

Awake in the World

A Presentation with Acharya Dan Hesse

Welcome back to this next presentation in our Science of Meditation series, my name is Dan Hesse and our topic today is insight and embodiment and I'm going to be drawing from our Shambhala tradition that comes from the Kagyu and Nyingma schools of Tibetan Buddhism and talking about something that is often called insight or awareness, in Sanskrit it's vipassana and in Tibetan it's lhaktong and those names are not so important but what we're interested in is the nature of insight and how it relates to our journey as meditators and especially its implications for us in terms of understanding how we are embedded in our world. How our awareness, our mind, our sense of being is embodied moment to moment in this physical body we have and obviously in whatever room we're in and in our culture and our families and in the flow of our lives and this topic has been really essential to Buddhist meditation from the very beginning, for twenty five hundred years now.

So when we talk about insight or awareness or vipassana we're talking about understanding things, knowing not from the point of view of being this little person inside our head who's knowing, this inferred person, I think the technical word is homunculus, which is, if you have sort of an image of a little guy sort of pulling the levers inside your consciousness, the person who is experiencing. This was obviously an important topic for the Buddha, who is meditating? And the basic discovery of shamatha is that the sort of panic of keeping ourselves occupied so that we know that we exist, that we can take the chance of simplifying our sense of being by placing our attention on an object of awareness, and relaxing, and that just feels good, that feels better. Usually when we start doing that kind of practice, the first thing we experience is how busy we are, we had no idea how busy we were emotionally, psychologically, our thoughts and our perceptions, that we're running around like a crazy person. So it's almost as if we are in a whirlwind and our shamatha practice, our mindfulness practice allows us to abide peacefully, to actually just be there, simply.

One word, just being there simply, some interesting questions arise. Who's being here and where are we and what is this sense of being present, what is it like? And those kinds of questions are the boundary between our mindfulness practice and our insight or awareness practice, our vipassana practice. And so the quality of curiosity that is both theoretical and experiential is completely appreciated in our practice and it comes out of the quality of being able to be simple. So you can imagine if you're driving down a road, I drove down from Shambhala Mountain Centre up in the mountains in the snow today, and I was zooming along at seventy five miles an hour and there were trucks and cars weaving in and out, and that's in Colorado, who knows what it would be like if I was in New York or LA, and if someone were next to me and said " Well, who are you and what does it feel like to be in your world?" I say "Don't bother me, I'm busy, I'm trying to stay on the road." So without that sense of settling down this next quality of being curious about what it is to be awake is impossible to ask, so the precursor or the ground of insight or vipassana, awareness, is being able to be simple and bored. You say bored? Well, not bored in the sense of looking for a new thing to occupy our mind, a new fantasy or a new perception to get fascinated by or picking up our iPhone, not that kind of bored, but what we call cool boredom which is a sense of our whole momentum, because we've practiced regularly for a long time, settles down.

And that kind of settling allows a sort of discovery, a natural discovery, that we've always been awake in the world, that our sense perceptions don't need any encouragement, that we're already seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, by itself and that one of the most extraordinary insights or intuitions, it's a very intuitive process that we're talking about, is that that person who is meditating is strictly imputed that you can't find anyone doing the

awareness. This is almost the definition of insight, is the radiation of awareness without a radiator, that any idea we have of who's knowing, is just a momentary flicker that we can't hold onto at all.

So that insight into what we call technically egolessness, which is not so much of an absence as it is a presence, and what is it a presence of? It's the presence of a world of interdependence, a world of colour, shape, communication, all happening in the present moment, that is not centred on an imputed me, that it turned out that the world didn't need us as a persona so to speak, to be intelligent and awake and happening. So we realise we're very much part of an ecology, but we're not the centre of our own play or anybody else's play and that relaxation of there being a knower, and the ability to just be very simple in the knowing part has some important implications for us. That we recognise the world is awake and contains its own intelligence. So sometimes when we're very much thinking of ourselves as the person meditating or the person figuring stuff out, we think of the world as a puzzle we're trying to... and it's our intelligence from our side that's discovering how the world works. This kind of relaxation allows us to step into a world that is only happening in the present moment. It has no other existence and that world is full of intelligence and awakens, colour and qualities and vividness.

So when you're doing mindfulness practice or you have a very ultra-simple goal, which is to be present with your object of meditation, this kind of awareness is based on goallessness, that we are brave enough to simply be present, not knowing who we are. That kind of knowing is interesting. In our normal knowing we're constantly sorting our objects of knowledge which includes our thoughts, our emotions, the objects of our sense perceptions and we're putting them in heaps, we might say, saying oh, that's a heap of things I like, and this other heap over here are things I want to avoid and there's a bunch of stuff that's really not important to me, I kind of pay no attention to it and as we know those kinds of classifications are constantly changing that one day you like peppermint and the next day you don't like peppermint, or one day you're in love with someone and the next day you're totally pissed at them. So it's not as if your perceptions or your present knowing is based on absolutely clear rules, those rules are always in flux and changing, but there's a constant evaluating what you know, what you're going to ignore, what you're really going to concentrate on and what you're going to avoid. So this kind of awareness, vipassana, insight, this kind of awareness is not sorting things according to what's good and bad, everything is included. Because you're not sorting, the scope and depth of your knowing relaxes into a much greater scope and precision. That means that you might experience tremendous big feeling, you could be really angry, well, you can know that without any bias and you can also see the very faintest arising of a thought just as it pokes its little head out into your awareness. That whole scope of knowing, of noticing not just the person you're looking at but the light coming in the window in the periphery of your vision and the sound of the forced air heating coming on. That you find yourself in a brilliant, awake, present world that has its own dance, you might say.

So in our ordinary persona there's a quality of buying and selling our experience, that we're sort of in business, being a person, knowing what we like and don't like, trading on our personality, you might say, trying to find out how we fit and sort of campaigning to be part of our world. This is the opposite of that, that we find that we've always been embodied, embedded, integrated with our world that's never not been the case, and we start using as a reference point what is as opposed to what we think should be. From one point of view this is tremendously disappointing, because our grand project of being a person in the world stops making sense in the way that we thought it might in the past. However, when we realise that that project was always just a construction that never had any real basis to it since there was no-one making it up, it allows our hearts to open, our eyes and ears to relax and our sense of caring and courage to manifest to the benefit of others.

Thank you for your kind attention.