

*Homework: Witness Meditation: The Power in
Awareness
Week of April 20-27, 2011*

December 9, 2008

Dear Ones,

Thank you for helping to create such an open and present space for us to be in together. Salutations from my heart to yours!

In the following few paragraphs (sections 1 and 2) of this letter, you'll find some general counsel for working with the practices for the week. At the end, you'll find the 'official' meditation assignment.

1) Experiment with the Practices

Please feel free to experiment with *any* of the practices we did this evening—'listening' to the spaciousness between sounds, or to the silence that is the background to sounds, or holding sounds, body sensations, thoughts, breath in your awareness, then becoming aware of the awareness that holds them. You can 'station' yourself at the back and slightly above the head, as we were doing last week, or you can center yourself at the back of the heart according to the instructions in the meditation given below.

2) Play with Self-Inquiry Practice

At some point in each daily meditation, spend some time in the basic attitude of self-inquiry. You may want to continue with the question "Without thought, memory, images, perceptions, emotions, what am I, or What is I?" You could work with the slightly different approach: 'What is it that knows all this?' Or you could simply turn attention back on itself, so that you sense yourself as the awareness that is the context, the basis, and the heart of everything that you are able to experience. You don't have to use words to ask the question; in fact the easier you become with the inquiry the more it does become a wordless attentiveness to the spaciousness beyond thoughts, emotions, memories, perceptions.

You can apply the original question to any situation—for instance, when you're feeling confused, worried, thought-full, anxious or angry, and it's a really good way to restore the mind to balance when you're out of sorts, or just to

investigate reality in whatever mood you happen to be.

For instance, suppose you're frustrated or angry with someone or something. Try noticing the anger, taking a breath, (maybe 5 breaths!) and then asking, "Without thoughts, memories, emotions, perceptions, associations, intention, ideas, am I angry, not angry or neither?"

Do this always as an *inquiry*, not trying to force any kind of state change, and not trying to damp down emotions either. Simply as a practice for shifting perspective. (And there isn't a 'right' answer! That's what's so cool about this question—it can simply call attention to that spaciousness, or silence, or pulsation which exists in the midst of the emotion.

In the beginning, applying self-inquiry to emotions 'works' best when you're sitting with feelings, rather than when you're on the hoof. But if you stop from time to time during the day and ask yourself the "What am I?" question, you should notice that it will start to trigger an immediate shift back to the witnessing consciousness—first temporarily, than more and more.

Alternatively, try coming back to the thought, "Whatever is arising—thoughts, images, emotions, contractions, expansive feelings, love, energy AND the one who knows all this is arising—all these are made of the same consciousness, the same substance, the same subtle mind-stuff." And keep noticing what happens to your inner state when you have this understanding.

This sounds like a lot to remember—but as you work with it, you'll find that you're not having to 'think' it so much. Instead, it becomes a knowing that arises when you turn your attention to it—almost as if the words have become a trigger that trips a switch into witness-consciousness. And each of these practices will take you to the same place—an increasing sense of being awareness, the witness.

3) Meditation Assignment:

(Please meditate for at least 20 minutes per day. If you prefer to do your 'normal' meditation sequence, you can do this practice at the beginning of meditation, then segue into your 'regular' practice, coming back to the inquiry from time to time. Then, before you get up from meditation, take a minute or two to work with the inquiry.)

Sit in a meditation posture, and close your eyes.

Bring your attention into the center of the chest, behind the breastbone, deep inside. Allow the breath to move in and out through the heart—either vertically, as in 'normal' breathing, or with the sense that the breath is moving horizontally, as if there were an opening or window in the chest wall.

Let the 'touch' of the breath move through the heart region, gently enlivening the area.

Let your attention move backwards, towards the back of the heart. Rest there. If it feels right, allow the awareness to move out the back of the heart, and

to expand around the body, taking in the room, the building, the city, the earth itself. Your awareness, your Great Heart, can open to become the space that 'holds' whatever exists.

If you can easily stay in that expanded presence, rest there, Allow the awareness 'I am' to vibrate within that Heart-spaciousness.

If it is more comfortable to rest 'inside' the heart, Allow the awareness or thought "I am" to fall into the heart with the breath. Stay in the stillness or spaciousness at the end of I am. Allow the exhalation to arise from that stillness, and, if it feels natural, to radiate out from the heart.

If you meditate with a mantra, you can use the mantra in the same way.

As your sense of the spaciousness in the heart center becomes more stable, begin to introduce the inquiry, 'Without using thoughts, emotions, perceptions, associations, sensations what am I?' Whatever comes up, apply the question to it. If thoughts, images, ideas etcetera arise, just know that your query goes beyond them...to the 'space' of nothingness or emptiness that may arise in the moments after the question.

As you become present in the emptiness, let yourself fall or sink into it, as if you were sinking into layers of awareness or space. Come to rest where it feels right. Let the question arise where appropriate, without forcing or trying to create a shift.

The longer you sit with this practice, the more it evolves. If you only have time for 20 minutes a day, know that every moment you open into that emptiness spaciousness is itself transformative.

Come back to it through out the day. Journal about it. Notice what arises.

Please do feel free to send your questions, either to me privately or to the listserve. And let us know what is happening!

Thank you for being part of this shared experience.

Love,
Sally