hilltop. His monastery was called Nagi Gompa. Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche had four sons, all recognized as Rinpoches. One was Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, who

teaches widely today through online and in-person programs. Another was Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who became our first teacher in this kind of practice—both Sally's and mine. He also had two older sons, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche and Chokling Rinpoche, who live in Nepal.

Though we initially met Tsoknyi Rinpoche, we eventually had the privilege of studying with his father, Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, at Nagi Gompa.

What I want to share is an account from Tsoknyi Rinpoche describing a teaching he received from his father. This appears in his book *Open Heart, Open Mind*. Tsoknyi Rinpoche recounts:

"I was able to spend only a few weeks with my father at his hermitage in Nagi Gompa. Near the end of my stay, though, he gave me a lesson in experiencing inner space that I'll never forget.

I was sitting in my father's private room—a small, wood-paneled space with a bed, an altar, and enough room for a few people. The setting sun cast golden-red light through the windows. My father said, 'Look at the area around you with all your senses open, seeing all the objects, feeling all the sensations. Don't block anything. Can you sense that openness, that simple awareness of the things you see and hear and feel?'

I nodded. With the sun setting through windows overlooking a broad valley, the sheer physical warmth of my father's body, and his sweet but penetrating gaze, it would have been hard not to be aware of all the phenomena.

Then he said, 'Now slowly turn that same awareness to the mind that perceives these things openly. Instead of looking at outer space, look at inner space.'

He demonstrated with his hands, turning his palms outward to show how we ordinarily perceive by looking outward, then turning his palms inward to indicate the mind that perceives. Then he let his hands drop into his lap to demonstrate letting the whole effort drop, allowing whatever happened to happen.

In that moment, due largely to the certainty and understanding he had cultivated over years of practice, I caught a glimpse of inner space—wide open and clear, completely beyond concepts or judgments—in which the entire realm of phenomena appear and disappear."

I'd like everyone to open their eyes for a moment. You don't need to mirror this gesture, but you can if it feels natural. Tulku Urgyen turned his palms outward to indicate the mind looking at objects, then turned them toward his face to show looking inward at the mind that perceives. Finally, he dropped them.

This gesture became the primary method I've used throughout years of practice in this style to connect with awareness. I eventually simplified it to using just one hand: look out, look in, drop.

I offer this as another cue you can use if it proves helpful. For years, I hesitated to share this teaching because it came through a specific lineage, and I didn't feel authorized to transmit those instructions. But since Tsoknyi Rinpoche published it in his book, it has become publicly available, and I now feel

comfortable sharing it based on his openness.

Let me demonstrate once more: out, in, drop.

Over time, this became increasingly subtle for me—eventually just the gentle turning of the palm would suffice. Later, simply seeing the back of my hand would open that space of awareness. Unlike some other techniques we've explored that involve multiple steps and take time to develop, this method is remarkably immediate.

With this understanding, let us now enter into meditation.

I'll repeat both the steps that we'll be using and suggest this hand gesture to see how it goes.

So again, please sit comfortably. Feel the uprightness and energy in your posture, as well as the groundedness and connection to the earth. Take a few moments to connect with the experience of breathing, feeling in the body the impact of breathing in and breathing out.

Now we can begin to practice with this instruction of turn—meaning turn the attention in the direction of awareness, recognize that awareness is present, and then rest with that experience of awareness.

Try this with the palm gesture that Swami Rinpoche described of his father. You can just visualize your palm facing away, representing our usual way of looking out toward the world. Then turn the hand back so the palm is facing you—the gesture of looking in—and then rest there.

Again: palm out, palm in, and rest.

Once you are in the phase of rest, you don't need to do anything else. Sense phenomena will still be happening. Sounds will come and go. Thoughts will come and go. The presence of a single thought does not have to disrupt the resting. It's only getting on the thought train and riding for a while that is a distraction.

You can notice that a thought can come and go and you can stay in touch with the broad field of knowing. Sensations come and go, sounds, there will be a mood, and thoughts will also be phenomena coming and going. None of that is an interruption to the resting.

