Awareness of Awareness (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 56:31

So we've been playing in the realm of cittānupassanā, tracking the heart-mind and looking at different ways in, different things to play with.

We started with the practice workshop on wise attitude a couple of mornings ago, checking in with how we're feeling about the meditation practice, to see if there's a sense of tension or strain or striving or self-judgment driving the practice. And also to get to know and appreciate wholesome qualities, wise attitude, when that is present in the heart-mind as well.

Then yesterday we were looking at working with thinking, one of the primary ways that the heart-mind distracts us from the meditation practice.

This morning, as promised, I want to turn the exploration to another aspect of citta, and this is the awareness itself, or we could say, the process of awaring.

A word of warning before we dive into this esoteric and subtle subject. When we hear of something like awareness of awareness, something that sounds subtle and refined, it's natural that we want to experience it. But this is a trap, of course. That would be preferencing one object over other objects. So it's really important that we treat this playfully and curiously in the same way that we've treated every other suggestion that has been made in the morning practice workshops. Certain types of objects resonate for some people. They work well, and whatever object works well for you, that's what you use. Those universal characteristics that Patrick talked about last night—of anicca, impermanence; dukkha, unsatisfactoriness; and anattā, not-self—are there in every experience, and hence no preference for one object over another. Any object can be the vehicle for insight and awakening.

I haven't yet settled on the language that I use to describe this aspect of experience. One of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, uses the phrase "awareness of awareness," and this works really well for me. But Patrick prefers to talk about "awaring," which emphasizes the fact that awareness is not a thing but a process, an activity, a flow of experience. So it's more accurate to call it a verb. Indeed, it's more accurate to call every aspect of experience a verb, because that's what we find when we get close up to it.

As Patrick was talking about yesterday, there's what we're aware of—the "aware-d," often in meditation practice the object of the meditation—and there's the awaring. And that's actually it. For some people, to think of it as a verb, as awaring, can help to avoid some of the conceptual tangles that we can get into with a phrase like "awareness of awareness." I will use both terms, and you can relate to whichever one makes more sense for you.

Awareness of awareness is taking awareness itself, or the process of awaring, as the meditation object. It's about shifting our focus from what we are aware of, from our meditation object, to the knowing of the object. We could look at it like making a foreground-background shift.

Usually in meditation, we're aware of an object. In vipassanā meditation, we're trying to get clearer and clearer about our experience of that object. To do that, we need to hold the object in the center of our awareness, much like seeing clearly an object that's on the bottom of a pond. But much like the clear water in the pond, we're not usually aware of the awareness itself, which is in the background. The meditation object is in the foreground, and then in the background, unnoticed, is the water—the awareness. What we're doing here is shifting the focus, shifting the foreground and background, to see if we can notice the awareness or the awaring itself. We're shifting the focus to the water in the pond and bringing it into the foreground of the practice.

It's a bit like becoming aware of the process of seeing. We've played around a little with this concept at various points in the retreat: are you aware you're seeing? If we think about seeing, it's integral to most of our activities—indeed, all of our conscious activities really. When we are seeing, we are normally completely immersed in what we are seeing, which is often necessary for whatever activity we're undertaking. So we're not usually aware that we are seeing, but we can become aware that we are seeing.

Right now, if we open our eyes, we have a visual field in front of us. We're very used to immersing ourselves in our visual field because this is how we go about our day and conduct our activities. But we can be aware of the process of seeing. We can take our awareness, just right now as we're sitting here, to the place where seeing happens from—which is of course our eyes—and we can be aware that in fact there are sensations in our eyes. We can be aware of the eyeballs moving as we look from place to place. Then if we stay with the seeing for a while, we become aware of the automatic blinking that's happening all the time. We know it happens all the time, but usually we're completely oblivious to it.

We can become aware of the boundary around our vision, that our vision is actually bounded by our eyelids, maybe the rim of our glasses. As we stay with it more, we can also become aware of a sense of depth in the visual field. There is a depth to it, a sense of perspective, which creates a sense of space. It also creates a duality between what is seen and the seer. The seeing is happening from a specific place over here, and out there is what is seen.

