

# From Concepts to Experience

## Conversations around Meditation

In his poem “Everything is waiting for you” David Whyte invites you to ‘put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation.’ From the context of the poem, below, it is clear that the conversation is not just with other people but with the intimate presence of all the familiar things around us – which is to say with the whole of our experience.

Your great mistake is to act the drama  
as if you were alone. As if life  
were a progressive and cunning crime  
with no witness to the tiny hidden  
transgressions. To feel abandoned is to deny  
the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely,  
even you, at times, have felt the grand array;  
the swelling presence, and the chorus, crowding  
out your solo voice. You must note  
the way the soap dish enables you,  
or the window latch grants you freedom.  
Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity.  
The stairs are your mentor of things  
to come, the doors have always been there  
to frighten you and invite you,  
and the tiny speaker in the phone  
is your dream-ladder to divinity.

Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into  
the conversation. The kettle is singing  
even as it pours you a drink, the cooking pots  
have left their arrogant aloofness and  
seen the good in you at last. All the birds  
and creatures of the world are unutterably  
themselves. Everything is waiting for you.

Meditation, conceived of as self-development, can feel like a lonely solitary endeavour. In reality, we are never alone, we are always in relationship and in conversation through our relatedness and interaction with the world and with each other.

In these going deeper meditation sessions we hope to encourage an easing in to this conversation, opening to the intimacy of experience, and sharing our experience with each other.

## From Concept to experience

As Bhante’s teacher Dilgo Kyetsen Rimpoche puts it:

In the heart of winter, the chill freezes lakes and rivers; water becomes so solid that it can bear men, beasts and carts. As spring approaches, earth and water warm up and thaw. What then remains of the hardness of the ice? Water is soft and fluid, ice hard and sharp, so we cannot say that they are identical; but neither can we say that they are different, because ice is only solidified water and water is only melted ice.

The same applies to our perception of the world around us. To be attached to the reality of phenomena, to be tormented by attraction and repulsion, by pleasure and pain, gain and loss, fame and obscurity, praise and blame, creates a solidity in the mind. What we have to do, therefore, is to melt the ice of concepts into the living water of the freedom within.

## Exercises

It is very helpful in meditation to be able to distinguish the 'living water' of direct experience from labels or concepts about it. In the mindfulness of breathing, for example, the intended object of attention is the direct experience of the breath, not an idea of 'breathing in' or 'breathing out'. These exercises are intended to help us see the difference more clearly.

### Right hand

1. Consider/bring to mind the idea 'right hand'
2. Look at what is actually there in our experience that corresponds to this idea: physical sensations, feeling tone, anything else associated
3. Hold in mind both the idea and the experience: seeing how they are different, seeing how they relate
4. Pair up to discuss, then share comments with the whole group

In his book on posture, 'Aligned Relaxed, Resilient', Will Johnson describes his experience of his right hand:

As your awareness of the feeling state of your hand continues to expand, you may become aware of even subtler sensations and activities occurring in this one small part of your body. Some people may begin to feel a kind of pulsing or throbbing extending into the tips of the fingers, the product of the pulsing of the blood and the ever-present beating of the heart. As your awareness becomes even more refined, you will eventually begin to feel even subtler sensations yet. The conventionally apparent solidity of the hand may begin to dissolve into a shimmering whirl of minute sensations, as though the individual atoms of the hand had become lights flickering on and off. From moment to moment, a tingling, electrical current can be felt ever so subtly to animate and pass through the entire mass of the hand. In a few short minutes, your awareness of the reality of your hand, which you may at first have conceived of as a relatively static and inert object, has evolved considerably.

### Body

As Gendlin says in 'Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapy: A Manual of the Experiential Method',

The body referred to here is not the physiological machine of the usual reductive thinking. Here it is the body as sensed from the inside

So we can repeat the exercise we did for 'right hand', this time for the whole 'body'.

Looking at what we label 'Body' we find a variety of physical sensations, covering some but not all parts, and varying. Also, each physical sensation has a sort of vibrancy: a texture or scintillation with a quality of momentariness.

- We don't experience 'Body' as a totality: just certain sensations in certain areas: other areas are neutral
- Attending to this we move beyond the concept of 'Body' in the abstract to participate more fully and deeply in the sensations that arise: what our experience actually is.
- This leads us directly to the quality of impermanence: we're with their momentariness and flux

## Breath

Repeating the exercise, this time for the experience indicated by the label 'breath', brings us to a place from which we can engage in the mindfulness of breathing meditation with the focus on the experience of the body breathing rather than on the idea or concept 'breath'.

## Awareness of the breath in the mindfulness of breathing meditation

Lightly anchored in awareness of the breath, with a broad awareness of sensations feelings emotions and thoughts, we rest in a direct awareness of our particular experience

Awareness reveals particular things to us: 'thinking about' deals in abstract general concepts

The particular things in our experience are characterised by impermanence: abstract general concepts are characterised by the opposite. By resting in awareness of particular experiences, and letting go of our ideas about our experience we contemplate impermanence.

For example, as Bhante puts it, we might think of a leaf changing from green to red, as though a leaf could hang on a tree without being green, or red, or any other colour. In fact there is no enduring 'leaf' with changing characteristics: only a process of changing colour, form, texture ... The concept 'leaf' is characterised by permanence, the experience of colour, form, texture by impermanence.

Similarly, we think of an in-breath as being long and smooth, as though a breath could be drawn in without being long or short or any other pace, without being coarse or smooth or fine or any other texture.

## Walking meditation

Just as the mindfulness of breathing is an opportunity to explore the experience behind the concept 'breath', walking meditation is an opportunity to explore the experience behind the concept 'body'. It has a similar pace of change with the succession of steps. It can be helpful to explore the particular experiences of intention and movement at the beginning of a step, just as it is to explore those at the beginning of an in breath. Nagarjuna devotes the whole first section of his 'Verses from the centre' to the unfindability of the concept 'walking'.