

Mindfulness of Mind (3 of 5) Respecting Awareness

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This morning, the perspective on the topic is that of respect. As you have heard me say many times, I like the word “respect.” I am inspired by it, partly because of its etymological meaning: “to look again,” or “to inspect again,” from the Latin root. The idea is to have the willingness to not just barrel ahead into the future and keep doing and doing, but to take a deeper look. Maybe our experience warrants a second look, a better look, with more sustained attention, asking what is really happening here.

We don't stop at the first impression of something. We take time to really experience and feel it more deeply. One of the benefits of doing this is we begin to appreciate the looking itself, the ability to take a second look. There is something valuable about looking again and seeing in a relaxed, open, receptive way that is

somewhat (or very) free of our preconceived ideas, agendas, biases, and preferences.

These preferences can so easily get brought along if we go rapidly from one thing to another. Instead, we can consciously decide: “Let me look more carefully here. Let me be more open. Let me take in this experience more fully.” This is a way of side-stepping or putting aside our preconceived ideas that automatically get brought along.

These preconceived ideas, thoughts, and agendas are often directing our attention – “I want this, I want that.” Some of us can experience this acutely when we are surfing the Web, going from one thing to the other, seeing this and that. The mind is being directed all the time. But we can step back and be willing to look again more carefully.

At some point, the fact that we’re looking – the act of looking itself – becomes kind of special. I have been to places where there are wonderful vistas, maybe high up in the mountains with great views of the landscape below, or on the beach looking out across the ocean. For me at least, there is something about panoramic views with lots of space and openness that I enjoy looking at in a relaxed way. After a while, I am appreciating what I see, but I also appreciate the relaxed, open, receptive looking and gazing.

It is almost as if the looking and what's being seen are both separate and not so separate. How they are separate is the looking now stands out in highlight: there is seeing happening. That seeing is so relaxed, spacious, and open that I could stay for a long time looking at the clouds drifting in the sky, or at the river flowing by. I can just look and look. It feels so relaxed and settling to look in this way – as opposed to evaluating every cloud and thinking: “Well, that cloud is a little bit too big; it has too much of a bump here; that one is a nice shape, and I would like to keep it that way; let me find a better cloud to look at because this one's getting kind of boring.” When we are constantly involved in this kind of directedness, we tend to lose sight of the fact that we're looking. We are looking more at our preferences, as in: “The cloud should be this way, not that way.”

Respect – looking again and again – is partly what we're doing in mindfulness practice. We are learning not to ride the waves of our preferences and our agendas – what we always want. We step back and take another look at them.

At some point, the looking, the mindfulness, begins to stand out in highlight because it feels good to be mindful. In being mindful, there is freedom,

spaciousness, relaxation, and ease. We feel that this is good. And we start becoming aware of awareness itself.

Awareness is a big topic. I like to use the word “awareness” as a vague word, because people have different reference points for what awareness means. When you talk about awareness, for some people, the way they know things is much more through their thinking, so how they are aware is through their thinking. For some people, awareness is more like sensing. They’re aware through their body and they are sensing. For some people, it is more a silent knowing, where they are not really aware of any active, cognitive movement of the mind to know. Instead, there is a silence. They just know kind of intuitively.

There are many ways to know. In the mindfulness tradition, there are a variety of different kinds of knowing that operate at different times. Regardless of what your way of knowing is – what you think awareness is – what can happen with each one of them is that at some point, awareness stands out a little bit in highlight. “Oh, here is something. This is not the object that I am thinking about. This is the receptivity or the experience of knowing it.”

Then we can become aware of the attitudes that we bring along with awareness – the desires or contractions that are part of being aware. But then we

take a second look, and another look, until we begin experiencing awareness – knowing, sensing, feeling, observing, whatever it might be – at ease, in a kind of open silence and spaciousness. Even when we are thinking, there can be a silence that knows that.

One of my first entry points to the world of spiritual life was spending a week in solitude at a beautiful farm. I was not meditating, but because I had no social contact and wasn't talking with anyone, it was like being on a meditation retreat. I became acutely aware of my thinking. I had no judgments about the fact I was thinking. But there was a clarity in which I knew I was thinking. That clarity: "Oh, there's a thought." There was a beauty, a clarity, a cleanliness, an openness, and a distinctness that I'd never seen before.

It was kind of like in the old days, when tuning into a radio station, it suddenly came into tune and became clear. It was as if I had suddenly found the wavelength in my mind. I was clearly aware, and I knew. That clarity of knowing is what some people call "awareness." It is not different from awareness, but it's not exactly awareness. It is coterminous with awareness. The clarity is so beautiful, so wonderful.

So I became aware of this clarity. I could see my cognitive thoughts, my words, and my mind, with clarity. I appreciated the freedom and the ease that were there.

To be mindful of the process of being aware is one of the supports for coming to a place of clarity. In the meditation just now, I talked about silence. Even though I was thinking when I was alone that week, that thinking became acutely clear. I was aware of each thought in a larger silence.

For some people, mindfulness of awareness is associated with stillness. Awareness is vividly, softly, and wonderfully still. Sometimes awareness is spaciousness. There is a lot of space for it. It isn't so much that space, stillness, silence, or clarity is the ultimate thing. What matters is that it helps us to relax more deeply, and it teaches us about non-clinging. It helps us to see where the remaining clinging is.

We get a feeling for freedom. There is freedom in the clarity of awareness. There's freedom in the stillness and the silence of awareness, so we get a feel, a little hint, a smell of freedom. The door is open, for that is where freedom is found.

I'll give you another analogy from my childhood – for some of you, if you're old enough and did this kind of thing. When I was a little kid, sometimes my parents would take their car to a car wash. You could stay in the car as it went through the car wash with all the spraying water, suds, and brushes. That was kind of chaotic outside the car, against the windows. But inside the car,

it felt so safe, quiet, and peaceful. The contrast was acute. That was one of the reasons I loved going through those car washes. I felt the peace, the quiet, the stillness, and the safety of being inside the car so acutely highlighted against the chaos outside.

That is a reference point for me of how it can be in the mind sometimes, when I'm resting in awareness, and there's a peace, a quiet, and an openness that are independent of the chaos that might be happening around me. We can carry our peace with us.

What I'm talking about today is a little bit esoteric. I trust that those of you who don't quite understand what I'm saying (which I wouldn't have when I was first introduced to meditation) can just relax with it, but keep it in mind, filed away.

At some point, you might have an experience of this, and realize, "Oh, that's what Gil was talking about." I trust this talk might help you appreciate and benefit from that experience. Thank you very much. I look forward to continuing this tomorrow.