

# Location for Awareness (1 of 5) The Head

April 3, 2023

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

aware, suffering, compassion, challenge, thinking, thoughts, eyes, seeing, voice, mouth, images, projector, tension

**Gil Fronsdal**

Warm greetings as we begin a new week of teachings and practicing together as a community. In my mind and my heart, the teachings for today are a continuation of the teachings on the different elements of compassion from two weeks ago. There is more I want to teach about compassion, but this week is an interlude because the medium for compassion is our awareness. Awareness of the suffering of others and ourselves is the means by which compassion can arise. So I want to spend these five days looking at different ways to be aware.

If we have a greater repertoire of ways to be aware, then when we are present with our suffering and the suffering of others, we will have different options for how to be aware of it, how to connect to it, and how to know it. If we only have one option for how to be aware, and we have never thought about the different ways of being aware, then it is very easy to sink into suffering, get entangled in it, or be impacted by it in ways that are detrimental for the sweetness and clarity of compassion.

So it is very helpful to learn that there are different ways of using awareness, and that we can shift modes of awareness at different times. If one mode of being with suffering is not working for you – you find yourself sinking into it or excessively impacted by it, so that someone else's suffering becomes your own suffering in a painful and overwhelming way – you might want to question the way that you are aware of that suffering. If you have a repertoire of different ways of being aware, you can switch to another way.

This week I would like to discuss five different ways of being aware. These ways have a lot to do with locations from which we are aware. This week we will explore these five ways. But first, remember this principle: when any situation is difficult for us and we are trying to find our way with the situation, one variable we can consider is the way that we are aware of this challenge. Often this is not questioned. Often we are absorbed in the challenge or difficulty. We are entangled or caught in it, concerned about it so strongly that we don't step back and ask: "Well, is the way that I'm concerned, the way that I'm attending to it – is that the best choice? Are there other ways of attending to it that might be more useful at this time?"

All by itself, asking that question changes the ecosystem. It is like introducing a new element to an ecosystem, so the whole thing morphs and changes accordingly. So introducing the question, Is there another way of being aware of this challenge? is the beginning of creating a new ecosystem, one that is probably much more useful and healthy. Just asking the question, "Is there a different way to be aware of this?" begins to loosen the attachments, the clinging, the grasping, the pushing, the tightening, and the contraction around the challenge – the "Oh no, I've got to take care of this." This gives space to be able to see the challenge more clearly and relax a little bit around it.

How they are aware, where they are aware from, and how they are present with awareness is very different for different people. So, as you hear these teachings this week, just be aware that your way is not wrong, but rather, discover what your way is, and learn the capacity to fluidly, relaxedly change that mode when it is useful to do so.

Today I want to talk about being aware from the head. Some people live from the neck up. The central location, the center of gravity, the center of everything is in their head. Usually, that means they spend a lot of time thinking. There are a lot of thoughts and ideas. The thinking itself is the way that they are aware, or the place that they are aware from. Maybe thoughts do not exactly have a location (or maybe they do), but the thinking is so strong, that is where we think awareness is, and that is who we think we are: "I think therefore I am." The identification with thoughts is so strong that, for many of us, we are our thoughts. To be aware through the lens of thinking, or from the place in which thinking happens is almost like saying, "I am that place where thinking is happening – that is the locus, the center, the nexus of who I am."

We can be aware that, “Oh, my awareness is mostly in my head.” This awareness might not be through thinking. For some people, it is through the medium of their eyes – not the eyes, literally, but the mind’s eye. The very eye-focused people live close to their physical eyes. They are not necessarily thinking-focused, but they are eye-focused. Even with the eyes closed, their physical eyes are engaged, almost as if they are looking at the breathing with their eyes. That looking, that eye-centric mode of attention, is the place in which they are aware.

For some people, where they are aware from (maybe related to thinking) is the place where the voice is projected – the speaker system, the mouth or the voice box.

For some of us, the awareness is where the projector is for the images we are seeing, maybe almost like a screen in front of us. We are aware through the images on the screen. Part of experiencing awareness is having images that come up and inform us about what is happening or are related to what is happening. So awareness is partly rooted in these images, in the seeing.

Sometimes there is tension somewhere in the head. That tension is the place we would identify as, “That is where I am, that is the locus of me, or that is the locus from which I’m aware.”

It is not wrong to be aware from the head. In Buddhist circles, it often seems as if somehow we are not supposed to do that. But it is not wrong. It is one mode of being aware, one place from which to be aware, and all these places have a time and season. There is no one way that is the right way, but if one way is the only way we have, then we are quite limited.

So first, we want to become aware of how we are aware. If your center of awareness, the place you are aware from is in your head, then see if you can find ways to soften that place. Feel the place you are aware from. That might be the place you are thinking from, or where you’re seeing from. See if you can kind of settle back into it, like it is a nice, relaxing, easy chair. Then you might be able to benefit from that way of being aware more than if you are tense in that place.

If being aware from the head is not what you do, try it anyway. What can be beneficial about being aware from the head is partly that sometimes it does remove us from our experience. It kind of pulls us away. Say there is emotional pain somewhere in the torso. By being aware in the head, there is a kind of distance from it. Sometimes people will automatically assume distance is wrong, but distance is actually one of the modes of being aware that has its benefits. I will talk more about that tomorrow.

For now, I want to see if you can get to know your mode of awareness and where you are aware from. If there is no place, is it in your little toe? Is it in your heel? Is it in your pinky? As it turns out, when you ask those questions, it actually becomes clearer – “Yes, it’s in the whole torso.” If it is the whole torso, is it in your back? Is it by your tailbone, or is it in the back of your neck? When you ask those questions, some people will say, “Oh no, it’s mostly in the front of the torso.”

If people who very quickly say, “There’s no location for me to be aware from” begin by coming from the widest place out and start working their way in, then by a process of elimination they may find that, “Oh, I’m mostly aware in the middle of the chest” or “I’m mostly aware here; this is the location.” When you find that location or close to it, relax. Relax the attention, wherever it might be.

So, this is the beginning. I am very aware that this week of awareness and where it is located might seem a little esoteric for some of you. If that is the case, I ask for your patience with it. I don’t think it will be harmful, and hopefully you will benefit a little from it. When we turn our attention to compassion again, I hope that you will see richer options for how to be compassionate. Thank you very much.