The Awareness Game (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:03:29

This morning we're going to start the retreat by talking about awareness, because if we're doing a meditation practice, everything that we do revolves around awareness itself and our relationship with awareness. Getting this right is absolutely central. So we're going to begin with talking about what we mean by awareness.

The term the Buddha uses is *viññāṇa*. Classically you see it translated as consciousness. I prefer to avoid that translation because the English word "consciousness" has been used extensively in Western philosophy and it's acquired all sorts of technical connotations that don't really apply. So I prefer to use the word "awareness." It's more basic.

If we ask, "What is awareness?" we could say that awareness is the presence of whatever is present.

What does that mean? We could start with something quite basic, like seeing. For example, right now, are you seeing? Is that happening? If your eyes are open, then the answer is probably yes. And what does it mean to see? Doesn't that mean that there's a visual field in front of you? This room and the people in the room are present to you. Since they are present to you visually, you see. There is visual awareness. Awareness is the presence, the fact that something is present.

In the case of seeing, awareness is not the room. It's not the people in the room. It's the fact that the room and the people in the room are present.

Now, as a result of decades of intensive meditation practice, I've developed a supernormal power which enables me to make you completely disappear. I'll show you. You're gone. You are no longer present. Oh, you've come back. You are present. Absent, present. Awareness, visual awareness, no visual awareness.

You can see on the one hand how simple it is. But on the other hand, do you remember the discovery that you could make the world go away by shutting your eyes when you were little? Did you ever make that discovery? Was it an amazing discovery? It was quite mind-blowing. But now, of course, we just take it completely for granted because we take awareness for granted. We're never actually aware of it.

This is awareness, and as you can see, it's the most obvious thing in experience, because you cannot have an experience without awareness. If there's an experience, there's awareness. But it's also the most mysterious thing because we never pay any attention to it. In the case of seeing, we pay attention to what we are seeing. We assume that what we are seeing is what's important—that's what it's about. We never pay any attention to the fact of seeing, to the awareness itself.

So it's obvious, but it's mysterious, because awareness isn't a something. It's the presence of something. We tend to overlook it because it is so obvious that we just don't notice it anymore.

But when we take up a meditation practice, we become interested in awareness. This is the central fact that we begin to get interested in.

Awareness has been compared to light, and it's quite a good simile. We have the expression, "he saw the light." But do we actually see light? We can argue that no, we don't see light—we know there is light because we see things.

So is there light in this room? Yes. How do I know there's light? Because the room is present to me. But I don't actually see the light. I see you. Therefore, I know there's light.

Awareness is like light. We know that there is light because the world is present to us. We know there is awareness because the world is present to us.

Imagine stepping into a dark room at night, a room which is completely dark. We step into it. What is present to us? Only darkness. We switch on the light and suddenly the room and everything in it is present. The quality of presence is awareness. The room and everything in it is the object of awareness—it's what we are aware of.

This brings us to the object of awareness. If there is awareness, there is an object of awareness. In other words, there is something we are aware of. If I'm aware, I am aware of something. If I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. If I'm thinking, I'm thinking something. This something is the object of awareness.

Usually when we talk about meditation practice, we often discuss it in terms of the meditation object. The most popular meditation object is probably the breath. "I want you to sit there and for the next hour be aware of your breathing." In other words, the object of awareness is the breathing. But notice—that's not the awareness itself. The awareness is there as well.

So when we're working with awareness, we have the object of awareness—what we are aware of—and we have the awareness itself. They always go together.

Awareness is something which is already happening. It's part of nature. The Buddha classifies it as an element, an elemental quality of nature. It's already happening. We are already aware. We don't have to do anything to be aware.

In the Buddhist tradition they say it is the mind's nature to be aware of an object. That is what it does, and it does so regardless of whether or not we want it to. It just does it.

So for example, if I ask myself the question, "Am I aware now?" the answer is always yes. Always. One hundred percent. And if I ask myself the question, "Am I making any particular effort to be aware now?" the answer is no. It's just happening.

So awareness has this quality of being already here. There's nothing we have to do in order to be aware. And this can be interesting from a meditation perspective.

