

Daily Life Practice Retreat

Noticing the Quality of the Observing Mind

For this week, we will explore the theme of noticing the quality, or the attitude of the observing mind. When we bring attention to experience, we sometimes don't notice the quality of that attention: is it straining, at ease, wanting something to continue, wanting something to go away? This aspect of our experience often falls outside of what we notice, it often happens "behind the curtain" of our attention.

We can open up to noticing the attitude of the observing mind by consciously checking it, occasionally. One way to do this is simply to ask yourself the question: "What is my attitude", "What is my relationship to what I am noticing," or "How am I with what is happening right now?"

As we start to bring this aspect of our mental life into awareness, we will notice roughly four categories that our attitude falls in to:

- Greed: wanting something. This includes the obvious feeling of wanting, holding on to things, along with more subtle states of expectation, wanting a particular result, or even a subtle leaning in to experience to try to understand it.
- Aversion: wanting to get rid of something. This includes the obvious feeling of hatred and strong aversion, but also includes the weaker aspects of dislike, annoyance, discontent, dissatisfaction. We can sometimes pay attention to difficult experiences with the subtle attitude "by paying attention properly, this difficult experience will no longer feel difficult."
- Delusion: confusion, not wanting to notice, not wanting to pay attention, beliefs, strong identification with experience: e.g. "I am feeling this", "I am being mindful".
- Balance: calm, peaceful, contented, at ease (even around difficult experiences). The attitude, or relationship to our experience can also be one of balance. This often manifest as an easeful quality to the awareness, even when something difficult is happening. The feeling might be one of "I don't mind this."

The practice begins to help us recognize states of mind that often go unnoticed by us. When we notice the relationship (or attitude), we don't need to try to change it, we simply let it be noticed. For instance, if while observing a pleasant experience, you notice an attitude of wanting it to continue, simply allow that wanting to be part of your observation. When an unskilful attitude comes out from behind the curtain, it no longer has so much power over the mind. This practice has a great power to reveal the habitual tendencies, and subtle forms of clinging in our minds. It also encourages us to take an interest in how our minds work, so that recognizing this subtle clinging doesn't need to be frustrating or depression, it can be interesting, even amazing.

Paying attention to the attitude starts to point us in the direction of becoming aware of awareness itself, since we are starting to notice the qualities of awareness. We can also begin to realize that we can notice how our minds *function*: that we can notice the mind perceiving, feeling, knowing, and creating all kinds of mental states.