

Dharmette: What Is Awareness?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 19, 2011

What's closest to my mind to talk about is awareness. Ours is a tradition of mindfulness, where the emphasis is on mindful attention to what's happening in the present moment. Mindfulness is a particular way of carefully noticing, cognizing, and perceiving what's happening in the moment. When teachers like me talk about mindfulness, we use a variety of seemingly synonymous words. One of these words is 'awareness.' You might say, "Be mindful" in the same breath as, "Be aware" – as if they're the same thing. You might use the word 'attention.' Occasionally, people might even use the word 'conscious' in the same way. It seems like they are all the same, but, in fact, there are distinctions to be made between these different words.

The word 'awareness' is often used quite freely, but how is that distinguished from 'mindfulness'? What is awareness? Buddhists who want to refer back to the teachings of the Buddha might ask what word the Buddha used in his language that can be translated as 'awareness.' Or how do we back-translate the word 'awareness'? That's a little difficult.

We have modern psychologists who are also trying to define these things. There are clinical definitions of what mindfulness is. As clinical research gets done, you get narrower and narrower definitions of what mindfulness is, because the researchers have to have narrow the definition in order to do clinical trials. Otherwise, how do you know what you're studying?

Then you have psychologists and brain researchers who are trying to figure out, "What in the world is consciousness?" There are all these theories, and every few years, there is a new theory that tries to explain what consciousness is. As far as I know – and I haven't followed the literature – I don't think anybody has an adequate handle yet on what consciousness is. What does it take for a human being to be conscious? What is consciousness and how does it operate?

One of the interesting things about awareness – if I'm allowed to use this word now without defining it – is sometimes it seems so obvious what awareness is. We're aware, right? You're all aware of listening to me? Some awareness is operating. So, what is that awareness you have? If you focus on it, and try to understand what the awareness is that allows you to notice what I'm saying, you'll tie yourself in knots pretty quickly trying to define or clarify what it is. What's operating here? But it seems so obvious. It's natural to be conscious – but what is it really to be conscious?

For most of us, consciousness generally operates pretty smoothly. You're just conscious. You don't think about it much. We don't have to orchestrate being conscious. When we get in our car to drive on the freeway, we're not really trying to figure out exactly what consciousness is, and how to bring it into operation. It's just there. We're focusing on other things, like the stop sign, speed limit, and the cars in front of us and around us. There's a lot to pay attention to, but you're not going to pay attention to consciousness. Consciousness is taken for granted.

For people who have physiological problems with their brains, consciousness may not be so obvious. It actually gets pretty complicated. The whole act of perceiving and understanding the world is not a smooth, harmonious operation. Researchers say that consciousness is made up of different elements that come into play, and some of these elements – physiological and psychological brain functionings – aren't operating correctly anymore. How people are conscious and what's going on is not happening in a way that is smooth and easy, and it can become difficult. When it's operating smoothly, it's very easy to see consciousness as a unitary event: you're conscious or you're not. When you're focusing, consciousness is just a single thing. Consciousness is consciousness.

One of the things that can happen, especially in Buddhist practice and meditation practice, is you can begin to feel how malleable awareness and what we might call 'consciousness' is – at least in the way that we sense, feel, or experience it. At some point for people who meditate, as we get concentrated, relaxed, more open, and settled, there is a sense of the mind. You know there are these words that can be synonymous with consciousness and awareness. I brought in a new word: 'mind.' What does he mean now? People say that the mind, consciousness, or awareness becomes broad, expansive and large. The Buddha actually talked about

one of the things to be aware of when you do mindfulness practice is when the mind becomes expansive, open, and big. Especially when you have that as a reference point, you can feel sometimes how the mind, awareness, or consciousness can get contracted. It can get very tight, fixated and focused on something. There can even be a sense of darkening of awareness as you get focused and caught in a certain kind of thought. And then you can relax, and feel it get expansive and open again.

With that open, expansive awareness, people have the sense sometimes that it's not limited by the boundaries of their body or their skin. It feels like it's broader and bigger than even their body. But is it really? Is it like radioactivity that radiates out beyond the edges of a uranium rock, and just goes on and on? Is awareness like a hot stove where the heat radiates beyond the stove? Does awareness radiate beyond the body, or is it just a way of experiencing when there is no concept of boundary? When we're relaxed and open, it can be experienced that way. But awareness doesn't actually go beyond. Or does it go beyond?