Years ago, when Sayadaw U Tejaniya first came to Australia, he opened up his retreat by asking the punters, "Are you aware now?" To which the answer, again, is obviously yes. Then he asked the question, "Are you making any particular effort to be aware now?" And the answer to that question is again, obviously, no. But then he added, "That's all the effort you ever have to make in meditation practice. You never have to make any more effort than that."

I have to say that came as a bit of a shock, because I was trained in the U Pandita school of Mahasi meditation, which is all about more effort. So there was a bit of discombobulation there. And we are going to explore this whole issue of effort in the meditation practice. Of course it's particularly important if we're about to embark on meditation for a month.

Let me channel U Pandita: "Can you make heroic, unceasing, relentless, remorseless and heroic effort for a month without a break?" Nope. Maybe not. Or you could try the Tejaniya approach: "Can you manage to notice that you're already awake?" It's quite a different approach. So this is the sort of thing that we want to explore.

Let's look at it in this way. Let's try another question. Right now, are you sitting? Is there anyone in this room who's sitting? Yes? Very good. How do you know? How do you know you are sitting? Well, don't you just know? In other words, we are already aware of our posture. We already know we are sitting. It's already available. There is this basic awareness of, essentially, how the body occupies space, and it's already available.

But did you notice any difference between your awareness of the fact that you were sitting before I asked, and your awareness once I asked? Was there any change?

Now, the English word "awareness" is pretty much always presented as a noun. But awareness also indicates an action. Notice the difference between these two questions: "Are you aware you are sitting?" versus "Can you aware your sitting posture?"

The first question is asking you about your state of being. Are you aware or not? How are you now? The second question, "Can you aware your sitting posture," is asking you to do something. In English, we don't use awareness as a verb. But in fact, it does work as a verb—the verb "to aware." In Pali, there is such a verb, *vijānāti*, from which we get *viññāṇa*. In Burmese, there is also such a verb.

Those of you familiar with Mahasi's approach to meditation, have you heard the expression "to note"? You must note this, that, or the other. Now, the use of this verb is somewhat confusing. When Mahasi was teaching in Burmese, he used a standard Burmese verb which essentially would be translated as "to aware." But when his English-speaking Burmese students were translating him into English, they scratched their heads and said, "But English-speaking people don't say 'to aware.' So we have to use

another verb."

So they came up with the verb "to note." But of course that creates all sorts of confusions, because for us "to note" means to make a note—so it's conceptual. But when Mahasi talks about his approach to meditation, he talks about noting, and what he means is to aware. This awaring is absolutely central to everything that he's talking about.

And if we ask, what is the source of awaring? Of awaring as an action? Where does it come from? What's its origin? What is its source? Is it effort? I would suggest no. Effort has got nothing to do with it. Effort comes later. Effort comes in the commitment to renew awaring. But what is the source of awaring? Where does it come from? Essentially it comes from choice—the choice made now to aware.

So this morning, as we play around with awareness, forget about effort and just choose. And you notice that with choice, we do not try to choose. That is complete nonsense. We just choose. Even if we refuse to choose, that's a choice. We don't try to choose. Trying, effort—these have got nothing to do with choice. We simply choose. And we do it now. It's really that simple.

So what we're going to do is play around with the choice to aware, just to get a sense of it. We want to develop the habit of choosing to aware. And to get a sense of it, we're going to play a game—the awareness game. It's important to emphasize that this is a game. In other words, do not try to play this game. If we try, if we're making effort, we're making something that is not heavy seem heavy. So don't make it heavy. Just play. Don't try. Do not make effort.

The game is this: we'll play it for about five minutes. Now, this is not meditation practice, so there's absolutely no need whatsoever to maintain any sort of meditation posture. There's absolutely no need whatsoever to stay in the hall. At the end of five minutes, I'm going to go outside and ring this bell, so if you're wandering about, just come back in after about five minutes. You can stay here if you want to. You can sit if you want to. You can wander around if you want to. You can lie down if you want to. You can go outside if you want to. Just do whatever you like—it doesn't matter.

But remember to mentally name "aware." In other words, every now and again, just drop in the word mentally: aware. Just doing whatever you're doing—aware.

Now, the idea is that when we drop in this word "aware," we are reminding ourselves that we are aware. We're not doing anything to be aware. We're just reminding ourselves: oh, that's right, I'm aware. And no effort is involved because mind is already aware. It's just a question of remembering—remembering to drop in the word "aware."