So we've shifted the focus from the usual...

immersion with what is being seen to the process of seeing itself.

In a workshop a couple of mornings ago, I was describing the shift from object-focused meditation to subject-focused meditation that we make with cittānupassanā—the turning of attention to the one who is meditating, to the selfing process by which this meditator constructs her world through sensory experience. This is another aspect of that shift to subject-focused meditation. But this time, we're not so

much watching how we construct a self out of our reactions to sensory experience as we are directly investigating who is meditating.

When we look to the awareness, we are opening up to the not-self experience of awareness. Because usually, of course, we associate "me" with "my awareness." Particularly in meditation, this can be quite persistent—this very strong sense that I am the one experiencing my world. In meditation this can manifest as, "Okay, well, I can see that the thoughts are impermanent, and I can see that the pain is not me. But aren't I still the one meditating? Aren't I the one still having this experience?" This sense of identity residing in the awareness can be quite strong.

But if we can turn our meditation towards this process of awareing, then we're exposing ourselves to the reality that awareness is just an impersonal process. When we see this, the duality between self and world begins to break down. The subject-object dichotomy begins to dissolve, and all that's left is the process of awareing.

Like the other experiences of seeing that we have been exploring on this retreat, this is not something we can force or manufacture. But in the spirit of having an intention to investigate phenomena, it's quite interesting—an interesting area to play with. I have a couple of exercises to experiment with, to see if we can catch a glimpse or feel a taste of this quality of awareness or awareing. It's very important that you treat these lightly, with a playful approach. There's no right or wrong.

Let's move into the first exercise now, and I'll take some questions afterward. If you'd like to get into a comfortable posture for a short meditation activity.

This exercise plays with the possibility of catching a glimpse of awareness as it moves. Often when we're looking for subtle aspects of experience, it can help to work first with transitions—when experience changes from one thing to another, when we move positions, or when we change our focus of awareness from one thing to another. Subtle aspects of experience can be easier to see at the beginning of a new activity or experience. So let's do a brief exercise to see if we can catch awareness move.

Begin with your awareness resting lightly on your breathing. Just a gentle awareness. Shortly I'll prompt you to move the awareness to something else, and when you do, see if you can catch the experience of awareness moving from one object to another. But for now, rest your awareness on your breathing, in a relaxed way, with whatever aspect of the breathing is most clear.

And now switch the awareness to sound, and see if you can notice the movement of awareness. See how this focused awareness is a bit like a torchlight that was pointed towards the breathing and is now illuminating sound. Stay with the sound, directing your awareness towards it.

And now move your awareness to your feet, and notice the movement of awareness—how it lights up your feet now. Stay focused on your feet. Wherever you intentionally focus, awareness is immediately there, illuminating the object with its light. Tuning into this is developing your sensitivity to the process of

awareing.

Your awareness is on your feet. And now switch to your hands, and watch awareness jump from your feet to your hands. Stay with the hands and see if you can tune in to the light of awareness.

And now widen your awareness to the whole field of the body, being aware of whichever sensations are most clear within the field of the body. Did you catch the movement as the awareness widened out from the hands to encompass the whole body? Does the light of awareness feel different when it's spread over this wider field?

So, did you notice awareness move? Yes? And what was the experience like?

"It was a bit like a torch beam. And then right at the end, there was a whole lot of noticings in between. But when..."

When I invited you to open out to the whole body, I felt like I was suddenly running around—no, no, no. Reset. Receive. Just receive, rather than going out.

So at first it felt like you took that torch of awareness and tried to point it in lots of different directions all at once?

Yes, kind of feet, you know, and coming back into different places, and sound, and it was like, whoa. But then suddenly thinking, oh, realising—oh, just to receive. Because it's there everywhere.

So in the end, you found a different experience of a wider awareness.

Yes.

