



DIANA WINSTON

THE
LITTLE
BOOK OF
BEING

PRACTICES AND
GUIDANCE FOR
UNCOVERING YOUR
NATURAL AWARENESS

BOOK EXCERPT

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. 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, KPFJudgment, or WNCAnger. 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 smartphones 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 separate-ness—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.

5 UM, WHAT IS MEDITATION?

I consider meditation to be any practice that cultivates inward investigation. It is as simple as that. The word *meditation* is a giant umbrella term for these practices, and there are many types of practices that fall under it.

You can think of it in the way we think of sports. *Sports* is the general word, and there are dozens of categories of sports: land activities, water activities, ball related, animal oriented, and so on. Within each category there are often countless variations of sports: beach volleyball, land volleyball, pool volleyball, and so on.

There are dozens of categories of meditation, including concentration practices, positive emotions practices, physical meditations, prayer, and healing practices. Within each of these categories are practices that are endlessly creative and generative, and I couldn't even begin to count them, just as new sports are continually being invented. (Have you heard of chess boxing, cheese rolling, or extreme ironing?)

Awareness practices are a particular category of meditation. Awareness practices can teach us how to cultivate awareness and how to recognize, prolong, stabilize, and live from awareness. This book focuses only on awareness practices and not on any other type of meditation. We won't be exploring visualization or walking a labyrinth, prayer, or other contemplative practices, all of which are valuable but outside the scope of this book.

Within the category of awareness practices is classical mindfulness meditation. Because it has gained quite a bit of currency in the West in the past decade, we might think of classical mindfulness meditation as the baseball of meditation—well-known, frequently practiced, and well loved. (Although it's hardly a spectator sport. In fact, I can't think of anything more boring than watching someone do classical mindfulness meditation. But then again, lots of people say that about baseball, too.)

For more about classical mindfulness meditation, please see chapter 6 and chapters 15 through 19.

A Word about the Word *Practice*

I have already used the word *practice* many times, so let me take a moment to clarify the meaning. *Practice* means to actively and deliberately work, generally through repetition, to develop or cultivate something, usually a skill. To become proficient at playing a musical instrument, for example, we practice daily, often for hours. Meditation is no exception; it requires ongoing, regular, daily practice in order for one to develop facility.

Meditators tend to refer to meditating simply as *practicing*; we might say, "I practiced this morning for thirty minutes" or "I didn't practice at all yesterday. I'm a slacker!" An outside observer might be confused. Practice what? For whatever reason, *practice* has become shorthand for "meditating." To confuse things even further, we also call meditations themselves *practices*. "How is your practice going?" is a common question that means, "How is your meditation practice coming along?"

Also confusing is how we can use the word *practice* not just to mean meditation but also to mean a shift of mind you can deliberately make at any moment. An example of this is what I call the *glimpse practices* throughout the book. They are not full-on, extended meditation sessions, but short moments of practicing natural awareness that can be employed in the midst of your daily meditation practice or any time during the day.

ASK YOURSELF . . .

Try this practice at any moment. In meditation you might want to focus your mind before you employ it. In daily life, try it when you feel drawn to.

Turn your attention to whatever is happening in the moment, which we might call “just this.” “Just this” could be anything—thoughts, emotions, sensations, sounds, your breath, the visual field, or some combination of these things. Then drop the following question into your mind and see what happens, as if you were dropping a stone into a pond to notice the ripples:

“Is it okay to be aware of just this?”

6 BUT WHAT ABOUT REGULAR OLD MINDFULNESS PRACTICE?

Perhaps you have been practicing mindfulness meditation for some time, and now you've picked up this book. You may be quite confused. Have you been wasting your time? Have you been practicing an inferior form of meditation and only now are finding the secret, advanced teachings?

No!

Practicing mindfulness meditation may well have been life changing for you. You may have found that your mindfulness meditation practice has given you a way to reduce stress, build attention, regulate emotions, and cultivate states of well-being. These are not small things. But mindfulness is not the full picture of how one can cultivate awareness.

For the sake of this book, I'll call the practice you have been doing *classical mindfulness meditation*. I need to distinguish this familiar way of practicing meditation from natural awareness practices. *Classical mindfulness meditation* is an imperfect term because natural awareness practice is also classical (that is, rooted in its own tradition) and there are forms of classical mindfulness meditation that enter the territory of natural awareness. But hang in here with me, and you'll see why the distinction is useful in our contemporary meditation context. You will also see that many of the general instructions throughout the book apply to both kinds of practices.

Mindfulness 101: The Basics

I define *mindfulness* as paying attention to our present-moment experiences with openness, curiosity, and a willingness to be with what is. It is a deliberate application of attention. Mindfulness itself is experienced and cultivated through practicing classical mindfulness meditation. Classical mindfulness meditation typically involves placing your attention on a main object of awareness, such as your breathing,

and when your wily attention wanders away, you gently but firmly bring it back to your main focus. Over time, as your mind gains stability, you learn to expand your attention to other objects of awareness (such as sounds, sensations, emotions, or thoughts).

