

## THE ART OF AWARENESS

In my early days as a Zen student, I really wanted to know what it meant to live an awake life. I would often read or hear that living awake meant being “one with our experience,” so whenever I would meet someone who I thought knew something, I would ask, “What does it really mean to be one with our experience?” I never got an answer that made sense to me, so I began to follow up with the question, “When you’re watching a movie, and you’re totally absorbed in it, is that the same thing as being one with your experience?” The answer was almost always yes. The absorption experience would usually be equated with being totally in the moment, or awake. Sometimes it was described as analogous to “just chopping carrots,” where there is no separation between you and the carrots. Another example was of athletes, who become so absorbed in their activities that they enter “the zone,” equating this state of flow with the experience of “no self.”

These answers posed a dilemma, since I knew first hand the experience of being totally absorbed in a movie, which for me was *not* an experience of being awake. I had also practiced Zen carrot chopping, and had been an athlete who had experienced “the zone” on quite a few occasions – and in none of these instances was I really *awake*. Even though there was no sense of self, this “no-self” experience of being absorbed in activity is often a form of “waking sleep.” At best, it’s an experience of absorption or concentration. There’s nothing wrong with absorption or concentration; in fact, they can foster the enjoyment of artistic creation or athletic performance. However, we can experience these states and still not be truly awake. So to romanticize them with phrases like, “being one with activity” is not something that is particularly helpful.

So what *does* it mean to be awake? Along with seeing through the misconception that to be “one with activity” means that we’re awake, we also have to abandon the misconception is that when we awaken, the experience becomes permanent. Simple observation of ourselves and others would clearly demonstrate that this is untrue. But hope still persists that there is one magical experience that somehow changes us forever. Those who have had powerful “enlightenment” experiences, if they’re honest, will admit that even though these experiences may dramatically affect us, they certainly don’t wipe

out our conditioned patterns forever. Quite the contrary, the most pernicious form of waking sleep is believing that we've become an awake *person* just because we were awake for a few moments or hours or even weeks. The diminution of these patterns requires many years of practice in the Me-phase.

## AWARENESS AS A CONTINUUM

In actual fact, “awakeness” is a continuum. This continuum does not correspond exactly to the three stages of practice described in this book; rather, the modes on this continuum interweave throughout each of the different stages of practice. For example, the concentration mode on the awareness continuum is required in the Me-phase, as well as in the phases of Being-Awareness and Being-Kindness. Likewise, the wide open awareness mode is particularly important in the later phases, but is also relevant even in the Me-phase. The point is, the different modes that are about to be described can be experienced at any time, and are a useful way of gauging to what degree we're awake in any given moment.

On the far end of the continuum, almost as a pre-stage to awareness, is the mode often described as *waking sleep*. This is the state out of which we live most of our lives, although we're often unaware of how asleep we actually are. The single strongest element of this state of waking sleep is that we are *identified*, or lost, in virtually everything – our thoughts, desires, emotions, activities, and so on. More specifically, we're almost always addicted to our thoughts, in that we believe our thoughts and opinions are The Truth. In addition, we rarely can control our emotions; in fact, we often love to indulge them. And perhaps most importantly, we can't stay in the present moment for more than a few seconds at a time. In truth, it's the last place we want to be. Thus, we rarely know who we are or what we're doing, except in a very narrow or self-conscious way. There is no sense of presence or clarity; in a way, we exist primarily as sleepwalkers.

The realization that we're living in this state of waking sleep is often what motivates us to begin practice. Usually, we begin by moving to the *concentration mode* on the awareness continuum. For example, we may learn to focus intensely on the breath or on sounds. Here we may begin to be “awake,” but often only to a very narrow segment

of reality. Concentration is not a bad thing – it’s just limited, in that it shuts most of life out. However, it’s certainly useful in helping the mind and body settle down. If it’s done intensely and for a long period of time, it can even set the stage for brief breakthroughs from our normal mode of perceiving reality. For example, in the Zen practice of koan study, our normal bubble of perception may be temporarily broken when the koan is resolved. But the bubble usually closes again quite quickly, and then we’re on to the next koan, and the next, possibly ignoring the rest of our life. There may be moments of great insight, but as soon as these moments end, we are likely to become just as angry or fearful as ever.

