

Practice Note: The Shape of Awareness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 15, 2010

In terms of the practice, I am inspired to say some things about awareness, prompted by whatever was going on out in the street. I think that they're cleaning out or drilling a major sewer line. There was all this loud, grinding motor sound that was strong enough that I was vibrating a little bit inside. It was quite nice [laughs]. So I thought I'd say something about awareness.

Awareness is not a thing; it's a process. It's probably many processes that come together. And so the idea of being aware is, for some people, a strange idea in that awareness is not a thing. When we bring our awareness to awareness itself, it's quite fluid, quite flexible. In part, awareness is what we say it is. We partly define it and create it by how we engage in it, how we frame it, how we apply it.

I think of awareness as being more like water than a container. Water can flow into any kind of container and take the shape of the container. And awareness can flow into all kinds of containers – the container being the definition we have for it, or what's needed for it at any particular time. Part of becoming free is to have fluidity – and for awareness take different shapes at different times.

For example, in mindfulness practice sometimes the mindfulness or the awareness becomes very narrow and precise – like putting our experience under a magnifying glass or a microscope. It gets very focused. At other times, awareness can become more like a wide-angle lens. It becomes very broad, spacious, and open. And it is possible to go back and forth between these two modes.

It's possible for awareness to feel itself quite independent from what it's aware of. Sometimes awareness can feel like a very safe cave or refuge where all kinds of stuff goes on around us and within us. And you feel you're not really touched by it. You're free of it. You're independent of it, cozy in that inner sanctuary of awareness that is not touched by the things around you.

Sometimes awareness is not held as something separate from experience, but rather awareness is not apart from it because it becomes the experience. It becomes what's going on, and there's no separation at all. There's no sanctuary away from things. That's too dualistic and separate, and can hold things at bay sometimes. Rather, awareness can become transparently porous and penetrated by everything. There's a freedom that can come when there's no separation: things just arise and pass through.

So with that loud sound that was going on, what I did was I just became the sound. I could see periodically how thoughts arose: "This is too loud," or "Maybe too much," or "Maybe I should go out and talk to them?" [laughs] Different kinds of thoughts arose, and I could see how my thoughts created a separation between me and the sound, which could lend itself to me suffering, or being caught up. And the most peaceful thing to do was to become the sound – to let go of the thoughts that were separating me from the sound, and to let the sound completely fill my awareness and fill me.

It was quite interesting. Any time there was a thought that took me away from the sound, or if I judged the sound, or separated from the sound – I just let go of it, and became the sound again. In that way, there was not a problem to have the sound there. I got pretty peaceful with it, pretty present. And it was interesting to see as time went along, the shifts within me among how I felt the sound, how I experienced it, how it filled awareness, how it was there. Then at some point, the workers moved on down the street and were no longer there.

The idea that awareness is not a thing, but rather something we shape, and use, and apply in different ways comes into play when we practice. We can be curious about: "What's this thing called awareness? What is it to be aware of something? What is it to be aware of the breath? How am I when I'm being aware of the breath? Do I hold myself separate from the breath and watch it from above? Do I watch it from inside? Does awareness go inside and feel it?"

Sometimes we feel apart from our awareness, sometimes right in the middle of it, sometimes sensing it from the inside and out. Sometimes awareness feels very contracted; sometimes it feels very broad; sometimes it feels

that the awareness is entangled with our emotions and our attitudes and we're aware with fear, or desire, or expectation, or striving. Or is there no food coloring in the awareness, and awareness is independent of our attitudes and feelings? We can be aware of them, but we're not somehow swayed by them.

In some ways it's a mystery, in the sense that it's so variable what awareness is. It takes so many different shapes. As you practice today, you might get curious, not only about what you're aware of – paying attention to your breath or your feet as you walk – but you also might get curious about the awareness that knows, the mindfulness knows, that capacity of being conscious. What's the shape? What's the quality of your consciousness here?

You're only conscious in the present moment, and so if you're curious and interested in consciousness and awareness, it might shift your perspective about the things you take so personally, the things you think are so important: your feelings, your emotions, what happened yesterday at work, or whatever. It puts you right here. The awareness that knows all this – what is that?

Thank you.