The Awareness Game (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 43:30

This morning we're going to start off by playing a game—the awareness game—because meditation practice is all about awareness and our relationship with awareness.

We'll begin by defining our terms, what we mean by awareness. In Pali the term is *vijñāna*. Often, usually, you see it translated as consciousness. I prefer translating it as awareness because the English word consciousness has all sorts of philosophical uses and connotations which just get in the way of trying to work out what the Buddha is talking about. Awareness is a much more ordinary, everyday word, so I prefer that.

So from the Buddha's perspective, what is awareness? When we get down to its elemental essence, awareness is the presence of whatever is present.

For example, right now, are you seeing? Is anybody in this room seeing? So what does it mean to see? What's the experience? Doesn't it mean that this room and the people and things in this room are present to you?

Now, there is a magic trick where you can make them go away. I'll demonstrate it. Try doing that. As the room and the people in the room disappear, they are absent. You open your eyes, they are present. You close your eyes, they are absent. Now as adults you feel like a complete idiot doing this. Do you remember when you were a child and you discovered that? You discovered you could make the entire world go away—admittedly, only for a relatively short period of time. This is when we first played around with awareness.

So awareness is presence. And we can say that awareness is like light. In English we have the expression, "he saw the light." But do we in fact see light? What we see is the world. But we see the world because there is light. So is there light here in this room? Obviously. How do we know that there's light in this room? Because the room is present. What we call light can be found in the fact of presence.

Awareness is like light. We step into a dark room at night—what is present to us? Just darkness. We switch on the light and suddenly the room and everything in the room is clearly, vividly present. This is how light is like awareness. Awareness is not the room; it's the appearance from darkness of the room.

And this is what makes awareness, in this elemental quality of it, so slippery. Awareness is both the most obvious thing, because we can't have an experience without it, but it's also incredibly slippery and obscure because we can't actually pin it down. Awareness in its essence is not a something; it's the presence of something.

But of course, whenever there is presence, there is something which is present. So we call presence itself awareness, and the something which is present is the object of awareness. Which is a complicated way of saying that when I am aware, I am aware of something. When I'm seeing, I'm seeing something. When I'm hearing, I'm hearing something. When I'm thinking, I'm thinking something.

In the context of the meditation practice, we call this something the meditation object—the object of awareness when we're practicing meditation. And of course, when we talk about meditation, a fair bit of the time we talk about the meditation object, and this is what it is.

When we take something for granted, we forget. We don't notice that we already know.

Awareness is part of nature. The Buddha classifies it as an element, a dhatu. It is part of nature and it is already happening. In other words, we are already aware. We're already doing it. Even if we do not want to be aware—and sometimes we don't—we are. We can't get away from it.

The Buddhist tradition says it is the mind's nature to aware an object. That is what it does, and the mind does not stop to ask our permission or how we feel about it. It just does it. It just awares.

So if I ask myself the question, am I aware now? What's the answer? Yes. Am I making any particular effort to be aware now? The answer is no.

Now what does this suggest to us as meditators, as practitioners? What it suggests is that awareness is not a matter of effort. We do not try to be aware. We simply are aware. Effort is not involved. And this is very interesting data when you embark on a meditation retreat. It's fundamentally not about effort.

But while effort is not involved, action is. And this is something that we tend to miss.

Let's ask a more specific question. Right now, are you sitting? If the answer is yes, how do you know you are sitting? And the answer is, well of course I know. It's obvious. We are already aware of our posture in a general sense. We basically know how our body occupies space. So if I'm aware of my posture as a deliberate meditation exercise, I'm being aware of what is obvious and already available to me. Yet if I'm doing this, I am performing an action. I'm doing something.

We miss this very easily, partly because of how we conceptualize awareness. In English, for example, we use the word awareness as a noun. We treat it as a something. And we tend to overlook the activity of aware-ing.

Let's approach the same experience of sitting using two different questions. The first question is: are you aware you are sitting? Probably the answer is yes. The second question is: can you aware your sitting posture?

Do you notice the difference between the two questions and the answers that come up? The first question is asking about your state of being—are you aware or not? The second question is asking you to do

something.

In this retreat, what we are doing is aware-ing. We spend a lot of time playing with awareness, which means we spend a lot of time aware-ing.

The Buddha spoke Pali, an ancient Indian language very closely related to Sanskrit. In Sanskrit-based languages, there's a tighter relationship between nouns and verbs than we find in English. In one discourse, the Buddha explains the nature of awareness, and this is what he says: Why do we say awareness? We aware. That's why we say awareness.

