

Simple Being

Being aware—simple as that!—is the alpha and omega of meditation practice.

Simply being aware is so simple that it confuses our minds which love complexity, and somehow got the idea that anything of value in this world must be complicated, obscure, incredibly rare and cost a ton of money.

Whereas awareness is the simplest and most obvious thing in the world, costs absolutely nothing and at the same time is by far the most valuable thing one could imagine. Without it nothing would exist, including joy.

We are talking about “being aware of” and not “thinking about.”

Being aware is not *about* it; it's *it*.

In meditation terms this one difference makes all the difference. Which is to say it marks the difference between experiencing the illusion of suffering on the one hand, which certainly does feel awful, and the reality of an ever-present and always-accessible knowing of peace on the other, which is pure bliss.

“Being aware” is the simplest thing you could ever do, because in fact you are already doing it all the time.

It's just that you don't think that you are.

That might come off as smart-alecky, or like I'm trying to imitate a Zen koan, or being opaque and contrary to create a dramatic effect. But I mean it quite literally and it's something I've discovered is true in my own experience. I've discovered that I actually am aware all of the time and that when I'm not, when I look deeper, it's only because my thoughts are telling me I'm not.

Try this, the next time you are trying to meditate and these familiar thoughts arise: “You're not doing it. You're failing. You're a failure. You're not meditating. You're not awake. You are sleepy, distracted, conflicted and angry. You should just quit.”

Instead of quitting, though, just notice this: that all of these harsh thoughts and judgements are themselves being noticed. They are being known. Now just stay with that knowing. That knowing is, itself, it. That knowing is the portal, the door, and not only the door but the very beginning of the open path to the whole universe—the universe of your life, of the magnificent mystery that *this* is.

Don't stop there, take a first step onto that path. Keep noticing the noticing, and notice the qualities of that noticing. And you will discover then what the Buddha, Lao Tsu,

Rumi, Jesus and all the countless sages noticed about the noticing, which are its qualities of emptiness, stillness, silence and love. All of them right there, right in the space-like space of the open path, hanging in the air like fruit.

“The Kingdom of God is within you,” Jesus said. He taught being aware, he called it the “Kingdom of God,” the “Father,” and “Heaven.” “Heaven is spread out upon the earth but the people don’t see it.”

But in meditation we can see heaven and know our own true nature as it.

It is consciousness itself, the simple capacity of noticing.

In other words, what is real, and what is present, are emptiness, stillness, silence and love. Because these are the qualities of our noticing. If we look with caring interest at our noticing, this is what we notice, these qualities of perfection.

Noticing notices everything and it does so effortlessly, without judgement, clearly, and precisely. Noticing is infinitely empty because it must accommodate knowing everything it notices; its boundaries need to go beyond the edge of the universe, because that boundary can only be noticed by an awareness beyond it.

The stillness and silence of noticing inserts no distortions into its seeing. And there is always—see if you can notice—a quality of caring interest, which I call love, in every single instance of noticing. As if the universe were curious about itself, as if it were like a child discovering the world in its earlier days of life.

Emptiness, stillness, silence and love are not at all the qualities that thought said were there—i.e., dullness, anger, distraction, sadness and all the rest.

But be careful, don’t get mad at thoughts for spinning these illusions.

Because it was only in the noticing these thoughts about our suffering, that our attention was drawn to this portal to the cosmos, to the beginning of the path of awareness that winds through eternal emptiness, stillness, silence and love.

II—Magical Doorway

We can thank our suffering, our aches and pains, they are just doing their job.

Emotional suffering is just like physical pain in that way, it’s drawing our attention towards itself, not so that we suffer more, but so that we see the emptiness of suffering and through that portal touch the love that dissolves all suffering.

For myself, when I turn my attention to the qualities of noticing, all that I find are spaciousness, silence, stillness, emptiness, clarity and relaxation. If I simply keep my attention on that noticing quality of awareness, this one tiny noticing becomes the

magical doorway through which I can step into space-like awareness, simply by continuing to notice all that I am already noticing—because it seems there is something in me (it's really more like I am in it) that is already noticing all the time, and I become one with that noticing. Something delightful then happens, which is that one by one, and sometimes all by all, a great many other experiences show up in that same space-like space of awareness.

This of course is only natural because our whole life unfolds in consciousness, isn't it so? Where else would it happen? So, in turning our attention to our consciousness, which is the simple noticing capacity, right "there" we discover everything we experience in that moment. I'll notice the sounds in the room, the sensations of my breathing, nodes of emotions, the meanings of words, the color of an image, the texture of a rug, the smell of lilacs. My whole life in that moment shows up and is known, and in this being known, all the little details of experience are shining, hovering and blinking like fireflies. It's beautiful.

Suffering also shows up in this knowing. But over time, trained by practice in this way of knowing, the mind comes to immediately interpret all suffering as like a movie street of a street whose buildings are flat facades, behind whose doors and windows is nothing at all but space. Each of those doors and windows are the magic portals that one can pass through and emerge into the space-like space of stillness, silence, emptiness and love. When you've gone through the doors and windows of suffering enough times, entering each time into the space-like space of awareness—still, silent, empty and loving—then after a while you don't even see suffering as suffering any more. You see the flat facades of suffering for a while but then, after you've passed through their doors and windows enough times, the mind learns the falseness of the facades and they dissolves away, and you realize that the space behind the facade is the same as the space in front of it, and always was.

