

**THE DISCOVERY OF AWARENESS AND ITS IMPACT**

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

**The Baumann Institute**

**December, 2009**

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study explored the first-person accounts of individuals involved in several contemporary awareness teachings regarding the nature and qualities of awareness, the relationship of awareness and its recognition to the alleviation of human suffering, and the impact that the discovery of awareness has across multiple life domains.

**Methods:** Purposive sampling was employed and individuals selected who were either senior students or teachers within several contemporary awareness traditions (n = 28). In consultation with several 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.

**Results:** Despite some diversity across respondents, a number of consistent themes emerged. In general, awareness was defined as that which knows or cognizes phenomena or the conscious space within which phenomenal experience arises and subsides. Several qualities of awareness were noted including vital, wide-open, unobstructed, indivisible, and spontaneously present. The recognition of awareness as the fundamental ground or basis of all perceptions was consistently seen as crucial to the resolution of human suffering for several reasons: a) awareness is undisturbed or unaltered by phenomena; b) by itself, the recognition of awareness in any moment appears to resolve the search for well-being; c) from the vantage of awareness, one recognizes that so-called negative mind states do not require management, control or alteration because they naturally resolve themselves owing to their impermanent nature; and d) the recognition that the context of awareness is ultimately inseparable from its dynamic content leads one to view phenomena conventionally labeled as disturbing, as essentially insubstantial, empty and non-threatening in nature.

Along with its role in the resolution of psychological suffering, participants noted several other ways they felt that the realization of awareness had positively impacted their lives. These included: greater intimacy, ease and openness in relationships; diminishment or loss of self-identification and self-focus; an enhanced capacity for skillful and innovative responsiveness to life situations; a movement to be of benefit and service to others; and, insight into the fundamental roots of suffering and a corresponding natural arising of compassion for self and others.

**Conclusions:** Based on these self-reports, the discovery of awareness as the essential basis or ground of all 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 qualities are actually innate, intrinsic to awareness or life itself rather than skills one must learn or cultivate. Taken together, these preliminary findings merit additional follow-up by psychologists, neuroscientists, and other researchers interested in understanding the factors that contribute to optimal human well-being and functioning.

### ***Characteristics of Sample***

A total of 28 individuals participated in the study. Interviewees were drawn from several contemporary direct path/non-dual awareness teachings. In addition, three individuals were not specifically affiliated with any one teacher or tradition. All subjects were either senior students or in almost all instances, functioning in the role of teacher themselves. There were 15 men and 13 women. Mean age across the sample was 50 with the following number in each age range: 20-29 (1); 30-39 (5); 40-49 (8); 50-59 (5); and, 60-69 (9). Participants were in general, highly educated – four reported some college education, seven had completed a Bachelor's of Arts; eight held a Master's degree; six subjects a PhD; and three a J.D.

The interview followed a semi-structured format. Interviews took on average, 90 minutes to complete. Seventeen were conducted in person with the remaining eleven carried out over the telephone. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for later analyses.

### ***Awareness – its nature and qualities***

Following a brief introduction to the study and the list of demographic questions, participants were asked to define from their own experience and perspective, the word "awareness." As was the case with all questions, while responses varied, a number of clear themes and patterns emerged. In general, awareness was characterized or described as:

1. The space in which experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations) arise: “The wide-open relaxed space of perception”; “The container in which everything is arising”; “This completely empty but conscious space in which everything arises and falls away.”
2. That which *knows* or *cognizes* phenomena: “Awareness is what’s looking and that which is looking is *always* looking”; “Garden-variety awareness – whatever it is that is receiving the input of the senses”; “It is that which is knowing everything.”
3. *Being*: “The source experience of existing”; “The instinctive recognition of being”; “What is present, knowing that I am”; The power to know that we are.”

Overall, respondents were quite consistent in their view of awareness as that mechanism or faculty which allows for and can therefore be considered to be the fundamental basis, foundation or root underlying all phenomenal experience. At the same time, many also noted the difficulty in defining or characterizing awareness for several reasons. First, it was acknowledged by most participants that awareness is not a thing or object but rather that which is conscious of or awake to all objects, whether these are perceived as being internal or external to the organism.

Second, if as many participants reported, awareness is not exclusive of any phenomena or experience, any description of it would necessarily be partial and limited. As one person noted: “If our premise and our experience is that we can’t find boundaries between anything when we look for them, you’re really talking about the world as it is constantly manifesting in the broadest sense - that’s what awareness would be.” As another participant shared:

My own personal experience of awareness is that it is not a thing – not an object – not anything that can be defined, and it is the ground and utterly inseparable from everything that a human being can possibly experience.

This theme of the inseparability of awareness and experience (which will be revisited in the next section examining the relationship between awareness and the resolution of suffering) was quite common. Examples of this can be seen in the following:

Awareness is inseparable from all thoughts, experiences and emotions. It is the root and source of everything, of all phenomena.

It is all-inclusive. It has no edges or boundaries. It doesn't look any particular way – it looks like whatever is appearing in this particular moment. And that includes all labels, descriptions or ways . . . It *is* what's appearing. Whatever thought I'm aware of in this moment, *there's* awareness. Whatever I'm looking at in this moment, *there's* awareness. Whatever I'm hearing in this moment, *there's* awareness.

Awareness is empty yet full of itself as form. It's solid like a mountain – a completely still presence and yet in it is also the dance of life - trees moving, the wind blowing things, people talking - there is absolutely no difference, no separation.

If I had to characterize it, I would say it is the source, substance and function of all things, without quality but appearing as all qualities.

That which is aware and that which it is aware of - ultimately you can't find any difference between these two things.

Awareness is the quality of knowing, which occurs simultaneously and inseparably from all perceptions. Perceptions appear, and the fact of appearance itself *is* awareness. It is not a thing but rather, a self-dependent quality that makes all things possible. It is open, clear, ungraspable, and completely free of duality. It is complete peace and love.

Everything we experience in a phenomenal way - sensations, sights, sounds, thoughts, feelings - are all objects in awareness. Awareness is the non-locatable, insubstantial, empty ground in which all that's occurring. But ultimately the truth is - which isn't always so readily apparent- that everything is made *of* awareness. Awareness is actually the non-substantial

substance of everything. Usually it's easier to see that it's the ground - it's later that we see that it's actually that which constitutes everything.

To me, awareness is fundamentally what everything is and in that, there is no separation.

The whole universe is one bright jewel. In other words there is no inside, there's no outside, it's just one bright, radiant jewel. It is inseparable – it is non-dual.

Related to this quality of being all-inclusive, awareness was also described by a number of participants as being whole, complete and all-satisfying in nature.

The most distinguishing feature that I can pin to it would be that sense of there being nothing that you could add to it that would make it any better, or nothing within it that needs to be removed to make it any better. It is perfect, complete, and full.

It can be a frightening thing for people when they read these translations of emptiness as some sort of void or nothingness. It's not like that at all. It's the complete antithesis of that. It's absolute – there's nothing you could imagine that you could bring into it that would improve it.

Again, while many participants expressed that it was difficult to characterize awareness in terms of specific qualities (since it is by nature inclusive of all descriptions and qualities), a number of essential qualities were still noted. These include: indestructible, open, indivisible, innate, stable, reliable, ever-present, lacking in nothing, equanimity, clarity, vibrantly alive, embracing, welcoming, all-pervading, at ease, saturating, intelligent, uncontrived, without limit, spontaneously present, and undisturbed. The following quote captured a perspective shared by a number of respondents that while not exclusive of any quality of experience in life, awareness can be considered to have certain fundamental or essential qualities:

Maybe one way to clarify it is to say that awareness has certain *essential* qualities – like openness is an essential quality because awareness is by nature, unobstructed. That doesn't mean to say that at the level of phenomenal experience there's always going to be what we might describe as a *feeling* of openness. There may be times when our experience is one of feeling closed in and constricted. But that experience described as "closed" is actually completely open because as a perception, it's essential or basic nature is wide-open, unobstructed awareness. That is why I would say an essential quality of awareness is openness. Indivisibility would also be another of its essential qualities.

Many participants expressed the view that awareness was neither contained within nor dependent upon the physical brain/body. In response to a question regarding the scientific skepticism surrounding this perspective, one interviewee (a scientist himself) noted:

It's very interesting that the proponents of the brain-based consciousness theory are mostly neurologists or biologists. And the reason for this is that at the root of their science, there is biochemistry... at the root of which is chemistry... at the root of which is physics. So the assumption is that, "okay, we don't know how to explain the atoms in the molecules that the brain cells are made of, but we assume that these guys down the hallway (the physicists) can." So what [the neuroscientists and biologists] do is simply push back the explanation to physics. However, when you investigate what it is - what is matter, what is the brain really made of - you end up with very weird stuff. You end up with a space, which is empty and pregnant with everything. You also end up with a universe that is non-local. Therefore, there is no separate physical entity in the universe - the brain from the vantage point of physics (or the human body for that matter) cannot be considered to be a separate isolated system. That just doesn't fly. That is a nice theory, but it is a childish theory. If the brain of the human body is not an isolated system, if the man is not an isolated node in the stratosphere, why then it would be so strange that awareness alone would be isolated.

### ***Awareness and the resolution of suffering***

Participants were asked to reflect on the relationship of awareness to suffering, in particular the view expressed by many of the world's contemplative traditions that

the recognition of one's nature as awareness is critical to the resolution of human suffering.

Not surprisingly, as part of their response, a number of participants discussed the phenomena of suffering itself, what it is and what it is ultimately rooted in. In general, the view was that suffering is not caused by nor contained in particular experiences themselves but rather in how those experiences are described and one's subsequent relationship to and effort to find well-being or meaning in those descriptions. For example:

Suffering is the striving and the grasping and the trying to hold onto the pleasant and push away the unpleasant. But everything is going to change and the moment you can accept that as the reality, the inescapable reality, then I think suffering ends.

