

Location of Awareness (2 of 5) The Broad Overview

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Hello and welcome to this second talk. This week, the topic is changing our perspectives or locations for how we are aware.

I'll give you a well-known Chinese story about a skilled painter who painted a very realistic, detailed, life-sized tiger on a very big canvas. When he had more or less finished the tiger, the artist stepped back ten feet to see what he had done. It was so realistic that he got afraid and ran away. When he was close up, the details didn't bother him, but when he stepped away, the full picture seemed too realistic for him. The opposite can also happen – we can be frightened by being really close to something, but when we step back, we are no longer frightened.

I once took my son to the San Francisco Zoo. There was a big room, and at one end was a big cage with very thick, solid bars, behind which was a lion. My son was very young, so I was holding him. We could actually get very close to the lion, maybe three feet away. While we looked at it, the lion roared. There were solid bars between us and the lion, but, boy – I don't know if I was afraid, but I certainly had a lot of respect for that lion – so much so, that I turned around and left. Then, from outside the big door, I could look back at the lion. It was just a lion in a cage. I felt a little sorry that it had to be there.

So, how close or far away we are makes a big difference. We can learn to shift our perspective, sometimes with the help of the imagination, to get a different perspective that is either closer or farther away. Today I want to emphasize being far away.

Sometimes we are sitting with difficult emotions, for example, a lot of fear; we are caught in it, concerned with, reacting to it, and it seems like too much inside – we are overwhelmed by it. Sometimes this is because of the perspective from which we are aware. What is happening is difficult enough. But when the awareness is in the fear – caught in it, entangled with it, or wedded to it, close and right up against it – it is almost as if the fear takes over the whole room because the space of awareness is so small.

With an active imagination, we can spread and expand our awareness. For example, we can imagine that we are standing ten feet away and looking at ourselves, and from ten feet away we can feel the fear, see the fear, and be with the fear. We cannot be with the fear close in, but we can step back ten feet.

I have known people who, when asked to step back on a hillside 300 yards away and look back at themselves, and asked if they could be with their fear from that distance, say, "Oh, that distance is okay." They have a little more equanimity, a little more space, and less reactivity to their fear. The fear becomes a whole different thing.

The same way with pain. Physical pain is sometimes easier to be aware of really close in (which is the topic for tomorrow), or it can be easier to be aware of it when we open up really wide and imagine that we are seeing the whole landscape, and the pain is just one little piece of it. Then we might realize how reactive we were to the pain – living connected right to it, as if it was the most important thing and a crisis that had to be dealt with.

But we can step back, step back, step back. We can take that backward step, so that we have some distance and some spaciousness around the pain. The pain is still pain, but some of the intensity of it goes away, because some of the intensity has to do with our reactivity.

Pain is a complicated phenomenon. It is not a single, unitary thing. It is the same way with emotions. They are not single, unitary things. A lot goes into the construction of pain and emotions. Some of that has to do with how close in or far away we are – how much or how little space we feel we have for what we are experiencing.

We are finding ways to open up, to be spacious, and to create lots of room. One way to do this is to imagine that your inner eye, your perception, has taken a backward step really far away, and is looking back on you in the situation.

This backward step could also be used to be dissociated and aloof from the experience, but that is not what I'm suggesting. What I am suggesting is to get a bird's-eye view of what is happening with you. Step back enough so that you can have some non-reactivity in the awareness, and so you can be less entangled in it and reactive to it. Then you can start seeing it more clearly. You might be able to see not only what is happening – the emotion, the pain, or whatever it is, but you might also be able to start to work on understanding your relationship to it all – the reactivity itself.

One of the first times I had an “aha!” moment around this shifting of perspective was when I was in college. I was on the balcony, looking back through the window at some friends talking in the living room of the apartment we were in. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but they were expressing themselves quite vigorously with their hands. I think they were having a good time, but were quite physically animated.

As I gazed at them without being able to hear what they said, I was marveling at their communication and appreciating them in a different way – in a nicer way, maybe, than if I had been involved in the conversation, if I had known what they said and was thinking about it. That distance made a difference. It changed my perspective. It wasn't a better perspective, it was just different. It was nice to have that difference.

I have been in groups of people that have been having a lot of difficulty, arguing and talking hotly. Then for some reason, I had to step away. When I came back, I stood watching the group from a distance, as they talked in their upset way. I didn't feel as if I was in the upset anymore. I could just watch it.

I could watch it with kindness and compassion, take it in, and get a bigger picture of what was going on: “Oh, I see what's happening here. So-and-so is like this, so-and-so is like that. It looks like they're missing each other.” I got a much more useful perspective than if I had been in the fray.

This can be done in meditation. You might be in the middle of the fray. You might be very preoccupied with thoughts and stories, and what happened earlier today, or planning for tomorrow. The emotions might be quite strong and difficult. If you just show up for your experience with the usual kind of attention you have, that might not be the right attention for you to have some balance as you're with the experience. You might be too close. It might feel too claustrophobic or too tight like there is not enough space.

So learn how to step back – the backward step that creates space, resting back with awareness in order to make a larger awareness for the situation. Imagine that you're far away looking down on yourself, and then maybe you will be able to see what is going on in a clearer, more peaceful way, less identified with it.

I think the sense of identification – the sense that “I *am* the fear, I *am* the story, I *am* the experience” – tends to make our lives kind of claustrophobic, narrow, and tight. Stepping back far enough so that we don't feel like we *are* these different things can sometimes be really helpful in meditation.

Of course, it is possible to do that and be dissociated – to be aversive and so far removed from experience that you might feel kind of calm, but that is actually a disconnection from the experience. It is not a crime to do that. It's okay. It might have its uses. But the idea is to find the place of being clearly aware of what is happening in the present moment, and to be able to do this with some degree of equanimity and non-reactivity.

One of the tools for this is to take the bird's-eye view – get a different perspective. How far back, how far away you need to be, varies from situation to situation. Sometimes you need a lot of distance, like up on a mountain.

In doing this, you are physically enacting a little of what the meaning of equanimity is. The Pali word for equanimity is *upekkhā*. It means something like having a higher view – an overview, looking from above. The Buddha sometimes used the metaphor of standing on a hill, looking back down at all the hustle and bustle of the town. On the hillside, we are not in the hustle and bustle; we are peaceful and nice.

So we cultivate equanimity, non-entanglement, and non-reactivity. One way to do this is to imagine you are stepping away and getting some distance. You might try this today in your life in simple ways. For instance, in a room with people, if it's not impolite or awkward, you might sit further away from people than you normally do, and see what it is like to have a more distant view, as opposed to being right in the middle of everyone. In a one-on-one with someone, without making them think you're pulling away, you might physically sit a little differently, so you have a little more distance. See if that distance creates more non-reactivity and space.

If you are really caught up in some preoccupation, you might go out into an open field or a large park that helps you to expand the awareness and make it much more broad and open. Then it is easier to feel there is more space and distance from the entanglement and the caught-up-ness with what is going on. Find ways of changing the perspective.

Today, see how it helps you to have the perspective of a bird's-eye view – the large view of the situation. Also, see how it begins helping you to understand that you have a choice about the perspective that you use in being mindful. It never occurs to some people that they have a choice. They are mindful, but they are mindful in the same way every time. Maybe that same way is not the best medicine for some situations we are in.

Thank you very much. May your capacity for awareness bring you much delight.