In English, we don't quite get the connection, but in Pali it would be: why do we say *viññāna*? Because we *vijānāti*—therefore *viññāna*. The sounds are very close, and for the Buddha's audience, the connection was obvious. What he was getting at would have been immediately clear. For us, it's more difficult in English.

We know awareness because we are doing something. We are awaring. And in our meditation practice, we are going to be awaring the flow of our experience.

Now, what is the source of this awaring? Where does it come from? Does it come from effort? No. Effort comes later on. Effort comes as the commitment to maintaining awaring over a period of time without any break. That's where effort fits in.

If all this is true—if awaring is part of nature and is already happening regardless of our opinion—why is meditation so difficult? Does anybody find meditation difficult? A couple of people. Not many. Good. Glad to see we've got such an advanced crew.

Just my own personal speculation, but I think there are a couple of reasons. Partly it's because when we're doing a meditation practice, we are struggling to aware some things rather than other things. When we embark on a meditation practice, usually we're given a meditation object and told to aware this—the approved meditation object—rather than anything else. We divide the world into two: meditation object is good, and everything else is distraction, which is really bad. We really don't want any of that in this meditation hall. When we do that, we're setting ourselves up for a struggle.

But the major difficulty, I think, comes from our habit of forgetting awareness. We simply forget we are aware, and we forget what we are aware of. We'll talk about this more as we go through the retreat. For the moment, let's just leave it hanging there.

If we have a habit of forgetting awareness, then what's the cure? The cure is to practice remembering awareness—to make awaring a habit. It's currently our habit to forget awareness. What we want is a new habit of remembering it. And this remembering awareness is mindfulness. So a lot of this practice is basically developing the habit of remembering awareness.

Of course, when we practice something, that's what we become skilled at. We have spent many years practicing to forget awareness, and we have become very good at it. In this retreat, we're practicing to

remember awareness, and although we may not be very good at this today, over time, if we practice it, we will get better at it.

Now, to help with this, let's play the awareness game. Keep in mind that the title is deliberate. This is just a game. Do not try. Effort makes something that is not heavy seem heavy. So do not try, and do not meditate. If I see anybody meditating, you'll be in trouble.

For this game, there's no need to maintain a meditation posture. You can do whatever you like—get up and stretch, look out the window, wander around. You just want to be able to hear what I'm saying. So feel free to abandon your meditation posture and do whatever you like. A few people beginning to relax already. That's a good sign.

Okay, so all I want you to do is to remind yourself that you are already aware. I suggest that you could do this by mentally naming "aware."

So what we want to do is remember awareness. Every now and again, whatever you're doing—it doesn't matter what you're doing—remember to mentally say "aware." It just reminds us: oh, I'm awake. Just remember. Every now and again, mentally say "aware."

And when you do this, does awareness become apparent? Aware. No effort to be aware is involved because mind is already aware. So don't try, just remember. Oh, aware. Don't be concerned with what you are aware of—it can be anything at all. Just notice awareness itself.

And don't be concerned with how long you can remember awareness. It may be just for a moment, and then you forget again, because it's our habit to forget awareness. The more often we remember to be aware, the stronger the habit of remembering awareness will become, and so the time we spend aware will naturally expand.

It's like noticing that we are in the dark and then switching on the light of awareness. Aware. And when we do this, we don't care how long the light of awareness stays on. That's not our business. Our business is to remember. Aware. And again, notice that we are not concerned with what we are aware of. It can be anything at all. Just aware.

Okay. So how did it go? What's your experience of awareness?

One person shared: "It seemed that as well as being aware or not, or being aware of being aware, there was also a question of *how* I was aware. I felt that when I was just sitting without noticing, it was a kinesthetic awareness, which turned into a kind of sensory awareness."

What's the difference between kinesthetic and sensory?

"Kinesthetic is knowing yourself in space even if there are no sensations that you can pinpoint that tell you where you are. Whereas if I put my arm up, I've got some sensations of tightness and things like that.

But I know exactly where my little finger is up there without a specific sense. And physiologically they're different."

Good. Anyone else? What was it like? What did you discover?

Another participant responded: "Just constantly changing, you know—different things, the awareness of different things. And occasionally the mind just flitting off and losing the awareness, in a sense, until I realized the mind had flitted off and I brought it back."

Yes, the constant natural change in the world. It never stays still. Constantly shifting and darting about. And sometimes it darts about without you noticing it, and then you remember. That pretty much sums up the entire meditation practice.

Shall we modify the game a bit? Instead of saying "aware," we're going to name what we are aware of. Now, as we've talked about, awareness presents in the structure of a dyad: awareness and its object. Always it presents with that structure. In simple terms, when we are aware, we are aware of something. If we are seeing, we are seeing something. If we are thinking, we are thinking something.

