

Dharmette: Q&A – Awareness, Consciousness

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 19, 2012

Is there anything you would like me to talk about?

Participant 1: *How do you suggest we observe awareness?*

I don't know. I have no idea. How do we observe awareness? It's kind of like trying to touch your right elbow with your right hand. You know you have an elbow, but you can't quite get to it. Or it is like trying to observe what's behind your eyes. You know there's something behind your eyes, don't you? But can you look at it? What happens when you look at it?

What is awareness? It's a pretty palpable – sometimes it's a powerful thing to be aware. But what is it? And how do you observe it? How do you know it? It's a good question. Professionally, it seems like I should know the answer [laughter].

Sometimes I've said here that awareness is not a thing – it's a composite. Maybe it's a little like a rainbow. Does a rainbow exist? In a certain way, it exists. But you had better not chase after it, because it doesn't exist in that way. Like a rainbow, awareness is not like a single activity of the mind.

There's knowing; the mind can know something. I can know that I'm not sure how to answer your question; there's knowing of that. I can see you sitting there. There's seeing; there's hearing; there's feeling what's going on. I feel a little bit cold. I feel my concern for meeting you with your question. It's a good question, especially given what we do here.

There are all these things I can know, and then there's a sense that there's a field of awareness or consciousness in which it all occurs. That wider sense of a context or a field is something that I can sense and feel. But I don't know if it makes sense to turn towards it, look at it, and observe it. The fact that it's a feeling or a sense – does that make it something more than a rainbow?

It's possible to feel awareness or attention. These words are vague, right? What's attention? What's awareness? What's consciousness? Is it a unitary thing? Is it the harmonious functioning of many things working together?

On the last retreat I was teaching with Andrea Fella, someone asked about awareness. Andrea referred to her teacher, U Tejaniya, who, when asked what awareness is, said, "The variable interaction between the five faculties – that's what awareness is." The five faculties are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. Somehow, for him those things come into play in different ways, and awareness can shift. What awareness is and how we feel it shifts and changes too.

Sometimes awareness feels constricted and narrow; sometimes it feels expansive and open. Sometimes it feels colored by mood, or by what we're doing. Awareness sees things through the lens of a certain mood or feeling. Sometimes awareness doesn't have much energy – it feels dull. Sometimes it's crisp and sharp. Sometimes awareness comes with deep knowing and understanding; sometimes it doesn't have any understanding.

For U Tejaniya, the five faculties somehow define what awareness is. But that doesn't quite work for me. It's a definition of awareness. It certainly works for me to represent the different things that can influence how we experience what we call awareness – but I don't know if awareness is a thing.

When I use the word 'aware' – many teachers use the word 'awareness' – I think it's a pointer to something, such as being mindful, paying attention, being in the present moment. Then as we do that, it deepens, or it gets focused or stabilized in the present moment. And then what we call awareness or attention becomes stronger. At some point, it stands out in highlight, so that *what* we're aware of recedes from importance – and what we're aware of is not really that important anymore.

What becomes important is the strong sense that there is awareness; there's consciousness. Then you can

sometimes turn towards that strong feeling when it stands out in highlight – but that’s because it’s there. However, if you look at it carefully, you can’t quite turn towards it. Maybe you can, but I don’t know how to do it – to turn towards it and actually look at it.

It’s kind of like walking in the dark. If you want to see something with night vision, apparently you are better off looking a little to the side. In the dark, you have to not look in the usual way. You can’t just look and stare, because then you don’t see as well. You have to look with a loose focus – a little off to the side, so more light comes in. You can’t try too hard. It’s a little like that. If you try too hard with awareness, if you look at it directly – I don’t know.

I think one of the great challenges of neuroscience and psychology has been to figure out what consciousness is. Sometimes awareness and consciousness are used synonymously. I don’t think anybody has come up with a really good definition or understanding of what consciousness is that’s agreed by everybody. There are all these different ideas of what consciousness is. And there are all these ideas of multiple mental ways of functioning that work harmoniously together. As long as they work harmoniously together, there’s a rainbow. But once things start breaking down in the brain, consciousness starts getting frazzled. I don’t know. Sorry.

Do you want to ask some more? Why is it an important question? I think you wouldn’t have asked that question if I hadn’t have made a big deal about it earlier this morning. Was that meaningful? How did you observe awareness then?

Participant 1: *Well my tendency is – as you were suggesting – to have a light touch. Just let it flow, and follow it as it goes. And not worry too much about it. Just knowing and appreciating that it’s there. When you spoke this morning, I guess I was trying to appreciate it more, and I got a little frustrated. So I decided not to do that anymore.*

Good, that’s wise. That’s good. Are there other times in your life when you are a little bit amazed by the very fact that you are aware?

Participant 1: *Yes. I am a little bit amazed by it; yes.*

In my mind at least, it’s similar to when I’m amazed that I’m alive. When I’m really amazed to be alive, the sense of being alive – whatever that is – the sense of being aware or conscious is close at hand, or it overlaps quite a bit. But in order to have some sense of this – of awareness, of being alive – you have to be in the present moment. So if you are still thinking about the high school prom, or are caught up in that whole world – chances are, you’re probably not so fully present for the bigger picture – the bigger context of your life.

It’s the same thing if we are caught up with self-preoccupation. Then it’s hard to be aware of the larger context. Or if we’re caught up in fear about the future or what’s supposed to happen, it’s harder to get a sense of this. So we’re limited. But the unlimited life – the unlimited sense of awareness, presence, or life – the door to that is really in the present moment. And as that becomes stronger, then it’s a lot of rainbows; it’s magical.

Okay, so here we are. I like the expression, “Here we are,” because it’s so amazingly profound – and so ordinary. We should not to be fooled by a simple statement, “Here we are,” thinking that it doesn’t mean anything. It means a lot. “Here we are,” and we share it together. We share our present moment.

In monasteries, temples, and retreat centers, I’ve done a lot of cleaning together with other people. It’s interesting to watch the mind and one’s awareness.

What happens to your awareness? What do you get caught up in? Can you clean in such a way that you are not caught up in your inner stories, dramas, and concerns? But rather, you are present not only for what you do in a nice way, but also so that your awareness is a little more relaxed – wider and open. You take in what’s going on around you as well.

Some of that goes on in this fifteen-minute cleaning we’re going to do. It’s a bit of a dance. You are participating in this bigger dance with all these people doing different things. How do we interact and do this together? What kind of awareness, or attention do you have in the present moment, but which is more open – so that you have this wider context of the work you are doing?