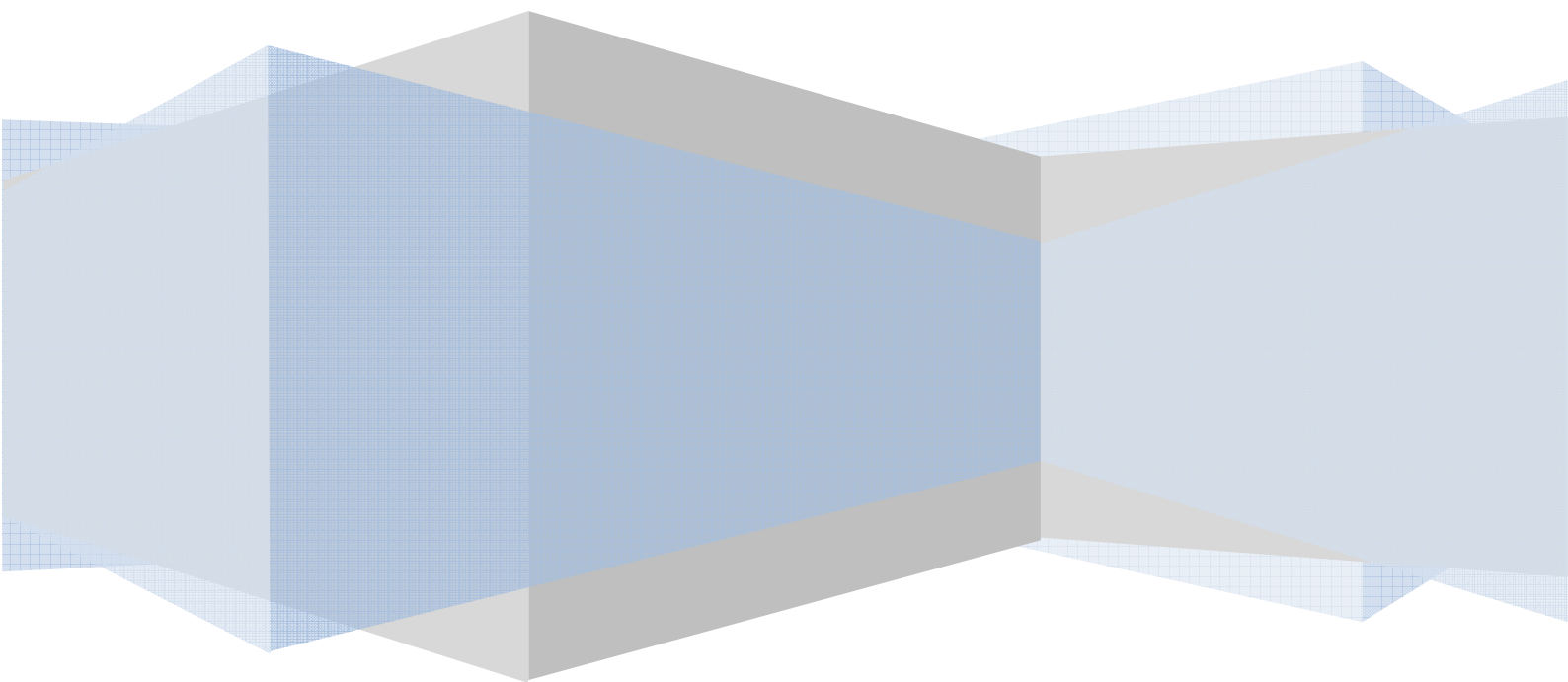


THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF AWARENESS

Andrew Marshall

March 2011

www.joyousness.org



THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF AWARENESS

There is a magical quality to awareness. We may not give it much consideration, but our awareness dictates not only how we are but also who we are – or at least who we *think* we are, as illustrated in the traditional tale of the ugly duckling.