Recognizing that phenomenal experiences, which human beings are typically either seeking after or trying to eliminate, are not permanent was seen by many as a crucial part of the realization of awareness. As one participant noted:

If you work at your circumstances and perhaps work at controlling your thoughts and trying to put yourself in pleasant situations, you can have some fantastic experiences. You know, you can have feelings of real bliss, of real joy, these amazing experiences. But they're always fleeting, always temporary, always kind of tinged with that feeling that they're not going to last.

Similarly, another respondent pointed out the futility of seeking fulfillment in experiences that are by nature impermanent:

Look into your own life. Have you ever been able to sustain anything? Ever? That's the direct evidence in your own life and to make any logical assumption about it being otherwise contradicts all evidence of every moment of your entire life.

Several respondents felt that suffering was essentially rooted in our resistance to what is. For example:

Reactivity times whatever is happening – pain, let’s say – equals suffering. No reactivity, no suffering. When there’s the slightest movement of reactivity, I would say there’s suffering.

Suffering is fundamentally struggling with what is. What is may be painful, but suffering is trying to stop it or get rid of it or fix it or understand it. Not that any of these things in and of themselves are a problem – they’re not. But where the transition from suffering to freedom happens is literally at the point of seeing the struggle.

Suffering would be what we add onto a given experience even if it's a difficult experience. Suffering would be what we tell ourselves about that, or how we resist or argue with that situation. That could be used as a working definition for suffering, that particular movement to push away or deny experience or to actually believe that it shouldn't be happening, even though it is.

However, regarding the relationship between suffering and resistance to phenomena, another participant offered the following, one could say, more nuanced view:

Is suffering the result of resisting what is? Well I would say, yes. But... on further examination, suffering is not a consequence of resistance – it’s an appearance of the basic state [of awareness] and not a consequence of anything else. I heard especially in spiritual circumstances, that suffering is due to resistance and then of course I tried to resist resistance. And then I blamed myself for being resistant. But to then see that the simplest most profound essence of suffering is the basic state itself because it is in essence an appearance that cannot be found to have a nature independent of awareness. At the same time, I completely agree that whenever I try to alter the flow of experience, I feel tense and there is pain and suffering. And so, like images in a mirror, I can describe these appearances in terms of cause and effect relationships. But their ultimate meaning is not how they relate to each other but rather that they are appearances in the mirror. Otherwise, I am saying that what has no independent nature has power over something else that has no independent nature.

Along these same lines, another participant shared:

I saw that all I ever did was want happiness and reject suffering. So I knew this basic game and realized that that can never lead to anything, yet I had the felt sense that whenever I recognized awareness, there was no suffering. So in a sense I felt immediate relief just by recognizing awareness, which I cannot explain. That's how it felt, like two different things initially. But increasingly, I could see that the source of suffering *is* awareness, which is incredible, that suffering is not outside of awareness. There would be no suffering without the presence of awareness. So less and less did relying on awareness become an antidote to suffering, which initially it was.

In terms of the resolution of suffering, the view of several participants was that awareness, by its very nature, illuminates or sheds light on those areas of our lives where there is some suffering or unease. The following quotes reflect this view:

Awareness illuminates the dark. Being enlightened is actually a very accurate term. The light [of awareness] literally illuminates what hasn't been seen.

Awareness seems to put into greater relief, the movement of reactivity and conditioning.

[Speaking about a tendency to want to avoid a family member who was dealing with an addiction problem...] I can't help but see these things at this point. Awareness is like a flashlight that's just on more and more. It sees any of those tendencies much more quickly, which allows a recognition of that in me that clearly does love and it doesn't want to avoid her.

Many participants reported that in awareness, one finds the very stability and reliability that had previously been sought out in transient phenomena. Examples of this perspective can be seen in the following:

To rely on having a healthy body, for instance, is so painful because it's not always healthy. Relying on something that can't be relied on is very painful. But relying on something that can be relied on –awareness - is by comparison, like heaven.

It is really a life of tension, trying to keep the bad things out and holding to the good ones. Once that is seen, then it's clear that we cannot find ultimate relief by holding on to *any* of our perceptions. Then to be introduced to something about us that is completely stable and can be always relied on, that is always present no matter what is going on. In being introduced to this aware nature that doesn't depend on what is occurring, people see and I myself saw, that *that* is the ultimate well-being.

It's really a simple matter of placing emphasis on what is completely stable, indestructible and unchanging rather than on fleeting appearances.

Times when I've had extraordinary physical pain, there's something in there that's just humming – pervading. I can feel this underlying ground of stability.

To see that there's something innate, and completely stable and clear and completely reliable to count on in every situation no matter what occurs, then that's compelling.

Participants also shared that in the direct encounter with this ever-present, stable ground of awareness, what was discovered was the very contentment, ease and sense of fulfillment human beings ordinarily seek out in changing phenomena.

I really thought I needed to find something in the future to be whole and what I found was this awareness that was aware of those movements to go to the future was *already* complete.

Basically, we're trying to be happy. So even when people are shooting heroine they're trying to be happy. Even when they're killing someone else, they're ultimately trying to have happiness. From our perspective of sanity, that's insane. But ultimately we all have that in us. So people are trying to be happy and ultimately awareness *is* happiness.

A key point discussed by many respondents was that at one level of experience, what is discovered is that awareness – that which knows - is essentially unaffected or untouched by whatever phenomenal content is appearing in or to it. The following quotes capture this:

Awareness is completely unaffected by what's going on – the pain and the worry, the fears and the thoughts, the thinking about awareness and the thinking about resting as awareness - all of these things effortlessly appearing and disappearing within the natural presence of awareness.

On one level, I'm so aware that I'm untouched by any of that. I'm just watching that all play out in me. And yet on another level, I'm experiencing it all – sadness comes, happiness comes – it all is playing out but there's this incredible comfort in knowing that I'm really untouched by it at a very significant level. It's like that old analogy – I truly am the screen and the movie's playing and when the movie changes the screen doesn't change. So at that level, it's all just wonderful to watch.

You stop believing your thoughts. So, my thoughts still arise but it's as if you just see them like energy rising, or like the radio in the other room. You don't buy into them and get entangled. So you don't have to buy into the stories anymore that cause suffering. Awareness itself is free of the attachment to thought. So to the extent that one rests in awareness, thoughts still arise, human experience still arises, but if you are resting in awareness, you're just not so entangled anymore. You're like in a clear, open space, an unengaged space.

It doesn't matter what comes. Not death, not having your bank account wiped out, not being totally broke and completely in debt. I've seen all of this. I've either seen it or I've experienced it firsthand. It doesn't matter, impact, or affect awareness.

Getting up in front of a crowd and speaking - the whole idea of that just sends the body into a complete tremor. And, you know, it's annoying. But it does not affect awareness. I am as equally aware in that state as I am when I'm completely and totally at ease. And that nervousness or self-centered fear, or whatever you want to call it, it arises in that space, it abides in that space, and it resolves in that space, and so there's nothing to be done about it.

Every experience we've ever had has passed effortlessly through our awareness leaving no trace.

Awareness is just a natural faculty that all human beings have. And in my experience, just the momentary recognition that that awareness is naturally present – naturally unaffected by all experience – always lucid – always clear – always open - is a tremendous relief, particularly in the moment's it's recognized. But the relief also somehow pervades everything, even when I'm not specifically involved in being aware that awareness is present.

Participants also spoke about suffering being rooted in our verbal/conceptual descriptions that tend to reify or substantialize thoughts, feelings and sensations as being something in and of themselves and as having power to influence well-being.

Pointing to the insubstantial nature of phenomena, one participant noted:

It's funny because you look for a particular state of mind and you can't find evidence of it, in a sense. Yet it's still appearing. This is the nature of each phenomenon - you can't find its beginning, its middle or its end because where does it end and the next state begin? It's all boundary-less. You cannot find the beginning of anything really; you cannot find the beginning of this moment, or the end of it. You can say, "well it doesn't exist." But you can't *really* say it's nonexistent either because it's appearing. It's amazing. The mind would say that something that was never born and never dies cannot exist. But here it is, unborn and undying. For convenience, we split it all up. But it is really just the continuity of everything as it is. It is seamless - there are no seams anywhere. Where are the seams, where's the zipper? That's why the sky is such a profound metaphor for awareness - absolutely unimpeded, unobstructed with no boundary anywhere.

Another respondent shared:

I see in the moment of their arising or shortly thereafter that they are just thoughts that don't have any inherent reality to them.

In discussing the impossibility of actually defining or describing phenomena, one participant noted:

That's the relief in it - just allowing all of those things to be and to see that they are all momentary fleeting appearances. You can't hold onto any of them. It's absolutely impossible. You can't grab onto any of them. You can't really define or describe any of them completely.

Apropos the above, many respondents felt that in terms of the resolution of suffering, the key point to realize was the non-independent ("empty") nature of phenomena and the ultimate inseparability of awareness and its content.

Initially the awareness was a distraction from reality, from form. And then there was trying to hold out in order to stay in the formless. But that became a futile attempt. And the deeper seeing that happened was that everything that was arising *was* this consciousness. That was sort of like the birth of compassion, just letting everything be as it is. So that helped relieve a lot of suffering for while before I was trying to escape worldly life, now it was more like, "Let it have me. Just come on in. You can have me. I'm not going to fight you, not going to resist you. I'm not going to try to get rid of you or hold onto you if you want to go." It was like a willingness to be with whatever was arising, forever even if it never changes.

Once you become more and more confident in relying on awareness, then it's very obvious that even labels like tension and stress are completely insubstantial - they don't have any substance of their own. They're not things in and of themselves, and through that simple recognition, they really lose their power. It doesn't mean that you won't experience tension or stress, but it means that it's experienced in a much more lighthearted, carefree way.

Every point of view, emotion, thought, perception that we have, I've learned, is awareness expressing itself without becoming divided into something else. If awareness is all that there is and it has no beginning, middle or end, then it's expressions can't have a cause or effect either.

