

Exploring Awareness During Daily Life

By

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I am often surprised about my lack of awareness and equanimity during daily life activities. Shouldn't decades of daily formal meditation practice have allowed me to be less reactive? Noticing this persistent reactivity has prompted me to search for informal practices, practices that I can do "off-the-cushion". I reasoned that, if I want to become more mindful and less reactive during the day, the most effective thing to do is to practice mindfulness during these daily activities. And obviously, practicing mindfulness while taking a shower, doing shopping, washing dishes or even reading vastly expands the opportunity to practice meditation beyond the time we allow ourselves for formal practice.

Receptive awareness

The meditation style that I found most helpful for use during daily activities is one that I learned from Andrea Fella, a practice she calls receptive awareness. Andrea, in turn, learned this technique from Sayadaw U Tejaniya, a meditation teacher in Myanmar. Before he became a monk, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, was called on to run a very busy family textile business in Yangon. Suffering from severe depression and having limited time to practice formal meditation, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, out of necessity, developed an open awareness method that allowed him to practice during any daily activity. Eventually, this practice allowed him to become mindful throughout the day, and he saw his depression dissolve¹.

Receptive awareness essentially is an open awareness mode of meditation, a practice where we let our attention roam freely around our entire field of awareness. We may become aware of a sound, notice the sound, and let it go. Next, we may become aware of a sensation in our body, or a thought, let it dissipate, and so on. This is quite different from mind wandering, where we are thinking about something, typically about something in the future or the past, and the thoughts proliferate and carry us along, so that we get lost in a train of thoughts, sometimes in a leisurely way, other times in a more compulsive fashion. That is

quite different from open awareness. Open awareness is also passive, but we do not get carried away, we stay present.

Using prompts as an anchor

The practice of open awareness can be somewhat challenging, in that it tends to invite mind wandering. In receptive awareness practice, this is mitigated by using prompts, such as 'Am I aware?' or 'What am I aware of?'. Although these prompts sound like questions, we do not really expect a precise answer to them, at least not an intellectual answer. It is more that they provide us with a reminder to be curious about our experience, not unlike the question 'What's this' that is used in the Korean Zen tradition². It is like carrying around a little bell that goes off on a regular basis, ping... 'Am I aware?', ping... 'What am I aware of?' Importantly, it is the simplicity of these prompts that makes this practice so readily portable, allowing us to use it throughout the day.

When I started to practice with this method, asking 'Am I aware?' felt a bit strange, because just asking the question entails that I am already somewhat aware. However, as Andrea Fella points out, this prompt gives us the opportunity, especially after noticing that we have been mind wandering for a while, to sense the difference between being aware and being unaware. With practice, this allowed me to develop a felt sense of awareness. Aaah, this is what it feels like to be aware! And it is this felt sense of awareness that, over time, allows us to sustain awareness for longer periods of time.



Photo by Marc Symons

The prompt 'What am I aware of?' probes into any sensory experience, including sights, sounds, smell, taste and touch, and also interoception, our internal body sensations such as breathing, tension and relaxation. Obviously, our field of awareness dramatically depends on whether we have our eyes open or not. Thus, I found that sitting and walking meditation mutually supported me in developing this open awareness practice, relying more on the 'Am I aware' prompt during sitting practice and the 'What am I aware of?' prompt while walking and other daily activities.

The field of awareness, obviously, also includes anything that's going on in our minds, like thoughts, emotions and moods. Importantly, when we are noticing that we are thinking, even when we are thinking a lot, but we are present with our thoughts, it does not mean that we are not aware, on the contrary, we are aware of thinking. Thus, noticing my thoughts, as if they were part of the weather patterns of my mind, made a big difference for me, dissipating the negative judgment that often arose when I noticed that my mind was wandering while I was trying to focus on the sensations of breathing. And interestingly, in turn, this has helped me to stay present when practicing focused attention meditation as well.

Notably, this practice is not about keeping track of everything that hits our awareness, which would amount to drinking from a fire hydrant. As Andrea Fella often mentions, using these prompts is like dropping a small pebble into a pool of water and watching the ripples fade outward. Thus, how often we use the prompts really depends on how present we are. When we are fully present to our experience, we know that we are aware and what experience currently resides in our awareness, making prompts superfluous. When we start this practice, we can use these prompts quite frequently, up to several times a minute, especially during formal practice. Over time, we can adapt the frequency of the prompts according to our own experience.

Receptive awareness also uses a third prompt: 'What is my attitude?'. This prompt is an invitation to pay attention to the relationship that we have with our experience. In other words, we're asking 'How reactive am I?', reaching deep into the origins of our suffering. For most of my life, I have been much more interested in achieving some or other goal, rather than in the process, rather than in being present. Asking 'What is my attitude' tends to ease my way into a mode of being, rather than doing.

In formal practice, this prompt is used much less frequently, maybe every five minutes, which also is open to experimentation. In addition, in practicing with this prompt, it is very helpful to start off with a simple way to categorize our attitudes, such as the well-known afflictive emotions, including grasping, aversion and ignorance. The latter category also comprises boredom, disconnection and confusion, any attitude that relates to expectations or beliefs that we have about our experience. It also makes sense to include a fourth category that groups positive attitudes, including gratitude, loving kindness, compassion and equanimity. A word that could represent this category could be OKness.

Implementing the practice

As mentioned above, the simplicity of the prompts facilitates the dropping into awareness throughout the day. However, as there is so much going on during our daily lives, it very much makes sense to initiate the practice of receptive awareness in a formal setting, by carving out some dedicated time to sit in a relatively quiet place. After a short time, it became quite obvious to me that I encounter reactivity much more distinctly and variedly in daily life than during formal meditation and as a result, I felt the beneficial effects of using the prompts more strongly when practicing during daily activities. Still, after practicing with receptive awareness for more than a year now, I find it very supportive to continue using it in a formal setting as well.

References:

1. Sayadaw U Tejaniya (2019). *Relax and Be Aware: Mindfulness Meditations for Clarity, Confidence, and Wisdom*. Shambala Publications, p. 3.
2. Stephen Batchelor and Martine Batchelor (2019). *What is This? Ancient Questions for Modern Minds*. Tuwhiri Project Ltd.

Resources:

To learn more about receptive awareness, a set of detailed instructions for the practice have been transcribed and edited from a July 2015 residential retreat with Andrea

Fella: <https://andreaella.org/2023/08/05/awareness-and-wisdom/>. Guided meditations can be found at: <https://andreaella.org/teachings/>.