When practice doesn’t bring more awareness and clarity into our everyday life, we may begin to realize that something is lacking. At this point we may become motivated to explore the next aspect on the awareness continuum, which is often called *mindfulness*. This mode is particularly relevant in the Me-phase of practice, where we begin to pay more precise attention to our thoughts, emotions, activities, and strategies of behavior. We begin to see clearly the beliefs that run our lives, and the repeating patterns that keep us stuck in our own particular modes of suffering. We also come to know the basic fears out of which all of our beliefs and behaviors arise, and we learn what it means to observe and fully experience our fears without getting consumed by them.

If we persevere with the mindfulness aspect of the awareness continuum, our solid patterns gradually become more and more porous, and our emotional reactions no longer dictate how we live. In this sense, we are, in fact, living more awake. Yet, this is still only one aspect of awareness. We can become very aware of our personal tendencies, and begin to live a more open and genuine life, but still have a very limited awareness of reality.

This is the point where we may realize the need to expand our view of practice even further. As we increasingly understand that practice is not just about nice states of mind induced by concentration or absorption, nor just about freeing ourselves from our personal psychological conditioning, we may move along the continuum of awareness to what is often referred to as *wide open awareness*. This is the most important mode in the phase of Being -Awareness. In wide open awareness, unlike the concentration mode, we are not focused on one particular thing, such as the breath. And unlike the mindfulness

mode, we are not paying as much directed attention to the observation of personal thoughts and feelings. Instead, they may appear and pass like clouds across the sky, and as we become increasingly alert to *whatever* arises, awareness begins to expand beyond our normal boundaries or limits of perception. This is a very difficult state to describe, but a particular meditation practice, The Three Point Awareness Meditation, opens the door to this expanded awareness state. The instructions for this meditation will be given in the next chapter.

## LIVING AWAKE

There is a very particular sense – a visceral experience of presence – that can be activated by wide open awareness. There is a vividness, as if you were *here* for the first time. Sometimes the feeling is almost electric. On occasion, our normal sense of who we are begins to desolidify; and as our fixed boundaries begin to disappear, we feel more connected. We may have the momentary understanding that “All is one” or the equally powerful understanding that “All is love” – but those are still only moments. In the actual living of our lives, all of the messy stuff remains. Problems still arise; fear still arises; thoughts still cascade through the mind. The sense of self does not fully disappear, nor does it have to. Yet, something changes. The sense of who we are, the sense of “me”, of all my stories, loses its substantiality, its heaviness.

As we begin to relate to the clouds of thought, emotion, and self as just clouds, we no longer feel the need to stop them. They don’t go away, but there’s a vast difference between identifying with the clouds and identifying with the vast sky within which the clouds appear. Identifying with “I-as-Awareness,” rather than “I-as-a-me,” is like identifying with the sky, and from that awareness the clouds are never as substantial as they appear when we’re lost inside them. For example, anxiety may arise, but within the wider container of open awareness we can experience the anxiety but not *be* anxious. The narrow sense of “I-as-anxious”, which normally predominates, gives way to the wider sense of “I-as-Awareness.”

To live increasingly from the sense of “I-as-Awareness,” or Being-Awareness, is an essential aspect of living an awake life; it is also the direction toward which wide open awareness practice leads. This is not the narrow experience of absorption, nor of losing

our sense of self; rather, there is an experience of awake *presence*. As awareness expands, as the clouds of attachment and self-centered drama diminish, the experience of *living* – including the most mundane activities – takes on clarity and freshness.

Immersed in activities, there is a *knowing* of who we are – that we are more than just this body, just this personal drama – and the clarity and wonder of our basic connectedness increasingly become a lived reality.

Perhaps the one thing that most prevents us from this awareness is our judgmental mind. It is a readily observable fact that we constantly judge events, ourselves and others as good or bad. Often, when we have difficult experiences, we automatically make the judgment that something is wrong. And we may then jump to the conclusion that something is therefore wrong with us. This pernicious sense of unkindness often permeates our lives, and consequently prevents us from living in an open-hearted and genuine way. Even when we have enjoyable experiences, we often judge them as right and good. Such so-called “positive” judgments do not cause the same suffering as more negative judgments, but they are judgments just the same, and they perpetuate the cycle of waking sleep.

