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Attention vs Awareness

Steve Lovinger 07-20-25

Attention

This is focused, narrow, and object-oriented. Whether you're placing attention on the breath, body sensation, mantra, or sound, you're zeroing in. It's selective and often excludes other stimuli. It's what makes concentration meditation (*samatha*) possible—honing attention down until it's razor-sharp, stable, and clear.

Awareness / Meta-Awareness

This is broader, more open, spacious. It's not so much focused on a single object, but rather aware of *whatever is happening*—without identifying with it or being pulled into it. Some traditions might call this *choiceless awareness* or *open monitoring*. Meta-awareness also refers to *knowing that you know*—like being aware that you're meditating, or that attention just drifted.

The Trade-Off

There is a trade-off, especially experientially, between the two.

High attention, low awareness: When attention is tight (e.g., totally absorbed in the breath), awareness of the broader field diminishes. You might not notice posture collapse, tension, emotions, or thought patterns because attention has zoomed in so far. This is great for concentration states but can miss what's unfolding around or underneath.

High awareness, low attention: When you're in a spacious, open state of awareness, your attention is diffused. You might catch more of the subtle shifts in the body, mind, and emotional field—but it can be harder to maintain precision or stability on any one object. It's more prone to drift if you're not anchored, especially in early practice.

The Dance

In mature practice, the two can *coexist* more smoothly, but it often requires intentional training. You might:

- Start with attention to stabilize the mind (like on the breath or sounds).
- Then *soften* the attention to allow awareness to open up, including body sensations, thought-emotion flow, etc.
- Then toggle back to a narrower focus if you feel lost or scattered.

Some practices train this interplay directly. For example:

- **Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen** in Tibetan Buddhism often emphasize awareness first and use objects only as reference points.
- **Vipassana (insight)** often moves from attention (like breath) to awareness (watching all arising phenomena), and meta-awareness becomes key to not identifying with content.
- **Stephen Batchelor-style secular mindfulness** will often encourage the balance between grounded attention and reflective, wide awareness.

Why This Matters

This trade-off has real consequences:

- If you're too attention-heavy, you may cultivate calm but miss insight.
- If you're too awareness-heavy, you might get overwhelmed or distracted, especially without the support of concentration.

Skillful Means

A possible framework for practicing with this:

1. **Anchor attention** (e.g., breath) for the first few minutes.
2. **Expand awareness** to include thoughts, emotions, and body sensations.
3. **Cultivate meta-awareness** by occasionally asking: *What is happening in my mind right now?* or *Am I aware that I'm aware?*
4. **Adjust as needed**—tighten attention when dull or scattered, open awareness when fixated or tense.

Attention as a mooring:

Attention = anchor

Awareness = sail

Meta-awareness = navigator

Too much anchor and you don't move. Too much sail and you drift. Without the navigator, you don't notice you're off course. That's why your dynamic of returning to attention when distracted, but favoring awareness, is such a skillful rhythm.