The facade was unreal and the only real thing was the space and you were always living in that space—as that space—and from then on basically everything that appears in awareness is immediately seen as being like objects on the movie set. Not only the building facades but also the props, the trees and the people.

You don't value any of them less for being illusory, you value them more for being so beautiful, so miraculous, so various, so fragile and so fleeting. It's all an illusion but what an illusion, as complete as the cosmos, teeming with spirits, shining with sparkling stars, tasting like tea and oranges and, most of all, most mysteriously of all, marked by suffering, and how suffering molts into peace.

III—One Simple Shift

So let's talk for a moment in a little more practical detail about how to switch on "being aware of" instead of "thinking about." Because the whole path of meditation boils down to this one simple move, this one shift from identifying with the objects of our awareness, to identifying our true nature as awareness itself.

Hopefully, looking back over the past five weeks, we can get a sense that exactly this is what we have been practicing day by day, week by week. That is, we've been teasing ourselves away from our usual tight identification with thoughts, not only to notice our breath, body and emotions better but even more so—ultimately—to better know our capacity to be aware and to take our stand as awareness.

Take the very simplest moment of meditation: that moment when we notice we are thinking, that we have lost touch with the present moment and are “lost” in thought—dreaming, remembering, worrying, planning or whatever. In that moment we let thought go and return to noticing the breath or the body. We gently guide awareness back to the raw sensations of life itself.

Right there, what we are really doing is exercising our capacity to be free from our thought and to know reality directly, instead of through the veil of thought.

But here is the critical next step and the one to which we devote our last week of practice. In this week, we want to notice that when we return awareness to the sensations of breathing and the body; or the knowing of emotions or of thoughts themselves; actually we are not, ultimately, returning to those objects. Actually, we are returning to awareness.

Because in our very simple practice, over and over, what we are really doing is noticing that we never experience anything but experience itself—consciousness itself, awareness itself, knowing itself.

“We aren't human beings having a spiritual experience, we are spiritual beings having a human experience,” as the saying goes. It actually goes far beyond that; we are actually having the experience of the whole cosmos knowing itself.

We are all made of stardust and so when we look at a star, we are that star, knowing itself.

It's just as simple as that. Very ordinary and very miraculous.

IV—Touch, Touch, Touch

We are the cosmos knowing itself; we can test this with two fingers.

Try it right now, and if you want you might close your eyes and spend a few minutes doing this practice—because in doing so, you can walk right through this specific portal into cosmic consciousness, right at the tips of your fingers.

So, simply notice the sensation of the right finger touching the right thumb. As you do, commit for the period of this exercise to stay only with your experience and to put all thoughts, memories, images and theories of matter to one side.

So explore the sensation, dwell in it, enjoy it, experience it. Try to let this experience be your whole experience in this moment—just this touching sensation. Of course there will be sounds in the room, thoughts in the mind, all of that. But just let those be in the background as you keep awareness trained on that sensation. And then ask yourself: what do you know about that sensation, other than your knowing of it? Nothing at all, comes the answer. You will notice that the sensation lasts only as long as the one fingertip touches the other. When the fingers separate, the sensation goes away.

So touch, touch, touch in succession a few times, to watch the appearance and the disappearance of the sensation. Each time ask, when the sensation disappears, where does it go? And when it reappears, from where does it arise? And the answer will come: the sensation arises from awareness. Because all that exists in this moment in experience, is awareness; therefore the sensation can only have come from awareness. If it arises from awareness then what is it made of? Of course, only awareness itself.

In this way, after a while, simply recognize what we are knowing in our actual experience—putting aside all thoughts and theories about matter, atoms and molecules and all such borrowed thinking. And what we notice in our actual experience is that sensations arise from awareness, are known by awareness, are made out of awareness, and sink back into awareness.

When we notice that our whole experience of life is made out of consciousness itself in this very direct and tangible way, our relationship to life naturally changes. Because how could we ever be anything but compassionate, gentle and wise in our dealings and relations with everything we experience—because everything we experience is a manifestation, is made out of, our own awareness.

In this way, we can experience the whole world as a way to know more, learn more and become more skillful in the knowing of my self—as this new “self” that is the all, the universe, everything that is known and is constantly unfolding itself to itself as “me.” “Me” being the infinite, eternal, impersonal “me” of awareness.

This is true when we experiment with every other object we notice with awareness—our body sensations, emotions, perceptions and thoughts. That is, everything that we experience, the totality of our lives, is nothing but awareness itself. Consciousness. That which presents itself to us not as any object—not as any noun—but instead as the activity of knowing, of noticing, of being aware.

The whole point of meditation is to learn how to abide in this knowing. That is, to courageously shift our lives away from our habitual tense concentration on objects, which creates suffering in the body from grasping and wanting.

Instead, we learn how to live as relaxed awareness, knowing everything in the present moment, surfing if you will on this continuous noticing and enjoying very much the energy, the power, the salt and the sea spray (which exist in consciousness and nowhere else), and the incredible thrill of the ride.

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