

Consciousness (1 of 5) Knowing that Changes the Knower

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Good day everyone, whether it's morning, afternoon, or evening for you. As most of you here today know, I have been away for three weeks happily teaching a three-week retreat at our retreat center in Santa Cruz, California. It ended two days ago, and I still feel very much in the momentum of the retreat.

With the retreat teachings still on my mind, I would like to talk about consciousness or awareness. I see consciousness and awareness as synonyms. In one dictionary, when you look up the definition of consciousness, it says “awareness,” and when you look up the definition of awareness, it says “consciousness.” I'm sure that there are people who might make

distinctions between them, but in simple English, it is very easy to treat them as the same thing.

The question is: what is consciousness? What is awareness? I don't really know exactly, but I have a working theory – an understanding with which to find my way. I am in awe of the capacity to be aware (to be conscious). I see consciousness as like a spark in the vast universe, or a little candle burning. There are seven billion of these candles of consciousness, brightness, and clarity, which all humans share. The degree to which we share consciousness with animals and other sentient beings is not very clear, but there are many different ideas about that.

I would like to relate the idea of consciousness to the basic tools of mindfulness. Consciousness is not a static thing, but rather, it is the image or the sense that the mind constructs as the gestalt of all our different capacities of attention and all the different kinds of mental influences that might impact our attention. “Gestalt” means a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. The mind has the capacity to construct. It is a constructing organ. It takes in data from outside through all our different sense doors, and inside, from the mind’s memories, thoughts, and projections of the future. The mind is an amazing organ that processes the data

coming in and then reconstructs it in such a way that we can navigate the world.

One of the mental capacities that I marvel at is that when someone throws you a ball, your mind will calculate the physics of when, how, and where you will catch the ball. If it's a beach ball, you will calculate it very differently than if it's a baseball thrown at you as a fastball. A calculation goes on that includes the height of the throw, the weight of the ball, and its size – many things come into play. Your mind does not calculate the physics of it in a conscious way. But somehow it knows. It takes in all the data, maybe the memories of different balls being thrown before, and it understands the specifics of this time.

This is an example of the mind's ability to construct and make things. We know that sometimes it does so creatively. For instance, it might see things as dynamic that are not really dynamic, like the old eight-millimeter films with all the individual frames that are still shots, but when they pass through the eyes quickly, the brain reconstructs them as motion. There is no motion on the screen. You see a lot of quick still shots there, but the mind constructs something.

So the mind is a constructing organ. It puts together all the different capacities for perception, awareness,

knowing, and recognition, and forms a whole sense of what that is. That whole sense of consciousness can feel marvelous, like an open, broad spectrum of awareness. But the way people experience consciousness (being aware) varies very much from person to person and individually from day to day. Our experience depends on all kinds of mental factors that come into play and influence our sense of awareness and consciousness.

For example, if we spend a lot of time being distracted, then we hardly even know that we are conscious and aware. We know it in the abstract, but we do not live in the immediate awareness – the intimate knowing of: “Wow, this is amazing.” When we are not distracted – maybe we are in some beautiful natural setting looking at the sky and clouds – we might marvel at how special it is that here we are on this planet, aware of the planet. It is quite something to be with someone as they die, and see that there is consciousness in that body, and then, seemingly, there is no more consciousness. We see that will happen to us someday.

So, the sense of consciousness can depend on whether we are distracted or not distracted, and calm or not calm. The sense of consciousness is influenced by the different ways in which we know things. In mindfulness practice, different attentional faculties come into play.

Different people will specialize in different faculties as their grounding into mindfulness. Mindfulness is not a function of a particular organ of perception, but rather, it also is a kind of gestalt of different things that come together to help us to be mindful. This may be a narrower, smaller sphere of things than that which constructs the idea of consciousness.

For the rest of the week, I want to talk about our different attentional capacities, so we can recognize them. The more we recognize them, the more we can use them in different ways. I will talk about the ones that the Buddha emphasized when he taught mindfulness practice. He emphasized four different ways of paying attention.

In Buddhist practice, the principle is that we are changed as we use different faculties of attention. When we observe something, the observer can be changed by the observation. We practice according to this principle: we are observing and being mindful in such a way that we are changed in the observing. The simplest way of saying this is that, as we observe, if we observe in a calm way, we become calmer and calmer. If we observe our experience in an agitated way, it is easy to become more and more agitated. So *how* we are aware is crucial for the enterprise of mindfulness – allowing it to change us for the better.

Today and tomorrow, I will talk about what I call “knowing,” which I see as a synonym for recognition, meaning a moment of recognition – just the simplest recognition of something. For example, looking at a cup and recognizing, “That's a cup.” That recognition can be verbal, or it can be nonverbal cognitive recognition. We have a lot of nonverbal cognition that goes on all day long.

Take the time to really know something. Let yourself stop for a moment or more to really know the experience you're having, or know the thing that you're with – know the cup that you're with. Then, see if you can know it in a calm way. Begin experimenting with the calm knowing of things. This can be the homework for the next 24 hours if you are inclined. During the day, look at the manner in which you know the world you're in – the way you are perceiving it – especially, *how* you recognize what is going on. Are you knowing in a hurry? Are you agitated, tense, or contracted? Are you pulling away? What happens to you when you recognize something, and there is time to recognize it calmly?

I hope this makes sense. And I hope that as we go through this week, you will start appreciating the different faculties of attention, and how those faculties

might help shape our construction of consciousness
itself. Thank you very much.