

Awareness, Consciousness and Bearing

by

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Many of us were present during the last two International Conferences on the New Paradigms of Science. In 1994 I presented a paper with the title, Human Transformation Independent of Knowledge and Time; and in 1995 another paper on the topic Inner Transformation and Bearing. It was my hope that the second paper would deepen the first. Likewise, I hope this present meditation will deepen the two papers that preceded it.

These papers are concerned in that rarest of human activities, genuine self-inquiry. Genuine self-inquiry is independent of outward and inward authority. It cannot be coerced by political and economic constraints nor does self-inquiry obey the tyranny of ideas nor the mind-set of the times. Genuine self-inquiry enjoys an unlonely aloneness which is secured by the most earnest vigilance against self-misunderstanding.

Though self-misunderstanding includes a host of confusions and an ongoing anxiety over the prospect of the next day, its basic character is simple: I misunderstand myself precisely as I take myself to be this or that, i.e., when I identify myself with my particulars.

Genuine self-inquiry awakens to it that one's real self is the Unconditioned which is not an idea, an event nor an experience since the really real is devoid of plurality. Indeed, as one long-time self-inquirer observed, "I may come to any view about myself, because all are equally wrong."¹

Awareness

When speaking and writing English formally, the words awareness and consciousness are easily and often confused. Nonetheless, their meanings are as sharply distinguishable as the words 'know' and 'understand' which in usage are also often confused. However, the confusion between awareness and consciousness is the

more serious confusion.

Let us take an example from English usage that will point up a difference between the words 'aware' and 'conscious.' One might say to a friend, "Are you aware that John left town a couple of days ago?" That represents a normal usage. To have asked, "Are you conscious that John left town a couple of days ago?" sounds rather strange – almost as though one was doubting the mental state of the friend. Further, the use of the word 'conscious' in that question need not imply one or more things to be alert to. Quite otherwise with the word 'aware.' It puts one on notice that here is an event which needs attention; indeed, it might imply something dangerous as though one were standing at the edge of a precipice. It is this sense of the word 'aware' that has the most far reaching significance for the practice of self-inquiry. Self-inquiry recognizes two aspects of awareness, the first has to do with practice and the second with the natural state of human nature as distinguished from its dysfunctions. Unfortunately, it is human nature's dysfunctions which, for the minds of many, appear to be the fundamental character of human nature itself.

On pondering awareness from the side of practice it is helpful to consider the etymology of the word 'aware.' The root of the word means to guard, protect, preserve, pay heed to, give watchful attention to. Here we have moved afield from an emphasis on knowing which the word 'conscious' expresses.

On the field of practice, then, to be aware is to guard, watch over, to heed what needs protecting, preserving through watchfully attending it. This recalls the words of Lao Tzu: "Know the masculine, guard the feminine" (*Tao Te Ching*, 28). The name of his book, *Tao Te Ching*, is variously translated, *The Way and Its Power* or *The Way of Life* among others. What is cogent here for the practice of self-inquiry is the Chinese word 'te' which is usually translated 'virtue' but whose primitive meaning is 'knack.' Accordingly, we may translate the name of the work as "The Book of the Knack of the Way."

Knack has something magical about it. It goes beyond skill and strength. Strength without skill misses the mark and skill without strength cannot reach it. Neither skill nor strength nor their combination are equal to the unexpected. Only knack is equal to that contingency. Knack is purely intuitive. When someone brings off an action seemingly impossible to execute, we say "Oh, well, she has a way with her" or "He has a way with him." This is a fair description but explains nothing.

Knack is an immediate response to primal intuition, that negative summons from within, that Socrates said always told him what *not* to do, never what *to* do. Obedience to that inward negative command requires absolute trust since there is no further instruction on what will happen if primal intuition's warning is disobeyed. Yet, miraculously, it is precisely the unexpected that is met harmlessly, creatively when the

warning is obeyed. The effects of knack are easily discerned from athletics to statecraft. Unlike strength, knack cannot be trained and unlike skill it cannot be learned. We call knack a gift, a grace, since we do not know the source of it nor can we control it.

