

Awareness and Presence

By Julian Zanelli

Many therapists and clients use the word ‘awareness’ a lot, but what is really meant? Awareness can be a far reaching and transformational experience, if utilized fully.

Dictionaries tell us that awareness means awake, or cognizant. However what is entailed in those moments that we are awake or that we are cognizant? First of all we can break down awareness as it is experienced. When we are already physically awake and we become more psychologically awake we recognize that there is a quality that is different, we can feel this more awake state, or we simply know that our senses are more finely tuned, and we call this awake, or at least more awake than usual. This subjective state is a key to understanding awareness. Often we just need to shift our state slightly by reminding ourselves to be “more aware”, and we feel this qualitative shift. It is subtle, but clear.

Awareness is the thing that happens when we are taking in and registering information about something. We use our senses for the first part of the process, and then we comprehend the object, so we are using another part of our minds for the second part of the process. Awareness is always in relation to a thing, whether it is a feeling, a thought, or another person. And we know that there are levels of awareness and that it occurs at different levels of clarity, fullness and intensity.

Most of the time what we experience is the thought or the memory of an object intermingled with the sense perception of the object. *This state is not very aware, but it is very common.*

This happens most of the time when we are interacting with other people. We utilise our memory for convenience sake, and the choice to do so is unconscious. This results in a less vital sense of who or what we are actually dealing with. We lose the immediacy of the contact in the present moment.

There are several reasons that we are utilising our memory and intermingling this memory with the actual real time sense perception. One of the major reasons is that when we are engaging with someone or something we do so with an agenda, and with our preconceived ideas. Put more simply, we have specific attention and intention. Therefore we are training our attention on those aspects that suit our intention, and we are overlooking those bits of information that do not suit this intention. This is to say that because we are not fully present to what is actually occurring as it unfolds, we



effectively ignore the rich variety of information in the moment-to-moment reality. This relative lack of awareness on our part leads to a relative lack of awareness of the other person or object.

I would propose an extended definition of awareness so that we can become more aware of how we lose and gain awareness. This definition is focused on interpersonal awareness.

Awareness is the perception of information from self and other, balanced with the perception of the impact of this information on self and other as it is happening. Awareness is directly related to presence- which requires the letting go of intention (and many other distractions) and the opening up to the present moment.

So, awareness requires us letting go of our intention, so that our attention can be as broad as possible.

This shift from grasping, which is shorthand for unconsciously pursuing an agenda from the object, to noticing can best be felt in the change that happens if you look at an object and relax, and allow the object to come into your eyes, rather than you putting effort into searching the object out. You will notice that you cannot make this change without a subtle shift in your internal state. Each way of relating has a completely different underlying attitude. Each way yields different information. Try it, sit back and look at something (choose a simple visual object), and let the image come to you, and sit quietly allowing the image to continue arriving in your senses. Just keep letting it happen for a minute or two, and notice the gradual changes that the body keeps going through.

Did you relax? Most people relax when they do this. No one actually thinks that they are searching out objects, or more commonly searching out characteristics in another person, but the automatic attitude of search and locate is far more prevalent than the more open position of simply being aware of what arrives.

In fact this open “position” is more fully alive, receptive, and responsive than the position of search and locate. However many people seem to act as though this kind of awareness (receiving / allowing) cannot be used in the real world. As though it was a jungle out there, and it is necessary to tighten our focus, and in turn lose a degree of presence, because in their minds it is the only practical way of being. Here the therapeutic application of awareness becomes crucially important. If we can relax our deeply ingrained agenda based awareness for long enough (this is quite an achievement and would normally require some assistance), the effort that has historically been used to continue this position will be released back into the mind and body. However as is always the case, there is a need to integrate this discharge of energy, and the accompanying underlying attitudes. We may come into contact with the feelings associated with, and reasons why, we held ourselves in such a way. Not necessarily in one cathartic movement, but as a general therapeutic trend. And the result, over time, is a less affected personality, a more authentic and trusting sense of



oneself. As though what was underneath was a truer picture of who you have always been. This is a matter of you being more fully you. As your beingness has been mistrusted and partially cut off from awareness due to a range of unconscious attitudes. It is philosophically difficult to say that there is a “truer” you, however the subjective sense is overwhelmingly that this is the “real” you. We can often feel a connection to this new place, as though we have always known it. It is intimately personal, and it is in the background of our experience of ourselves all the time, however we usually don’t recognize it.

As a point to note, the above paragraph should be read in the context of a structured therapeutic relationship. I am not suggesting that we can discharge this energy and integrate previously underlying attitudes and discover a truer sense of ourselves in a simple two-step process (although I am sure that we have all experienced this process to some degree). This usually occurs in a gradual process as many other aspects of the personality simultaneously unfold.

So there is an expanded definition of awareness, and a very broad and brief description of the general change in the style of perception and associated states that can come about in therapy.

I wish to turn the focus now to the idea of presence. It is another concept that is used widely by therapists and others. Of course presence, like awareness, is a profoundly transformational state and substance when realized more fully.