In the first game, we were not interested in what we were aware of—we were just interested in the aware itself, so we just named it "aware."

Now we're going to become interested in the kind of aware that we are doing. We're going to use the six senses as our framework. Which of the six senses are we aware of? Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, minding.

For the Buddha, mind is another sense. If you're not quite sure what he's getting at, we'll just make it thinking. That will make it simpler.

So we'll start. And again, no meditating—I find it somewhat disturbing. Just see what happens when you remember to be aware of whatever you are in contact with. You can name if you find it useful. If you realise you're seeing, then say "seeing," and so forth. What are you aware of now? Which of the senses is strong now? What is clear now? What is obvious now? What's happening now?

How did it go? What was clear? What was obvious?

"Hearing." "The body." The whole body? "I found the contact of the buttocks on the cushion and the movement of the body kept being obvious to me."

Did you find you favoured any one particular sense?

"Seeing." That was the one you kept coming back to? "Yes, it's just so dominant."

When Mahasi Sayadaw defines what he means by insight meditation, he says the practice is to directly be aware of whatever is predominant in any of the six senses now. So it's a wide open practice.

From this morning, hopefully what we get a sense of is this: first, awareness is part of nature. It's already here. It's just a matter of remembering it. And awareness presents in the structure of a dyad—awareness and its object. I can be interested in either end of the dyad. If I name "aware," I'm directing the mind towards the aware-ing itself. If I name seeing, touching, and so forth, I'm directing awareness towards the object itself.

Either one works because each contains the other. But you might find you feel more interested in one rather than the other.

Awareness always presents as a dyad. There's the aware-ing and there's what is aware of. In the first exercise, when we just remembered aware, we were aiming at the aware-ing. In the second one, we were looking at what we are aware of—the object. And that's a continuum, a spectrum. Each contains the other.

But there's a shift in emphasis. Some people find that what works for them is to go for the object, because that's more clear than the awareing itself. Certainly that's our habit—we tend to be fixated on the object of all habits. But some people might find that simply aware itself might work for them. You've just played with it, so you've got a sense of it. And you might find yourself dancing between the two ends of the spectrum. There are different possibilities available.

As you do this, as you play with both, do you find they're different? Or are they essentially the same? What's your experience of it? If they're different, which one are you more comfortable with, more naturally than the other? And among the senses, which sense tends to be predominant? This is just playing around with it and getting a sense of how awareness works, what it's doing.

The key points are: remember to aware, and do not take this seriously. No effort. Do not try to aware—because awareness is already happening. If we try, we may well just smother the experience and make something big and stressful out of it when it really isn't. So just remember to play the game, but be interested in the result.

Your mission this morning, should you choose to accept it, is to play the awareness game. Do it in whatever posture you like, in whatever way you like. As we mentioned last night, you could play the awareness game of being aware of going back to your room and taking a nice post-breakfast nap. That's another way to play the game. So play with it. And you notice that we haven't actually started any kind of meditation yet—we'll talk about meditation this afternoon. But for the moment, just play with awareness.

A question arose: So is it remembering to aware, or remembering that we are aware?

Either one works. Though the first one indicates an action—remember to do something. But you're already doing it. So you can't remember to do it, but we've forgotten that we're doing it. We can remember that we are doing it. That would be a good way to look at it, if that makes sense to you. When we talk about awareness, as I said, it is very, very slippery. It's both bleeding obvious and extremely slippery. So whatever form of words helps you get in touch with it.

Someone observed: Not just to think of seeing as it were what we are wearing, but there's kind of the seeing and there is what we are seeing. So there's awareness in the seeing, and there's what we are seeing.

That's right. Seeing itself is a form of awareness, but the object of awareness is usually the thing that we think we have seen. And in general, our habit is to fixate on the object so that we miss the awareing. But when we engage in meditation practice, we want to actually open up to the awareing itself, because that opens up a whole field of very interesting stuff that's going on.

Another practitioner wondered: When you gave the example of feeling the bobbles on the cushion underneath you, during the second version of the game I was noticing seeing, hearing, sensing, but I wasn't so much paying attention to what it was that I was seeing, hearing, sensing—just the more general category. I was just seeing. So when you gave your example of what you were actually feeling, I started to wonder, is that what I should have been doing? Not just noticing sensing, but noticing the sensing of the thing that I was sensing?

No, there's no should here.

There's different ways of playing the game. But there's no should. What happened for me was, as I was asking myself what I was aware of, that question came up naturally—well, what am I aware of? And I thought, well, this is what I'm aware of. Very simple and straightforward.

