

Sinking Into Awareness 7-30-2020 Transcript

Marcy: Hi, how are you?

Practitioner: Yeah, okay, I've just been feeling kind of a bit flat this week.

M: Flat?

P: Yeah, flat, quite emotional at times and then flat, not my usual excited self about doing the practice. I just feel blah about it all, which is not my usual self.

M: Even if I didn't know anything that had been going on with you, when somebody reports that, the first thing I would look for is whether anything interesting has come up in your practice lately. What was the last thing that came up? It happens so often that if there's a big Insight, or something that's really intense, then our system will automatically swing back, pendulate in the other direction and kind of go numb, or flatten out, like it's compensating for itself.

And then I happen to know, too, that you had a pretty intense time just in the last week or two. So, it may just be an automatic "taking a break" by the system, taking some time to absorb and calibrate. It's really sweet. I look at it as a real beauty of nature, this balance of expansion and contraction where if things get really intense over here, then they need to swing over there to keep the system regulated, and not stay too intense for an extended time.

P: Yeah, okay, that makes sense. I've heard of it happening with people who meditate, and I haven't experienced it in quite this way before, especially around my practice. It hasn't been difficult to practice, although I haven't done as much practice this week or so as last week. It's actually been very easy just to sit. What I've typically done is orient myself with my eyes open and focus a little on external visual activity, and then focus a little on external auditory activity, and then I just go into my body as this kind of vessel, and it feels like ... yeah.

M: Wow.

P: One time I did write down a report. I think it was soon after we spoke last week. Oh, no, maybe it was a few days later, actually, it was only three days ago. It feels like a long time ago, but I had a couple of days that were very emotional, and I found it hard to concentrate on my practice. I have been doing a metta practice every day, and I have this whole group of people I'm sending lovingkindness that keeps getting bigger and bigger. So, I just lump them all together. It just felt easier.

I guess, as I think about it, overall there's perhaps a feeling like there's less distinction between practice and non-practice. Maybe that's part of one's experiencing. It doesn't feel like it's always something I'm doing for formal practice, where I'm thinking "I'm really doing it, this is my practice time, I'm doing this technique." Now it just doesn't feel like that, there's not that same distinction.

So maybe that wall is coming down a bit - I'm just thinking out loud here - between how I'm seeing things. I'm not sure. I'll just keep going.

M: There's something else that could be at play, too, because the more you describe that, especially when you say practice isn't hard and you could just sit there, what this sounds like is that there's possibly

been a jump in equanimity. When there's the flavor of equanimity, it can sometimes be hard to recognize, or even unrecognizable, when the quantity of change is greater than we're used to.

So, when it's just a little bit more, we recognize it and think "Oh, that feels good, that's equanimity, that's clarity, that's concentration." But then when it jumps a significant amount all at once, which tends to happen when you have a sudden insight, like a week or so ago you had a big "Whoa, this is kind of different" experience, and usually what happens with that is some aspect of what we could call attentional skills will take a pretty significant jump. This tends to be how you can spot equanimity, when you're thinking "Well, I don't know that I really care what I'm doing or not. But, oh, that's funny, I don't feel irritated or agitated or apathetic."

What's underneath that is what in Buddhist traditions they would call a drop in craving and aversion. And now, in secular mindfulness, we call that equanimity, which is like a really deep experience of "This is what it's like to not have to push and pull."

And when it takes quite a jump, it's so different from what we're used to. We might wonder "Is that apathy? No. Is it irritation? No." It's like something's been removed, so there's an absence of a problem, but it's kind of unfamiliar.

P: It feels unfamiliar. We talked about allowing opening and allowing space. It feels like I'm more able to do that. But there's not the same kind of excitement.

M: I find that the equanimity language can be supportive and helpful because that unfamiliarity can cause dis-ease. We don't want to make the mistake of thinking that the dis-ease is a fundamental part of what's happening, instead it's a reaction.

So, this place that you're at right now can be just an objective circumstance, it doesn't have, inherent in it, a value of good or bad. But then we will react to it in a certain way, and because it's unfamiliar, maybe label it as bad. We can balance that out by looking at it as having qualities of equanimity, helping to ease that concern that it's a bad thing.

We might have a little bit of - I don't want to say fear, but on that spectrum - an uneasiness, like "Oh, where's my excitement?" You may notice that excitement isn't there, but there's also a lack of needing to get away from anything, a lack of irritation, a lack of agitation.

So, we encourage focusing on that part, and enjoying the peacefulness of that, so that what's missing, that you liked, doesn't have to be a concern.