There are a few ideas to clarify around the concept and experience of presence. For example : Is presence the same as being present? Can we have “stage presence” and yet not be present? When we say we are present, what are we present to? Or what is present to us? In my experience these are ultimately the same fundamental thing manifesting in either a dynamic passive way.

First I will discuss presence as something that is noticed about us by someone else. Things have presence because they have essential existence. Who can look at Mt Fuji and say it has no presence? If you have ever stood in the vast deserts of Australia, you would say that they have presence. We know that some people have presence, so it is a fair idea to presume that all people could have more presence.

So what do we mean? Generally the meaning is that they are in touch with their inner life. In the case of mountains and deserts, the same principle applies. There is nothing obscuring the essential aspects of the mountain, some particular quality of its nature is self evident, fully revealed. This is the same with people. The less obstruction to their essential aspects there are, the more present they seem. The more fully revealed they are within themselves, the more we notice that quality of presence.



Secondly I will discuss “being or becoming present”. Being present can also be a state. And it is characterized by a lack of distraction, a receptive attention to oneself or a person or object. And like all states it can increase or decrease in intensity and fullness, hence the expression “fully present”. Fully present really requires a complete absence from the normal distractions of the mind. “Fully present” seems to occur somewhere around the moment where our focus has left “us” and is solely on an object - just before the experience of perceptual merging (with the object). So that there are still clear boundaries between the objects that one is being present to, and the one who is present. There is such an intense exclusion of all other things, and equally intense, yet effortless, focus on one thing. There is an unmistakable sense of aliveness and stillness. This level of presence is not commonly achieved in daily life. It is more often the domain of meditators. However what can be achieved in daily life is still a remarkable degree of effortless exclusion and effortless presence. It is when we feel that our whole being is in contact with something or someone, we can really say that we are fully present with them.

In order for this to happen there needs to be an internal softening of perceptual barriers. It is a different state of perception and a different way of opening oneself up to, and coming into contact with ones self and then with a person or object. A state where there is a global awareness not merely of self, but of self and other. This state of presence seems paradoxical, as generally we feel full and empty. The fullness relates to perception, as though we are filled with the awareness of the object, and the emptiness relates to self-involvement. We often feel very quiet internally, and at the same time very alive. The whole body will shift to allow this state to arise if it is given the right conditions. Perhaps you can feel a hint of this even as you read?

In my experience ‘presence’ in it’s dynamic manifestation is a thing in itself. It is an aspect of our being that is active. It is the force of aliveness and source of personhood that makes us feel so alive, so personally in touch, unique and connected. There is an unmistakable experience of quiet aliveness in that state. The subjective experience is vivid, engaged, and seems to contain it’s own wisdom and energy. When in those states, we often surprise ourselves and say things with much more clarity and precision than normal. There is a force behind our words and actions. There is a real sense of definiteness. This force is presence.

However we may benefit from a careful inquiry about this force. Core emotions derive their energy from presence, however emotions, which start their cycle of creation and expression as pure presence, are then instantly shaped into a specific affect that relates to how you interpreted an event and your psychological history. Presence is uniquely personal but as yet unshaped. Presence is prior to specific personality based affect. In every core emotion (Love, Anger, Joy, Fear, Grief Sadness etc) presence is providing the drive. However it is not usually recognizable through the ‘situation specific affect’.

Being present and presence then, are respectively the state that comes about when presence is touched in its passive manifestation and the psychic substance that activates and animates us in its dynamic manifestation.



As clients learn to access more awareness, and gradually start to experience states of presence, the therapeutic work they are doing moves along with much less effort. What we notice with the increasing use of presence is that much less ‘doing’ of therapy is needed. Suddenly clichés like ‘being with’ seem to be all that is needed. When we mindfully engage with our pains, limitations and fears, we notice that simply coming into contact with them, in that state of presence, causes a shift. The resonance of the state of presence effects the resonance of the difficulty, almost immediately allowing a movement to whatever needs to come next to bring about resolution. Often a deep sense of peace accompanies such a moment, as again, the resonance of the presence comes into contact with previously withheld aspects of being.

A therapy that actively includes these states is going to have widespread benefits for the client, as the more time that person spends in each of these states, which are generally occurring separately from the influence of the wounded and constructed self, the client’s inherent spontaneity and aliveness are reinforced as a naturally occurring part of themselves.

New pathways are created in the patterns and expressions of language and relationships, which are based on the movements of this authentic self. Coming to know one’s self becomes direct and immediate, rather than inferred through emotional history and intellectual deduction. This is the self-revealing of the Self. This is the process that leads to presence.

Awareness, as it grows, leads to greater presence, which in turn supports direct experience and noticing people as they are, rather than, as we usually perceive them. This allows a greater level of awareness of self and other and an expanded sense of our own being.

Experiencing presence within ourselves, especially in the therapeutic environment allows us to settle back from the usual effortful striving to be different, and really be with what is there. A deceptively difficult task for many. And deceptively transforming as well, for as each state is finally met with real acceptance of the whole being, it can no longer remain as it was. All states are held in unconscious packets or formations, and the experience of full consciousness on the packaging is always dissolution. Again, I stress that simply the “seeing” aspect of consciousness will not cause any change, we need our experience to go past seeing, through feeling, and into being.