Knackful performance at its most exact is not expected of everyone. We tend to feel an unhappy admiration for those superlatively gifted with knack. This painful admiration is the better side of envy since admiration arises innocently from wonder and astonishment. Yet the unhappiness stems from a grudging sense that something is going on here that is not quite fair. If knack cannot be earned since it is a sheer gift, why has it not been apportioned to each and all equally? Speculations on this question are various and some far reaching yet remain empirically inconclusive.

Ironically this unhappy admiration hides within it a hint of its real basis. It is only human knack that we envy. Superlatively knackful performances in other creatures we regard as incomparable to our own. We do not envy the strength of the lion nor the grace of the gazelle. We envy human knack precisely because we sense that there is something genuinely comparable between my deficiency of knack and the other human person's sheer display of it. The adjective sheer points up a radical feature of knack since it derives from an Old English word meaning clear, bright; hence pure, sole; hence transparent, perpendicular.²

Knack enjoys the absolute quality of being without admixture of any kind. It is free from process, increase or decrease whether of intensity, as with light, or of duration as with time. This characteristic situates it upon the vertical axis of instantaneity, the moment, the instant which Kierkegaard called "an atom of eternity."

At this point one might be asking what on earth has knack to do with awareness. It has everything to do with it precisely because unlike its special embodiment in psycho-physical performance which is particular to gifted individuals, genuine self-inquiry energizes the gift of primal intuition which is no respecter of persons. All have it equally. It might be objected that not everyone is in a state of readiness to listen to it. The objection is beside the point since the matter at hand is one of nature, availability and not use. Likewise, we do not hold that a human baby is by nature less human for not yet being an adult. Primal intuition is available to all, though not all may be ready to receive it. That inability is a privation and perhaps in some cases a deprivation. But it is not an essential feature of human nature. On the contrary, primal intuition is an essential feature of human nature.

Now we come to the heart of the matter. Response to primal intuition's warning *not* to act is *instantaneous* whether that response is in accord or dis-accord with it. Calculative reason can have no part in it since there is no known objective or goal to envision and plan toward. To heed primal intuition's warning *not* to act is precisely the

knack of obedience to the necessary in oneself. This necessity is not a private possession. This obedience secures one's freedom. True freedom is not having to choose.

Awareness of primal intuition is a matter of attitude, not of will. It is not from will but from attitude that preference, choice and decision follow and follow automatically as night the day. Attitude is our sole responsibility. When one is attitudinally attuned to primal intuition, identifying with one's idea of oneself, even one's felt self presence, vanishes completely. It is the quality of attitude that distinguishes the sage from the unsage. When this is realized the Neo-Confucian description of the sage comes clear, namely, that the sage is in accord with his nature and acts with ease.³

Obedience to the necessary in oneself is not conformity to representational definitions of human nature such as man is the symbol using animal or the tool maker. Clearly, one's nature is the necessary in oneself but it is never revealed in abstraction. It is always becoming discovered in the moment, instant by instant as one obediently accords with one's nature through the most attentive listening to one's inner voice of primal intuition.

Now we may return full circle to the root of the word aware which means to be on guard, watch over, to heed what needs protecting, preserving through watchfully attending it. We now ask, what is it that needs guarding?

Between the experiencer (subject) and the experienced (object) lies the possibility of self-misunderstanding. The experiencer, the subject, can identify with the object experienced and also identify with his or her own self-conception. As either or both of these self-misunderstandings obtain, the pure acts of listening and witnessing are corrupted. This condition is described biblically in the well known statement, having ears to hear and hearing not, having eyes to see and seeing not. Yet, the possibility of self-misunderstanding is the indispensable condition for self-awakening. Endemic to our human species is the actualization of this possibility for self misunderstanding so that if self-awakening is to occur this spiritual pathology must be negated.

Any pure act of attention is immune from the possibility or actuality of self-misunderstanding since one cannot be both self-consciously and at the same time single mindedly attending to whatever is at hand. A pure act of attention annihilates distraction whether through identifying with oneself as the experiencer or through an emotional collapse into the object experienced. Krishnamurti puts this exactly in his phrase "observing without the observer."