P: Yeah, that's interesting. I had my annual physical this morning, and they do this depression screening when you go, I think it's a matter of course, and they were asking me have you felt sad in the last few days or apathetic, all these questions, and I was thinking in my head "Kind of, yes, but I'm not going to say yes because I know what you're screening for."

So, it's good to look at it from that point of view, because I realized that there are some things that really do, more and more, signal that something's positive, like what you're saying, more than just a kind of apathy.

I'm getting my stuff done, it's not that I'm not doing well, it's just that maybe there isn't the same kind of drama about it.

M: I think we get used to wanting this kind of excitement, or the kind of happiness that has a certain intense flavor to it, and we mistake that for a more lasting, sustainable state that's really beneficial. But we can try on the perspective that if that was just something that helped us escape feeling bad, balancing things out, then if you don't feel really bad, you also don't need the escape of having this intense happiness feeling to balance out the negative feeling.

There was a time when I had a particularly rough bout with this, something along these lines, and when the Insight came to me that brought relief, it was when I went to the ocean with my kids. I was checking in with this sensation that had been concerning me. It was bothering me that there was a quality of bleakness or deadness to it. So, I sat at the ocean and I just said, "Okay, I'm just going to be with this completely, I'm going to pay attention to what this thing is," and suddenly, I saw that it was a gift to be at the ocean, because it was a place where I had reliably been able to find relief from discomfort.

I then realized that the benefit that I had gotten, I had unknowingly attributed to the change. What I missed was the feeling of relief happening while it was in progress, and the change was that now I was already at that level all the time. The realization was "Oh, I don't have that feeling of relief anymore because I don't need to come down. I'm already okay."

P: Another thing, earlier today, I was just checking in with myself a bit, noting auditory, visual, and somatic activity, internal and external, getting outside myself and my environment. I was having a little coffee after my appointment at Starbucks. And there were these little sparrows around. I felt so much pleasure just watching them, I was just watching them and I gave them a few crumbs.

The clarity of seeing these little birds, and feeling like I'm having these experiences where I'm able to get so much more easily absorbed in natural phenomena, was just so easy. I looked around and everybody was on their phones. I thought "What are you, crazy, just look at these beautiful little birds, they're just here, and they're so gorgeous." There have been a few times like that, nothing exciting or aha, just these quiet, really, really beautiful moments, and without needing to go very far to find them.

M: Exactly, yeah.

P: So, I sort of felt like "Yeah, I think I'm probably okay. I don't know what is happening, but it feels great."

M: Those are the things to place your attention on and revisit and notice. And thank goodness, too, no matter what time of year, you've told me that even when it's super cold where you live, you'll still go outside and connect with nature. That's where you want to focus.

There was really something that was in the way that got removed, this kind of drivenness that tends to be underneath things like excitement and anticipation. With that removed, there can be a scary idea that something's wrong. But really, when you pay attention to that, now what's left is that you can merge with these little birds anywhere you are because of that louder stuff being out of the way.

P: It has been very interesting to experience that, and I think it's even when I do my normal sits, just sensing the body - I don't want to use the word empty, but in a way that is how it feels - it just feels like everything sort of It's certainly not unpleasant, in fact, it's very pleasant, but I think maybe spaciousness is a better way to describe it. It feels like there's just a lot more space.

M: Sounds like you've had a significant amount of stuff that you never needed removed. So that now you get to notice all the space that has been there all along.

P: That's a very thoughtful way of saying that it sounds like you've had a lot of baggage with you, which for me is so very true. It's a different feeling and it's unfamiliar.

M: And it totally changes. I've had this experience, and one of my close path friends has, too, and most people I know who stay with the practice and keep going have this experience where everything changes and flips between formal practice and everyday life, and practice becomes 24 hours a day. You see it in everything, in your contact with the birds, and the strangers at the store, and everything.

And then formal practice continues, but the nature of it totally changes. It's not anymore like an activity that you're doing with some purpose, so that something else will happen, it's just "This is the time when I settle into this body and notice what's going on," and it's just a thing that you do.

Over time - I have a feeling probably a very short time for you – we realize "Oh, it's okay, I don't need that old feeling that I used to have about it. This is how it is now." You see all the benefits, all of the wonderful ramifications of that, in your life.

P: I'm beginning to notice, too, what I'm beginning to notice – I think this is correct – is that the transitions don't seem quite so hard between things or activities, things that would seem to be sort of difficult or overwhelming, like I was describing last week, going to the mall. I've tried to be sensible about pacing myself, but on the other hand I think there is a bit more ease in going from one thing to the next, maybe because I have more of a baseline of equanimity. I think that's what you would say.

M: I am going to predict that you're going to notice a lot of really interesting things for the next few weeks, at least, and maybe it'll just continue, but you'll probably be able to notice a lot of cool stuff, like you talked about with the bird.