It follows that, if we take charge of our awareness, we have the power to transform our lives. Although we cannot control nature or determine the circumstances that life will bring to us, we can choose to be in control of ourselves and, by doing so, maintain inner stability. Even when everything around us seems to be going awry, it is possible to retain clarity and confidence.

For most of us, the awareness is easily distracted and our mind is often filled with thoughts, ideas and memories that are irrelevant to what is going on in the present moment. How we focus our awareness is similar to shining a torch beam – we are conscious of whatever we shine it on. Children playing with a torch will point the light in almost every direction, constantly moving it, seeing what is lit up and then aiming at something else. Our normal state of mind and awareness can often be like that, flitting from one thing to another. Conversely, it can be the case that something fascinates us and then the focus is held without trying. Once the fascination is gone, however, more distractions arise until something else our attention. Producers of television programmes know this tendency – observe how quickly camera

shots change, often every two or three seconds, and in advertisements within a split second.

If we are to enjoy a calm and clear mind, we need to be enchanted by everything we see, hear, taste, feel and think. That enchantment can only come when we fully appreciate the people we interact with, and the things and circumstances in which we are engaged, in any given moment. We have to develop a richness and fascination for life and every aspect of it. Then we are in a position to turn our focus in any direction we choose and by doing so have the opportunity to significantly improve our quality of life.

One of the main causes of unhappiness is that our self-identity tends to be governed by how our mind is habitually focused – as in the ugly duckling story. It is human nature to identify ourselves with our environment and with the conditioning that makes up our personality. For example, many people identify themselves with their main occupation, their sex, home, family or relationships, social connections and so on – and, of course, their name. So John may say, ‘Hello, I’m John – I’m a graphic designer from London. I have a partner called Jo and we have a small child. At weekends, I play for a local ice-hockey team.’ But John cannot be all these things at the same time. When he is working, he is a designer – but he is not an ice-hockey player. When he is playing ice-hockey, he is not a graphic designer. When he is with Jo, he is neither of these things but becomes a partner or lover and, when with their child, a father. If he is fully present in whatever he undertakes, the ‘John’ aspect of him will also disappear. We only are what our awareness makes us in any given moment.

One of the strongest forms of identification we have is with the physical body. It is a rare person indeed who does not associate their identity with the body at least to some extent. We live in a world of form, so it is natural that we tend to identify with our own outer form. Naturally, too, we recognise others principally by their form or

outer appearance. There are limits to this, of course; in talking on the phone, we recognise a person by their voice, for example. But, by and large, it is an individual's appearance that we regard as 'the person', with the thoughts, feelings and behaviour that they exhibit as being their 'character'.

This tendency causes us problems. Body consciousness can make us feel unhappy if we don't like what we see in the mirror – too fat, too thin, insufficiently developed here and an excess there – and notice how easy it is to regard the reflection as real. "I've put on weight, I look older, I look wonderful" and so on. Fooled by this illusion, the perception of being separate from others, and the complex emotions that stem from it, are reinforced. Body consciousness underlines our vulnerability, too, as we suffer, or see others suffer, from sickness, the effects of ageing and death. Because we see the body as real, its deterioration and the prospect of its eventual demise can be frightening.

Another, and perhaps more significant, problem is that body consciousness confines our awareness to a three-dimensional world, where what we perceive through our physical senses is taken to be both the beginning and end of reality. So the world we live in is seen as the only source of enjoyment – and as nothing in it is safe from change, any fulfilment can only be temporary. Happiness is easily threatened unless we take our awareness beyond the three-dimensional and realise that what is usually perceived to be reality is nothing but a magical display.

