

Notes for Wednesday, June 11, 2025 Talk At Orlando Insight Meditation Group

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Topic: Retreat Report

Retreat Center: [Spirit Rock Meditation Center](http://spiritrock.org) (spiritrock.org) Woodacre, CA

Retreat Name: The Nature of Awareness: A Retreat for Experienced Students

Retreat Dates: May 17 to May 29, 2025 (12 nights)

Lead Teachers: [Guy Armstrong](#) and [Sally Armstrong](#)

Teacher Bios: Guy - <https://www.spiritrock.org/teachers/guy-armstrong>

Sally - <https://www.spiritrock.org/teachers/sally-armstrong>

To access the audio recordings made during this retreat:

1. Go to the [Dharma Seed](http://www.dharmaseed.org/) website (<http://www.dharmaseed.org/>)
2. On the Dharma Seed welcome page click on “Retreats.”
3. At the top of the Retreat Dharma Talks page enter the retreat code V97TN and click the “Find” button.

My Two Favorite Talks:

[Guided Meditation With Instructions](#) – by Guy Armstrong – Noticing space and then noticing awareness.

https://dharmaseed.org/talks/player/90364.html?access_key=n45qd21H9O

[The Art Of Resting](#) – Dharma talk by Sally Armstrong

https://dharmaseed.org/talks/player/90481.html?access_key=aUL9Y1hsx5

My Notes (numbered) And Reflections (not numbered):

What's different in this retreat?

1. Vipassana with Brahmaviharas for support but meditation instructions are different.
2. Vipassana is heavily focused on objects: breath, body sensations, sound, hindrances, other sensations and states of mind, feeling tone and thoughts.
3. Mindfulness means deliberately and purposely being aware of our present moment experience. Most Vipassana meditation retreats stop here.
4. Is there a mental component to our experience? For example: the breath, sensations in the body, etc.
5. Is there some degree of knowing a sensation, of knowing a breath, of knowing a bodily sensation?

Have you ever used the phrase, "I know." For example, "I know I heard music." I know I smelled smoke"? We are intuitively aware of what's happening in the world around us. If a sound enters the ear or a thought enters the mind or a smell enters the nose we are conscious / aware of these experiences. This is called the capacity of awareness / consciousness.

6. In this moment are you conscious? Are you receiving input through the sense doors?
7. Are you conscious during sleep?

When we are asleep the sense doors are still open. Our ears still hear sounds, our noses still smell, the body still registers sensations, our bodies move during sleep but we don't remember them, we aren't aware of them because we are unconscious. Have you ever been awoken from sleep by a loud sound, the smell of smoke or from someone shaking you? When we are asleep the body still retains some level of consciousness.

8. If you are awake and your senses are functioning you are conscious. All sentient life has the capacity for consciousness. We are conscious / aware of all input from all of the sense doors.

The brain is constantly bombarded by input from the senses but it filters out the vast majority of it in a process called "sensory gating" or "selective attention." Neuroscientists state that we typically use a very small percentage of incoming sensory stimuli to guide our behavior from moment-to-moment. How does this filtering play into the statement that, "We are conscious / aware of all input from all of the sense doors?"

What Is The Difference Between Mindfulness And Awareness / Consciousness?

9. Mindfulness is typically synonymous with awareness but in the context of this retreat awareness has a different meaning.
10. Mindfulness is a learned technique that can be on or off. We aren't always mindful.
11. We are always conscious when we are awake and our senses are functioning properly.
12. Awareness / Consciousness is a mental capacity that's joined with our bodies. For example, hearing a sound is a bodily function but the awareness / consciousness of the sound is a mental function.
13. We know our senses are working because we are receiving input but how did the capacity for awareness / consciousness develop?

This is one of the most profound and challenging questions in neuroscience and philosophy. There isn't a single, universally accepted answer. How is it possible to know that we are knowing?

14. When we recognize all the experience of the senses is being held in consciousness it provides another place to look from. Another perspective on all our sense experience.
15. We can learn to be mindful of sense experiences; there's a lot of freedom to be gained in being mindful of our sense experiences but mindfulness doesn't take away the pleasantness or unpleasantness or pain of the experience.
16. Tuning into awareness / consciousness opens another dimension. A dimension that

includes sense experiences but isn't tied or limited to them. In that there is a great deal of potential freedom.