Simply rest in a relaxed way, not trying to alter the experience, not trying to make it deeper or stiller or longer. Just open to this broad field of awareness, empty enough to hold all the arisings and their passing.

This field of awareness isn't constructed by us. It's already here. As we develop this practice of non-doing in the resting, we realize we're resting in what's already there—or we could say resting in reality itself. No effort is needed to improve it or change it.

As you rest in this field of awareness, you'll continue to perceive other sense phenomena. Sounds come and go, sensations arise and change, thoughts appear and disappear. You don't need to connect your

attention deliberately to those phenomena.

In choiceless attention on changing objects, we would connect the attention to each new predominant experience. A sound would call the attention and we'd go there and stay there for a bit. A sensation would stand out, we'd connect, and the attention would linger.

While you're resting with awareness, all these phenomena will be known. They will appear. You don't need to send the attention there to connect or sustain with them. The attention really stays in the broad field, although other arisings will be known. They are, you might say, left in the background.

If you've become distracted, then you again go through the steps of turn, recognize, rest. Notice that in the turning, there is volition, there is intention, there is effort. This is appropriate, the same way we would bring the attention back to the breath in samatha breathing. We deliberately bring the attention back to awareness in this meditation.

So the turning is a volitional step, and you can use any of the techniques that you found helpful: "Am I aware?" Body space awareness. Meta-pervading awareness. Even if it takes some seconds, your turning step, that's fine. This is appropriate.

Or you can try the palm—palm out, palm in—to connect to awareness. And then once you've recognized, you can rest there, letting go of effort in the resting.

I suggest that you try this as your ongoing meditation practice through the day: this turn, recognize, rest. I want to say just a bit more about each of these steps.

In the turn, this is a technique. Whatever technique helps you get there - maybe it's just saying the word "aware," maybe it's asking "am I aware?" maybe it's the palm turning back, maybe it's going in through metta. Whatever has worked best for you, use that today.

I find in the long run it's helpful to have two or three of these techniques. Because I find I use one for a while, and it's magic. I just... wow, I'm right there. But then the magic wears off. I use it, use it, use it, and the magic of it kind of wears off. And then I need to bring in another one for a while.

So it's good to have two or three backups. And then I use the other ones for a while, and I've taken a break, and then I use my primary one again. Wow... right back there again. So play with this. It's not that one is always going to work super well.

When you get to recognize, here is where you have to really use your own discernment and take what you get. This is as close as I'm getting right now to the experience of awareness. However clear that is, even if it's a little bit vague, you're a little unsure, trust what you get. Use one of these techniques that has been most helpful for you and believe in that.

We each hit awareness with different degrees of clarity and fullness and perception of emptiness in it. So

trust what you get when you do that turning with the tool that has seemed to work best for you. For each of us, that's our current vision of awareness, what it is.

And then when you get to rest, let it rest as long as it will. One of Tulku Urgyen's favorite sayings was, "short moments many times." If it doesn't last hugely long, that's okay. However long it lasts, that's fine.

A main factor that will let it last longer is samadhi. As concentration develops in the mind, that stability will carry over into the awareness practice. And that's really why we've done the concentration as a preparation for moving into awareness. The longer it lasts, the more you can feel the richness and the depth of the awareness that's there.

So that's why it's still helpful to do some concentration-style practices, say at the beginning of sits, even in this awareness phase. Or take a whole sitting and go back to breath or metta, really collect the mind, then open up again.

It doesn't really work to try to force the sustaining, to dictate how long it should last. It'll last as long as it does. And what makes it not last? Proliferation, or another term is grasping. Grasping, selfing, fixation, obsession, clinging. This will break up the access. This will block the access to awareness. It's no longer empty. There's a self. There's a strong self there.

So when that's come in, you need to find a way to let go of the holding and then connect again with awareness. So this is the outline of the practice.

Any questions this morning?

Ken and then Lisa.

"When you're explaining the turn, recognize, and rest, you talk about the volitional aspect of that."

"The turn."

"The turn. It seems to me in the turning of the palm..."

