

# *Presence:*

*Emerging Clear Awareness  
and How it Deepens in  
Meditation and the Brain*

Doug Kraft



Easing Awake Books

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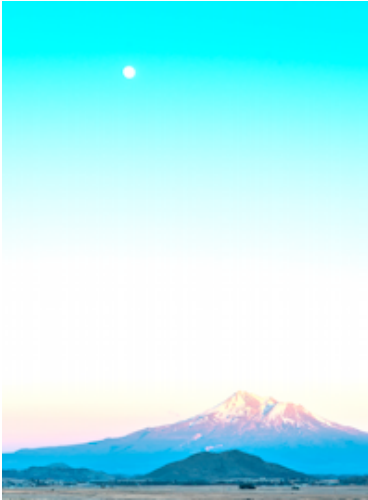
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# 6

## *Awareness Is Magic: Enlightened Futility*

*See simplicity in the complicated.*

– Lao Tsu



Now we come to the core of the Buddha's teachings. This principle is not stated explicitly in the text, but it undergirds all his teachings. It is also not stated explicitly in neural science, but is implied in its findings.

The principle is this: awareness is magic. Awareness is the ultimate healer of all that disturbs us. In the long run it dispels all dukkha.

Why does awareness heal? I have no idea. And if the Buddha knew, the answer wasn't passed down to us. Ultimately, I suspect there is no answer. Asking why awareness heals is like asking, "Why is there gravity? Why do large celestial bodies pull on other objects?" I have no idea. There's no explanation. It's just how the universe is made.

Physics can tell us how gravity works. Mathematical equations eloquently describe its effects. But why do those formulas work? There's no reason. It's just how things are. Neural science cannot explain why awareness heals any more than physics can explain why gravity attracts.

When I say, "Awareness is magic," I'm not suggesting that it is supernatural or draws on occult forces. Quite the opposite. The healing power of awareness is as natural as gravity. It does not draw on any other force.

Buddhist practice ultimately rests on the seemingly magical healing power of awareness. The effects are subtle enough that they can be masked. The most obvious mask is tension. But ultimately, the practice is not even about getting rid of tension. It's about seeing it clearly. When tension and awareness are both present, awareness wins in the long run. Tension wears out and exhausts itself eventually. But with awareness, there is nothing to be worn out. It just is.

It's also said that awareness can be one insult after another. As we open up deeply, all the messy things we tried to bury rise to the surface: one insult after another. But the resolution is to trust awareness: turn toward and relax into.

Trying to fight, control, or ignore awareness is like trying to fight, control, or ignore gravity. Good luck with that! Gravity is there whether we acknowledge it or not. Awareness heals, whether we give it credit or not.

However, our practice and our living do improve over the long run if we accept awareness as it is. Spiritual practice is less about attaining and more about attuning to a deeper reality. And even if we get caught in the attainment treadmill, being aware of the treadmill is healing over the

long run. Our lives do become easier if we accept things as they are.

Sometimes the ways we ignore reality can be subtle. For example, somebody attached comments to a dhamma talk I have on YouTube. The person called me “low caliber, verbose, disgusting, megalomaniac,” and more. I thought it best to just ignore the insults. So I did. Or I tried to.

Yet in quiet moments, I kept thinking of clever responses I could post like, “If you’d like to say what you disagree with, maybe we can have a conversation.”

I asked a friend, “Do you think that’s a good response?”

She smiled and shook her head. “No. It’ll just enflame.”

So I did nothing.

A few days later I woke up in the middle of the night thinking about a note Ralph Waldo Emerson sent to his brother Charles during the transcendental controversy in the early 1800’s. Part of it said, “They say the world is vexed with us on account of our wicked writings. I trust it will recover its composure.”

I thought, “That’s brilliant. I could post that quote on YouTube. It would be a good poke in the eye of my YouTube detractor while I pretended to take the high road.”

Then I caught myself: “Poke in the eye? Is this the affective emotion of RAGE?”

It obviously was. I don’t like to admit rage, even to myself. But there it was. In my mind I heard the voice of my old therapist saying, “Doug, it’s only RAGE”

Suddenly I was smiling. It was such a relief to let the feeling be what it was unconstrained by propriety. When I



befriended inner RAGE rather than try to ignore it, it peaked and subsided even if I didn't act on it.

