

Last week Mary asked whether spiritual adepts like Adyashanti ever feel anger anymore and I said that since human beings are hard-wired to feel anger as an essential strategy for our own survival and the survival of the species, at least of our tribe, that probably the goal is not to never feel these powerful emotions but to not be so reactive to them. I thought of another way to reflect about that, on the drive home, of course. That our bodies are also hardwired to sneeze or cough if we need to expel something toxic from our system. But, unless there's a history of sinus infections or pneumonia, we usually don't go into alarm about it. And we usually don't say, "Bad boy! You shouldn't be coughing!" There's an awareness, I am an entire body that is experiencing a sneeze or a cough at the moment. We usually don't identify ourselves as I am a sneezer, or I am a cougher, and we usually don't condemn ourselves for sneezing or coughing. We may learn to do a vipassana sneeze or a vipassana cough, but we don't judge ourselves or identify ourselves with the sneezing or coughing.

Similarly, we are actually taught in this tradition, my awareness is larger than any particular experience arising in the moment, a sneeze or a cough, a flare of anger or a drop into sadness or a plummet into despair. Awareness is larger than, and different from, the experiences it is holding. So, perhaps, experienced teachers like Adyashanti may react to a flare of anger or a startle of fear the way they react to a sneeze or a cough; it's human; it's hardwired; it may be a cue to practice awareness and compassion, but it doesn't define who we are, or determine how we choose to behave, or condemn us for how we behave.

So we cultivate mindful awareness and self-compassion, to strengthen the equanimity that allows us to be with our experience, have compassion that we are having this experience, and discern how to respond to it, how to respond to any of the eight winds of change - traditionally taught as success and failure, praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain - or any other dualities, any other 800 winds of change - hope and disappointment, generosity and envy, kindness and crankiness, courage and fear, love and hate, strengthen and vulnerability, respect and contempt.

Tonight I want to explore the higher reaches of Rick's 5 levels of awareness – the allness or oneness with all of existence, no separation, and the unconditioned or conscious beingness that all phenomena, even awareness, are manifestations of. Because, even though we don't live in these states of oneness or consciousness all the time, states that are considered non-dual, larger than the dualities we experience on the human plane, experiences of and our wise understanding of those non-dual states can profoundly strengthen our equanimity and inform and guide how we do live with the dualities of our day to day. It strengthens our equanimity in three very practical ways that I'll talk about, and then lead you in an exercise to access this open awareness of unconditioned presence and love.

First, to be clear, brain scientists do not yet fully know the neural substrates of consciousness with a small c let alone Consciousness with a capital C. Mapping the mechanisms in the brain that cause the brain to create consciousness or to understand how consciousness manifests all forms of existence, including the brain that studies it, is simply not yet known. It's not like mapping the genome or measuring how meditating increases cortical thickness. I heard a TED talk once about mapping all the possible synaptic connections in the brain that could perhaps

leads us to understanding consciousness, but computers powerful enough to do that haven't been invented yet. Science is left with not knowing, for now.

Deepak Chopra, in an interview with Michael Krasny on Forum last week, talking about his new book *Super-Brain: Unleashing the Explosive Power of Your Mind to Maximize Health, Happiness, and Spiritual Well-Being*, began with acknowledging the unknowability of consciousness. He drew an analogy to the dark matter of the universe; scientists now speculate that what coalesces into what we know as the matter of the universe is only 4% of what exists in the universe; the rest is unknown and to our current perception unknowable. Likewise, consciousness is the unknown and unknowable that all form and experience and thought and theory arises out of. Chopra described touching this consciousness as living in the space between the thoughts.

Experience of this living in the space between the thoughts, experiencing this mystery of consciousness, is universal. And we do know it; we do experience this spacious allness and spacious unconditioned awareness as a phenomenological experience, whether science can test it or measure it. All spiritual traditions point to it and teach practices to access it. And, increasingly, rather than pointing to an IT, a noun, they point to a process, a verb. I've heard Guy Armstrong at Spirit Rock use, rather than the words awareness, awarenensing. We could say rather than beingness, Being, rather than presence, presencing. Being that awareness, being that allness, being that beingness is what the practices teach us and open us to. The Tibetan tradition teaches us this process is:

Closer than we can imagine;
More profound than we can imagine;
Easier than we can imagine;
More wondrous than we can imagine.

People often use "space" or "spaciousness" to describe the experience, or words like openness, emptiness. Adyashanti says, "To be aware is to feel the silence, the space, that everything is happening in." Tara Brach says we loosen the guardianship of our self and turn our attention toward the awareness that is attending. We bring this background awareness of awareness to the foreground and let all that we normally focus on fade into the background. We recognize the skylike quality of the mind – remember awareness as the vast sky that storm clouds pass through - the empty, open, wakefulness of awareness – in the Zen phrase emptiness dancing - and be that. We sense the depth of our own being, the mystery of what we are in the silence and the stillness, we realize this pure being as our true nature, our true home.

Sufi poet Rumi expressed it this way.

This We Have Now

This we have now
is not imagination.

This is not

grief or joy.

Not a judging state,
or an elation,
or sadness.

Those come
and go.

This is the presence
that doesn't.

And the poet Danna Faulds

All you ever longed for is
Before you in this moment
If you dare draw in a
Breath and whisper "Yes."

Trust the energy that
Courses through you. Trust
Then take surrender even deeper. Be the energy.
Don't push anything away. Follow each
Sensation back to its source
In vastness and pure presence.

- Danna Faulds

So what might be happening in the brain that could allow us to experience this vastness and presence of pure being, and to recognize it as who we truly are?