I just had this amazing realization - "I'm making all of this up, it's all made up. I can call this pain or whatever I want, it's just vast and completely wide open and it's empty of anything other than awareness (or whatever you want to call it)." The despair and the pain became the underlying ease and openness, which *was* the joy and the bliss and the clarity. It was all this subtle, pervasive, spacious ease.

Yes, disturbing states still arise. I think if they didn't I'd be dead. Nothing in my life has changed circumstantially. The same points of view that arose five years ago arise today. Nothing has changed in that regard. But the *relationship* I have with them has completely changed. So when something arises that has some label called negative or afflictive, then it's recognized to be what it is, an appearance of the basic state of awareness.

Let's say I've got this feeling of stress. I then say that this stress has happened because of this, and this always happens, and why do I feel like this, and I shouldn't feel like this - it's like feeding a fire with more and more wood. We tell ourselves, "I've got to do something about my stress. I've got to get rid of this. I've got to learn how to deal with it. I've got to do *something* with it." And yet all of that trying to do something with it - trying to suppress it or avoid it or replace it with something that seems more pleasurable - is still feeding it. But as soon as it's recognized that stress is simply this dynamic energy appearing, this phenomena occurring in the basic state of awareness, then you notice, and it's immediately obvious that there's nothing really

there. There's nothing really going on. There's nothing that's a real threat. Because it *is* awareness, so how can it be a threat *to* awareness? It *is* the basic state appearing, so how can it be a problem for the basic state?

So this is what happened to me in the beginning of resting as awareness - I could see things like anger and awareness, side by side. So, I could still be frustrated and angry and be quite amazed that I'm really furious *and* relaxed at the same time. So that was my initial experience of a negative state and awareness existing seemingly side-by-side. I could get up and sit in front of people being really, really nervous and scared with nothing to say and my voice all up high and at the same time I was completely relaxed. It was amazing: "Wow, I'm really nervous with nothing to say, I'm really embarrassed but I feel fantastic!" And slowly those two just became one, realizing there's no separation between nervousness and awareness.

We are so trained perceptually to see phenomena, particularly the disturbing ones, as somehow having power in and of themselves when they're actually being powered by something else. It's amazing - they don't have any independent power. They don't have any power because they're really not separate. They're not standing apart from and exerting influence over the rest of life, they *are* life.

I think it gets deeper the more one realizes the inseparability of everything - that everything that's arising isn't separate from what it's arising in and to. There isn't anything struggling with anything else actually. That's just so remarkable. It's not like us here struggling with some state that's arising over there. That's really not the way it is. It's experienced like that's the way it is, but that's just because it's being described that way - described as someone having an experience.

Not surprisingly, this realization that phenomenal states no longer pose any threat because they are recognized as inseparable from the ground of awareness itself appears to radically alter one's relationship to all experience. This transformed relationship appears to take several forms:

1. No longer the same degree of effort or perceived need to either escape, avoid or seek after particular states.

2. Less secondary mental processing, commentary or elaboration about whatever is appearing in consciousness (e.g., “I have emotion but there is no story or struggle with it”).
3. While descriptions may still be used to characterize phenomena, the descriptions are no longer taken to be something substantial.
4. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are viewed less as concrete things or objects and more as the dynamic movement of energy or awareness.
5. There is an increasing sense of ease, openness and fearlessness with everything that appears, even uncomfortable body-mind states.
6. A sense that as awareness, one is allowing or welcoming experience, *as it is* (e.g., “That incredible welcoming that meets reactivity I have seen is the very undoing ultimately of the reactivity.”)

The following passage from a respondent who had suffered from a chronic illness throughout most of her adult life highlights the practical impact that the view of awareness appears to have:

Relating to it or experiencing it as being awareness or resting in awareness seems to shift the whole nature of the experience of being “sick.” When there’s just a resting in or as awareness, it kind of suffuses everything – all these physical symptoms that are arising become so that they’re not a problem. And oftentimes there can be a sense of expansion, resting, spacious, relaxation that in some ways – it’s kind of strange, but the symptoms almost facilitate that happening, because they’re a little bit of a spur to remember to rest as awareness. So there’s awareness and there’s stuff arising and sometimes it can seem to become more a sense of movement or energy inside rather than even what I would ordinarily term as painful, uncomfortable symptoms. It seems to be experienced differently. More fundamentally a sensation and yeah – there’s this relaxation with the whole experience.

At the heart of this transformed relationship to experience is the discovery of what appears to be an internal ease and profound sense of well-being that is not dependent upon the presence or absence of particular experiences or circumstances. The following quotes capture some of the essence of this transformation:

One of the things about awareness as it relates to suffering – one begins to recognize that there is a freedom that’s present in the midst of all states.

If we just recognize that awareness is present and all experiences effortlessly come and go, then worrying or getting wrapped up in everything and trying to control things is simply not relevant in that framework. It’s not necessary. That is not just a relieving idea or a comforting perspective but is really true. And the more confidence you gain in the fact that reality is like that – that it is *really* like that - the more one will relate to life as if they *know* that all is well.

It’s just amazing to find that I can sit in a room with people who think I’m wonderful, or I can sit in a room with people who think I’m completely weird and I feel comfortable in both situations. I feel comfortable even if I feel uncomfortable – which is *such* a gift. I can really enjoy both situations. Whereas before I’d be trying to do all kinds of weird things internally, trying to be more confident or trying to be more comfortable if I wasn’t, now I just sit there feeling uncomfortable, completely happy. It’s just wonderful.

I’m not interested in how I feel any longer. If you asked me just about the thought or how I felt this afternoon it would be effortful to find the description of my thoughts and emotions at a particular time and place. I can say that I feel utterly well and stable, but that doesn’t depend on the content of my mind or the content of my physical experience.

[Discussing a stroke suffered by his teacher]. Obviously this physical damage to the brain had brought about this big disruption in the functioning of his mind. But the peace beyond is untouched because it is the reality *of* the mind.

A number of participants also noted that a central quality of awareness was compassion and that this disposition toward experience (what several people referred to as a kind of welcoming or allowing of experience) was a core factor underlying the relationship of awareness to the resolution of suffering. For example:

Compassion is allowing suffering in one's self and others. That's the most powerful transformation there is. The only way it's possible to allow suffering is not psychologically – not emotionally but from the vastness – from the realm of awareness – that is what ultimately frees us.

Welcoming would be an essential aspect of awareness I would say. Awareness welcomes itself. It welcomes everything as itself, even the reactivity it welcomes. This welcoming I have seen is the very undoing – ultimately – of the reactivity. The welcoming of everything just the way it is, is truly the end of suffering.

Several participants also shared the view that what we conventionally label as disturbing mind states (including suffering), rather than being something to do away with or struggle to become free of can actually be realized to be and experienced as inseparable from freedom itself. The following quotes illustrate this:

When you believe in a destructible human existence and holding to that so dearly, you miss the obviousness of complete inseparability, complete okayness and indestructibility. The key is to realize that in the suffering itself, in allowing oneself to get uncomfortable, to feel the suffering, there's the freedom. Allowing that complete overwhelming sense of suffering to be as it is and see that it resolves in and of itself, like a line drawn in water. Trying to avoid suffering is the wheel of suffering.

There is no escape. I can't do anything about it. It was something that seemed to me that I had to endure to get through whereas in fact, it was right there *in* that disturbing experience. What I was looking for was *in* that experience.

To cut through concepts in my direct experience – not merely in a philosophical way where I know everything arises in awareness, but to let the pain of the world rage in me and to just let it be there and not think that awareness is freedom from suffering. It's not about freedom *from* suffering; it is freedom *in* suffering.

While this was the prevailing view of most respondents, at times, the language used by some would reflect a different perspective, one that appeared to emphasize freedom *from* the phenomenal world. For example:

At the phenomenal, body-mind level, there is no freedom, there's just decay and death. That's all we're headed for. We can go through our little changes - we get married, we get divorced, and we have children, and they grow up, and we have a job, and we retire... But what joy, what ultimate joy or freedom is there in that? The only freedom and joy, true joy is the freedom *from* that, the recognition that it is just an arising...

Finally, in considering the roots of suffering, the belief in being a separate person or individualized “node” of awareness was noted by several participants.

If we investigated in hindsight every time we experience psychological suffering we discover that we can always trace it back to the beliefs and/or the feeling that we are a separate awareness, a separate entity. Therefore the discovery of the true nature of awareness may put an end to the suffering if it turns out that awareness is not, as previously believed, personal, limited, or body/mind based but rather universal, impersonal. Usually we believe we have good reason not to be happy - say I'm not happy because my bank account is empty. So these are the alleged reasons but it turns out that all of these alleged reasons would become moot the moment it would be discovered that awareness is not personal.

### ***From Recognition to Stabilization***

Consistent with descriptions found in several awareness traditions (e.g., Dzogchen Tibetan Buddhism), the majority of participants 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 enduring. As part of this, subjects were also asked to comment on any specific activities, relationships, or practices they'd found particularly supportive in terms of their growing more confident and stable in the recognition of awareness.

Several themes emerged. First, a number of people shared that what eventually began to dawn for them, sometimes through the guidance of their teachers, was that

awareness could not actually be absent, despite the experience of having seemingly lost touch with it. The following quotes capture this sentiment:

If you feel like you've found [awareness] and then lost it, what's aware of finding and losing? It's like there is a more subtle awareness if you would. Whatever awareness that you had that you imagine is now lost is actually being aware. It is really about recognizing the inescapability of awareness - you can't escape your Self. You are always here.

In the beginning of becoming familiar with awareness, it was more like moments of relief, and in between, some kind of lostness. I started to realize, however, that even the "lostness" appears sweetly and perfectly in awareness.

Apropos this, several participants noted that the sense of awareness being more stable really began to take hold as they grew more confident in the fact that awareness was as present in the experience called "recognizing awareness" as it was in the experience labeled "non-recognition of awareness." As one person shared:

The sense of awareness coming and going resolved totally for me once I really saw that it doesn't matter how I describe my experience. I can describe it in all kinds of ways, like not recognizing awareness, or that it's not here - I can emphasize all these descriptions but that doesn't make the basic state [of awareness] not be there.

