

What is Awareness?

In spiritual circles we hear a lot about “awareness” and “consciousness”. It’s important to have the direct experience of what that actually is. We’re all familiar with our five senses; they’re responsible for how this organism knows what’s happening out in the world. There’s also this sense of thought, and that’s similar in some ways to what’s commonly called the five senses. Thought is almost like an internal hearing. One of the things about the five senses is that they’re pure, non-conceptual inputs. Thinking is a little bit different, but what thinking has in common with the five senses is that we can watch our thinking; we can observe and receive the information that runs through our minds, almost like a movie screen, a video.

Since we can stand back and observe thinking, it means that what we are is not thought. In the 1700s, Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.” This attempt to define who we are limits us to our thinking. However, there’s many times in our ordinary lives, not just in meditation, when thinking ceases: when we’re surprised; when we hear a good joke; when we’re startled; when we’re awed into a moment of silence before the mind comes in and says, “Oh, what a beautiful sunset.” There are many moments of silence in our lives, and yet, we still exist, despite not thinking in those moments. The mind may come in a split second later, like an NFL announcer, and tell us what just happened. But there are moments when the mind ceases, and yet, we still are – we still exist.

Right now, everybody, without exception, has the sense of simple existence, of everyday awareness. That is because no one can say, “I’m not aware.” Or, “I don’t exist.” Those statements aren’t possible to state honestly. In fact, the one thing that we can say about ourselves with absolute confidence is: “Yes, I exist.” You may not know what “I” is, and you may not understand what “existing” is, but there’s this sense of simple existence.

This sense of awareness, existence, aliveness, consciousness, it doesn’t matter what we call it, is not a state. It’s just simply looking and noticing what’s happening on the screen of our mind; what’s happening from the information that we receive from our sensory inputs. Just that sense. That everyday awareness. I’m not talking about a special “spiritual awareness.” You may have heard the term, “pure consciousness.” This doesn’t refer to a moral purity. It simply means tuning into consciousness that exists *prior* to content. And by content, I mean everything else, everything other than consciousness. I mean the thoughts in our heads, the physical sensations, the experience we’re having, our visual field – all of that. Our situation, story, history, memory: all content. And then there’s this simple awareness that is aware of all of it, and always has been.

We may sense into this awareness as if it’s always been there somehow. Even if we’ve spent decades on this planet, there’s a sense of, “Yes, there’s something that I always felt was there, even though my body has changed and aged, my story has changed, my cells have come and gone many times, and yet, there’s a sense of this simple awareness.” We can rest in that awareness; we can be curious about that awareness. That’s the doorway.