17. As we turn to the wider sense of awareness it's a dimension that holds everything else. In holding everything else, in some way it offers the potential to go beyond it but not completely as we are still connected to the sense realm.

After his awaking the Buddha was reluctant to teach his Dharma. He reflected that the truth he had realized was incredibly profound, subtle, and difficult to grasp. This sums up my feeling about this retreat.

The Practice Of Awareness By Noticing Space

From A Guided Meditation By Guy Armstrong

1. How to direct attention in order to connect with the faculty of awareness.
 - i. Ask the question, "Am I aware?" and notice what happens.
 - ii. Sensations are being known but known by what?
2. Another way to reach awareness is to notice space and then noticing awareness.
 - i. Both of these suggestions are described by the Buddha in Majjhima Nikaya 121.
3. Open awareness to what is here.
 - i. What is coming in through the sense doors?
 - ii. Keep the attention open wide and receptive. Don't focus on any one sensation.
 - iii. Notice the aspects of change throughout the body. Are they fixed or changing?
4. Can you notice the distance between the top of the head and the seat or the feet. They are in different places.
 - i. Noticing the distance between different places in the body creates a sense of space.
 - ii. Can you notice areas in the body that don't have sensations?
5. Can you notice the space around the body beyond the barrier of skin?
6. Is the space inside the body and the space outside the body different spaces or one space? Can you feel the space outside the body and the space inside the body as one unified space?
 - i. Rest your attention here on the one big space inside and outside of the body.
 - ii. How wide is this space? Is there a place where the space stops?
 - iii. Does the space extend further than the walls of the room?
 - iv. Is there an edge to the space? Does the space stop somewhere?
 - v. Can you an sense this space that has no edge, no boundary, no limit?
 - vi. In the field of your visual perception is there anywhere that space ends?
7. When we bring our attention to this sense of space it becomes part of our felt experience. It's not conceptual, it's the way we feel the space. This is the perception of boundless space.
 - i. Can you rest your attention in this perception of space that includes the body but also goes beyond the body?
 - ii. As you rest your attention in boundless space other phenomenon are still arising. Sensations, sounds, thoughts, etc. continue to arise and pass away but choose not to pay attention to them.
 - iii. Attention may briefly go to another sense object but we don't stay there. Keep the attention focused on the sense of boundless space.

- iv. What happens when you keep your attention focused on boundless space? How does that feel?
 - a) Is your relationship to arising phenomenon (sensations, sounds, thoughts, etc.) changed?
- 8. Now bring the attention back into the body.
 - i. Notice the changing sensations in the body.
 - ii. Sensations are arising and passing and the sensations are being known. Sensations are being known in consciousness.
 - iii. Do you have a sense of these sensations being known in the mind?
 - a) This is a subtle knowing. If you can't sense this don't worry.
 - b) Knowing is an activity of mind. Without knowing we wouldn't be having experience.
- 9. Now notice the quality of space within and without the body. Space extends all around us.
 - i. Space is being perceived but what is doing the knowing?
 - ii. If we are noticing space we are conscious of it.
 - iii. Can you sense what that knowing of boundless space is?
 - iv. The knowing of the space around us is called awareness.
 - v. The broad field of consciousness is called awareness.
- 10. How big is the awareness? How far does it extend?
 - i. Everywhere you notice space is awareness there?
 - ii. Is awareness knowing the space inside the body?
 - iii. Is awareness knowing the space outside the body?
 - iv. Is there an edge to the awareness?
 - v. Is there an edge to consciousness?
 - vi. If consciousness is knowing boundless space isn't the consciousness also boundless?
 - vii. Wherever the space goes consciousness always goes with it.
 - viii. Can you sense this boundless knowing? If you can this is the perception of boundless consciousness.
 - ix. Let your attention rest in this perception. How does this resting feel?
 - x. Sense appearances are still arising. Is your relationship to these objects changed?
 - xi. Our attention is not with the objects but with the attention is with the knowing faculty. Vast empty knowing of awareness.
 - xii. This awareness isn't a thing, it has no shape or size. We can't touch it or smell it but it's working. It's revealing the world to us.
 - xiii. Consciousness contains everything in the inner and outer world but it's not limited by them.
 - xiv. The basic nature of consciousness is empty. It holds all the appearances of the world and it's still not full.
 - xv. As we rest our attention there we see its knowing quality and its emptiness.
 - xvi. This is the open door of awareness practice.
 - xvii. As we rest in awareness we are untangling ourselves from all the arising objects of body and mind. Not cut off from them but not entangled in them. This is a place of peaceful restfulness. A place of equanimity.
- 11. This meditation on space is one way into the knowing of awareness but it may not work for everyone. If this didn't help you to recognize awareness let it go and return to