Rick spoke two weeks ago, and I spoke four months ago, about a medial or midline network of structures in the brain that seems to be what coalesces a sense of self – the mode of processing in the brain that allows us to focus on details, plan and complete tasks, create a coherent story of who we are and how we came to be here. Researchers call it the self-referencing network; I call it a focusing network.

There is another mode of processing in the brain, I learned this from Rick, that seems to operate more on the sides of the brain, a lateral network, that I call the defocusing network. Its attention is more diffuse, less particular, more spacious, and it seems to be the network that is operating when we're daydreaming or in a reverie; it seems to be the source of revelation, epiphanies, aha!s There is speculation that this is the network that is operating when we can drop into open, spacious awareness, and awareness of Awareness, the non-dual of the unconditioned, of being, of Presence.

Tara tells the story in her book *True Refuge*, of Ananda, the Buddha's most devoted disciple, who served and accompanied the Buddha for many years. Through all this time, he worked

strenuously at becoming enlightened. He practiced meditation, was impeccable in his generosity, wise in speech, good in heart. Yet after the Buddha's death, when a great council of enlightened monks was planned, Ananda was not entitled to attend. While honored as deeply kind and wise, he had not yet attained inner freedom.

On the eve of the council meeting, Ananda vowed to practice vigorously all night and not stop until he attained his goal. But in spite of his heroic efforts, he made no progress. Toward dawn, exhausted and discouraged, he decided to let go of striving and simply relax. In that state, attentive yet with no clinging at attainment, he rested his head on the pillow – and became liberated.

This relaxed state of open, effortless, awareness, is what allows us to experience being that awareness and openness; the self drops away and we can simply BE, and know that we are one with all that is.

My friend Richard Miller shared an article with me yesterday: Enlightenment: Is Science Ready to Take It Seriously? Written by Jeff Warren in Psychology Tomorrow by Jeff Warren. The author participated in a study at Harvard Medical School in March 2012 along with 20 other adept practitioners taught by master teacher Shinzen Young. (Guest teacher Michael Taft taught practices from Shinzen Young to our sitting group when we were still meeting at Falkirk.) The practitioners were scanned in fMRI scanners during various state of visual rest, auditory rest, body rest, and an open state known as “do nothing” where scientists wanted to measure what the brain was doing when it wasn't doing anything. This article did not report what the neuroscientists discovered in those four states. What it reported was that in the “do nothing” state two of the most experienced practitioners, 20 years of daily practice, “disappeared.” What they reported later was cessation of awareness, presence, of existence. This “cessation” experience they call enlightenment, as indeed we call nirvana cessation of experience.

The article did not report what the scientists reported, though it did say the brain of these adept practitioners is re-organized, less self-referencing processing, period. And it did say that because there is an “unfixating” from sensory experience in general, experiencing this state does strengthen equanimity; there's less gripping in the sensory system.

I believe I have experienced this state of cessation in a training with a non-dual teacher and can talk about it during the Q&A.

So why is it important to experience this? Why does Suzuki Roshi teach: The most important thing is to remember the most important thing. Why is this experience of the mystery, the spaciousness, the unconditioned beingness, the most important thing? Other than it brings more inner peace and freedom than we can possibly imagine, and that it is the expanded state of openness, awareness, and unconditioned presence or love that we call enlightenment?

1) Experiencing this unconditioned allness of non-self changes our experience of our self, our personal self. It opens up the tightness and constrictions of the survival-driven self. It allows us space and time to be with our experience differently, with more equanimity. As Rumi says,

I've gotten free of that ignorant fist that was pinching and twisting my secret self.
The universe and the light of the stars now come through me.

2) It opens us up to what Dan Siegel calls the “plane of open possibilities”, before things are cohered or stuck, we can connect the dots in a new way. The defocusing mode of processing creates a sort of mental play space in the brain. We can even rewire our stuck patterns and previous ways of connecting the dots and more and more align ourselves with our true nature.

3) And any experience of the unconditioned, the allness or interconnectedness of life contributes to the moral compass we use to guide our actions and steer our lives by. It gives clear direction to our Wise Effort.

So how do we do this?

We learn from Lao Tzu:

We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.

- Tao Te Ching,
Trans. Stephen Mitchell

How do we, as Rumi says,

Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking.
Live in silence.
Flow down and down in always
Widening rings of being.

- Rumi

I've adapted this practice from one in Tara Brach's book True Refuge. Tara also has an audio version of it available on her website.

Settle into a posture that is relaxed and calm, yet engaged and alert, to come to a sense of presence and calm. As Rick has been teaching, allow yourself to feel already safe in this moment, in this sangha. Allow yourself to feel already filled within. Allow yourself to feel already loved.

Let yourself imagine the space between your eyes.

Let yourself imagine the space between your ears.

Let yourself imagine that the region between your forehead and the back of your skull as filled with space.

Let yourself sense that your hands are filled with space.

Let yourself sense that your chest is filled with space.

Let yourself sense that your belly is filled with space.

Let yourself sense that your whole body is filled with space. Breathe gently into the space that is your whole body, and let your whole body feel spacious.

Let yourself imagine that the space within your body and the space that extends outside your body into the room is continuous, is the same spaciousness.

Notice your awareness of this spaciousness.

Let yourself rest in this wakeful and open spaciousness.

Let yourself BE this wakeful and open spaciousness.

Gently bring your awareness to your breathing, to the sounds and sensations of sitting in this room in this moment. [bell]

Questions, comments, reflections.

[My practice of settling in, becoming quiet, and giving myself permission to “go lateral.”
My experience of cessation in training with John Prendergast]

Closing Meditation

Is there anything I can do to make myself enlightened?

As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning.

Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe?

To make sure you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.

- Anthony de Mello