As was seen in many of the responses to the question about the relationship of awareness to the resolution of suffering, the theme of the *inseparability* of awareness and phenomena was again noted by a number of participants as a critical factor in terms of the stabilization of awareness. Below are several examples:

Whether we describe something as abiding or not abiding, as recognition or as not being aware, whatever it is, everything rests in itself. So then it really came to that point and I saw that nothing can avoid the natural presence of awareness. It is all inseparable. Seeing that our descriptions and labels are

nothing but the basic state of awareness, there was nowhere to turn and then even looking at my realization just relaxed.

That recognition of awareness – it never goes away. So it's only going to get more and more recognizable if that's possible. It's not like a destination of more and more recognizable – it's that every experience is more recognizable as awareness.

For me, it was realized that non-recognition of awareness *is* awareness. At a certain point it's very clear that that's the case. With very basic logic, you can see that. After awhile, the choice became apparent to me – am I really going to trust that or not. Both are fine, of course, but somehow that was quite a big shift for me. Am I going to live by that or not? It kind of was a decision, “okay I'm going to have the innocence to allow that to be as it is – whatever the 'non-recognition of awareness' is that I have, or the lack of confidence that I have - am I going to let that be as it is or I am going to continue trying to correct it?” When I chose to let it be as it was, that was perhaps the biggest change for me.

With respect to the experience called, “not recognizing awareness,” we can't really identify a moment at which we stopped recognizing it and we can't really identify a moment at which we started recognizing it.

Well, it's really more recognizing the way things already are. It's like we think about resting and growing more stable as a kind of “thing” that we're doing but it's really much more acknowledging that, “well, it would take there to be two things for there to not be stability, right? It would be one thing that could get thrown off balance by another thing.” But really, it actually isn't working that way at all. It's just complete stability; everything is stable in itself, naturally. It's just recognizing that that's just the case. Even in moments of feeling unstable, there's complete stability.

How is it possible to be out of that which is inclusive of everything? And yet, in the way we describe our experiences, this is how it can *seem*, especially for those of us who have gotten into those kinds of teachings where there's this sense of being really in touch with awareness and then a sense that it's not so much in the foreground. It's useful to look at this and see that the description of the non-recognition of awareness is just full-on blazing awareness as is everything. And then the idea of ever falling out of it starts to be seen through, that it's not really possible to fall in or out of awareness. In realizing this, the experience is one of more and more ease, and in that relaxation, what's so blazingly apparent is awareness.

Related to the above themes, another key observation shared by a number of participants was that the experience of awareness being unstable (i.e., the sense that

it is somehow coming and going) is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding that equates the recognition (and subsequent stabilization) of awareness with particular states or experiences. For example:

Stability, if you want to call it that, comes about by recognizing awareness in all states and not just associating it with particular states or circumstances. Of course it even makes logical sense to say that what's stable is what's present in everything. That's what makes it stable. That's really a key discovery, to see that it's never absent from any state, that it's not possible for awareness to be absent from any state.

You're not trying to hold onto any particular moment or trying to pin down awareness as looking any particular way because the next moment it will be something completely different!

I think we end up missing something really fundamental, which is that every perception is inseparable from awareness. It's not only the moments where the perception is one of an intensification of the sense of presence of awareness because then we're back in putting it in a category when it's actually all pervading, and saturating experience. If freedom's going to be *really* free, you have to be free in the midst and in and as everything. That's real freedom.

Awareness is equally present in and as every flash moment no matter what the content of that moment is, which isn't to say that we might not prefer to be in certain environments where people are talking about awareness and pointing to that and it feels like it's coming more alive than in another moment where your partner's pissed off at you or something, whatever it might be that might not be our preferred experience. But there it is in that too, and the whole host of responses that might arise in the face of that kind of an encounter.

One mistake I see many people make (and I have done this myself) is having what we could call an interesting or very profound experience. Now, even if this is evidence that there *is* recognition of awareness, that we're growing familiar with awareness, awareness doesn't reside anywhere. Such experiences arise in, of, as, and through awareness, just like the experience of being totally nervous arises in, of, as, and through awareness. They are equal and even. So, to pinpoint a certain sensation or feeling or vision as "awareness" and then when it isn't like that, to conclude that it's not awareness is just a misunderstanding, that's all. It is devastating if someone does lockdown on a certain perception, thinking that that's awareness and if they don't have that experience then they've lost it. You know it's like the greatest lover you've ever had and then they're gone and you'll never get

them back, you know. And then you'll pine and lament, want to kill yourself, and that's not an exaggeration, I know people like that.

Let's say you go on a retreat and you have no external distractions, you're just resting as awareness, resting in the ease of being. Then you leave the circumstances you're in and the instruction you're receiving and now you're in your life and your wife says something that pisses you off, or the next circumstantial perception arises, a new perception - whatever you want to call it, all the labels, we might give experience. We think awareness is gone now because there's a new perception. But once we really get that this new perception is also it, how can there ever be instability if every experience is the movement of that? Anything that comes can go because that's the nature of phenomena, right? We can't hold anything in place, including recognition of awareness.

I had some amazing experiences - quite cosmic experiences - some quite psychedelic experiences at points, as well as some feelings of *incredible* bliss - absolutely *overwhelming* bliss, and obviously this is quite amazing because it is so out of the ordinary in terms of our normal everyday experience. But these experiences are nothing special - these experiences are also simply the dynamic energy of awareness. And if that's the way it's appearing in the moment, then that's the way it's appearing in the moment, which is great so you can enjoy that. But that's not awareness. Awareness isn't that blissed-out state. Awareness isn't that psychedelic display. Awareness is also that feeling of feeling shitty. This is so common, that association, because the first time you really do recognize the fundamental inseparability of everything, it's usually an incredible revelation, and it does feel great and you do feel a sense of relief. But then to associate awareness with that particular set of feelings or that particular experience is immediately to limit what can't be limited - you're deciding, "*This* is awareness." You're defining it. And yet by nature, it is completely un-definable - completely ungraspable. It is whatever is appearing, and if it's appearing as bliss, it's appearing as bliss, if it's appearing as depression, it's appearing as depression. It's incredibly powerful when you have that recognition in these afflictive or negative states and see that they are also this same ground of being. That's a *huge* recognition. And then there really is no chance of falling back or getting lost in a story of non-recognition of awareness because that story of non-recognition of awareness is evidence *of* awareness.

Apropos this, a recurring theme and challenge for many people involved with awareness teachings, including many of the participants in this study, appears to be the re-arising of disturbing or afflictive mind states and the feeling that the presence of such states is somehow evidence of the absence of awareness, of having lost

contact with it in some way. Below are a number of passages that highlight participants' feelings that a key to stabilizing in and as awareness is the way in which one relates to the re-occurrence of disturbing mental-emotional or bodily states.

I found it kind of a remarkable revelation, an ongoing one I should say, to see that when disturbing states suddenly are showing up, there's often the interpretation that that is somehow evidence of awareness being absent, when in fact it's the opposite, it's evidence of the *presence* of awareness rather than it's absence. And that has just completely flipped everything upside down in terms of my own understanding of the impossibility of it being absent, seeing that *everything* announces awareness, even the most difficult and challenging states and experiences.

If something disturbing arises and at the same time there's resting as awareness and not really a separation between what's arising and awareness, then what's arising isn't really a problem and also starts to begin to seemingly open and move. So, I guess it's seen through, but there's a sense of it not really being very solid.

I'm more and more amazed if disturbing states come up because I really see the power and the clarity [of awareness] in them.

A key point is to see that awareness can't be there on it's own – it's inseparable from all appearances and perceptions. So, every perception is amazing in that way because it *is* the natural presence of awareness. So, everything then is an opportunity to realize that presence.

When difficult states arise, there's a much more compassionate understanding of the fact that this is the human predicament – this is the human dilemma – this is how we function as human beings. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong, and so there's a total relaxation. I don't have a sense that I need to do anything about it. It's interesting because I used to use a lot more non-dual tools...

[There's a] progression from thinking that there are horrible things I want to get rid of to they [those states] are just the natural lighting up of awareness that's always continuous and nothing can upset that. It's so beautiful.

And so now, even when I am – you could describe it as being ruffled, I don't mind. I don't mind being ruffled any more. So rather than, "I'm resting as awareness to not be ruffled any more," it's more that I'm seeing that it's okay anyway, that the whole expanse is as it is, and that includes whatever "lack"

or “progress” that I have – it’s all included – like a wonderful, all-encompassing view.

It’s not that any one thing is right or wrong or better or worse – it’s that everything, every experience, equally fuels the recognition of awareness.

In terms of this transformed relationship to the re-arising of afflictive states and the impact of this in terms of gaining greater stability in awareness, the theme of inseparability was again evident:

Unless it’s understood that awareness is all encompassing and that somebody’s willing to see if that’s true in their own experience, then there’s always going to be running away from disturbing states and this idea that awareness is an antidote to feeling afraid – “I’m feeling afraid so I better realize awareness,” whereas awareness *is* the fear.

At some point, the experiences are known to *be* awareness. At some point in the beginning, we’ll package good experiences that make me feel good as awareness, and then these not-so-good ones as something different. But then there’s just some point where the so-called bad one doesn’t feel so bad any more. You recognize that the experience itself is fueling the recognition of awareness. That was how it was for me.

A lot of times afflictive mind states are viewed as an it, it’s something that’s happening to me, it is happening to you, and then very gradually there’s a relationship that develops with that - you’re happening *to* whatever that particular mind state is. And then there’s finally the recognition that you *are* that mind state.

While many of these respondents felt that even if very powerful and disturbing patterns of mental-emotional reactivity occurred, such phenomena did not require any particular action or activity in order to resolve them (other than to continue to see them as appearances of or inseparable from the ground of awareness), a number of study participants felt that in many cases, such experiences needed to be addressed at a psychological or psychotherapeutic level in order for one to grow

more stable in their recognition of awareness. Examples of this perspective can be seen in the following:

But it wasn't like in some people's experience the end of suffering – it was the *discovery* of suffering. It was the beginning of realizing that there was a lot of healing that had to take place – there were a lot of wounding – I realized back then that, “I had a lot of karma to clean up.”