How can we raise our awareness in such a way? A key to this is the natural tendency for the mind to remain with those things it is enchanted by. We need to release the grip that holds it to the world of form. As the strongest hold is the illusion of the body being real, this makes a good place to start. All we need to do is reflect on the nature of the body – it is an appearance that is in a constant state of change. Nothing about the body we had

as a child is with us now. A river appears to be a permanent feature of the landscape, but it is actually flowing water that changes from moment to moment. The cells in our body are constantly being replaced and the forces and energy patterns that mould the appearance of the body are also changing – energy is dynamic, not static. We may even reflect on the fact that nothing of our body is manmade; every cell is composed of matter that comes from numerous elements. So it can be helpful to reflect fairly frequently on the nature of the body – *"this body is not me, it is not mine, it is not myself."*

As we become used to seeing the body as being an appearance that is in a constant state of change, the mind becomes freer. It is a small extension of this practice to see that all forms share the same quality of being temporary appearances. Realising that everything is a magical display can release a great deal of inner tension. For a good while, we may only have an intellectual understanding – in other words, we have to think about it or imagine it – but gradually our perceptions will change. Incidentally, it is important to remember that this approach is not saying that the body and other forms do not exist – simply that they are not the fixtures that they are usually taken to be.

By releasing our awareness from the apparent solidity of everything around us, we are ready to release ourselves from the thoughts, emotions, desires, beliefs and traits that make up what we call our character or personality. It is not uncommon to think that these are real and permanent but, like the body, they are continually changing. Reflecting on the nature of the main factors that comprise the personality does not harm or destroy our character but instead frees us from the grip of believing "this is me". Using the analogy of the torch, we focus the beam so that we can see more clearly and, with increased understanding, become liberated from the idea of a little self. If we are angry, for example, we feel the feelings that are present in us without trying

to judge, justify or suppress them in any way at all. *“Aware of this feeling of anger, I slowly breathe in. Aware of this feeling of anger, I slowly breathe out. This feeling is not me, it is not mine, it is not myself.”* Anger is a strong feeling, so we carry on with this exercise until the feeling has abated, which it will. Whenever we criticise ourselves for being angry or blame someone else for us being that way, we set up a train of negative thought patterns which inevitably creates difficulties later on. By increasing our awareness, those tendencies that hold us back and create unhappiness are healed and transformed.

Gradually, the fierce grip that we have on the body, feelings and so on as being “me” decreases. We can almost experience a sigh of relief as we let go of the false picture we have of ourselves. There comes a certain lightness and sense of freedom, and life becomes so much richer and more enjoyable. Our various roles in life can be seen for what they are – roles and responsibilities that circumstances may demand we carry out for the time being, but they are not actually *us*.

As this sense of freedom begins to pervade our life, we are in a better position to shift our awareness to a higher level. When we think we are just a designer, a labourer, a teacher, a mother and so on, we identify with that role. It is like being in an aircraft flying beneath a cloud base without a view of the sky – our view is restricted to the mundane. When we wake up to who and what we really are, the clouds of our mind begin to disperse. We begin to understand that our nature is more like the boundless blue sky, a sky that is not aloof from the world but which cradles it without becoming blemished by it.

The ugly duckling was transformed not by growing into a swan but by realising its swan-nature. Its awareness shifted from believing it was a duckling into knowing it was a swan. In the same way, we have to understand that our nature is greater

than we believe it to be. We have to understand that we are all spiritual beings undergoing a process of learning and transformation. Only then are we likely to think, speak and act ethically, with compassion and with the good of the whole in mind. Our view then becomes multi-dimensional and we develop a sense of responsibility, not only for humanity but for the whole environment and every living creature in it. Any tendency towards being self-centred fades – not all at once, but gradually – like mist evaporating in the morning sunshine.

This transformation is very real and it continues to evolve. We enjoy a broadening of awareness that comes from a simple shift of focus – and rather than just a torch, we have a light that is always on.

Andrew Marshall

March 2011

Andrew Marshall is the author of a number of articles that are published on www.joyousness.org and www.fieryyheart.org. The articles may be copied for private use provided they are copied in their entirety and that no charge whatsoever is made for them.

Andrew has written two books – *The Great Little Book of Happiness* was published in 2008 and *Awakening Heart* is due for release on 1st June 2011.

© Andrew Marshall 2011