

Location for Awareness (4 of 5) 50/50 Awareness

April 6, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

challenge, social, attention, communication, listen, self

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Welcome to the fourth talk on shifting perspectives or locations for awareness. We can think about different places from which we are aware. We can also think about different locations where awareness lands – what the focus of awareness is. We have some choice around those. The emphasis this week is on using our capacity for choice and discernment in order to become wise about how to use attention – to begin to feel we have some agency and engagement with how we are aware, so we can be aware in an effective and useful way.

The overall theme since the beginning of the year has been how to work with challenges. This topic is an important part of that theme. Because challenges of all kinds are challenging, we tend to be swept into them and focused on them. We can also be very impacted by

them. They can be difficult emotionally, physically, and psychologically. We can get wrapped up in our reactivity to the challenges, and in the impact that has on them.

But in our challenges, we will be less vulnerable and less impacted in a negative way if we are engaged in being aware. When we are swimming in the ocean of change and the world, if we navigate in the water and adjust ourselves according to the situation, rather than just floating and letting whatever waves come wash over us, then we have some agency, some engagement. The engagement of exploring how to be mindful is a kind of protection from being too open and receptive and being impacted by everything. We still feel things deeply, but we are not as vulnerable to it all if we have some sense of engagement – we have something to do. We are not helpless and hopeless in the situation.

One very useful thing to do with awareness practice, especially when we are in social situations, is to have 50 percent of the attention on the people we are with, the social situation we're in, and 50 percent of the attention on ourselves. Fifty-fifty is not an exact number, but approximately half and half. The idea is to go back and forth, or to be aware of both at the same time.

If we are only aware of the other person, then we are not aware of the impact of the situation on us. We are

not aware of our attitudes and judgments that are coming up, or our responses and intuitions. But if we are only aware of ourselves, then we're not really taking in all the information about the other person. We are not really listening well. A lot of communication is non-verbal. So if we are not really paying attention, we don't pick up the nonverbal cues in the conversation.

Going back and forth and being aware of both brings us into a nice balance. If we are paying attention to ourselves, we might notice that we're not paying attention, we are not listening. That is pretty dramatic. We might also notice that we are making judgments, or we are starting to plan what we're going to say next. We might also see that we are impacted by what is being said, and we are swimming in the impact. Maybe we are crumbling under it, or getting tense around it, or getting assertive, or feeling angry.

All this information is useful because all of it comes into play in the act of communication, the act of exchange with people. It is good to have knowledge about it, to know it. Also, by being more aware of ourselves, we have access to a much larger set of information about what's happening in the exchange with other people. I like to think of our psychophysical body as being an antenna, or many antennas. We have amazing capacities for sensing, feeling, and receiving information

from the world around us. People do not avail themselves of many of them.

When we really begin taking in that information by being present with ourselves, we are not just being aware of ourselves. This practice is not self-focused. We are much more present for all the sense apparatuses, all the ways that we take in information, respond, and mirror the other person. It is not so much that we're paying attention to ourselves, with the emphasis on self. We are 50 percent here in this body, in this psychophysical system that we happen to be in, in order to really take in what's happening in a deeper way. Then we are actually better able to pay attention to others and know people by being grounded in ourselves.

By being grounded in other people, though, we are also able to take in more information and understand them better. We offer our kindness. Paying attention well to other people is a kind thing. The fifty-fifty division of attention actually can make us better listeners. People being listened to might think that we are really present in a full way. But they feel that because of the heightened awareness, heightened listening, and heightened attentiveness when you are also present 50 percent in your own experience.

Among all the different ways that we are attending, we are aware of our posture. Posture has a lot to do with

how we are with other people. When you are aware of your posture, then you can adjust it in such a way that you are more connected to what is happening, rather than turning towards the door ready to leave, for example.

One of the choices that we have about mindfulness and awareness is, where is our attention? We track that – for instance: “Oh, it’s mostly with the person. I am being pulled in.” One place to experiment with this is when someone is telling a wonderful story or joke, or you’re listening to a wonderfully engaging speaker, and you are getting pulled into the story or the idea. Ask yourself how that feels to lose touch with yourself and be absorbed in what’s going on. If you are really angry with someone, are you absorbed in them as the object of blame, and are you losing touch with yourself? This fifty-fifty attention is a way to come back into balance and take care of yourself so you can be a better companion, a better listener, and a better participant in whatever situation you’re in.

We have some choice about where we put our attention and how we are aware. When we bring the attention to ourselves, we might be experiencing it more in the body, centered in the feelings – how it feels to be here with the other person and with what is being said. Internally, we are reacting to our feelings. That is one way. It’s a good way at times. Or are we more in our thoughts,

planning what we're going to say, reacting to and reflecting on what the person is saying? That is good sometimes. But both of these ways sometimes have their weaknesses. What is really the best way to be with the situation? Maybe we should shift back and forth.

This kind of engagement with the situation is a kind of protection against getting overwhelmed or being too impacted by the situation. There is not as much room in us to be overwhelmed if we are engaged in an intentional, clear way with what is going on. With our attention 50 percent back and forth, it is possible to be very aware of and know what is happening in the body, what's happening in thoughts, what's happening in feelings, and also be very aware of the other person. The beautiful thing that can happen is that somehow, the self-concern falls away.

The self-preoccupation, the self-definition, the selfing that we are so often caught in can fall away so that it is almost as if we are not there, but there is a lot of presence. We are not there, but we're not checked out. We are acutely sensitive to what's happening in this psychophysical body. We are responsible, caring, and involved, but the ego and coagulation around self can relax and fall away as we engage in this full attention that is half with the other person or the situation, and half with ourselves.

I would encourage you to look for situations today where it might be not too complicated or difficult to do this kind of work of shifting attention back and forth, maybe while you are listening to a lecture, maybe even this one on YouTube, maybe to me, or maybe listening to a podcast – just so it is a safe place. Find a nice rhythm of going back and forth between listening and asking, how does it feel? How are you as a listener listening, and how are you? Maybe there are certain friends with whom it makes sense to do this while going for a walk with them. That is a great place to practice this fifty-fifty attention of your friend and yourself.

We have an amazing capacity to be aware. Awareness is multifaceted. There are many ways of being aware. It is a very rich life when we can find our way, have choice, and navigate the different locations of being aware, for the benefit of ourselves and the benefit of others.

Thank you. I look forward to the last talk in the series tomorrow.