People often have to do more psychological shedding afterwards, because everything that is incomplete will arise. So if I had never done all that work I'm sure I would have had to start facing a whole lot of aspects of my nature that were still corroded by my conditioning.

I think that for a lot of people, there are some left over energies that maybe just karmically, have to be resolved before they can really surrender into the awakens. It might be a need to make money, it might be a need to deal with some family crisis, or it might be some lack of confidence in oneself, it can be anything. But there is often some big piece that arises that isn't finished.

In many ways, I have felt that for people who have done a bunch of therapy first, it's much easier, much easier to let awakening just be there and not then object when life intervenes. But if you've never done any therapy and especially if you have any trauma in your history, it's like those aspects of the personality keep arising. And then you feel like, “gee, I was completely free and now all of a sudden I'm this, this energy of depression or anger is here, what's the matter?” What's the matter is, the way my teacher has talked about it is that those undercurrent pieces are coming up because they want to be awakened too, so they keep arising. But most people unless they have someone like (my teacher) around, don't recognize that's what it is and that it's not a bad thing, and that they need to meet them. They're just meeting the unfinished business in themselves.

There's very little help in spiritual traditions for the psychological aspects of letting go. So you either need some system for that dissolution. I feel like when I listen to people talk to my teacher, I'm looking at different psychological states that haven't been resolved.

Many people develop an awareness and their bodies are not channels – they're receptacles. They end up being sick and they end up having a lot of problems.

I think, a secondary movement kicks in that starts inquiring, “What's this about,” and in a way starts getting interested. First in a feeling way and then in a kind of analysis of what's going on. “What's giving rise to this?” Then kind of an unrelenting inquiry where I want to try to understand what's

going on to bring an end to it because I know the harmony that was there before and will be there. So there's a kind of an unrelenting trying to understand it and entering into relationship and dialogue to try to move through it. I grew up in a family where there was a lot of irritableness in the family and a lot of repression and I think I kind of embodied that as a way of being.

Several participants shared that over time, their focus had shifted from trying to make the recognition of awareness (as an experience) more constant or enduring to being more interested in whether or not the *results* of recognizing awareness were evident. For example:

I think for me what happened more and more was that the *results* of recognizing awareness were becoming more and more stable. Previously, my understanding was that the goal of the practice is that recognition of awareness as an experience becomes stable. So that's what I was trying to do – trying to bring it about and then maintain it. What happened after I became involved in this teaching is that I started to realize that whether or not the recognition of awareness is present isn't actually what I'm interested in. What I'm really interested in is feeling okay, being able to relate naturally, and being able to show people to this relief if they're interested in that. That's what I'm interested in, and then this other thing – that's just the method that's been explained to me to reach that. So I realized well, "I'm going to trust only the results." In terms of stability, it's not a question of whether there is some enduring experience of awareness recognizing itself, but rather is there a stability of well being.

My most afflictive state after I was introduced to awareness was non-recognition of awareness because I knew that this [recognition] holds all the solutions to everything – and I can't do it! I had experienced it directly and now to not be able to access it was, well just really very disturbing. But to see that complete recognition of awareness is possible even in the thought of, "I don't recognize awareness," was incredible. So, if someone asks me, "Do you always recognize awareness?" I would be sitting there like, "Hmmm." I don't always think about awareness any longer." I would often ask my teacher for confirmation – "Am I doing it right? Is this resting as awareness? Is this being aware of awareness?" In one talk, she said, "Well, if you want to have a context for measuring how far you've come, just look at all the benefits that you have in your life and maybe that you've provided for the lives of others." And so, I'm not so much concerned any longer about the recognition of awareness because ultimately that's another point of view.

What I'm really interested in is the incredible compassionate intent - this is what I want. I'm completely sick and tired of my self-improvement projects, and recognition of awareness became a self-improvement project for me and I didn't want to do that any longer.

It was also pointed out by several participants that becoming more stable or abiding in the recognition of awareness is actually to see and grow more confident in the fact that awareness, by its very nature *abides*. As one person noted:

Yeah, awareness becomes more abiding because you stop trying to look for it, because how can you find it. The whole thing of trying to look for something is already creating a duality or a dichotomy and I think that's what actually sets up the seeming problem - you're looking for something, looking for a state. And who you are is not a state. Once you've recognized that then you're going to have to give up the search. If you keep looking for it is like you found your keys now why are you looking for them they are in your hand it's a waste of time. It is when you give up trying to find anything that you recognize that awareness abides.... awakening abides.

In some traditions, one of the signs or indicators that the realization of awareness has grown more stable and abiding is that an individual is able to recognize the presence of awareness, not only during the waking state, but also in the states of dreaming and deep, dreamless sleep. With this in mind, participants were asked to reflect on the extent to which there was any sense for them of consciousness or awareness abiding during the states of dreaming and/or sleeping.

Responses varied. While a minority of individuals reported that they felt largely unaware during non-waking states, most respondents felt that there *was* in fact, a sense of awareness that was evident even during dreams and sleep (although the extent of this was quite variable). In general, those who reported experiencing

some continuity of awareness in either dreams or deep sleep said that while this was not something they had really sought out or tried to cultivate, it seemed to have come about quite naturally and spontaneously. In many cases, these individuals saw the experience of increased awareness that was now more evident during the states of dreaming and sleeping as a natural outgrowth or extension of awareness having grown more stable during the waking state.

While it was somewhat more common for people to report a sense of being aware during the dream state (e.g., lucid dreaming), a number of individuals did also report experiences of varying degrees of awareness being present during deep, dreamless sleep as well, an interesting finding given our conventional notions of this state being essentially a non-conscious one.

Among participants, there was also considerable variability in terms of how they felt the recognition of awareness had impacted the quality of their sleep. For example, one person reported the following:

I'm aware that I'm dreaming and I'm also quite aware when I snore. I'm aware of sleeping, often. Probably the only down side of this whole awakening process is that I think the quality of sleep is hugely disturbed.

In contrast, another participant said:

I think I fall asleep as quickly as I do (even if I have to get up early to pee and then go back to sleep afterwards) because I simply drop fully into awareness.

One person shared that earlier on in their process, the awakening to awareness seemed to have disrupted sleep. However, their present experience was that even with very little sleep, their body appeared to function quite well.

After the awakening, oh my goodness, it was like all I could call it would be aware sleep. It also affected the body. There were a couple of years where I was just exhausted, the body was exhausted. It would also keep the body awake. And now the body gets maybe three or four hours of sleep and when I'm at home there will be sometimes when I don't even sleep at night, because I can write or work or whatever. But the body's never tired.

Below are several quotes from participants illustrating the varied degree to which they'd experienced awareness as present in non-waking states.

That's never really been something that I have explored [recognizing awareness in dreams and sleep]. I just go to sleep and sometimes I have dreams and sometimes I don't.

I would say that I only have *some* experience of awareness during sleeping and dreaming. I don't know why but when I travel on a plane, there is the sense of resting deeply or sleeping, and also sort of being awake in awareness at the same time. There is a refreshing quality and a clarity throughout it when awareness is present during sleeping. I know instinctively and logically that the power of this experience which I've had only limitedly during sleep is that it shows us that there is not an individual that's sleeping who conks out and then wakes up again and experiences life and activity during the day but that the individual that's sleeping is just a point of view, a phenomenon like any other experience and it is awareness that's continuous throughout all states. So, there is really not an individual that goes through these states – the sense of an individual is just the thoughts or emotions that are points of view appearing in awareness.

I believe my sense before the shift was more that I was a character in the dream that was experiencing all these different things. My experience of dreaming now is a little bit different - I feel more like I'm watching a movie but it's not so much like I'm a character in it. They say we are all the characters in our dreams but I just mean that it's not so much like it's happening *to* me as much. Sometimes I'm a character in there but more often than not I feel like I'm watching scenes. I can often be in a dream and if it's negative, like it's unpleasant, something will pop into the dream and just go,

“I’m going to just change the channel - I don't have to watch this because this is just the next passing thing. I think I'll have a nice dream now, or maybe I'll just get up now, I'll wake up and go to the bathroom.” It's just a sense that there is more I guess what might be called lucidness present.

Some nights, awareness is there; other nights I’m just completely caught up in the dream. It’s consistently growing where I recognize in the dream, “Okay, this is a quite bizarre story and I can just choose to get out of it.” But I’ve also had a couple of very strong dreams of recognizing that nothing need be done about anything. It really has been a profound teaching, waking up in the morning and just feeling even more relief, seeing that you always have that choice. It just shows the complete indivisibility of all experience, that whether waking or dreaming, it is all the basic state of awareness. It just shows that this personal identity is also an appearance of awareness, a point of view in awareness. Just seeing that you have the ability in dreams to make a decision to rest as awareness or not is powerful.

In response to the question whether they’d ever recognized awareness during deep sleep, several people commented that they sometimes could not tell whether they were asleep or awake. For example:

There are nights where I thought I hadn’t slept very much but I’ve been very restful and I wondered if I thought I was awake but wasn’t really awake – I just don’t know.

Sometimes there is brightness in that depth of really deep sleep. I mean it would be kind of too much to say this but it's almost like a little smile is there hanging out in sleep. There's a sense of the refreshment of it as it's happening. I don't know – my husband will ask, “How did you sleep.” And often, I can think of times where we’ll say to each other, “I don't know but the experience seems like I’m not sure if I was awake or asleep last night. It’s like who knows – you’d have to hook us up to a machine I guess!

Other participants reported quite definitively, that they had experienced awareness as pervading not only the dream state, but deep sleep as well. For example:

I don't sleep. The body goes to bed, dreams appear, the waking state appears, and unstructured perceptions like noise appear in the deep sleep phase. But I don't sleep. I am always awake. Awareness has always been aware - we have

never been asleep. You can sleep only if you identify with the sleeping entity, not with awareness.