Other people find the movement of awareness differently. My experience is that there's the knowing of attention being directed on objects, but that which knows the attention isn't moving. It's like the sky that receives all things equally, and things just come and go. So there's a sense of awareness being still and vast, and then a movement of awareness within that—a movement within that stillness. And I frame it differently as attention.

So you call the moving awareness the attention?

Yes. And that which knows this directly moving is this pure presence, this vast space that knows and is unmoving.

I experienced the difference between the sound awareness. And so a question arose, because it was quite spacious. I thought, are they different? For me, awareness has a feeling. But then I thought, are there different sorts of awareness? Does the object condition them? Do they have a dependent relationship?

Well, that's a great question for further investigation, because certainly we do notice that our experience

of awareness changes. It has a depth to it. It has this ability to be like a very focused torch beam of light sometimes—like in samādhi states, to the exclusion of anything else. And it also has an ability to be a diffuse light that can open up and take in many objects all at once. So it certainly has a depth to it, and it is, like anything, a conditioned experience, subject to change. But it's really interesting to drop in that kind of question, because it helps us to get clearer about the different experiences of awareness.

What do you think? Do they condition each other?

Yes, absolutely. And other things too. Each experience of awareness is conditioned by many different factors. It's also conditioned by, for example, the state of the heart in that moment. If the heart is more unified, then awareness is going to have the quality of immersing more deeply into the object of attention. So yes, there are many factors conditioning what we call a moment of awareness—something we see clearly in our practice.

The example of the hand was a good one, because it felt like the feet and the hands were too restrictive. Maybe the concept of the feet and hands—so it felt too restrictive to have awareness focused on them. I played with having feet and hands in awareness instead. Then that became much more spacious. I think it's a balance between that wide open space and focus.

So the concept of turning your awareness towards your hands felt like it was too much of a—

It wasn't a concept. It was that there was too much awareness to be locally located.

Yes.

So then flipping it around felt like a nice balance. If I'm going to focus on hands, then hands in awareness rather than awareness on hands.

Yes, so this is another great example of the depth that this experience of awareness can have, and how there are so many things that condition that experience in any moment. It can be like flipping around how we're thinking about what we're doing, and that can actually change the experience that we have.

Soraya, yeah, you've had your hand up before.

I also had—I'm sure others had a similar experience—moving from breath to hearing. They felt quite different. And so I stuck around there and was flipping backwards and forwards for a little bit. One of the things I noticed is if I focused on my breath as in *here*, it was a kind of concentrated feel, whereas hearing was quite an expansive feel. Then I went, okay, so I changed my focus of breathing to breathing in air. And then they had more similarity. So I guess, in short, the thing of conditioning how I experience breath.

Yeah, and getting an experience of the expansiveness of awareness versus the more focused attention style type of experience.

Let's have Marion and Greg and then maybe we'll get on to another exercise.

So my awareness changed through the meditation. Initially it was the focus—like seeing—like I would almost internally see the sound, or I'd be moving my eyes effectively. When we got to the hands, that had fallen away, and my hands were just in awareness. There wasn't any focus, just hands in awareness. And it continued like that with the following—it was like less effort.

It's just being with.

Yeah. Was it also more a sort of lessening of the sense of duality between awareness and aware?

Yeah. So it started out with more of a consciousness of being together.

Thanks, Marion. Greg?

There's something kind of similar, actually, to what other people have been expressing. For me, the knowledge of the aware brings a whole field of consciousness within which the thing that I'm attending to resides. And so to bring an example of when that's not happening might be if I'm typing or writing something and entirely engaged with the content of what I'm writing. And then having the consciousness that in that experience I'm not aware of anything else. But to ask myself to do that brings the remembering of aware in itself, which brings the consciousness of the whole field. So in some ways I don't have that capacity to really forget that I'm aware of everything else, weirdly.

Well, shall we do another exercise? This next one is playing more with this quality of the consciousness of everything, or the vast awareness in which the movements happen. So let's have a play with this one.

Meditation begins

Settling into a comfortable posture. And do whatever it is that you do to bring body, heart, and mind into balance. Gently opening up to the flow of experience, with whatever's arising, or with your grounding object.