How is it that on hearing these words and grasping their meaning theoretically one so easily fails to embody them in conduct? It is because this negation must obtain

upon every instant since every instant brings with it the unexpected. Clearly, one cannot attend to instants, instant by instant, in succession. Only attitude can relieve one of such a burden, an attitude of vigilance against throwing oneself away to the distraction of the moment or recklessly attacking it with the ambition to control it. Either movement makes matters worse.

We are now in a position to answer our question: what is it that needs guarding? It is our natural state, our original innocence whose voice is primal intuition.

The field of action, the home-ground of practice, is where the unity of striving and consequence plays itself out both grossly and subtly. Gross action is a matter of displacement, the movement of body, a transposition. Subtle action pertains to attitude, not to external movement. Essential action is a change of heart. With a change of heart the quality of one's being changes and that attracts a different level of life. The eye that sees externals only cannot perceive a change of heart. On seeing no gross displacement, no transposition or transportation, it thinks itself in the presence of inaction only. On that account the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4:18) states that the wise one sees action in inaction and inaction in action. The essence of action is the leap from self-misunderstanding to self-awareness.

This leap does not fall under the illusion of agency by which one imagines oneself the *doer* of the action. On the contrary, the mark of self-awareness is the awakening to it that one is not the doer of the action. The illusion of agency is the result of attachment to egoic activity. This attachment imagines itself the doer and controller of action through superimposing its self-misunderstanding upon the unconditioned self. Since the unconditioned self is not another existent but being itself, it cannot be an object. It is the unconditioned subject of all objects and objectifications beyond any split between subject and object.

Awareness is of the very nature of the unconditioned self, changeless, primordial, groundless, undivided and uncaused. It is the *light* in which the duality of subject and object play out their scenarios in the whole drama of coming to be and passing away. It is in this sense that incorruptible awareness abides between the experiencer and the experienced as the pure witness of our roles in the flux of existence.⁴ Awareness also transcends its residence between experiencer and experienced. It is aware of the universal field of consciousness but consciousness cannot be conscious of awareness. Only through a supra-relational intuition is awareness apprehended – never comprehended. Awareness remains entirely independent of our apprehensions of it.

Awareness and Consciousness

The inherent duality in consciousness declares itself unmistakably in the etymology of the word 'consciousness,' as con+consciousness, L. *con* -- together, and *scisere*, to seek to know; thus, to seek to know together, a shared knowing. The seeking to know betrays the affective, the emotional element within consciousness. The ever seeking to know bespeaks a felt need that seeks its satisfaction. It implies that consciousness is not its own goal. But how could it be since consciousness is in time? If consciousness seeks its fulfilment within itself, time will rob it of its object for time entails process and process has beginning, middle and end. Temporal process cannot provide the end, the goal that consciousness desires, which is to be self-luminous. For that it would need to be independent of time. Consciousness cannot be independent of time since it is tied to change. Its luminosity is borrowed from awareness. Consciousness shares its reflected light with its object. Its object being subject to change within the flux of existence, consciousness can find no abiding ground within its partner. Since consciousness is within time, it cannot find an abiding ground within its own nature either. It remains totally dependent on awareness for whatever light it enjoys. To make matters even more humbling for it, it cannot be conscious of awareness though awareness is ever aware of consciousness.⁵ On that account timeless awareness appears to time-bound consciousness as unconscious.

I am aware that this view of consciousness differs from that of modern philosophy and psychology both of which often have tended toward absolutizing consciousness by regarding it as wholly other than its object. But consciousness is not independent of being any more than its object is incapable of being known. Consciousness and its object oppose one another dialectically not absolutely. Neither consciousness nor being is an ultimate principle. They presuppose a third principle whose ultimacy makes consciousness or knowledge able to know and being able to be known.⁶ This ultimacy is awareness. Awareness is of the very nature of Reality. In the sixth book of the *Republic*, Plato calls this ultimate principle the Good which, he says, is beyond being surpassing it in dignity and power. (*Republic* 6.509C)

The way to this great intuition is not found through argument or publicly verifiable experiment. Plato found it in the life and teaching of his master Socrates who said, "I know that I do not know." Some would say that the statement is contradictory since to know that one does not know is still a knowing. This superficial misapprehension of the sentence is typical of the modern mind whose attitude and mode of analysis is without a sense of wonder. The medieval and ancient approach to the sentence would trust the last half of the statement, "I do not know," as indeed the case. That being so, the word know, in the first half of the statement would be understood differently. The spirit of this Socratic statement comes clearer if we render it "I am aware that I do not know."