I don't know if it's fundamentally necessary, but it was my path. There was a lot of lucid dreaming, even before my awakening then during and after it. And then very gradually, lucidity dropped away and there was just dreaming but there was not an issue anymore, like there is not an awareness that's standing apart from the dream as you might have in a lucid dream. So, it went through a phase like a separate witness (e.g., "Oh wow, I'm dreaming and I'm aware that I'm dreaming") to not even being concerned about that anymore. And the same thing with deep dreamless sleep. Being awake while I slept was very profound, like what [Ken] Wilber refers to as "constant consciousness" - going to sleep, but never going to sleep even though eight hours would go by like this (snaps fingers.) That still occurs even now like just last night, I felt as if I never went to sleep but I did go to sleep. So it's there but it's almost like incidental now. I don't know how to say this in words, but I'll do my best. It's just like a sense of continuity and there is a constant continuity all the time. I go to sleep but I don't go to sleep. I wake up and there's that presence. There's just this constant thing. Then there's noticing it, but not noticing it - it's not important to notice it anymore.

Especially in times when there's something that happens and this purity of awareness kind of ramps up - becomes very bright, I'll find myself - the body is sleeping all night long, but there's a continuity of awareness - awareness being aware of awareness all the way through the night and there are images I would call dreams that are happening, but the pervasiveness is so strong and there are other times it feels like that ramps down and gets very low voltage and then dreaming may take over. There may be moments of lucidity - awareness of dreaming, but I would say in a way I've lost interest. To me, it is just another movement of phenomena, that I'm no more curious about my dreams than I am another feeling I may have during the day.

There was another experience that I had in deep sleep - it's close to indescribable if at all describable - where I could see that awareness doesn't depend on the brain, which was one of the things that I still held to, that there must be a connection between awareness and the brain. But I knew that my electronical (brain) pattern wouldn't allow for awareness in that very moment because everything was just dead asleep, and yet I was having the experience of spacious awareness. That just showed me that it's exactly the same awareness in all states. I'm not too obsessed with trying to remain aware as I fall asleep because I think that's about what we need to learn from these experiences.

During the interview, one participant, in response to this question about the presence of awareness during dreams and sleep shared that he'd never really considered that before. He said he would pay attention the next night and proceeded to write the following:

I paid attention last night and found that yes, in fact, awareness continues through sleep and dreams and of course, upon waking up in the morning!

Several participants also reported that the presence of awareness during sleep was most recognizable while snoring:

For me, it was quite a profound experience – it wasn't lucid dreaming – it was lucid snoring. I often thought of myself as a loud snorer, and I've had several experiences of noticing this snoring going on, and then becoming aware of the fact that I'm snoring. I'm asleep, but I'm completely aware of that snoring that I'm making. It sounds quite frivolous, but the whole thing of lucid snoring was very interesting, to see that the conventional descriptions of awareness and consciousness and where those limits are and where awareness begins and ends, in fact really don't apply.

A number of subjects spoke about the impact that recognizing awareness in dreams and sleep had had upon them, particularly in terms of strengthening a sense of confidence in the all-pervading, ever-present nature of awareness. For example:

The few occasions when I have realized that I am dreaming or sleeping have been wonderfully insightful and supportive of my conviction in the nature of reality.

It supported my confidence in knowing the nature of all appearances.

What is really important initially about it is just to see that the awareness that is aware during the day is the same awareness that's aware during dreams and sleep. And then you really get it that there's total freedom, *total* freedom.

Several respondents also shared that the recognition of awareness during the dream state served to in a sense further reinforce their understanding about the insubstantial/empty nature of phenomena. For example:

One of the most impressive lucid dreams for me was to drink water and to feel the water running down my throat and knowing there is no water in my throat. [Laughing] To have that experience that the water is there – that it's totally there! It felt even more real because I never attend to the water running down my throat because I'm not practicing mindfulness [Laughing]. It just felt like, "Wow, that's amazing – what does that say about this table (points to table)? It is very powerful when you're awake in a dream and you have that experience of solidity at the same time knowing it's not.

From the time I was a tiny little girl I would have the same recurring nightmare. The scene of it would be different, but it would be the same thing. I would be being chased by this big huge ominous thing that would grab me and tickle my. That was my most dreaded thing. And I couldn't get away from it and I could not stop it. And that followed me all through into my adulthood. And then, one night it started, and all the fear came up. And I just thought, "This is a dream. I am dreaming." And you know, this whole crowd was coming at me ready to... and I just realized, "This is a dream!" And suddenly everything changed. And I was completely aware in the dream. And I knew I could do anything I wanted to. And then it went into another nightmare I'd have where I was standing on the tippy peak of a thousand-story building. And the wind was blowing and I used to just pray I wouldn't fall. "This is a dream! I'm going to fly!" I knew in that instant, "Wow! This is all awareness. There is nothing solid here. Just like during the day." This was a very profound experience. But you know, it was profound in that I realized as we're sitting here today, it is no different then when I'm dreaming all these things at night. But just like any other profound experience, it's not anywhere to lay one's hat.

To be aware during sleep or dreams - what it showed me was that awareness is just always present – that sleep is a point of view as well. There have also been insights which I didn't make anything out of but that I could see clarified or deepened my understanding of the nature of solidity, knowing that I'm dreaming and just seeing that in dreams things appear equally solid and that they don't exist on their own. I had a direct sense of something being stable or solid, seeing the inseparability of awareness and all appearances whether in the dream or awake – they were equal appearances – so suddenly there was a stream of complete awareness and all its experiences. So every

now and then the experience of falling asleep and just recognizing and maintaining awareness and seeing that there is never a cut or a stop – never an end or beginning. Mostly by waking up dreaming and then waking up so to speak just before *really* waking up and seeing the non-conceptual state and also how one by one, thought by thought I build up where am I and what am I – just putting all these points of view together.

Dream states are a wonderful opportunity to recognize the fleetingness, the mirage-like appearances of phenomena. I do dream and I am aware of my dreams so I'm aware that I'm dreaming and I have the ability to change my dreams – the phenomena around my dreams. It's not something I tried to do – I just found myself being aware of my dreams and then not liking the way a dream was going and being able to, "Well I have the ability to change around the phenomena" and I wouldn't say it's like replacing it because I couldn't take it, but like, "This is not a beneficial story." [Laughing] So when I sleep, sometimes I don't remember sleeping at all, but coming here I slept most of the way on the airplane, but I knew it would be beneficial for me to be aware of my surroundings. I didn't have to think about it. So, I was aware of my space as I was sleeping and still totally sleeping. Again, it builds confidence when we can see that we're aware in our dreams and we're aware while we sleep and we're aware while we're awake and that awareness is just naturally present all the time. There was one point I recognized, "Wow, I'm aware every time I dream." And then there are times when I'm sleeping where I am totally aware that I'm sleeping. So this really now is 24/7 – this is stable.

Finally, a few respondents noted that their reliance on the qualities of awareness seemed to have pervaded the dream state, even if they were not necessarily consciously aware while dreaming. For example, one participant shared the following:

I have found that my tendency to rely on the qualities of awareness has also grown in my dreams, without necessarily knowing that I am dreaming. So there is a growing sense of stability, peace and responsiveness in both dreaming and waking life alike.

### *Role of Practice*

While not asked specifically about their views on the role of spiritual/contemplative practice in realizing the ground of awareness, a number of participants discussed

their relationships to and history engaging in various practices and their feelings about the extent to which such practices were necessary in order to recognize awareness. The majority of respondents seemed to feel that because awareness was already and always present, practices such as meditation were not necessary in order to bring about this awareness nor its recognition. As one subject noted:

I was involved in meditation and I thought that there must be a destination somewhere called awareness. Then to see that there was nothing to make or to get into and then also nothing to fall out of, that awareness is full-blown present, and this presence cannot be affected by anything. So knowing this, all the effort to get somewhere, to find awareness simply dropped.

Similarly, another participant shared:

I was in a meditation retreat and I saw that awareness – that what's observing - is the space in which everything appears. And it need not be sought or cultivated. And I never meditated again.

Finally, the fairly poor success rate of practices were highlighted by several subjects:

All these practices - yoga, meditation, satsang - what is the success rate? Even if I was being really, really favorable you could say 1 in 1000. But it's probably more like 1 in 100,000. If you applied that success rate to any other human endeavor you would say it's a catastrophic failure. It's like, why are you meditating, you've got less than a 1/1000 percent chance of finding what you're looking for. So meditating doesn't work in terms of providing an ultimate goal. We just lose all our faculties when it comes to spiritual endeavors. It's much more effective to just tell people that the recognition of their self- perfect nature can occur wherever you are - meditating, doing yoga, wherever you are.

Interestingly, some respondents felt that while the practices they'd engaged in had ultimately revealed the futility of practices because they essentially amounted to trying to attain what one already was (awareness or being), they still felt such practices and the realization of their ultimate failure was somehow necessary.

I would never have awakened to that reality if I hadn't done the work. And yet, the work ultimately failed and it was only when I quit doing the work that it worked.

One participant felt that meditation was not only helpful, but maybe essential to gaining stability in awareness.

I really emphasize meditation in my teaching, which I know a lot of non-dual teachers don't. But my experience is that if somebody has meditated a lot and then they have an awakening they know where to go to visit it. When they meditate they go into stillness or emptiness or vastness or peace, even for a little while. To me that's like a portal into pure awareness. The more you marinate in that the more accessible it is when you are not meditating. To me, it's as if that primary condition is always here and then there's, as I said, this character. For most of our lives this character dominates and dominates. Meditation is a way of strengthening this one and weakening the other one. I think that's why so many people wake up but they don't stabilize because they never meditated.