"Is there anything hiding beyond the RAGE?" I wondered. Yes. There was a little bit of CONNECTION — or actually the loss of connection. I relaxed into that whiff of loneliness.

"Is there anything beyond the RAGE and missing CONNECTION?" No. Beyond them felt like endless space. Within five minutes, the RAGE and CONNECTION had faded into the distance and there was little except ease and a persistent smile. There was not even a definable self. Just open space.

In the days since, I have thought about my YouTube guy now and again. Each time a soft smile arises.

Clear awareness is magic.

## *Enlightened Futility*

Another way to say "awareness is magic" is "enlightened futility." We see deeply that trying to get somewhere in meditation can only get us so far. Eventually we hit a block because the tension of trying hinders awareness beyond a certain point. Trying to get any further ultimately doesn't work.

The only option left is to see starkly, sincerely, and unromantically exactly where the mind-heart is at this very moment. This is what I mean by "enlightened futility."

I was meditating in the wee hours of the morning when I noticed "America the Beautiful" singing softly in the background of my mind. I was a bit annoyed by the intrusion and blocked it out. That left my mind with a stodgy block, not with the sweet stillness I had earlier.

“Well, that didn’t work so well,” I thought. So I relaxed and let the anthem sing itself. I let it be as it was. It came back and then slowly faded into a deeper stillness. All was quiet.

That is the magic of awareness. It’s also radical acceptance and enlightened futility. They all point toward clear awareness.

## *Signs of Clear Awareness*

If you have some inclinations toward skepticism or doubt, as I do, there are a few things we can do to take advantage of the magical power of awareness to heal.

One is to notice the quiet, subtle effects of clear awareness — the signs that it is there in a relatively pure form. It is always present though it is often elusive enough to slip by unrecognized. But if we know some signs of it, it is easier to feel it sitting quietly in the shadows.

The signs are not states to strive for! That doesn’t work. But if we sense them, it helps to relax into them and soak them up. This wears down the cynicism and at the same time helps the sense of self get a little rest.

Clear awareness is not monolithic or something that’s either on or off. Rather, it’s a collection of qualities which wax and wane on their own.

The following are a few signs of clear awareness that I notice. You may notice these as well or observe very different ones. We all have slightly different proclivities. You might want to use my list or make your own.

I have not listed them in any particular order because they emerge differently for different people.

### ***Fading of Thoughts***

The most obvious sign of clear mind is the fading of thoughts. They drift into the background as the mind feels more spacious. This is not accomplished by intentionally stopping mental chatter. Rather we let the thoughts be without getting tangled up in them. We relax. Without tension, thoughts have no fuel and gradually fade.

### ***Dropping***

Often the fading of thought happens gradually. But sometimes it can happen rapidly. It's as if the mind has used up the tension that fuels it and it relaxes by itself. We feel the effects of gravity. It's a sensation similar to dropping, but it's serene.

### ***Non-Dual Awareness***

The fading of thoughts often give rise to what could be called, "non-dual awareness" in which logical opposites co-exist peacefully. For example, as I accepted the RAGE about the YouTube guy, for a few moments I felt both anger and serenity. Opposites are not hobgoblins. We don't have to resolve seeming paradoxes. We let the thoughts be there and, at the same time, notice a serenity that feels like it's been here all along.

It's like a storm at sea. Trying to calm the waves by beating them down with a stick is futile at best. If anything, it just creates more turmoil. But if we go beneath the waves, there's already a stillness. It has been waiting for us patiently. And it's as big as the ocean itself.

### ***Tingly-ness***

One subtle but obvious physical sign of clear awareness are small waves of tingly-ness on the surface of the body. I used to call them "prickles." More often they are called "goosebumps."

It feels like the skin is relaxing and the pores are opening. These gentle waves of sensation may flow through various parts of the body. If we relax into them, the waves may get bigger or infuse more of the body.

As the body relaxes, the brain often produces small amounts of dopamine and other neural transmitters. Tinglyness may be one way they are felt. It's an impersonal, body response.

### *Content Fades into Process*

The mind is constructed to know things that are happening. To give context to these happenings, it also puts them into larger stories.