So do that, and just check to see what you are aware-ing. It can be anything. It doesn't matter what it is. Just notice the fact that you are aware-ing. And don't be concerned with how long this awareness lasts. It may not last very long at all. You may realize within seconds, whoops, I've completely forgotten. How long the awareness lasts is not the issue. The issue is to remember to drop in that word, "aware." And when you

do it, see what happens.

Again, we're not concerned with what we are aware-ing. It can be anything. Just aware. That's all.

A student asked, "By dropping that word 'aware,' isn't it encouraging an effort?"

Find out. See if you're making effort when you do that. And if so, where is the effort? This is a game, an experiment. Let's see what happens. What we're trying to do is just become familiar with the territory. Now it's weird because we're already familiar with it, but we're so familiar with it we don't notice it anymore. So you just want to notice it. What does happen?

Beginner's mind. Don't take anything for granted. Just play with it and see what happens.

Another student raised the awkwardness of the expression: "Is there any reason it couldn't be 'to be aware,' which is more familiar?"

It's much more familiar because "to be aware" is the way we normally use it. And it turns awareness into a noun and describes our state: I am aware, I am not aware. But we are trying to get a sense of aware-ing as an action, as an activity. And it is unfamiliar. Even with consciousness—there is the verb "to cognize," but you don't see it used very much at all. In our culture, we simply do not treat awareness as an activity. It's alien to the way we use language.

But in the Buddha's language it isn't. He has a clear sense of the activity of minding, aware-ing, perceiving, and so on. So this is unfamiliar, but that very unfamiliarity may be advantageous. It may get you to notice something that otherwise you wouldn't notice. But again, it's just a game. Play with it, see what happens. If you don't like the game, you never have to play it again.

Remember, you're not meditating and you're not making any effort. Just play.

Okay, how did it go? What happened? And in particular, was there any effort involved? That would be a good place to start.

One participant shared: "To bring myself back when I got off..." So there was something, there was an activity. You had to do something. "I had to choose to."

Thank you. So there was a state of drift and then you made a choice? "Yes, and I guess because I'd gone out with the decision to do that, the choice, the kind of activity wasn't such a heavy thing, like 'okay, I'm going to choose.' It was more like 'oh.'"

So that was almost like when you're driving and you just go, "oh, I have to change gears." It wasn't really heavy or difficult, but it was something that had to be done. You just kind of do it—well, not quite automatically. You just do it.

Anyone else? How was it?

"I find as soon as that word 'aware' comes in, it's automatically in the body. It seems to have been patented, or maybe that's just the way it is. That 'aware' means, oh, what's happening in the body? And it will go to a specific place where there's stress or tension, if there is, or contact with something. So the mind seems pretty much conditioned that the first thing to be aware of is body."

I have the same sort of experience when I play this game. It's very physical. And it is interesting that the first satipaṭṭhāna is mindfulness of body—that the Buddha puts that at the center of the whole enterprise. To the point where... well, I like to say that meditation is not a spiritual activity. It's a physical activity. Because we do it with the body. And we do it not just with the body, but we do it *as* body.

"The other thing I noticed in retreat conditions is that it happens so frequently that I can't take it for granted."

So the difference in a retreat is that you're undertaking the project of noticing it. In my ordinary life, I'm busy doing something, so all my interest and concern is thrown into the something, and I tend to neglect the awaring of it. But in the retreat, we're interested in the awaring. What exactly happens isn't so important. We're creating a very boring environment, so it's the awaring itself which becomes interesting.

"For people that have ADHD, awareness is a very active thing. It's been called one of the advantages of having ADHD. I think that a lot of it depends on the kind of personality you have and how you experience it."

Yes, that's true. We each bring our own particular personality to the meditation practice, and that personality shapes the whole enterprise. And it's one of the dangers of a meditation technique which purports to be universal—"you must follow these instructions." But often that doesn't work because of the individual nature of the personality. The effect of those instructions can be radically different for two different people. So you really pay attention to, in this case, your particular relationship to awareness.

And that relationship sounds like it's quite active. So presumably you would be very careful about not adding too much activity.

