

Practice Notes: Doing Awareness/Allowing Awareness

Gil Fronsdal

February 19, 2025

Keywords: awareness, attention, mindfulness, present moment, meditation, practice, effortlessness, receptivity, breathing, conscious engagement

And to offer you some practice or orientation for the practice, it can be sometimes quite lovely and quite informative, quite supportive, to understand that there are two sides to the practice. There's what you offer and what reality offers you. It's the practice that you do and the practice that just arises from you if you make room for it. What I mean by that is that awareness or attention is something we can do intentionally and something that we do unintentionally through much of the day. We could become aware of things without intending to or wanting to and without being consciously involved in the act of attention. So I imagine most of you today opened that front door of ours and the wonderful music for our meditation time.

So you would have probably grabbed the handle of the door handle and turned it and opened up, but you probably didn't think, now I'm going to be aware of a door handle, I'm going to stay aware of the door handle so I touch it. It's something like that—sometimes you're aware of it, but you don't give a lot of thought to it. You might be thinking about what it's going to be like to meditate in here, or is the room in the practice discussion sheet or something. And the opening of that door, you're aware of it, but it's not part of your conscious reflection, thinking, or organizing your life around the door handle. It's just you're aware of it. That awareness happens without any effort on your part, without you thinking about it.

Much of what we're aware of during the day comes to consciousness that way. Without, as I turn my head around now, as I start to look in that corner of the building, without wanting to, trying to, or having any orientation that I should focus like that, I just became aware of how the color of the white over there was two different colors because one is more shaded and one has more outdoor light coming in on the wall. I just saw the difference, the contrast. But that was effortless. I didn't do it. It just arose in my awareness.

So there's these two sides. There's the awareness that we evoke, that we direct, that we engage in, and there is what comes to awareness without us having to think about it. Those two things are part of the play of meditation. We have to have some conscious engagement with the present moment. We have to be here to show up and notice, but we can not only direct our attention, we also notice what comes on its own, and how effortless that is. As we practice, the balance between how much practice is just noticing what comes into awareness in the present moment is what's at the center, and how much of the center is that we apply attention, like to do the breathing, for example.

It's interesting to see how those two play together. If the mind is spinning and thinking a lot, then it might be that we have to direct the attention more and stabilize ourselves on the breathing. But if we're somewhat relaxed already, then it just feels nice to have a very light touch on the breath and just notice how much of the sensations of breathing come on their own. We're not focusing on them. We're not trying to. We're not doing the practice. We're being done by the practice. It's more of a maybe receptive or allowing or something.

So we have these two sides of awareness: what we do to be aware and the awareness that just happens without us doing it. As you go through the day-to-day, you might see a little bit the interplay between those, and seeing that they're both practicing at the same time maybe helps you to apply your awareness, to stay in the present moment, in a little bit more easeful way. The practice isn't dependent only on what you do, it's also dependent on what you allow in terms of present moment awareness. So see if this kind of interplay and back and forth and a combination of these two ways of being aware makes the morning kind of interesting to discover what it's like to be mindful. So, thank you.