Yet, as the mind quiets, these contexts and stories recede and fade into the background. Meanwhile, the processes become more prominent. We become more aware of what the mind is *doing* — e.g. thinking, worrying, explaining, complaining, musing, storytelling, and so on. The *content* of thinking and storytelling fades. Awareness shifts from nouns to verbs, from content to processes. Content is usually in the past or future while processes are acting in the present. The mind settles more and more into this present moment.

The shift from content to process is part of a meditation strategy (Chapter 4, pp. 48-55). However, sometimes content can fade into process on its own. The same thing can happen with the next three signs of clear awareness.

### *No Thing*

In the text, this fading of content into process is sometimes called “the realm of nothingness.” But I think it is a mis-translation. It really means “no thing-ness.” Awareness itself doesn't stop. But it is relaxed enough that it doesn't coalesce into separate things. Ironically, there is still a lot going on in

no-thingness. But the mind doesn't perceive separate objects as much as the moment-to-moment flow of feelings and textures.

### ***Process Fades into Qualities of Awareness***

Years ago I noticed times when my mind seemed like a herd of buffalo raising clouds of dust as it stampeded across a distant prairie. The individual animals became indistinct while the feeling of rumbling became more prominent.

Just as awareness of content can give way to awareness of processes, awareness of processes can give way to awareness of qualities of awareness. Qualities include feeling tones or textures: rumbling, quiet, jumpy, smooth, spacious, thick, etc. The variety of possible qualities is quite large. Noticing them is like noticing the mood of a story without paying attention to the characters or plot.

This is a phase of the Spectrum of Awareness (Chapter 4).

### ***Qualities Fade into the Field of Awareness***

Sometimes the qualities of awareness fade into the background leaving a sense of presence which is open and empty. This is "awareness of awareness" because we sense awareness even as its contents and qualities are drifting away: we are aware of awareness itself even if there is nothing in it.

Another way to say this is that everything outside the current moment feels less and less relevant. In the moment, there are no stories or things. Just a quiet sense of presence.

To see this movement of attention from content to process to qualities to presence, consider another example. There are times in meditation when my mind gets antsy. I used to will up strong determination to overcome the restlessness. I don't do that anymore. Now I just notice the agitation as a phenomenon. I notice how the mind wants to daydream and how the

daydreaming can feel comforting compared to the agitation. So I let it daydream.

But here's the trick. Rather than focus on the content of the daydream or even the process of daydreaming, I notice the feeling of comfort that arises.

The comfort is in the present. The content of the daydream is not. So I let the mind rest in the comfort. I savor it. With this, the mind tends to relax into the soothing feeling. The content drifts away. The daydreaming process slips away. And the mind settles into a comfortable abiding with very little going on.

This is also part of the Spectrum of Awareness (Chapter 4).

### *Quiet Smile*

In clear awareness, a quiet smile often sneaks up on me. I'm sitting in meditation. Suddenly I'm grinning widely though I hadn't seen that smile come up. At these times, the mind is usually bright, smooth, and a little surprised at how good it feels. When I first started noticing this years ago, I thought, "Where did that come from?" These days it's familiar enough that I no longer ask. If I relax into the smile, it goes deeper.

Sometimes I call this a "Buddha smile" because it's like the half-smile we see on many statues of the Buddha.

### *Chuckles and Sighs*

Sometimes a quiet chuckle or sigh arises spontaneously. Like the quiet smile, I usually don't see it coming. It just happens.

The diaphragm that powers our lungs is one of the larger and stronger muscles in the body. When we tense up, a lot of the tightness gets held in the diaphragm. As the muscle relaxes,

it sometimes shakes reflexively to loosen up. Chuckles and sighs are the result of this dispersal of tension.

### ***Body Posture Corrections***

With clear awareness, the body is more likely to spontaneously adjust posture without comment. For example, if I'm sitting hunched over, the body may spontaneously elongate before I even think about it.

### ***Soft eyes***

Along with this, the eyes tend to relax. The eyes, like the mind, become less interested in seeking what they want than in receiving what is already here. We may experience this as a physical softening of the eyes and their surrounding sockets.

### ***Receptive Rather than Active***

Like the softening eyes, we become content to receive whatever presents itself. We become more interested in attuning than attaining: attuning to what's here rather than attaining what is not here.