Once you start to get interested, you can play the game in different ways. You could just decide that you're going to stick to the categories: seeing, hearing. When I do my own retreats, my own practice, usually that's the way I begin. I want to keep it very simple and straightforward—which of the senses is predominant? So I'm not particularly concerned with what I'm seeing, what I'm hearing, what I'm touching. It's just in general, because it's like a broader target, and that gets me settled. Then it naturally goes into what the object is, what I'm actually perceiving. It starts broad and then comes in. But this is just what happened for me at this particular time. That's why I mentioned it.

So there are different ways of playing with it. If you ask the question, "What should I be doing?"—at that point, it sounds like you're turning it into work. It sounds like you're turning it into something that you might succeed at, in which case you get a wombat stamp, or you might fail at, in which case your wombat stamps are in danger. And that's not a game anymore.

I think the attitude of playing with it is important—that you don't have an attitude of winning or losing, doing it right or doing it wrong. It's more like a childlike, spontaneous approach where whatever it is, is what it is. But you remain interested in it and curious about how it unfolds.

Meditator: I became aware that hearing was quite predominant for me. Then I started thinking, well, I have all these other senses, so I wonder if I focus on my sense of touch, what am I going to experience on the cushion? So that becomes a bit of an effort then, to purposely change around rather than allowing it to naturally flow.

Yes, you could play that game. You could say, as you put it, get interested. "Well, this is obvious. Is there anything else? Just this one? Let me go around and have a look and check it out." And you notice that as you do that, you're getting a sense of where your sensitivities lie.

Everybody comes to the practice with a particular set of sensitivities. There are certain things that people are sensitive to, and certain things that people are not sensitive to. Especially when you're getting started, what you want is to use what you are sensitive to as your meditation object, because it's available, it's there, it's fairly straightforward.

Hearing, for example, is a very good meditation object in this style of practice. And people who use hearing as a meditation object quite a bit really like this particular centre because it is, to put it kindly, a sound-rich environment. Some people find it drives them absolutely crazy—"How can I meditate here? It's so noisy." But for other people, it's fantastic. There's such a variety of sounds around here. You use whatever is available.

Again, you've got this sense of exploration. This area is difficult for me. This area is easy. That might explain why I find this style of meditation practice hard.

Because I'm just not sensitive to that area, and so on.

When does this kind of slip into being effort? Because I was consciously saying to myself, I'm going to focus on this one now. I've got my hearing, I'm going to focus on touch, I'm going to focus on that. So it kind of slips into effort at some point.

If you say "I'm going to focus on X," what we're talking about here is a decision—a choice. And choice is really interesting, that choice to be aware. Now, do we try to choose, or do we just choose? I would suggest we just choose. The effort comes in later. We make the choice, but then where the effort comes in is: now I've landed here, I'm going to stay here. That's where the effort enters.

So it is interesting to start disentangling these very subtle movements of the mind. Because when we're doing a practice, one thing we're doing is studying the mind. We're studying experience, and the mind creates the experience. So we're, in a sense, looking at how we create a world. We're interested in these things. But again, don't be heavy with it, because that generally slows us down.

One thing I like to illustrate this point: if you're living in a modern household with all this electronic whizz-giggery all over the place, and something goes wrong with some high-tech piece of equipment, who do you call? Usually you call the youngest member of the household. Now, is this because children these days are born with PhDs in electronics implanted into their brains? No. It's because when a child sees a complicated bit of tech, what they think they're looking at is a game. And they play with it. And they learn it. But if we have this really heavy attitude of "Oh my God, I've got to get this right, I've got to work on this," it slows us down. But if we see this is a game—I'm going to play with this and see what happens—the learning process kind of naturally manifests.

I have an eight-month-old granddaughter, and she's getting into playing peekaboo, which of course is playing with awareness. And there's such joy in it, such pure joy at that age in being aware. It just makes me think: what happens as we become adults that we don't remember that joy?

Well, before the Buddha became the Buddha, when he was a struggling yogi and got completely, hopelessly, totally bogged down, he had to give up the whole thing and walk away. He must have been in existential despair, thinking, what the hell am I doing? What got him past that was a spontaneous memory of childhood when he was aware. Oh, I did it before. Maybe I could do it again.

So yes, that sense of childhood is important in developing a meditation practice. But all too often, as adults, we come to meditation assuming it's work. For many years, I would teach retreats in Malaysia to Chinese students. They have the Confucian work ethic—I mean, if you think the Protestant work ethic is bad, you haven't seen anything. So all year it's work, work, work, work, work. And then they come to a meditation retreat: work, work, work, work, work. They go back home: work, work, work, work, work. So I spend a fair bit of time saying, don't work here—just play, enjoy.

Okay, good luck. I'll see you this afternoon.

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