

THE
LITTLE
BOOK OF
BEING

PRACTICES AND GUIDANCE FOR UNCOVERING
YOUR NATURAL AWARENESS

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 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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1 WHAT IS NATURAL AWARENESS?

Awareness is a capacity of the human mind. Awareness is the ability to directly know and to perceive, sense, feel, or be cognizant of experience.¹ We might think of awareness simply as the state of being conscious of something.

Every living being is aware. We usually don't think much about awareness, but in order to function, humans have to be aware. Not only do humans have the capacity to be aware, but they also have the ability to be aware of awareness, or aware that they are aware. Let's try this simple experiment:



Right now, put down the book and don't be aware. In the next minute, please stop being aware. I mean it. Ready, go . . .

Are you back? Could you *not* be aware? No, you couldn't. This capacity to be aware is a function of the human mind. And in this exercise, you noticed that you were aware and that it's impossible to stop being aware.

However, being aware is not natural awareness. Natural awareness is very hard to explain (and that's why it takes me the next 208 pages!), but here's the synopsis: Natural awareness is a way of knowing and a state of being wherein our focus is on the awareness itself rather than on the things we are aware of. It is generally relaxed, effortless, and spacious.

Natural awareness can subjectively feel very powerful. It can feel like a deep sense of peace, joy, love, contentment, serenity, connection, and much more. It can be evoked through specific practices, and it is a type of meditation in and of itself. It can become a familiar state, accessible in daily life and regularly experienced as you meditate with it over time.

Because natural awareness is hard to define, it is primarily recognized experientially. Let me give you some markers of it. Natural awareness can feel like:

- Your mind is completely aware and undistracted without you doing anything in particular to make yourself aware.
- Your mind is like wide open space, and everything in it is just passing by.
- You are aware but not identified with the part of you that is aware.
- Your mind feels at rest.
- You are noticing that you are noticing, and you are abiding in that awareness.
- Everything just seems to be happening on its own.
- You feel a sense of contentment not connected to external conditions.
- You are simply being—without agenda—and this beingness creates a feeling of timelessness and ease.

You can experience natural awareness in one of these ways or some combination of them. Everyone experiences it in different ways, and how you experience it can vary from day to day.

Maybe one or more of the markers above makes sense to you. If you think you have had a taste of natural awareness or entered the territory of natural awareness, please trust that. Any experiential sense of natural awareness will become a touchstone that you can always return to during your meditation practice or in life.

2 WHAT MAKES NATURAL AWARENESS NATURAL?

I call this type of awareness *natural awareness* because this name seems to be the best one to get at its qualities:

It's natural or inherent to all humans. All humans have had experiences during which their mind seems to rest in a place of ease or well-being. In the introduction, I shared my own story of accessing this place as a teenager. Countless students have told me of times that they encountered this territory when they were in nature, playing sports, or viewing art. One student told me that the second she heard a description of natural awareness, she remembered sitting under a tree in the woods on a fall day as a small child, her mind entirely at rest. Another shared that throughout his life, he had encountered a profound sense of ease and immersion while shooting hoops. Another student was reminded of early days in her marriage when she and her partner would sit on the porch listening to old records (yes, this was a while ago). They had no agenda; they just listened and sat and “be’d” together. (Recollecting this memory actually led quite naturally to her opening to natural awareness in that moment.)

Many of us can recall a sense of “just being.” Just being isn't natural awareness, but it is evocative of it and in the same territory.

It's natural in that it's always available, if we can find it. The term *natural awareness* invites us to notice or rediscover the awareness that already exists and is available at any moment.

I like the following analogy, which I learned from Loch Kelly, a teacher of “effortless mindfulness”: Natural awareness is like a radio station that is always blasting and is always available to us. However, much of the time we are tuned to a different radio station. We tend to tune to station anxiety, station catastrophizing, KPFI Judgment, or WNC Anger. So even though natural awareness is part of being human, we need to practice tuning in to it in order for it to become the radio station we listen to most often.

The word *natural* helps evoke it. I also like the term natural awareness because the words themselves seem to evoke a quality of resting, letting go, letting things be—all of which are qualities of the awareness I’m pointing to. It arises when our minds let go. Much of the time we’re caught in our drama and what we might call *ordinary mind*. We are holding tight to our opinions, beliefs, desires, and so on. We basically believe our own stories 99 percent of the time. However, we can learn to let go of these stories, and when we do, we find a freedom of mind—a mind that’s not clinging to anything. What is here in the wake of clinging, when we really investigate? You’d be right if you guessed a natural awareness.

RECOLLECTION

One of the simplest ways to access natural awareness is through memory. Let yourself remember a time when you felt awake, connected, peaceful, expansive—in a state of “beingness.” Recall this time. Don’t try too hard; let it come to you in a simple way.

Perhaps you were in nature, in the midst of athletic activity, in the creative flow, lying at rest in bed, with a lover, or laughing uproariously with your best friend. Can you remember where you were? What did you see? Hear? Now remember how you felt at the time. What did your body feel like? How about your heart? See if you can invite in a full-bodied experience of the memory. Recall details: sight, scents, sounds, any other sensory experience.

Now notice what is happening in the present moment. See if a sense of beingness is present for you, just by your imagining a past experience. What does that beingness feel like? Connectedness, ease, presence, relaxation? Let yourself rest here.