Relaxed. No effort. Just this.

Cultivating a sense of intimacy with unfolding present experience. Relaxed and aware. Just noticing what's happening now. Feeling the richness of being alive in this moment.

In your meditation, you're aware of things in your experience. But what is this awareness? Can you shift the focus now to the awareness itself? Can you feel the quality of awareness? The felt experience of the process of awaring.

One way it's described is as the space in which experience arises. Or in the Tibetan tradition, you're sometimes instructed to direct attention to the gap between thoughts. Can you tune in to the felt quality of awaring? What does awareness feel like?

If you were to describe it, how would you describe it? Does it have a location? Is it expansive or focused?

Clear or obscure? Dynamic or still? Peaceful or agitated?

Meditation ends

How did you go with that one? Did you find a felt quality to awareness or awaring?

Seems formless and ongoing.

Formless and ongoing. Ongoing in the sense of space, spaciousness? Without beginning and end.

"It seems to me to be active and still."

Active and still—do you want to say a little more about that experience? What was the experience of active?

"Active because there's a receptive quality. It's not asking for something, just noticing. And then my sense of consciousness expands. If I ask in an unspecified way, there's this expansion. If I ask in a specified way, it's different. So it's actively receiving, expansive, and there is a stillness. But I struggle with the concept of object—if I can be aware of it, then is that an object? I was wrestling with that toward the end. I kept asking, what is being aware?"

Yes, and this is one flavor of the experience. I think Patrick mentioned earlier in the retreat that one time when he did this activity, he reported there is no awareness—you can't find it. There's experience, there's what's going on, but awareness itself can't be located. That's one of the ways it's experienced.

But also, with the conceptual tangle of this thing called awareness, that can be tricky to think about too much. That can get us into a knot. If there's a thing called awareness and I can be aware of that thing, then is that another awareness? And so on, infinitely back—turtles all the way down.

So again, don't worry too much about the concept. Just see what is there in the experience.

"I've never tried to do that before. What I kind of experienced was something that happens more and more—this energetic but very quiet quality, or still, not so much quiet, but something. And I'm noticing, but it just holds. It's dynamic. All these things that were not one, not the other."

Yes—neither this nor that, both and neither.

So this exercise tuned you into this quality of experience, which you kind of knew was there.

"Yes, I hadn't thought of it as awareness. You and Patrick have talked about that, but it's something that's grown in my experience. Something that's just... this is amazing. Not having a name for it or a description or a place to put it in the story of whatever."

And that's great. You just play with it and use names for it as long as they are helpful in clarifying the experience. If they help you see more clearly aspects of experience that were in the background before,

then wonderful. But if they become something that tangles you up, don't worry about it.

"But it's great to know—oh, it fits somewhere."

Yes, exactly.

"In that exercise, unexpectedly, the awareness was precise."

Which is not what I expected. In the first one, it swooped a little bit like a bird that knew where it was going for nectar or something. I didn't realize at the time that Emily Dickinson—hope and the feathery thing—so there was that flavor to it.

And then going wider, there's a bit of a clamor. The literary critic thinks, "Oh, that is such a cliché," you know. But quietening that, it's like this prismatic, crystalline diamond around my hara—or the hara—and very not-me, because the account of me goes wide. And here's this prismatic, crystalline thing breaking everything into the colors.

So that was the awaring in that moment.

Now try not to get attached to it. Or just at least notice when you do.

Okay, so it was expansive and there was less of a sense of self, but interestingly it was quite a clear experience—this was not what you were expecting.

It's like needles of light all around it.

Laughter

I think that's why I like to offer this workshop—because although it is a subtle aspect of experience, it can be very fruitful to turn the attention there. But, you know, like any aspect of experience, it resonates for some of us and doesn't resonate for others. So we just play with it. If it's useful, we keep playing with it. If not, don't worry.

Then you said just this—"just like I shattered." And my heart went bang. And it's sort of like, "I'm free." Because that's all there is, is this. And this is the awareness. It was just like—bang.

