

The Discovery of Awareness and Its Impact – A Qualitative Study

Executive Summary

This study sought to explore the first-person accounts of individuals involved in several contemporary awareness teachings regarding their views of awareness (its nature and qualities), their experience of what it means to recognize awareness as their essential nature or identity, and the impact that this recognition has had upon their lives. Purposive sampling was employed and individuals selected who were either senior students of or teachers within several contemporary awareness traditions (n = 28). In consultation with a number of consultants and teachers, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed. Interviews, which took approximately 90 minutes to complete were then transcribed and thematic analyses subsequently carried out by two independent reviewers.

While there was considerable diversity across respondents in terms of how they described their view and experiences, a number of consistent themes and patterns emerged. First, in general, participants defined awareness as that which *knows* or *cognizes* phenomena, the space within which phenomenal experiences and perceptions arise and subside. Some also described awareness as the recognition or felt sense of *being* or *existence* itself. While it was noted by many that awareness could not really be characterized owing to the fact that it is not exclusive of any phenomena or experience, a number of qualities of awareness were noted. These included: vital, intelligent, wide-open and unobstructed, indivisible, indestructible, spontaneously present, and incapable of being grasped.

Second, recognizing awareness as the fundamental ground or basis of all perceptions and experiences – irrespective of their nature or content - was consistently seen by participants as crucial to the resolution of human suffering. Several reasons were cited for this: 1) since awareness is experienced as inherently peaceful, content and all-satisfying, its discovery in any moment essentially resolves the search for well-being; 2) awareness by its very nature is undisturbed or unaffected by phenomena, regardless of their descriptive label; and, 3) in discovering the inseparability of awareness and its phenomenal content, one discovers the ultimately insubstantial, empty, and non-threatening nature of phenomena.

Another key and related theme was that when phenomena – even those labeled or experienced as aversive and a source of suffering – are experienced from the vantage of awareness, one realizes that they require no management or modification in order to be free of them for the simple reason that owing to their dynamic, impermanent nature, phenomena naturally resolve or “self-liberate” upon arising.

It was also noted that as one recognizes and gains greater familiarity with this aware ground as the basis of all perceptions, he or she discovers a profound sense of freedom and well-being that abides, regardless of the nature of the particular mental, emotional or bodily content being experienced. Related to this, many participants reported a growing sense of fearlessness and openness, even in the face of very challenging or disturbing states or circumstances.

Third, the majority of participants also spoke about a process in which the recognition of awareness was initially experienced as more intermittent and fleeting but then over time became more stable and abiding. Several factors were cited as key facilitators of this stabilization: 1) seeing that awareness can never actually be lost or absent for it is the ground within which all phenomenal experience arises and resolves and is ultimately inseparable from those experiences; 2) recognizing that awareness is neither contained nor defined by particular perceptions or states of mind, and that it is therefore present in and *as* all perceptions; 3) understanding that the arising of mental, emotional and bodily states labeled as “negative” or “afflictive”, rather than being evidence that awareness has been lost, are actually evidence of its presence; and, 4) recognizing that stability *already* exists for awareness is never actually in opposition to any of its phenomenal appearances (it is inseparable from them) and so from that experiential viewpoint, there is only ever a single, non-dual ground of stability, even if what appears may reflect tremendous diversity and multiplicity.

Finally, in addition to the profound impact that the realization of awareness appears to have in terms of resolving personal suffering, participants highlighted several other ways their lives had been beneficially impacted by the realization of awareness. These included: the domain of relationships; the discovery of wisdom and compassion; an enhanced capacity for responsiveness and skillfulness in daily life, a diminishment or loss of self-identification, and a natural movement to be of service. In terms of the impact of awareness on relationships, several changes were noted. These included a greater sense of connectedness and intimacy with others

while also experiencing a diminution of attachment and dependency; an enhanced capacity to listen; a reduced focus on one's personal preferences and agenda; a greater ease and naturalness; and, the discovery of an openness and love that is neither determined nor conditioned by the behavior of others. Along with the emergence of this spontaneous movement of empathy and compassion, many subjects reported an impulse to be of benefit and service to others that seemed to arise naturally from the recognition of and growing stabilization in and as awareness.

In terms of the relationship of awareness to the emergence of wisdom and compassion, several themes emerged: 1) the view that awareness is essentially synonymous with or inseparable from the qualities of love and compassion and that the recognition of awareness serves to awaken a spontaneous and uncontrived compassion; 2) the discovery of awareness affords one deep insight into the nature of and fundamental basis underlying human suffering, which in turn gives rise to a natural movement of empathy and compassion, for self and other; and, 3) compassion arises naturally from the recognition of indivisibility or inseparability (i.e., the wisdom or clarity that knows everything to be itself).

Several participants shared that through the realization of awareness, they felt that they had also gained access to an enhanced capacity to respond more effectively to life situations, and to problem-solve and make decisions with greater ease, flexibility and creativity. Apropos this, participants noted that the sense of relaxation and easefulness inherent in awareness appears to enhance one's capacity

for clarity in so far as attention or awareness, being less locked in or fixated upon particular perspectives, beliefs or points of view is now freed up to see a wider range of possible options and solutions in any given situation.

Lastly, a number of participants highlighted the shift out of self-identification that accompanies the realization of non-dual awareness. Some of the features of this change included: recognition that what we call “self” is not really fixed or definable; an experience of one’s identity or self-sense as no longer contained within the skin line of the body; less effort being directed toward substantializing, protecting or defending a sense of self or personal identity; and, a sense that the body-mind is inseparable from the vast, boundless space of awareness, a view of awareness as timeless, space-less and non-locatable, and the experience of awareness as impersonal in nature (not being contained within or generated by the body-mind).

Conclusion

Based on these self-reports, the discovery of awareness as the essential basis, foundation or ground of perception, and the experience that this context of awareness is ultimately inseparable from its phenomenal content appears to have important implications for our understanding of: 1) suffering - it causes and resolution; 2) the potential for human beings to realize a well-being and contentment that is increasingly less dependent upon particular circumstances or experiences; and, 3) the realization of greater equanimity and compassion, and the

possibility that these are actually innate qualities, intrinsic to awareness or life itself rather than skills one must learn or cultivate.

Taken together, these preliminary qualitative findings merit additional follow-up by psychologists, neuroscientists, and other researchers interested in better understanding the factors that may contribute to optimal human well-being and functioning.