3 WHY IS NATURAL AWARENESS SO HARD TO FIND?

If natural awareness is part of what it means to be a human being and is always available, why isn't everyone walking around resting their minds in it? Why do we have just occasional whispers of it, if that? Why does it feel so far away?

There are so many answers to these questions. Some of the ancient teachings tell us that natural awareness is too obvious, too close—as close as our face, some say. It's also so subtle that it is almost impossible to recognize unless it has been pointed out to you. Or else it's too easy to recognize! It's right here, and yet we miss it all the time. Clearly, it's not intuitively easy to first recognize and then sustain or deepen our experience of it, nor is it easy find our way back to it regularly and at will.

Resting our minds in natural awareness also seems to be the opposite of how most people typically live. Most of us are lost in ordinary mind. We are caught in our dramas, lost in habitual reactivity, anxiety, irritation, or sadness. Or we are checked out, operating on automatic pilot, just kind of going through the motions as we sail through life. Either way, we're missing much of our lives. Ordinary mind feels familiar.

Connecting to natural awareness can feel counterintuitive, or it can simply feel unfamiliar to most people. We are used to our habitual states of mind, and so we stay in them most of the time. Those moments when we taste something different, such as in the creative or athletic flow, are like little bleeps that wake

us up and point to something wonderful beyond our small self, but that is not our usual mode of being.

Plus we live in a world that seems to be about evoking the opposite of natural awareness. Most people, at least in the globally northern world, tend to be living a life of speed and distraction. Distraction from what? Well, from ourselves. The worlds we inhabit are practically invented to keep us from looking inward. There are television and technology and smart-phones and tablets and 24/7 news cycles and invasive media. Our devices in and of themselves aren't necessarily inherently harmful, but most of us use them to check out of ourselves, rather than check in with ourselves.

Then there's the ever-present to-do list that we can never get to the bottom of. Personally, I have a university mindfulness center to run, with the endless tasks that entails; I have to get my daughter's permission slip for the beach cleanup filled out by tomorrow; and I have about four hundred emails cluttering up my inbox. If I listen to and take seriously a voice that says, "You have too much to do," I will never meditate. I am way too busy a person to foster awareness! And when we finally check off everything on our to-do list, there's always the "should" list: I should clean out my files, repair my bicycle, and get my daughter into another one of those classes she doesn't really need.

Put all of this together, add a sprinkling of despair at the state of the world, economic uncertainty, environmental catastrophe, or just making ends meet, and sure enough, you will begin to see that accessing natural awareness is not so easy—at least on your own.

4 WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

Natural awareness is one of many ways of being aware, and awareness is good no matter how you slice it. But there are many other reasons why you might be drawn to a natural awareness practice:

You've already experienced natural awareness. While you are meditating, you might find that, although you are trying to keep your attention on a focus point, like your breath, your mind keeps settling into a more spacious, open awareness. It seems like natural awareness is where your meditation practice wants to take you at the moment.

You've gotten some of the goodies already. Perhaps you are already accessing natural awareness and are experiencing its fruits. For example, maybe you feel more peaceful and calm or have experienced profound feelings of well-being and ease, and those feelings seem to bleed over into your daily life.

You've been working too hard. I have met many students of classical mindfulness meditation over the years (and, I confess, I was one of them) who exert massive amounts of energy to keep their attention focused, who try to be aware of every moment, and who often feel a disturbing tightness and tension in their meditation practice. When they begin to relax into a more natural awareness, the struggle ceases, and they find they can continue to practice with much greater ease and spaciousness. They don't have to try so hard to be aware.

You need something to counteract self-judgment. Practitioners often judge their meditation practice and themselves ruthlessly.

I remember in my early years of practice I told a friend I was a terrible mindfulness practitioner because I could be mindful only about ten times during the day. He gently replied, “Why don’t you reframe it? ‘How *wonderful*—I am mindful ten times in a day!’” I carried a lot of self-judgment, and the narrative in my head was rife with criticisms like *You’re not doing this well enough!* When I began to practice tuning in to natural awareness, I realized there was nothing really to get and that inherently my mind was already aware. The judging inner critic soon went on sabbatical (and now visits only from time to time).

You’re looking for freedom from mind chatter. Natural awareness practices are not about working hard to calm our wild mind but about shifting into an already existing place of rest and freedom beneath the chatter. An analogy that’s often used is moving from the turbulence of the waves above into the deep stillness of the ocean below. As my dear friend Wim, who passed away many years ago, used to say, “Would you rather have a mind lost in thought or resting in awareness? You decide.”

You want to be free of your dramas. Our mind is usually busy defending, worrying, explaining, fighting, and comparing. Natural awareness offers another way for our mind to be—a way that is not lost in these dramas but that has a feel of freedom to it. In experiencing natural awareness, we let go. And when we let go, what is there in the wake of letting go? The goodness of our own mind—the space of a mind free of drama. This is a sacred place. We usually just zip past it—“Phew! I’m no longer caught in my story. I’m not in pain anymore”—and then we move on. But we can learn to rest in this freedom.

You want freedom from ego drama and polarization. It’s extraordinary when we can step aside from our usual focus on me, me, me—on our separateness—and open to a sense of something greater than our own small ego dramas. Spending time in natural awareness is an amazing antidote to the

self-centeredness and polarization that our world is rife with. The practice of accessing natural awareness could potentially change our ego-driven behavior.

It's lovely. Sometimes when accessing natural awareness we feel a lovely sense of compassion, kindness, interconnection, joy, and radiance. Think how your embodiment of these qualities can impact all whom you meet.