But when you notice these transitions, too, anytime you notice something that's easier, or that catches your attention, that's pleasant, you might see these pieces coming together where you'll get more clues about what it is that's missing.

I relate to what you're saying, and some of the things that I noticed were activities that I might have dreaded, or had an idea that they would be something I didn't want to do. Or seeing people that I had an idea I didn't want to be around, or had memories of being so uncomfortable in certain people's presence that I thought "I can't tolerate this." All kinds of things like that remind me of what you're saying about transitions.

And then, I started noticing that they just weren't like that anymore. This was the event I was talking about in my Dharma talk where I said that I was looking for my stuff, "Where's my stuff?" I had the memory of some person approaching me, and totally unconsciously, automatically, I would go to my bag of personality, getting ready to be afraid or upset or aggravated, and it just wasn't there. Instead it was "Oh, I'm just available to that," and I still get to notice it all the time, because it's just such a pleasure, or I still have so many memories lingering of how it used to be so much harder, this too.

Having a busy day ahead, or having a lot of meetings or something that I know is going to be hard, those things used to be almost derailing. I could have so much stress going into certain things, and noticing how different the responses were then.

Each time there's a significant shift, it tends to take quite a bit of time for all of the little pieces to show themselves. You can know this is different, but that's the most obvious level. What's really fun, that I think is probably going to be unfolding for you over the next couple weeks, at least, is you get to see more and more what's really making that up; why is it so different?

A lot of that tends to be, you may notice, less self-referential thought because when there's difficulty with transitions or reactions, the reason they're difficult is probably because there are ideas about them that say "This is difficult, I don't like this, I remember when so-and-so blah blah blah," and that's what you might be noticing. Some of that story might not be happening as much, or it might happen but you don't identify with it at all, like it's someone else's story. So, it could just be really cool now.

P: Yeah, it will be. It's nice to think of, and to remember all the little things, like the episode with the birds. I had a similar thing with some aspen trees when I was waiting to see my trainer yesterday. I arrived super early and I pulled up the car and closed my eyes for 20 minutes. There was a little aspen tree, glittering in the wind. I don't know if it's a greater sensitivity, because I've always been sensitive, but it's more of an ability to allow it - I think maybe that's what it is - in everyday life, without feeling.

I've been listening to music more, and that's been a really hard thing for me for a number of years, just because of a lot of grief I had with my parents dying, and I wasn't able to listen to music, it would bring up a lot of feelings. And now I can do it. There's not as much angst, maybe that's what it is, there's not the same kind of angst about it.

M: There's a habit that most of us, I think, have our whole lives, that we look for something, the thing, that's been changed; how is this different? And we're looking for something to be present. Like I have greater this or more of this, and it's easily misunderstood, even in spiritual teachings, because they'll use words like attainment, as though we're getting something. But I think it's really that all the opposite things are removed.

I heard this when you were saying "Well, but I've always had this sensitivity." So, it's more like there's less in the way of you just being with that sensitivity; it's a lot about what's been removed so that you're able to just be like you already are.

It can be kind of confusing to figure it out because it's like "Oh, now I'm like this. No wait, I was always like that. Why does that feel different?" It's more like there's less static, there's less interference, there's less of everything that you didn't need. And it's hard to know what it was because a lot of it was subconscious.

A lot of what's removed is not something that we were looking to remove, it was just clouding our vision.

P: Yeah, we didn't even know what it was, that's a really good point. Because there is a simplicity about it, too, somehow things do feel a bit simpler, like maybe some of the drama has gone.

M: Wonderful.

P: I'm getting used to that, I suppose.

M: These are the really, really deep fruits of practice.

P: The other thing that I have really enjoyed from time to time recently is applying the deep truths about nature and life, and understanding how practice, or how these skills, can show you them.

When I was in a sitting group last week, I had this insight that you can just not interfere with things, and that is a deep truth; let nature take its course, you don't need to interfere all the time. It was nice to feel that in a sensory and visceral way.

I find myself just being more aware of these deep truths, and how they apply to little incidents throughout the day, which to me makes everything feel so much more integrated. I'm not separating something more mundane from something more like a deep thought, it just feels more integrated, more natural. That gives me pleasure, actually. Yeah, I think that still gives me some pleasure.

M: You may also find some really interesting things to notice, then, in your communications with other people.

Now what I'm hearing you describing, if we talk about this in terms of attentional skills, is an aspect of clarity, something that's so simple that's been there all along, but almost no one actually understands it. It makes sense in their brains, but they're not demonstrating an understanding because they're always interfering. Suddenly you have this deep and complete understanding, "Oh, non-interference, of course."

