

Dharmette: The Value of Knowing That You Know

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on March 7, 2012

To be aware of awareness, to be aware of yourself being mindful, to be aware of yourself being present for something is part of this path of practice. A certain self-reflectiveness or self-awareness is part of this.

If you're only focused on the external world – for example, on your concerns for other people, or things, or activities – it's very easy to be so concerned, that you don't notice how you are in being concerned. You might be stressed out, worried, and tense. It's possible to spend a whole day tense, and so focused on what you're tense about that you don't know you are tense! Part of the self-reflective, self-aware aspect of mindfulness is that you don't focus only on your concerns. You also have self-awareness, self-understanding: "Oh, I'm tense."

That's one step. Then you can take a step further. You know you're tense, but you also know that you know you're tense. This might seem abstract, but stay with me. It's one thing to know you're tense; it's another thing to know that you're present, to know that you know. It's one thing to be present; it's another to know that you're present. If you know you're present, then you know some of the qualities of presence. You know what it feels like, and you know how present you are.

It's possible to know that you're paying attention. For example, you're tense and you're paying attention to the tension. It's also possible to know that you're just paying attention halfheartedly. "I'm not really paying attention. I'm a dutiful Buddhist practitioner, and I've been told to be mindful. Okay, I'll do it. I don't know why I'm doing it, but I've been told to pay attention to my pain. I don't know if I believe in this, but I might as well give it a try." You can be aware if it's halfhearted. Or you can be aware of your pain or tension, and you *know* it. You're going to bazooka it! You're going to zero in like a laser. You can be aware of the quality of the awareness and the attention you bring. It's one thing to know something like tension; it's another to know *how* you know it, to *know* that you know it. When mindfulness, attention, and consciousness are really strong, there is a beautiful quality – a beautiful feeling of knowing that you know.

Here's an unfortunate example – hopefully it won't traumatize some of you. Maybe this has happened to you. You've been on the freeway or driving some place, and you had a really dangerous, near miss accident. You were just driving along, minding your own business, thinking whatever you were thinking – random thoughts, nothing about driving. Then out of the blue, a car does a crazy thing and you're a hair away from being creamed, flattened. But, nothing happens to you. For a moment the brakes screech and all kinds of stuff happens, but you came out of that near miss. Chances are you wouldn't immediately just pick up those random thoughts again, like what you're having for dinner. Suddenly you feel alive. Maybe the adrenaline is running. You feel really present in a way you weren't before: "Wow! I'm alive and present." Things are clear and crisp. There's an energy, alertness, or clarity that wasn't present before. In that clarity, that alertness, that sense of presence brought on by the near accident, you can palpably feel that you know you know. You *know* you're present. There's a whole new entity here: presence, alertness, clarity.

Maybe a better example would be waking up from sleep or a nap so refreshed that you feel the refreshment, and you know you're refreshed. But the refreshment is not separate from the awareness that is refreshed, and the clarity of awareness that comes. So there's a self-reflective aspect of knowing that you know, and it's beautiful. "Wow! This is really something. This is powerful."

Sometimes in meditation, you come to a point when the mind gets more and more settled; and at that point, the awareness flowers and becomes strong. It almost becomes its own entity. In ordinary life, however, awareness is not its own entity. In ordinary life, awareness is this poor thing that's co-dependent on everything else, lost with everything else, pulled around, hijacked, held hostage by whatever concerns you, so that you hardly even know you're aware, let alone *know* that you have awareness, because you're so involved and caught in what you're doing.

As mindfulness and meditation get stronger, then slowly the sense of being aware becomes stronger and stands out in highlight. One way it stands out is that you can feel the *quality* of the attention you have. And you can feel how you can use attention, rather than attention being hijacked by everything. You can start using your attention.

For example, “Oh, right now I’m tense. I think I can use my attention. I will take my awareness and place it in my shoulders where I’m tense.” You place it there in a careful way, as opposed to continuing to think about the important upcoming meeting you’re tense about. Instead, “I think what’s useful would be to use awareness to pay attention to my feelings, to the anxiety I have.” Rather than being highjacked, attention becomes something you start using. It’s another way into feeling awareness and presence until awareness becomes its own thing, kind of like an entity.

With time, awareness, presence, mindfulness, attention become conscious, and can lead to a stronger sense of presence, and become something very valuable and meaningful. Awareness can become the most important and valuable thing you have, even more valuable than your valuables. At some point you’d be willing to give up your bank account, rather than give up awareness – this pristine, open awareness. This clear sense of presence is so valuable because that’s where freedom is. It’s where compassion and love are. When we have that, it’s where so many of the best qualities reside.

To know that you know, and, as you know that you know, to know the quality of the knowing is what the earlier talk was about. Is the way that you know entangled with attitudes and moods and anxieties and fears and desires and sense of self? Of course it will be. Part of the idea of knowing that you know is to keep stepping back. How far do you have to step back so you can just know what’s there with equanimity? Know what’s there without judgment? Know what’s there with some kind of allowance? “This is how it is now.” When you come to that place where you just know with some allowance, acceptance, and openness, “This is how it is. Right now I’m tense. Right now I’m upset.” When you can hold it with some allowance, then you begin to appreciate how precious, valuable, or even sacred it is to reside in that place where you know that you know.

When the sense of presence is so strong that you could say, “I know that I know; I know that I’m present” – that’s a great place to begin letting go of the ‘you’ that knows. There can be knowing that you know without it being you who knows you know. The ‘you’ is just extra; ‘you’ is more of this entanglement – the sense of ‘I.’ At some point, when the knowing that you know is strong, then there’s relaxing into it, letting go into it, but there’s no ‘you’ left in it. There’s just knowing, and that knowing stands out in highlight as its own entity – its own power, its own clarity, its own freedom.

I hope that made some sense to you. If not, just leave it here.