That is the turn. That's the technique of turning.

So let me just restate Ken's question if you didn't hear it. Where is the volition in this sequence: turn, recognize, rest? And I said, it's in the turn.

And he said, "But with the palm?" I said, "That's part of the turn." So that's volitional. The techniques for getting there are all volitional. Whether it's turning the palm or going through body space awareness or metta pervading awareness, these are the volitional steps. You call these to mind. You do that. And at the end of the turn, you get something. Whatever it is you get, stay there.

Lisa asked about when resting in awareness sustains for a while, there are arisings of qualities like joy

and tranquility and happiness. Other people have reported love and compassion coming in. The question was whether those should stay in the background as well.

This is where the background-foreground distinction might get a little misleading. You will notice them. Anytime you've been developing mindfulness around factors of mind, when factors of mind start arising in awareness practice, you will notice them in the same way you'd notice a sound or sensation. I want to be clear: these are sense arisings. They're very wholesome sense arisings, but they're still sense arisings.

So we basically notice them. It's good to notice them, and it indicates the mind has been trained to be aware of mental factors, which is really good mindfulness training. And we don't mess with them. We let them come when they come. As they fade, we let them fade when they fade.

With the recognition of peace and joy and tranquility, we also know as practitioners that these are really wholesome. It is a wholesome development that these things are arising. This is that quality—the third aspect of the nature of mind that we talked about. There's the emptiness, there's the cognizing, and there's the responsiveness.

As you've entered this field with good concentration and a good degree of metta, that's starting to unlock the heart qualities to really shine out. This is a beautiful happening. So we appreciate that it's there. We understand this is growth—our growth in the Dharma. This is part of the ripening of the responsiveness of mind. But we don't fuss with them.

It's kind of like we've let the Dharma take the lead. It will show us what's there. And those beautiful qualities will just get more and more unlocked and flow as we learn to trust in the resting—natural qualities of mind just coming through. It's good to notice them, just the same way we notice sounds, but we don't have to dwell on them. Come back to awareness itself and rest there. Continue to come back to awareness as the place you rest. And then these beautiful qualities can continue to flower.

Jiyoung asked about holding other kinds of thoughts—maybe some difficult thought or hard feeling. "Should I go back to meditation or vipassana? Going back to awareness sometimes feels..." This is an important point. The question is: when a difficult thought or emotion comes up—one of the hindrances—should one just go back to awareness and sort of leave it in the background, or should one attend to it with metta or vipassana?

This is really a judgment call. Jiyoung's comment was that it feels like just ignoring it is not really taking care of herself, is not really attending to what needs to be attended to. If there's any feeling that what's arising is important enough that it needs to be attended to, then I would move from awareness and meet it with vipassana or metta and tend to it in that way. It is a judgment that each of us makes, and we need to make it out of a real sense of heartfulness: "Oh, this is really calling me."

I need to give attention to this. We work with it through metta or in vipassana with RAIN, the heart of which is this quality of real acceptance. I need to give my attention to it and accept that this emotion is

there. It needs to be met, recognized, and honored.

Once we do that for a while, usually our relationship with it becomes clearer and calmer, and we can return to awareness. But if it feels like the hindrance is really strong and drawing us in, then it's good to attend to it. If we don't—and you all probably know this—we run the risk of bypassing. We're trying to use this lofty ideal of open awareness to avoid attending to emotional things that need attention.

When we don't attend to the emotional things that require our care, they end up causing suffering later, not only for ourselves, but usually for others. So it's beneficial to tend to these things when they arise. One of the metrics I always look at is the intensity of it, how strong the emotion is. If it's strong, I tend to think it needs to be taken care of. If it's weak, we can leave it in the background and stay with awareness.

Happy Juneteenth. Today is the day we celebrate the ending of slavery in this country. And happy Father's Day to all the dads out there. Let's include all other parents—happy Parents' Day. Just in recognition of how much each of our lives has depended on the care from others, and we continue, hopefully, to pass that care on. So, happy taking care of one another day.

Thank you for listening.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*