And what happened after?

Well, you asked about what the qualities are, and to me it's openness. Open and receptive. And there's a lot of qualities that are... there's no words for it.

So did you find the experience clear or obscure when you said there's no...?

Very clear. It was clear, it's just that it's not something that can be put into language, is it? There's no words for it, you know. And we don't... Something like being held. But those aren't the right words. Like

there were lots of—it's sort of like this, but that's not right.

Thank you. That's a very good question you just asked: "And what happens after?" Because we're not about clinging to them or anything, but we're in the aftermath, as it were. And so "what happened after" is a very... For me, at the very end, there was this very much an "I" going, "You can't stay here. What about what's going on in the world? What about this?" So what happens after is going to be one of my focuses for today.

Okay, yes. And also noticing that attitude to the meditation practice that just always pops up.

I found that quite challenging personally, because it was—I was aware, but my field was so large. I don't know, I dropped objects. And I was aware of all this. And then thoughts came in. But then what was useful was that Tibetan sentence you said.

Ah, yes, the gap between thoughts. Yeah, and that helped. I went, "Ah, okay." So in the midst of this open field, I'm aware of that, I'm aware of that, I'm aware of that. And then thoughts popped in. And then I went, "Oh, okay, you said that," and I went, "Okay, there's this little gap between."

So that gave you somewhere to aim. To get clear about the experience.

Yeah, and to kind of bring myself back out. And then it reminded me of the importance for me to have an object. This is an open field, and that's what happens—my mind has a field day.

And that's also why we do an activity like this, because it does try to bring in those qualities of aim and precision that we use in wise investigation to an object that is so expansive and diffuse and hard to pin down, hard to find the language to express. So it can help to have some places to look, and hence the prompts—sort of tossing them out to see which one lands for you.

So, you know, it might be, "Okay, the gap between thoughts, that's a place I can look" to get a flavour of what's there when the thoughts aren't there. Or it might be something else. For me, what kind of resonates is the felt quality of awareness. I find that that's quite—it's almost like a place I can go to, the felt quality of awareness. But it's different for everyone, what resonates. And so that's why I threw out different options.

I know that's not for me, and I'm totally okay about leaving it there. But I think those moments where I had the—like someone else was saying—the moments where I had the awareness of me looking onto these thoughts kind of gives me a bit of, "Oh, okay, you've done it." So it's okay, you've been doing bits, and that's okay at that level. It's permission, but it's also agency. There's a bit of agency there, which is like, "Yeah, cool, Dee, you're fine here." That was nice to experience. You know what I mean? There was this agency or control—not control, but choice. Seeing the choice. Yeah, seeing the choice and going, there's a flavour and it's nice to see that flavour or being aware of what it's like. It was nice to play with that. And as I said yesterday, I'm not telling myself off.

Very good.

Sorry for not doing that. Thanks very much. Moving on.

When you say the felt quality of awareness, do you mean you just say that to yourself, without needing to...?

I think I probably used to. I think what probably happened was—so, as you've probably gathered from the sorts of stories that I've shared over the course of the retreat, I'm not so great at using meditation objects that are in the body or the physical field. And so when I finally was given permission and guidance to use aspects of mind as meditation, that's where I feel at home.

So I think what happened was that I became aware of awareness itself—this sort of expansive quality, the process of awareing—and got to know it. And now it's probably my main grounding object. It's a place I can come back to.

Maybe in the early stages I would remind myself, "Ah, the felt quality." If I was lost—you know, some people will go to the breathing—I might think, "felt quality of awareness." I probably don't think that so much anymore. But it comes from a familiarity with it. So the prompt can just help to head you back in that direction, similar to working with any other meditation object.

Does that answer the question?

But like I said, that's using a concept that works for me. Is there such a thing as a felt quality of awareness? Everyone in the room would have a different experience of that. But it helps me to head in a direction of an experience that's familiar.

Okay, well that's time. So your mission today, should you choose to accept it, is to dabble in this realm a bit. Be aware—and be aware of being aware.

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