something where you do connect. That could be returning to the body posture or the breath or sound.

i. If you feel you can, after a while try opening to space again.

Meditating on space brings a lot of benefits of mindfulness practice. It brings the vastness, the inclusivity, the ease and peace that can be experienced by mindfulness practice. From resting with the perception of space can you turn to what's knowing the space and that opens to the awareness of knowing.

Awareness Practice: 10 Techniques to Access Awareness

- 1) Ask: "Am I aware?" or "Is awareness here?"
- 2) "Sensations are being known. Known by what?"
- 3) From the open space of choiceless attention, notice the knowing.
- 4) Notice space in the body and space outside the body. Perceive that it's boundless, then ask, "What's knowing space?" to perceive boundless consciousness.
- 5) Pervading all four quarters with Metta notice what is knowing this vast sphere.
- 6) Turn the palm: instead of looking outward (turn palm out), look inward (turn palm toward you), toward the looking (a way to focus the attention inward).
- 7) Big Mind Meditation: image of the mind (or awareness) like a big empty sky. For an example of this type of meditation see: [Guided Big Sky Meditation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq0ieEFZSJ8) with Joseph Goldstein on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vq0ieEFZSJ8>).
- 8) Soften the gaze, relax the eyes, allow the attention to be back & down. Meaning, focus the attention on the meditation object (awareness or the awareness of the knowing).
- 9) Inquire: "Who am I?" or "What is this?" or "Who is looking?" or "What is looking?"
- 10) Drop in a phrase: aware of awareness, knowing the knowing, it's already here.

Make This An Ongoing Practice To Connect With Awareness In Three Steps:

- 1) **Turn** - use one of the techniques above to access awareness; requires effort or intention.
- 2) **Recognize** - notice awareness; this is the magic which may happen or not.
- 3) **Rest** - rest in the perception of awareness; practice of non-doing (resting in awareness).

Suggested Readings On Awareness From The Retreat Teachers:

- 1) Emptiness: A Practical Guide for Meditators - Guy Armstrong
- 2) Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation - Bhikkhu Anālayo
- 3) Abiding in Emptiness - Bhikkhy Anālayo
- 4) The Island - Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro (esp. chapters 7-12; available online)
- 5) Small Boat, Great Mountain - Ajahn Amaro (available online)
- 6) Intuitive Awareness - Ajahn Sumedho (available online)
- 7) Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree - Buddhadasa Bhikkhu
- 8) One Dharma - Joseph Goldstein
- 9) Pure and Simple - Upasika Kee Nanayon (Wisdom Pubs; parts are available online)
- 10) Straight from the Heart - Ajahn Maha Boowa (also search on YouTube)
- 11) As It Is, vol. 2 - Tulku Ugyen Rinpoche
- 12) Primordial Purity - Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche
- 13) Pointing out the Dharmakaya - Thrangu Rinpoche

Two Weeks After A Silent Meditation Retreat By Heather Kirn Lanier

How quickly I loose my love of all things.
I nearly flick an ant off the cliff of an armchair.

But remember, Self, the week you spent enveloped in psalms intoned my monks?

By Wednesday you beheld a three-balled body creeping around the onionskin of your book,
its six teensy toothpick legs bent into all manner of delicate angles.

Your chest became a doorway to a spacious unmarked heaven.
You loved the ant.

The kingdom said Christ, is at hand, meaning not ticking above in a time bomb of gold-paved
streets but tapping its antennae along the heart line of your imperfect palm.