This rendering not only suits the Socratic attitude but implies the function of awareness on both its near and far sides. On the near side it illuminates the dialectical tension *between* experiencer and experienced, knowledge and its object. It guards against their confusion and conflation and their imagined independence from each other. On the far side, awareness in its beyondness is the effulgent source making consciousness possible as the illuminated object of awareness itself.

This perspective on the *borderline* between awareness and consciousness brings into clearer relief how it is that the possibility of self-misunderstanding is the indispensable pre-requisite for self-awakening. Consciousness both bears and obstructs the light of awareness. Insofar as it obstructs the light through misunderstanding its derivative nature and role it nonetheless remains potentiated to realize its natural state as transparent to awareness. Yet insofar as it is open to the irradiation of awareness it cannot abide in this illumination without constant earnestness, vigilance, and testing in action so as to distinguish between reality and fantasia. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj explains the need for testing: "How do you know you have realized unless you watch your thoughts and feelings, words and actions and wonder at the changes occurring in you without your knowing why or how? It is exactly because they are so surprising that you know that they are real. The foreseen and expected is rarely true."⁷ Genuine self-inquiry says amen to that.

Awareness does not coerce self-awakening. One can remain in self-misunderstanding indefinitely. Equally, realization is not a static state but as noted above requires constant testing. However, it is not action that removes self-misunderstanding since action is not opposed to it. Whether unrealized or realized the possibility of self-misunderstanding obtains and is therefore to be negated instant by instant through sound attitude. The dependency of consciousness upon abiding awareness is a permanent feature of its nature. Its strength is in its ability to become changed, its weakness is that it is not self-correcting.

Bearing

The two previous sections have laid a preliminary groundwork toward further inquiry into bearing which was introduced in last year's paper on Inner Transformation and Bearing.

To bear is to hold up from a position beneath; therefore the English word, uphold. It means also to carry, especially to carry from below as in the word support. The word offer is another in the family of bearing. The Latin *ob + ferre* means to bring before, i.e., to present a gift, to sacrifice. Here we are in a different mode of reciprocity from giving and taking. Giving and taking can be quite mechanical. Offering and

receiving presuppose an emotional link between the one who offers and the one who receives. Essentially, to offer is to present freely; to receive is to accept gratefully.

In earlier times when existence was approached with religious awe and philosophical wonder it was possible to share a meditation on offering and receiving while fully confident that the sentiment for them was abidingly alive and intact. Unfortunately, this is no longer the case. Our attitude toward technology has changed all that. It is an attitude that has deadened our sensitivity toward the unprecedented and unexpected which are the hallmarks of Reality. Today we boast easily that we are captains of our souls and masters of our fate. Haven't we gone to the moon and back, the moon which was once ignorantly thought to be a goddess? Now we know it is only a ball of stone and dust. It is just a matter of time before our technical skill will emancipate us from all the ills that flesh is heir to.

Such an attitude is rife among the so called developed countries -- technologically developed, that is -- and hardens with each oncoming generation. A very large number of those who cry out for environmental reform call only for a saner use of technology. But who has ever persuaded insanity to become sane? No doubt Mother Nature will have the last word, yet her word will not be persuasive but punitive.

Is it any wonder then that the category of bearing is so hard to communicate in our time? Bearing has two faces. On the near side, on the side of becoming, bearing has to do with behavior, how one carries oneself, disposition and its embodiment in gesture and conduct. On the far side, the side of being, bearing is a permanent feature of existence itself. As such, bearing does not change. This face of bearing reveals that all things bear from stone to star. Within the flux of existence, the stream of coming to be and passing away generates and wears away every individual being according to the term of its natural career. No matter how tenaciously any individual holds to its natural form, that embodiment of its identity bears the steady dissolution of its flowering. It must bear the tension between its unfolding and its fall.