We become more interested in being than doing. We're more interested in what is going on than what we might want. We have less judgment and more curiosity. And eventually we have less curiosity and more presence.

### ***Nimitta***

"Nimitta" is a Sanskrit term for "sign." A visual nimitta is a sign of a relaxed, attentive awareness. When our eyes are closed, it may appear as a white, fuzzy area in the center of the field of vision. In the center of the retina (the fovea) there is a larger concentration of rods and cones (light receptors) than in the periphery. The nimitta phenomena is probably the result of neural static from the denser concentration of light receptors in

the fovea. We have to be deeply relaxed and receptive to see this effect. If we actively look for it, it will disappear.

### ***Flickering Images***

When the mind is clear, relaxed, and receptive, faint images may flash through the mind very quickly. The images have little charge to them and seem unrelated to each other.

While a nimitta is probably produced by the retina, the flickering images are probably produced by the brain itself. I suspect that, with 86 billion neurons, these quick flashes are faint static in the brain. A small amount of tension will blot them out.

### ***“Of course”***

If I’m meditating with an unclear mind meandering in thoughts and realize what’s going on, I’m likely to respond with an inner, “Oh no” as in, “Oh no, my practice is messed up.”

If I’m meditating with a clear mind that wanders into a thought and I realize what’s going on, I’m likely to respond with an inner, “Of course.” This is an acceptance that given what my mind had been through that day or in recent days, of course it drifted. I take it impersonally and with a light spirit.

To say this differently, I’m more likely to just let things be and trust the magic of awareness to fine tune the mind rather than trying to push it into some semblance of a “better” state.

### ***Relaxing Into or Spreading Out***

When awareness is clear enough, the “Of course” may not even arise. If a bit of tension comes into the body, it may reflexively relax into the tension or relax and spread out into it.



Without clear awareness, my first response to tension is likely to be tensing up further. But with clear awareness the tightness tends to dissolve on its own.

### ***Blank Spots***

The final sign of clear awareness that I'll mention is subtle and potentially confusing: sometimes we may experience blank spots in immediate short-term memory. These are part of the "Nothingness" phase of the Spectrum of Awareness.

It takes a little effort to remember what just happened. When the awareness gets completely relaxed, it may stop registering experiences or stop putting them into memory. The result is a blank spot in memory. Usually we don't even notice these. Or if we do, we think we must have fallen asleep. But if the mind is bright and clear rather than groggy, the mind probably did not go unconscious. It just turned off its inner recorder, leaving an empty moment.

## ***Timeless Presence***

Again, these qualities are not separate: they overlap in many ways. Not experiencing these is not necessarily a sign of bad practice. And you may experience other things I have not mentioned, but that for you are associated with clear awareness.

By outlining these I do not intend to turn them into practices to be pursued diligently. I describe them in case you have noticed some of them in your own experience. If, like me, you are sometimes skeptical of your meditative skill, you can use these as encouragement that you may be doing better than you think.

And by lightly turning toward your own experiences, you may create the "causes and conditions" in which they are

more likely to arise again. After all, they are all with us all the time anyway. Noticing them attunes us to them and helps them quietly strengthen. Recalling what these feel like without lifting a finger to conjure them up creates the conditions in which they are more likely to arise spontaneously. This makes us more receptive.

One of the ways I routinely recall these is through reciting Buddhist refuges, precepts, and aspiration every morning before my first meditation of the day.

The aspirations remind me of what non-dual awareness feels like. This is the essence of savoring/smiling, the third essential practice: evoking a place where thoughts and images fade into wellbeing. The wording is sparse and not intended to define non-dual vision, only point toward it.

If they speak to you, you are welcome to use them. And if there are different words which are more evocative for you, please feel encouraged to write your own.

Repetition of phrases can deepen their meaning or make them feel a little stale or worn. So once or twice a year I tweak them a little to keep them fresh. Here is my current version of the aspirations:

*Knowing that one day this body will cease,  
I seek simplicity, clarity, and acceptance,  
and observe the mind-heart without preference.  
When sending and receiving kindness feel the same,  
self dissolves in contentment,  
yearning fades into timeless presence,  
and eternity merges with this moment right now.*