The mindfulness aspect of practice will help us see through our judgmental thoughts to some extent; and the willingness to look with honesty at our unkindness toward ourselves will gradually diminish our self-judgment. Yet, one other aspect of the awareness continuum is essential here: living from the heart of Being-Kindness. This is the reason so much emphasis is placed on awareness of the breath into the center of the chest, a practice that has the unique ability to *directly* undercut the solidity of the judgmental mind. In fact, when awareness is focused in the chest center, it’s very difficult to sustain thinking – particularly unkind thoughts. As we direct awareness to this area, the sense of Being-Kindness, which is the antidote to self-judgment, begins to come forth naturally. Regardless of how clear we are, or how spacious, without Being-Kindness, without a sense of heart, we will surely fall short of living in the way that is most genuine and true to who we really are.

AN ANALOGY

There is a good analogy that describes the kind of awareness required to live more awake. The analogy is to compare the continuum of awareness to a camera. The pre-stage of the awareness continuum, described before as the state of *waking sleep*, where we're basically not aware, not present, is analogous to a camera that still has a dark filter covering the lens. When we begin awareness practice, we are basically learning to take the filter off the lens – we're learning to see and experience in a new way.

The *concentration* mode on the awareness continuum is analogous to the telephoto lens, where we focus in on one aspect of our experience, such as the breath or a koan, and stay with it very intensely. We also use this lens when we're off the meditation cushion, such as when we need to focus on certain kinds of work, or on creative or athletic endeavors. Here, the concentration mode may be the most appropriate form of awareness. But when a focused concentration is not required, we change the camera lens to the mindfulness mode.

The *mindfulness* mode on the continuum of awareness is analogous to taking a snapshot. With the clarity of a photograph, we examine the present moment experience of mind and body. We look with precision at the photo, often seeing what we normally might not see, or looking at the same details in a very different way. If there is a strong emotion, we learn how to stay present with the visceral experience of the emotion without getting hooked into the thought-based story – with all of the drama and blame. In *seeing* the thoughts objectively, as we would when looking at a photograph, the thoughts don't fuel the fire of emotion; instead, we can feel the emotion as sheer energy.

When we're using neither the telephoto lens of concentration nor the precise snapshots of mindfulness, we use the wide angle lens of *open awareness*. The wide angle lens takes in everything, from the mundane to the shimmering. The experience of wide open awareness, when the lens is fully open, is like having a 360 degree view while listening to surround sound. There is a *knowing*, a realization, that we *are* the vastness of the surround, as well as a unique manifestation of it. This is the experience of Being-Awareness.

What's important to remember is that living awake is not limited to just one point on the awareness continuum. There are times when the telephoto lens of concentration is

needed, to shut out the incessant noise of the mind and to allow the body and mind to settle. There are even more times when the precise snapshots of mindfulness are needed, especially in dealing with our deep-seated conditioning, including all of our emotional reactivity. But as our photo album becomes more and more extensive, as we know ourselves with more and more clarity, we become increasingly capable of including our emotional reactions within the wide angle lens of open awareness. We learn to experience the clouds while staying with the wide angle view of the sky. We learn to live increasingly from Being-Awareness, able to maintain a larger sense of what life is. And within the spaciousness of wide open awareness, with the breath centered in the heart, we learn to live each day with Being-Kindness as our natural response to life.

Of course, this analogy of the camera lens of awareness is not a scientific formula. But neither is practice. In fact, the attempt to define and confine practice to *one thing*, or to reduce it to a scientific formulation, is much too limiting. Practice is not science; it is much more of an art form, where we have to deal with the worlds of subtlety, relativity, and paradox. We don't approach all of our experiences with one fixed formula, just as we don't use a camera only one way. Depending on what life is presenting, we learn which lens is needed. In the art of practice, we may flicker between the telephoto lens of concentration, the clear snapshots of mindfulness, and the wide angle lens of open awareness in a very short span of time.

Truly living awake is more than an art form; it is ultimately a mystery. But it doesn't have to be mysterious in a confused sense. The more we understand the subtleties of the continuum of awareness, the less we'll be seduced into a single limited view of what living awake means. Rather than reducing it to being one with our experience or being mindful or spacious, living awake is a fluid interplay of three essential components: a diminution of the self-centered story of "me"; a sense of presence, of Being-Awareness; and perhaps above all, the heartfelt sense of Being-Kindness that is the essence of who we are.