Whereas somebody else might be really working on actively aware-ing. But it may be that for you, that's the last thing you want to do. You just want to step back and notice that activity is already going on and not add anything extra to it.

"I think I'm along the same lines. Every time I said the word 'aware,' I saw everything—things that I hadn't noticed at the beginning. So of course, you can't be aware all the time. Too much energy. Also, ADHD. And then I started getting anxious. I noticed my foot moving, and as I recognized that as anxiety, it moved faster. A very confusing, weird moment."

So it's like you're riding a high-energy horse, and the last thing you want to do is say, "Giddy up." But again, you're getting a sense of your relationship with awareness—how that relationship can work for

you, how it can be effective for you. And how, if the meditation teacher emphasizes making more effort, you simply don't.

"Does that change when you're doing a meditation practice?"

No.

"But do the places where you stop change? Or is there a continuity between everyday awareness and meditation awareness?"

"Yeah, there is. It's recognizing that I'm no longer focusing on my breath, and then going back to it."

We shall explore that whole issue as we go through the retreat. It's a very interesting one.

"I thought it was a really pleasant exercise. It was nice not to use choice in the awareness. I just noticed where the awareness was. I didn't notice when I'd lost awareness, but I noticed the discontinuity of awareness and just enjoyed not forcing awareness on a particular object."

So it sounds like you enjoyed in particular not getting caught up in effort, not getting caught up in trying to do something.

"But it did involve remembering the awareness."

And did remembering the awareness feel active?

"It didn't. It just happens. But it was accompanied by a thought of, 'Where did that drop off? I didn't notice.'"

So the forgetting of awareness happened naturally, and the remembering of it happened naturally. And of course, the remembering of awareness is mindfulness, which we'll talk more about as we go through.

Let's play the game one more time, but we're going to change it slightly to get a different flavor—which I think you've already dabbled with, unless I misunderstood. Instead of saying "aware," we're going to name what we're aware of. As we've talked about, if I'm aware, I'm aware of something. One way of saying this is that awareness presents in the structure of a dyad: awareness and its object.

Awareness of X. And that's built in. If there's awareness, there's an object of awareness. If there's an object of awareness, there's awareness. It's always locked in.

Usually in our everyday life, what we're concerned with, what we're interested in, is the object. And we don't pay attention to the awareness itself. Whereas in this first game, we were persuading ourselves to get interested in the awareness itself. Now we're going to shift the focus to the other end of the dyad, to see the kind of awareness that we're doing.

For example, let's work with which of the six senses we're aware of: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting,

touching, minding. Minding includes thinking—most obviously it's thinking, but basically anything that's happening in the mind.

"In that exercise we just did, I found myself moving from noticing the sensations in my body, to seeing all the greenery, to hearing the rain. It bounced between all of those things. And then there was a thought, and I was lost in the thought for a minute, then I chose to come back. It just kept bouncing. But it was really nice, relatively relaxing."

"Yeah, it was lovely."

So this time, all that's different is instead of saying "aware," you just notice what it is. Seeing. Hearing. Touch. You just drop in what general kind of object is presenting itself to you at the moment. Does that make sense?

One would expect to be bouncing around. That would be perfectly normal. But every now and again, you just check: where is it now? Oh, that's where it is. Where's the awareness now? Oh, that's where it is. And again, you're not trying to make it go anywhere. You're not expecting it to behave in a certain way. You're just checking in. Oh, there you are. Oh, you're over here now. Oh, there you are. That's it.

"One of the reasons I like walking meditation is that if you lose your focus, you're very likely to stumble. And if you escalate from that to running a power tool, losing a finger—that's not paying attention."

Yeah, absolutely. You could say it's a basic human safety mechanism. We monitor what we're doing.

One thing I find interesting when I'm doing intensive meditation practice—well, one of the instructions I give at the beginning of a retreat, probably this afternoon, is: be graceful. As a meditation instruction, what this means in practice is be committed to noticing when you're clumsy. So if I stumble into something, trip over something, make a loud noise doing something—just pause. Oh, that's interesting. And check: what happened just then?

For me, usually it's because the awareness slipped away from the body into the mind, and I didn't notice it do so. That's when I stumbled.

Anyway, at this point we played another game. We actually did longer than five minutes, but the same principle: play, no effort.