### ***Impact on Life***

Along with describing the central role that the realization of awareness plays in the resolution of suffering, participants were asked to comment on the specific impact that the recognizing awareness has had upon their daily, lived experience. A number of themes emerged centering around the following: the end of seeking or searching for anything else; the beneficial impact on relationships; the realization of wisdom and compassion; an enhanced capacity for responsiveness and skillfulness in daily life, a sense of fearlessness, and a natural motivation to be of service.

In terms of relationships, participants spoke to a number of ways this domain had been impacted by the recognition of awareness.

I feel much more connected to other people, but not connected in the needy codependent way that I once was but just a literal connection. When our own agenda gets out of the way, we can really feel in a much more visceral level what other people are going through.

I think the way that I communicate has been profoundly impacted by awareness. My capacity to deeply listen to a so-called other, without any need to either agree or disagree or change their point of view, has changed my whole life.

If my husband and I have some kind of disagreement, there seems to be a really quick dissolving of any sense of substance to either of our positions, and less, I guess I could use the word preference or attachment to a position or outcome. So things are much more fluid and moving and much more open. And actually, the other part of it is that the real basis of our connection is this resting of our awareness.

I have a daily, moment-to-moment realization that I am at one and one in every moment living this paradox of being in relationship with a profound understanding that there is no other.

There is a resting in a larger space. It kind of feels like love – I could call it love. It seems to be just a natural arising with awareness. It's a part of the recognition – there's just more openness and less feeling of anything between me and everybody else, except for this fullness of space.

Because from the vastness there's no need for something to be a certain way, then there's real listening in that. I think wisdom is the ability to listen. And there's real learning and also the ability to allow suffering, which is compassion.

The connection that we have because of this – I don't even know what words to put around it. Instead of thinking, "Well, I need to do this to become a better person and you need to do that to become a better person," and having all these conditions around everything, just to be with someone and have no agenda is so freeing.

I think generally what I enjoy most is that I feel so blessed with the experience of utter solidity. And in another sense of the word, independence, but at the same time complete connectedness to whatever appears in my life.

In my relationships, there isn't the same clinging that there was in the past. But you're still present. In fact, you're maybe *more* present for them as far as doing things and being in the moment with them, but the attachment is gone.

In terms of the impact of recognizing awareness on one's relationships, several participants spoke specifically about love:

When awareness gets discovered in all of its glory, it reveals itself as absolute splendor, absolute intelligence, but also absolute love. Love is the energy of awareness. Intelligence is the light of awareness, but love is the *energy* in awareness. So basically, what awareness does for a living is to love itself. The activity of awareness *is* love. As the sense of separation falls away, it falls away from the inside out. There is an immediate, we could say, destruction inside at the very core of ignorance and then there is a ripple that gradually permeates all the realms of one's life - the way we think, the way we feel, the way we perceive the world, the way we act in the world, the way we interact with others. So let's take the way we think. We don't think any longer of ourselves as a separate entity. And as a result we think of ourselves as universal consciousness. And by the same token as we see ourselves, we see others, right? So if we don't see ourselves as a separate entity, it's only natural not to see others as separate entities but as being at the very core of their substance, this very same consciousness. And that's love right there. You see that's love in relationship, that's love in dealing with others when there *are* no others.

Several participants also spoke about how they'd experienced a transformation in terms of a greater sense of ease and openness to being in relational situations that in the past, they'd either tried to avoid or had experienced as difficult in some way. For instance:

You recognize your true nature, which is just completely relaxed and completely wide open and accepting of people. You start to see this in everyone else. *Everyone* used to annoy me - I didn't like anyone and I didn't like myself. I was very good at proving to other people how pointless their ideas were because of everything I knew and that I could prove it to them. To be free of all this and actually to be able to sit with someone who I previously would of thought was a complete idiot, and just think they're the most amazing person and it's got nothing to do with what they believe in.

People who used to really annoy me like my stepmother, who I always had trouble with from the first time I saw her. I didn't like her and she didn't like me. And to just be able to be in that circumstance now without having to do anything - to just be there and be completely harmonious - not having to prove anything. And at the same time still preferring to hang out with my

mom. You know, it's just completely natural without anything in the way, ever.

I used to spend weeks just in my house not going out apart from maybe the studio and things. I'd much rather just stay in and not see anyone. That's one huge thing to be able to be open and enjoy the company of strangers. That's just amazing.

One respondent shared that they themselves has been a very difficult person to be in relationship with and that they marveled at how the awakening to awareness had so totally transformed the way they were with others.

I used to say when I was practicing law that my motto was, "Seek pleasure, avoid pain." That's how I used to live my life. Anything that wasn't going the way I wanted it – that got slapped down or pushed out. I was a real jerk when I was a lawyer and I ran my life in a very selfish and brutally judgmental way that ended up making sure that me and my family didn't get hurt, but not being much concerned about anybody else. Now I would say that I live my life moment-to-moment, welcoming whatever comes along and open to every possibility as to what the next moment might bring.

This same person commented about the way in which the relationship with his wife had also been transformed.

My relationship with my wife changed totally to an openness and a lack of neediness that has deepened that relationship incredibly. A willingness to accept people for what they are and to – being frank with you – to accept an adultery and get past it to living with this wonderful person, instead of a reaction I would have had of thrashing someone to a pulp and tossing out the person I was living with. That didn't even cross my mind as an option.

Several people commented that while they once viewed having particular relationships as a condition for well-being, this dynamic had essentially disappeared. For example:

Something that for me is remarkable is that I was banking on either a relationship with fantastic sex or just to be in a relationship, and that's completely gone. But I just find there are a lot more attractive people than I ever noticed before. It's great you know. I just see beauty in everyone.

I used to really believe that an intimate or romantic relationship was something I needed in my life and that that is where comfort and security and well-being were. That was just a very conventional way that I thought, believing that this was essential. But that has completely resolved. Now, there's a connection with everyone and everything so there's no longer a need to focus on one person in particular. In fact, it feels impossible for me to do that, which is really interesting. And there's never a time where I feel lonely any more. Those sensations just haven't appeared. And if any of that were to come up for me in the future, I just think I'll be fine. It is what it is. It doesn't feel like it's a matter of not having any of this arise, but really understanding the origin of it.

Most participants shared the view that the recognition of awareness had awakened in them a natural compassion. For example, one respondent shared: "The flavor of pure being feels like it has really awoken an innate capacity for compassion and love that was always there – it just feels like it brought it online." Another commented that, "The recognition of awareness has enlivened such a burning compassion."

Related to this, a theme that emerged was the sense on the part of most participants that seeing very clearly into the roots of suffering in oneself gives rise to a very natural movement of empathy and compassion for what others are experiencing.

Examples of this can be seen in the following:

It's not a compassion like, "I feel sorry for you because you're hurting." It's more of a compassion that sees how the mind functions and sees how lost a person is because of how they're functioning.

I feel a much greater sense of compassion - the word that came to mind was identification, but it's the wrong word. It's really a knowing or an understanding of what other people are going through. And being with that I think leads to greater compassion.

When you have that understanding and clarity of seeing the game you've been playing with yourself – that is, believing in the independent nature of all your thoughts and emotions and experiences and feeding them this power and building them up into these really important things - once you see that in yourself, you see very, very clearly that that is what everybody is doing. You see that the reason why the overwhelming majority of people in the world are behaving the way they're behaving is because they're repeating the same pattern that you know so well in yourself. The compassion starts with yourself when you see what you've been putting yourself through and that it is so completely unnecessarily. There's that sense of relief of not having to do that – and that huge compassion of seeing what you've been doing and the way you've been relating to other people from that space. You see that even people who behave and do the most horrific things to themselves and other people, that it's all the same pattern being repeated. And so even with people who've committed what's conventionally called evil acts, there's just this huge sense of compassion, and it doesn't mean you condone the acts or anything stupid like that. But you have a clarity and an understanding of *why* they're doing what they're doing, and realize it's the same pattern. The particular set of circumstances and emotions and thoughts they are believing in may be unique, but the pattern is exactly the same. And so, that's real compassion.

Many participants expressed the view that awareness was actually inseparable from both wisdom and compassion.

These [wisdom and compassion] just feel like natural qualities. I know for a fact that it's not learned. I just know that because I tried to learn it, I really did! And I wasn't very successful. Again, that instinctive recognition of what's most natural reveals those natural qualities and I do believe that they are qualities, emanations of the basic state of awareness. And I see, not only from my own experience, but from everyone I'm with, everyone I work with, the exact same thing unfolds for them – the same insights. Regardless of their circumstances in life, we're all recognizing exactly the same thing. That's pretty telling – very much evidence that these qualities are just naturally occurring and naturally present.

The relationship between awareness and the development of wisdom and compassion? Well, they're not related – they're absolutely inseparable!

Wisdom is recognizing who we are. And compassion of course just arises naturally out of the recognition that there aren't two. Seeing that there is no separation, naturally compassion will arise because you see the other person as not separate. So, it's not something we have to think about – "I'm going to

be compassionate now, I'm going to cultivate compassion," as they say in the Buddhist tradition or anything like that. It's just you find yourself just naturally acting in a caring and compassionate way. It's just what naturally arises. Compassion is who you are – it's not something you have to cultivate.

Awareness is imbued with benefit and compassion and love and all those things that we always knew to be true in the beginning of our lives and now come to the fore really easily when they aren't masked by all of these misperceptions.

What I've recognized in my own experience is that wisdom, love, compassion are not separate from awareness.

The fundamental approach to living life is just recognizing that it is love-filled and that all wise actions are already contained in the basic state, in awareness.

Wisdom and compassion – these are the fundamental nature of everything – the wisdom that knows everything to be itself, and the compassionate understanding of everything being itself. So, the more awareness is recognized, the more wisdom and compassion are known to be the basis of everything.

It is only in the recognition of awareness that we can have the true recognition of all of these qualities of wisdom and compassion as actually our being – not as something that we need to become. There is no other way to do it. And in fact, I can see that it's impossible for these *not* to come about. Not only is awareness the only way – it's impossible for those qualities not to come about if someone authentically, instinctively recognizes awareness, which is actually quite incredible.