Many nondualists are fond of declaring that this phenomenon is of no matter since it is all illusory. The only thing that matters is to awaken to it that one is not one's body but the unconditioned self. Curiously, they overlook it that one needs the body with all its frailties, let alone charms, to find that out. Losing their footing on the ground, they ascend like a helium balloon into the sky of pure abstraction. This paralyzes earnestness, perseverance, resolution and courage which function within the fissure between awareness and consciousness where the drama of bearing is played out. Only on the integrity of this drama is consciousness guarded against an unstable career and raised to an ever higher level of quality and power.

To speak of the fissure between awareness and consciousness where the drama

of bearing is played out is not to contradict the great aphorism that "nothing was divided and there is nothing to unite." On the contrary, it is to hold in mind at the same time another Asian Indian sage's admonition: "Keep the truth of non-duality ever at heart: never should you translate non-duality into action."⁸

The cleft, the abyss, the narrow pass between the nonduality of awareness and the duality of consciousness is one of function not of substance. Without that chasm there can be no flow of manifested being where phenomena arise and fall according to their appointed destinies. There can be no such thing as action without duality. Once a great baseball player advised hilariously and with ironic wit: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it!"

Self-awakening entails the clear realization that while action is not the realization, it is action that validates it. One awakens to the unconditioned self within a supra-relational intuition. However, earnestness, perseverance, resolution and courage do not drop away. Wisdom and love are required for testing on the field of action the difference between reality and fantasy. Since the essence of action is attitudinal, the tester, the tested and the matrix of testing are within. The drama abides immune from the illusion that one is the doer of the action. One no longer takes the world personally.

A nineteenth century English poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne wrote some remarkable lines in his play *Atalanta in Calydon*. Though highly renowned in his time, our own century has not shown him the same degree of respect. I shall quote a stanza from his play which I find bears the mark of seership though Swinburne was not a sage. Perhaps the lines exhibit those flashes of intuition that come unbidden to poets in the course of their more typical works. Here are the lines:

Before the beginning of years
There came to the making of man
Time, with a gift of tears;
Grief, with a glass that ran;
Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
Summer, with flowers that fell;
Remembrance fallen from heaven,
And madness risen from hell;
Strength without hands to smite
Love that endures for a breath
Night, the shadow of light,
And life, the shadow of death.

One of our 20th century's most celebrated poets, T.S. Eliot, had only this to say of this passage: 'That it is effective because it appears to be a tremendous statement, like the statements made in our dreams; when we wake up we find that "the glass that

ran" would do better for time than for grief, and that the "gift of tears" would be as appropriately bestowed by grief as by time."⁹ Clearly, on reading these lines, the intuition of the functional cleft between the infinite and the finite, the eternal and the temporal, the necessary and the free quite escaped him.

These lines empathically disclose Swinburne's sensitivity to the category of bearing. Time, he says, comes with its gift of tears *before* the beginning of years. Time's dwelling then is somehow within the timeless, so that out of this timeless dwelling arises a gift of tears. Our tears are offered to us from a source infinitely deeper than a mood whether of joy or sorrow. It is grief, not our tears, that time sets a limit upon. The hour glass runs out. The last verse of the stanza, "And life the shadow of death" seems rather mad and opposed to common sense. Yet, it is not so on recalling that consciousness, in its own power, cannot be conscious of awareness even though awareness is aware of consciousness. Awareness must appear to consciousness as a nothing or death, unless awareness irradiates it.

The drama of bearing's career is played out between the primordial changelessness of awareness and the shifting character of consciousness. Precisely as consciousness bears opening itself to awareness by letting go of its self-identified attachments, it discovers the beatitude of the non-measuring mind.

1. George Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958) 157n.
2. Eric Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (New York: Greenwich House, 1983).
3. *Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology*, trans. Wing-Tsit Chan (N.Y., London: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967) 8.
4. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, *I Am That*, trans. Maurice Frydman (Durham: Acorn Press, 1982) 14.
5. *Ibid.*, 263.
6. Erich Frank, *Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth* (London, N.Y., etc. Oxford Univ. Press, 1959) 115n.
7. Maharaj, *loc.cit.*, 400.
8. Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Supplement to 40 Verses on Existence*, #39. *Ramana Maharshi and His Philosophy of Existence* by T.M.P. Mahadevan (Triuvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1959) 137.
9. Quoted by Henry Treese, *A Selection of Poems by Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. H. Treese (London: The Grey Walls Press, 1948) 15.