You can get into all kinds of philosophical puzzles. Awareness doesn't have to go on beyond somehow because I'm aware of the tree over there. So awareness has to be at least as far away as the tree? But what is awareness? Is awareness really as far away as the tree? Or is it that the light is bouncing off the tree and coming back to us, and there's no awareness going on out there? But it's light particles that are coming into here, and the mind reconstructs it. As the mind reconstructs it, it's very easy to get a sense that we're not really usually thinking about the light coming in here. We're just thinking that we're aware of the tree, and the tree is happening within awareness. So, therefore, if it's happening within awareness, the awareness is as big as the tree. People have this cosmic idea that awareness encompasses the whole world, and that it's boundless. But is that really kind of an optical illusion? Is it really the case that that's how it is?

You can have a sense that the awareness is tight and constricted. Or awareness is expansive. It's possible to feel that in your awareness, you're separated from what you're paying attention to. You have like a bird's-eye view. You're an observer watching what's going on. It's possible to have awareness and bring it close in, and feel like you're really intimate. It's almost like you're absorbed or collapsed into the experience, and you become one with the experience. There's no separation. People talk about non-duality, and collapsing or sinking into it.

In the Vipassana world, adjusting your awareness is sometimes talked about. Sometimes you have a broad angle lens on your awareness, and you take in the big picture. Sometimes you take a close-up lens, and you get really close in. There is something about awareness where you can adjust it and change the lens. Sometimes you look in a really refined way, like with a microscope, and sometimes you step back and you have this big, broad 360 degree awareness that takes in everything – not the details necessarily – but really broad and expansive.

The Buddha talked about how when the mind gets concentrated, the mind – again, what is the mind? – gets malleable, meaning it can be shaped and formed like malleable clay. You can't do anything with hard clay, except break it or ignore it. But, when the clay is soft, it's malleable and plastic. You can move it and shape it. When we're really attached, tight, and caught up in things, the mind becomes brittle or hard. But, when the mind is soft from concentration, a soft mind is malleable – it can be shaped. And one of the things that can be shaped and shifted is awareness itself. We can make it expansive, and we can make it narrow.

How we experience awareness might have something to do with the object of awareness, of what awareness is aware of. It's rare to have awareness by itself without being aware of something. And the thing we're aware of sometimes shapes how we experience awareness. For most people, it's hard to be aware without a sense of being the one who is aware. So the sense we have of who I am as I'm aware also shapes how we experience awareness.

It's possible that awareness is not a thing, but a process. Since it doesn't have any shape, weight or form, the sense of it is very much influenced or shaped by our relationship to it, our concepts of it, or what's going on around it. Maybe it morphs and changes.

It's beautiful when people have the experience of consciousness or awareness being vast, permanent, as the background sense of everything, or the stable source which experiences all the changes in the world. This can be very helpful and supportive. But, it's also a beautiful experience to be able to take awareness and narrow it down, to be focused, and really collapse into it and experience it. There are a lot of beautiful things you can do with awareness, which are valuable, and which should be appreciated and respected.

But what is it really? Some people say it's permanent; it's eternal; it never dies. It feels that way, but is it really? Is the fact that you feel or experience it that way an accurate indication of what's really true?

They say sometimes that when awareness experiences emptiness, it somehow begins to feel as if it has some of the qualities of emptiness. Emptiness can have a quality of being timeless or eternal. It's just there. So awareness is like that empty space, but is it? It doesn't make sense to talk about emptiness being eternal. Emptiness, what is it?

Awareness – consciousness – can be malleable. It can shift and change. What we do with our mind and the activities of our mind can shift and change how we experience awareness and consciousness. We can have beliefs and attitudes in relationship to what awareness / consciousness is. Some of those beliefs can feel ultimate. But, it's also possible to watch how the mind constructs ideas of ultimate, and how the mind has ideas about and relationships to what we call 'consciousness.' That's interesting. It's important to notice when the mind has these constructs and ideas around all this.

My understanding of the path of mindfulness is that we're fascinated and curious about how all this works. We just keep coming back to being mindful and we notice, "This is how it is; this is what it is." We also get more and more subtle noticing the little movements of the mind in all directions, all the activities of the mind, and the beliefs and ideas.

I would say that what awareness is is not that important for the purpose of learning how not to cling to any of it. What's important is that we learn not to cling. That is where our refuge is. Also our freedom – our safety – is found in not clinging. When we don't cling, awareness can be what it is. We don't need for it to be any particular way. It can be many ways. It can be the way that is useful and supportive in different circumstances in our life. The less clinging there is, the quieter the range of experiencing awareness and consciousness, and the more awareness can stand out as something significant and important among all the different things going on in this life. When we cling, it tends to obscure the functioning of awareness or consciousness. With less clinging, consciousness stands out more.

But what is it? I don't really know.

So I apologize for taking all this time to tell you about something I don't know. [Laughter] But I do know about not clinging. I hope that awareness does not become one more thing to cling to, but rather one more thing to not cling to.

Thank you.