Participants also expressed the view that their capacity for greater responsiveness to life situations and enhanced capacities for clear and creative decision-making was rooted in their recognition of awareness. Examples of this include:

The more settled I've been as I am – then naturally I'm more responsive to what's needed.

There's no distinction between material and immaterial – they're just two arbitrary labels – they're all phenomena, and that's why I'm particularly interested in the applications of the recognition of this inseparability into all these different fields because I've seen that application in my own life – in very specific, very technical, very practical ways. Mental and emotional

stability is amazing and it's fantastic, but it's only the beginning. It sounds like quite a claim, but just to see the way this spontaneous understanding and solving of problems just occurs from this same space of openness.

Does awareness represent another way of knowing? Well, that can sound a bit too esoteric and mysterious. That can be the case or it can appear like that sometimes. But it's often much more down-to-earth than that. We all know when you're relaxed you do everything better and that can be quite vigorous, so it's not a passive state. But when you're relaxed, you're able to make better decisions, whether that's of a physical nature or of a technical nature or of a nature to do with relationship of whatever kind. So it's really so practical. You're just relaxed in any situation. And from that relaxed space, you just see a whole range of solutions. You're really expanding the breadth of vision. You're just being open and relaxed and really perceptually astute because you're not coming at it through any filters or frames of reference or belief systems.

The complete reliance on conscious logical analytical thought as being the only way to come to an understanding – and I'm not in any way denigrating that conscious rational approach – I love it, but I'm also no longer limited by it. I'm open to allowing solutions to occur from within the problems because the solutions are not separate from the problems.

I noticed that my capacity to function in a really simple and effective way has dramatically increased. And my ability to see clearly how I can function as human being – where I can direct my energy for the greatest benefit.

A number of respondents commented that the desire to be of service seemed to be a natural result of recognizing oneself as inseparable from awareness. For example:

With awareness, there's just a natural movement to serve. That's what I can say.

There is a sense that less and less engages me in sort of human play in a certain way. But the only thing that I kind of live for now really is, this is going to sound pious or something, but it's just a sense that there's really no purpose to being here other than to serve. There's nothing that really engages me now other than just serving.

I can see that when there's a relaxation, suddenly it just comes alive in itself and I see it in others and then I see how natural this compassion and wanting to serve, to be of benefit is. Then suddenly, all these energies are really freed to benefit and to resolve all these ideas of what benefit is and compassion and trying to contrive that.

There's just an enlivening of every experience. And there's always this movement to give – to be of benefit and to support people. And it's not anything that I really think about. It's just that I see that this is how I'm moved to be - it's not a contrived activity.

Several participants also shared that a sense of fearlessness now pervaded their life, even if difficult experiences or circumstances (including fear) might be occurring for them.

There is complete ease and fearlessness, that's what I see now. Even if fear comes up, I'm not even fearful about fear or having really afflictive states. I'm not afraid of anything coming up. So anything could happen and that wouldn't mean that I don't have afflictive states but I'm not fearful of whatever might come up. There is such an ease around everything because I also know whatever comes up, it doesn't mean anything. I just know that I can't fall out of awareness.

When I'm in difficult situations, which I was recently, one that brought up some fear, it's almost like I'm no longer afraid of fear.

I see through all labels and words in a way that they can't close me down, like "I'm unworthy or I can't do this." So it's like seeing through them. There's just complete openness to all experience. I'm not afraid of anything. A thought could come up but there's a complete fearlessness.

There's no fear of death and no fear of life.

Along with this, several participants shared that experiences and circumstances were now seen as powerless to determine behavior. As one person noted:

In allowing everything to be as it is, there is no longer anything that determines my behavior. There is just a complete ease – that's what I see in my life, complete relaxation in every situation. Certain states might arise from time to time but I don't take them to be anything. The feeling of anger arises, but like I said before, it doesn't take me anywhere. It's not the cause of any of my activity any longer. When I say the same points of view are still arising – they are still arising, but they're also resolving (snaps fingers) like that.

Many participants spoke directly to the impact that the recognition of awareness has had upon the sense of self and self-identification and the subsequent impact this shift out of identifying with and focusing attention on the separate self has had.

Examples of this can be seen in the following:

There's so much energy that's freed up from self-focus. There's really too much energy to focus on oneself. You know it kind of does you in, in a way. Because it's so big - I mean the full force of the cosmic blast is in every moment! It's awareness, right? It's what we *are*. And so, I never thought of it this way until just now, but if you focus all of that on yourself, you kind of burn yourself up.

But the "I" that is evaluating all this, that thinks it is a separate individual, when I start resting, or when anyone does, the experience seems to be that there is no bundle of memories and experiences that make up a specific "I" that can be located anywhere. What starts to happen is that notion of a separate I, its just an expression - the awareness becomes predominate, the awareness that's continuous and vast and open in every experience.

You're simply persuaded, simply don't have any further questions about what the individual life might be or mean or is or how it can be burnished and polished to some great outcome. You're simply not limited to or chained to what you took to be your individual existence, you're just not.

In the recognition of awareness, with the identification not anymore on this person, when this person is just a phenomena appearing in awareness and as awareness, this focus on this person just kind of naturally dissolves. So, that is wisdom. The natural wisdom is not how much traditionally one can know, like how many books you have read. Wisdom is to understand and experience our true nature - that is wisdom. And to be able to live a fulfilled life, that is true wisdom for me. Then you are a benefit to yourself naturally, the biggest benefit you can ever give yourself. And when you are a benefit to yourself you automatically are of benefit to others also.

What I once took myself to be, it's crazy that I once took myself to be. It's amazing to understand that - whatever this skin line is, it is not anything. It's not anything that it used to be. It is just part of the vastness, as opposed to being something definable. So this is how my thoughts are too and my way of seeing. Again, that vantage is so broad and understanding of how everything is unified. There's no focus anywhere. There's no singular focus anywhere, then there's the ability to be completely focused on everyone and everything. That's why I feel things much more deeply. That's why I can relate to

everything in a much more intelligent way, the intelligent way that's not the intellect, but a knowingness.

So once your primary identity is more and more this wide-open perception of the basic state of awareness, then anything that occurs is also part of that wide-open perception. So it just resolves that dichotomy of separation of subject and object, of threat and promise, of hope and fear, of internal and external. All of these descriptive frameworks just relax and soften the whole obsessive focus on trying to analyze and work out what's going on, and work out who I am, and work out how to be in the world – that just relaxes and softens immediately, and that's why I call it this relaxed space, because from that relaxed open space, you're completely enabled to respond in whatever way is required. Because you're not coming at it from a whole series of preconceptions, you're really open to respond in a whole series of ways that, coming at it through any particular frame of reference, or any framework, or any set of constructs or concepts, you're immediately limiting yourself.

### ***Hallmarks and Indicators***

Participants were asked to reflect on what the hallmarks or key indicators were of an individual having recognized and grown increasingly more stable in the recognition of awareness. While many shared that they can “simply tell” whether or not there is a clear recognition and resting as awareness, a number of qualities and characteristics *were* highlighted as evidence of this.

That people had realized the true source of well-being and so were no longer searching elsewhere for it was a clear indicator for many respondents:

What I really recognize in people is that until we are confident of where well-being is – or let us say that our well-being is naturally present – to the extent that somebody knows that is also the extent that they no longer need anything (or they don't presume that they need anything in order to be well). Whereas when somebody isn't confident in the fact that well-being is naturally present, then they look for it everywhere. You can see that in their way of being, in their way of relating - in that sense it's actually very evident.

People are not fooled by appearances. They do not look for well-being in labels, yet have a natural enjoyment of life.

A lack of tension, an easefulness, stability and equanimity, even in the face of quite challenging circumstances was also highlighted:

We just become a lot more relaxed and at ease with ourselves. There is more compassion. We may still have issues and problems but we're more at ease with those problems and issues.

The smile, the eyes, the relaxed presence...

[In speaking about a friend of hers who she felt there was clear evidence of awareness having been recognized...] If she has a misunderstanding or we have a misunderstanding or there is a difficulty, it rolls off her very quickly. So this would be a hallmark – things roll off quickly, then she moves on. Internal flexibility, *that's* a hallmark.

Enduring equanimity; an unshakeable equanimity; not a stoic somber, but an alive equanimity, a joyfulness.

There is this deep pool of calmness and yet fun and lively and awake. A happy, peaceful, joyful person to be around.

Complete stability, mentally, emotionally, physically – and example of this was a friend's loved one who was dying of cancer and our friend who was caring for them day and night was completely stable even in the experience of utter grief and pain. There was no rejection of her experience; stability is not at the cost of experience.

Well it means for example that they're in the same life circumstance that they've been in before but they're completely undistracted. They find a stability in situations that used to distract them completely.

Several respondents pointed to the transformation of how people relate to both themselves and others as an important marker.

You can see it. That's an obvious thing to say, but there is a certain quality in that person's way of being in the world – there is less self-hatred, less self-judgment, less self-diminishment, and more compassion for self, and others.

I think there's a more open, relaxed kind of quality that comes through; a warmth.

Anyone that comes along, their full love and attention is with that person. No detachment but just this genuineness, this right here with you, right at home feeling.

You can just see in their sharing and their expression – their openness, humility, their willingness to be contributed to. There's this fun and humor and playfulness. But really, this respectfulness in every area of life and that is such a sign for me.

Participants also spoke to a shift away from self-focus and a corresponding orientation toward being of benefit and service to others as another hallmark of the realization of awareness:

The dropping or the lessening of the personal agenda - less caught in, "How am I doing? Where am I going? How do other people think of me? Where am I on my to do list? What do I have or not have?"

I definitely see how people shift their lives to being of benefit.

This insight into the nature of existence is incomplete without the appropriate action, so another good indicator is of how much direct, practical benefit one is, in whatever situation one is in.

When I'm with them, the room gets brighter - there's not a sense of cloudy confusion, but a sense of clarity of perception of awareness and the description of it.

### ***Summary of Results***

This study examined the first-person accounts of 28 individuals, focusing on 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.

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).

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.