What that brought to mind for me, is that another way that you can continue to deepen and integrate that insight, is paying attention to the interplay of your conversations with other people, and noticing the underneath layers of how you respond to people, in particular. Because when you've had an insight like that, it may start to seem sometimes that what other people are saying doesn't really make sense, or you're not sure why they're saying that. But instead of getting caught on that, you can back out another level and consider "Oh, I'm the one who's changed, I see it differently now."

I started noticing that, all of a sudden, it seemed like my husband was all the time bringing up these pointless things to talk about, and I would feel irritable. I would wonder why he was bringing up these pointless things to talk about, but then I figured out, after a while, it was me who had changed. I had lost the ability - if we talk again about this in terms of removing things, not gaining things - I had lost the ability to get hung up on things twelve steps ahead of me. I was automatically not able to do that anymore.

Again, I would wonder why would we talk about what we're going to do next month if that person comes, when we don't even know twelve things that have to happen, that makes no sense, "Why are you talking about that?" But of course, he's looking at me like "What is wrong with you? This is the way we talk." Well, not anymore.

You have that sense of non-interference and you might notice really interesting interactions with other people because your perspective is going to change how you interact, and how you receive what they say.

P: So probably offer a little bit of compassion to everybody involved, right? That kind of thing.

M: I think it'll come easily to you.

P: It's just a different way of seeing.

M: There's a very sweet kind of quiet reward flavor to it all the time, because you're always having this awe and appreciation for what's been lifted from you, like "Oh, wow, I see, I'm not relating to them because I don't have that element of confusion anymore."

P: Yeah. Did you find as you got into that more that it was harder to maintain relationships with friends or people who weren't caught up in those things?

M: It depends on the relationship. I'm much more interested in relationships with people who are into practice, so that we can talk about things like this. Those continue to develop more, and I've had to make a lot of adjustments because I am the one who changed. Usually, that's gradual enough so that it's not that significant in everyday interactions, and with people who I have more casual interactions with, it's almost always just a pleasure.

It's only positive because I take so little personally, almost never, and I see things easily and even if something rightfully makes me angry, it just isn't very sticky, it will just pass through. So, in most cases, it's just a pleasure, and then in very close relationships I think it's different for everybody, but it can be really challenging. Mostly, I have to keep learning how to adjust my communication so that it's authentic but understandable.

There's no point in my coming off as weird, that's not useful to anybody. I don't go around saying that I don't have emotions anymore. But I have to recalibrate what I mean by that, because my perception has changed. In order to communicate well with people, I have to tell myself, when this happens, this is when you would express it like that; the meaning for myself of those words has changed, but I don't need to go around and tell everybody that, it's not useful.

P: That's what I realized. I talk to people about working on enlightenment, that I'm trying to get enlightened, and it's not entirely a joke, I feel like I've been working quite hard. I did send a couple of emails saying that and I'm sure they thought I was kidding. But at some point, you have to hope that people are going to talk like this, right? The world hopefully will develop in this way and build skills in this direction, and it's going to be normal to talk about. It's for everybody, I just happened to be practicing ways that will get me in that direction.

M: Your interest in teaching is so wonderful, too, especially learning how to make the ineffable something that we can communicate in a normal way, so that we're not coming off as weird, so that we can meet everybody where they are, and be of real service while you continue to deepen your own practice, knowing that you don't have to talk about the really trippy or profound things that happen to you. With people who are just starting out, they really just want to sleep at night or get some pain relief.

P: So, if we could do just a short practice, and I don't know what you would suggest. The breath work was really lovely last week.

M: How about if we instead just spend a few minutes settling into this place of things being different and not having to be excited or driven and just see what it's like. I don't know what that means, but we'll find out.

C: All right.

GUIDANCE

[An audio of the guided meditation is available on marcyahn.com in the same module as this transcript.]

END OF GUIDANCE

M: So that was awfully short on something we probably could have done for 45 minutes, trying to relax into this sense of “let’s just pay attention” and not have to do anything.

P: It was still really relaxing for me. It's the paying attention without the drivenness behind it, is what I'm noticing. It's very helpful to talk about these concepts as well because it helps explain what's happening in it. I understand it better. But that's what it really feels like, it's much easier to just be aware without noting sensory activations.

M: A thing that tends to happen when you have a big shift - I feel like you had a pretty big shift - what happens to a lot of people, in my experience, is that what worked in meditation a few weeks ago just may not be available anymore in that same way. We have to work with what we get.

P: That’s the thing, it’s changing all the time, right?

Well, thanks so much more. It’s always reassuring to talk to you, I feel like I'm not going off the deep end.

M: I know yeah, I relate to that. It's very valuable.