

Expanding Our Awareness

Have you noticed that as you get older, your horizons tend to shrink somewhat? When you were in your 20s, you may well have said to yourself, 'I will definitely go to Australia/New Zealand one day.' But now, if that thought still crosses your mind, you may say to yourself something like, 'Hmm, maybe next lifetime!'

Of course, it is perfectly natural to become a bit more of a homebody as we age, but there is certainly a danger that as we get older and energetically frailer, our world may shrink to such an extent that we then become trapped in a really limited consciousness. Some older, retired individuals seem to spend a lot of their time going from one medical appointment to the next without doing very much in between times!

Young people can be obsessed about their looks and about making their way in the world. But older people can also become insular, particularly if their bodies are creaky and painful.

When we are in any kind of pain, mental, physical or emotional, we instinctively tend to tighten our mind around that pain. I am sure you have noticed that whenever you become anxious or angry, your mind tends to tighten around that anxious/angry thought or feeling and then simply refuses to let it go. I know that sometimes my own anxious mind is like a hungry dog gnawing at a juicy bone and absolutely refusing to drop hold of it.

So is there any way out of this tendency to exist in a tight, narrow, egoic band of consciousness that excludes so much of the beautiful world all around us? Well I do have one or two suggestions this month for practising extending our awareness.

Extending our awareness on a regular basis can definitely begin to counteract our normal human tendency to get all caught up in our own very small scale problems and concerns. So every effort we make to open up and expand our mind is so worthwhile and here are three simple awareness expanding practices that you might like to try this month.

First of all, whenever we notice that we are caught up in a tight web of anxiety or irritation about a particular issue, we can pause, breathe deeply, and silently

remind ourselves to soften around that inner tension or tightness. Please remember here that we are not trying to push away our anxiety or irritation, nor are we trying to suppress it. We are simply doing our best to observe our anxiety, anger, jealousy or 'poor me' thoughts with infinite unconditional compassion for the part of us that is suffering.

We are all aware of becoming anxious or irritated but many individuals still have no idea how to observe their inner agitation with a calm, open awareness. But with practise, we can learn to tune into the ever-present, witnessing observer part of ourselves (Eckhart Tolle) and this enables us to cool down the furnace of reactivity within our egoic mind-set.

A second way to practise expanding our awareness is to use our creative side to imagine our mind expanding upwards into a luminous, blue sky. I really like this practice because I love getting away from being trapped in my physical body – even for a moment or two. When I say to myself in a mindfulness meditation session, 'Mind like the sky' I can usually sense my awareness expanding into a perfectly calm space in which I can just rest peacefully for a few minutes or so.

The third practice, which I find particularly helpful whenever I am worrying about something, is to tune into the inter-connectedness of all human beings. So now when I notice that I am worrying about something, I try to pause briefly, centre in my loving heart and then send a wave of compassionate energy to all those other human beings who are in a similarly worrying situation to my own. For example, when I was getting anxious about my blurry left eye recently, I tried to remember to bring to mind all those millions of human beings who have some kind of worrying eye problem. I then sent all those suffering individuals a wave of compassion from the depths of my heart.

I have found that practising expanding my awareness and compassion to all suffering sentient beings is a great way to lessen my tendency to think, 'Poor me!' or 'Why me!' thoughts. I also love the sense of being connected to other sentient beings in a loving and compassionate way and allowing this positive energy to dispel the negative energy of any anxiety or irritation that has got caught in my system.

If you would like to know more about cultivating awareness I can strongly recommend a talk on You Tube by the wonderful Buddhist teacher Mingyur

Rimpoche entitled 'Calming the mind: The Practice of Awareness Meditation.' Mingyur Rimpoche is incredibly wise, but also really funny and engaging. In fact, it was listening to one of his talks recently that inspired me to write this particular message this month.

Finally, the month of May is so beautiful that I urge you – even if you ignore all the other suggestions in this message – to take some time in the next few weeks to go walking in nature. As you walk slowly and mindfully, you can easily practise expanding your awareness outwards to take in all the incredibly uplifting phenomena of spring including the infinite sky above you and the vast, nurturing earth beneath your feet. Enjoy!

Peggy Foster

May 2022