Reflections on this poem:

Life on retreat is very different than my everyday, non-retreat life. The silence, the routine of the retreat, and all the practice softens my heart. The walls I build around myself come tumbling down. What annoys me in my daily life passes by like a swirl of morning fog; noticeable but intangible, nothing I want to or even have the ability to push away or cling to.

Why, after a retreat, when I return to my outside life, do the walls go back up so quickly and the craving and aversion return? On retreat my heart opens and becomes a doorway to a spacious garden of ease and peace. I love everything, all beings, all sensations, all thoughts and actions. I love the broken world and I'm grateful for its pain and cruelty. How else can I learn to do more than simply accept the world? How can I embrace it and with unconditional love and welcome the brokenness into my heart? Remarkably, I even love the most difficult person I know – myself.

Where does all this love go after a retreat? Is it still there hiding in the swamp of my innumerable delusions, my conditioning, my fears and doubts? Why does my lust for the temporary, unsatisfactory physical world trap me in a prison of buzzing neon? Why all the grasping, all the needing, all the striving for what never leads to lasting peace?

The kingdom, the life free from distress and confusion isn't in some faraway, distant place. It isn't in some heavenly realm that can only be reached after eons of rebirth and suffering on the wheel of samsara. It's so close! It's all around me; pervading everything. It's in front of me, behind me, over me, under me, all around me. I'm surrounded by the possibility of lasting repose.

The sun is 93 million miles from the earth but it doesn't seem as if it's that far away. In my field of visual perception it seems so close. So close I can almost touch it if I just stand on my toes, reach up, and raise my hands to the sky! Nirvana, enlightenment also seems this close. The freedom I'm looking for has already been found! I know it exists because I've lived there. I've enjoyed moments of freedom as vast as the endless sky and I've rested in unbounded love. I'm sure this isn't another delusion because it doesn't depend on craving and clinging for its existence.

Yet why do I keep looking for it in places I know it can't be found when it's as close as an imperfect ant walking on the palm of my imperfect hand.

The Four Faults Of Natural Awareness

By the ḍākinī Niguma

So close you can't see it.
So deep you can't fathom it.
So simple you can't believe it.
So good you can't accept it.

The concept of "faults of natural awareness" often refers to obstacles or difficulties encountered when trying to rest in or realize a state of natural, unconditioned awareness, particularly within contemplative traditions like Mahamudra and Dzogchen in Tibetan Buddhism. These are not "faults" in the sense of moral failings, but rather inherent tendencies of the mind that obscure or hinder the recognition of its true nature.

While the exact phrasing can vary, a common teaching attributed to the ḍākinī Niguma, yogini and founder of the Shangpa school of Mahamudra from the Shangpa Kagyu lineage, describes four such "faults" or reasons why we don't readily recognize natural awareness.

So close, you can't see it: This refers to the idea that the true nature of mind, or natural awareness, is so intimately and pervasively present that it's overlooked. Like trying to see your own eyeball by pressing it to a surface, the very immediacy and closeness of awareness makes it difficult to perceive as an object. We're constantly operating within it, so we don't step back to notice it.

So deep you can't fathom it: Our minds are often conditioned to seek complexity, profundity, and something "special" or difficult to attain. Natural awareness, however, is described as utterly simple, ordinary, and without fabrication. Since it lacks the bells and whistles we often associate with spiritual experiences, we may dismiss it or struggle to trust its straightforwardness.

So simple you can't believe it: This points to the vastness and depth of natural awareness, which transcends the grasp of the conceptual, dualistic mind. Our usual modes of understanding try to categorize, analyze, and define, but natural awareness is beyond such intellectual constructs. Trying to intellectualize or grasp it with the ordinary mind is like trying to measure the ocean with a teacup.

So good you can't accept it: The liberating and boundless qualities of natural awareness, such as its inherent freedom, spaciousness, and radiant clarity, can be overwhelming and even threatening to our conditioned sense of self and our limited worldview. We may have deep-seated beliefs about our unworthiness or limitations that prevent us from fully embracing such a profound and perfect state. It's almost "too good to be true" for our small, constricted minds.

These four "faults" highlight that the obstacles to realizing natural awareness are not external, but rather they arise from our own ingrained habits of mind and perception. The path to overcoming them involves a process of letting go of these conceptual overlays and relaxing into the ever-present, effortless nature of awareness itself.