Don't make effort. Don't meditate. Just drop it. Remember to simply drop in the word—seeing or hearing or smelling or tasting or touching or minding. And if minding is too abstract, thinking.

So how did it go? Is there a difference between dropping in the word "aware" versus dropping in where the awareness is going?

"Yes, definitely. I think we're more conditioned to focus on an object."

So it's easier?

"Yes, a lot easier because you're aware of an object, aware of a sensation, aware of a thought. It's just more what we're accustomed to doing. So that was almost natural."

Much more habitual, therefore easier.

"Still very fleeting. Because if you're aware, the next moment you have no idea what's happening."

One teacher uses the expression "to switch the awareness light on." It's like this image of stepping into a dark room and switching the light on. The problem is, the light then goes off by itself. So you switch it on again, but then it goes off. So you switch it on again. And what he points out is that it's not the meditator's business how long the light stays on. That's irrelevant. Just remember to switch it on. And that builds the habit. Don't be preoccupied by thinking, "Oh my God, it doesn't last very long."

"Well, that's the hard bit, because the controlling part wants to say, 'I need to be aware of that.'"

Yes.

"It's just not happening."

Yes. And that's where we get tangled up in too much effort and too much conceptualizing.

Anyone else? How did you find this second one?

"I agree it was easier to note the sensations and the different doors. I was aware that it was a multiple factor. There would be a strong physical sensation, and being with it, and then a bird would call. And the sensation in the body was still strong enough that I could feel it, be with it. And then going off to the bird, it was almost like they were intermingling a little bit, layering on top of each other. It happened also with any sounds that were happening, bodily sensations, and then visually, I would open my eyes and then the bird would call. So it was all coming together."

Yes. And was it coming together as the body or in the body?

"It was hard to stay with just noting 'sensation' because it would come up either as hardness or tingling or pressure or pain, rather than just a more neutral sensation. So it would move from one aspect to another, to another, to another."

Very quickly?

"Well, with regard to the sensation, it would stay. But to just say 'sensation,' it couldn't land there. It was more identifying what the sensation was."

Yes. And of course in this exercise, you don't have to.

You're just aware of it. We're keeping it very, quite deliberately, very simple.

"I was wondering if I was getting too involved," you might say. But actually, it sounds like the mind wanted to get involved, and you were being dragged along for the ride. In which case, you could have named it "involved" or "tangled." What's important is that you're opening up to seeing what the mind is doing. It can do whatever it likes, but awareness asks: well, what is it doing?

To sum up what we've been doing this morning: first of all, we've been emphasizing that awareness is part of nature. It's already here. It is already happening. It's just a matter of remembering it. And the remembering—that's the central bit the Buddha emphasizes. This is what in English is called mindfulness: remembering the awareness.

So the whole issue of effort becomes very interesting. How much effort do I have to make? What role does effort actually play? Do I have to make an effort to be aware? If so, what kind? What is it exactly?

When you take up the meditation practice, don't take up a heavy burden, something you've got to do. Rather, take it up lightly and play with it as a game. See what happens. How does it work? What does the mind do? Where does it go? There's more interest, more curiosity than effort.

Notice that awareness presents in the structure of a dyad: awareness and its object. If we name "aware," we're pointing towards awareness itself. If we name seeing, touching, and so forth, we're pointing towards the object. Either one includes the other. If there's one, the other has turned up for the dance. But our habit tends to be preoccupation with the object—that's usually the most obvious aspect for us.

So play around with awareness. Your mission, should you choose to accept, is to remember awareness. And do not take it seriously. Don't make an effort to be aware. Don't try to be aware. Just remember to play the game and be interested in the result.

That's enough for this morning. This afternoon we'll have a look at mindfulness itself, and then in the evening we'll talk more about the actual meditation method that Mahasi presents. We're taking it step by step.

If you feel the need, go and rest. If you've got the energy, go for it. Do whatever practice you find appropriate. But just be interested in awareness itself. Perhaps remember to drop in those little reminders: aware, seeing, thinking—whatever.

This is part of the process of settling in, settling down, and becoming familiar with awareness. We've entered a realm in which what we are doing is not all that important. What's central is the awaring.

So start to get interested in the awaring itself.

Any final questions or comments?

Good luck.

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