Additionally, mindfulness is a *quality of attention* that you can bring to any moment and practice daily in an informal way. So once you understand how to be mindful, you can be mindful in the midst of your day just by remembering to be mindful in that moment. Noticing sensations in your body or the feel of your breath in the present moment is one great way to be informally mindful. You can then bring mindfulness into a daily activity like showering or eating. You can be mindful while walking or exercising. People often practice being mindful in a moment of stress or during strong, difficult emotions.

If you are new to the practice of classical mindfulness meditation, chapters 15 through 19 will give you much more detail about it. Many students find it is helpful to begin with classical mindfulness meditation before moving to natural awareness meditation, which is why you'll find that classical mindfulness meditation instructions appear first in this book. Some people do jump right into natural awareness meditation.

7 THE SPECTRUM OF AWARENESS PRACTICES

Go to a window with a busy, active street scene outside of it—one with lots of cars. Or you can imagine this scenario in your mind's eye.

Look out the window. First, make an effort to focus on one car. Follow it as it enters your view out the window and then exits the other side. Choose a few more cars and observe them in this way.

Next, rather than following one car from one side of the window to the other, notice other cars in the scene, one by one. Focus with some effort, but not as intensely as before. Then let your attention go to whatever grabs it, in no particular order. You might notice a blue sedan, then a plumbing truck, then a minivan. Where is your attention drawn? Watch with curiosity as the vehicles grab your attention.

Finally, look out the window again and take in the whole view in front of you. Instead of focusing on any one vehicle or multiple vehicles one by one, can you notice, really, pretty much everything? Can you even notice aspects of your view that might not be in the foreground—like the road or the sky? You may not notice the scene with a lot of specificity, as you did in the earlier views, but can you observe the whole scene in a spacious, relaxed, seemingly effortless way—and still notice the complexity of the many things happening in front of you? Stay here for a while.

As a bonus, see if you can even notice the part of you that is aware of the scene in front of you, looking through the window at the whole view. Can you become aware that you are aware of looking? This part is tricky. Some students report a dissolving of the viewer or sense that they are both perceiving the scene and part of the scene.

This exercise helps you see the different ways you can be aware: focused, flexible, and natural, in that order. Different types of awareness practices cultivate each of the three types of awareness. When you put them on a continuum, you can see how they relate to

one another. In this book I will concentrate primarily on natural awareness practice, but will also include the other types of awareness practices, since, as this continuum shows, they are related to one another. They're just employing different ways of being aware. I call this continuum the *spectrum of awareness practices*.

The Spectrum of Awareness Practices

A spectrum with three types of awareness practices looks like this:



This is the technical part, so hang in here with me. At one end of the spectrum is what we might call *focused awareness practice*. When we are practicing focused awareness, we're making an effort and focusing narrowly on an object—often our breath. When our attention wanders, we notice it has wandered and then return our attention to our breath (or other object of focus). Focused awareness practice is the classical mindfulness meditation practice most people begin with, and it is useful for training unruly minds. It helps us develop stabilization, concentration, and clarity of mind. As you can imagine, it often takes a lot of effort. Focused awareness practice is like tracking a single car as we look out a window.

Next along the spectrum is what we might call *flexible awareness practice*, which is also taught within classical mindfulness meditation. When we are practicing flexible awareness, our awareness has a wider field, rather than being narrowed to only one central focus (like our breath). Sometimes we flexibly move our attention to investigate other objects of awareness that pull us away from our main focus (such as a sound, a sensation, or an emotion) and then return to our main focus after a while. Sometimes our attention may appear to jump around from object to

object, and we rarely return to a main focus. Effort is variable, attention is both broad and narrow, and we still focus on objects. Flexible awareness practice, in our window analogy, is attending to whatever vehicle grabs our attention as we look out the window.

On the far end of the spectrum is *natural awareness practice*, which is not commonly included in classical mindfulness meditation. Natural awareness practice is usually effortless and objectless, emphasizing awareness of awareness. With natural awareness practice, we don't have to try so hard. Our mind tends to rest in a place of ease, and awareness seems to happen on its own. Typically, attention is broad, and it doesn't focus on objects. In our analogy, natural awareness is sitting back and taking in the whole scene simultaneously and without focusing on specific vehicles, even turning our attention to *awareness itself*. Despite not trying to focus, we can effortlessly be aware of the scene.

These three types of awareness practices are not fixed points on the spectrum; there are degrees of each practice, and they blend into one another. There may be other variations along the way, but these three are the main ones. They are different ways that our meditation practice can manifest itself at different times. Sometimes they occur in combination, as if you're doing several things at once.

The most important thing to know is that awareness practices fall on a horizontal spectrum, *not* in a vertical hierarchy or in levels, and are thoroughly related to one another. And they differently emphasize degrees of effort, focus, and objects, as we will talk more about throughout the book.

I often use a single three-step guided meditation practice to teach students about these three individual awareness practices. I teach them in this way, not because one awareness practice is better than another, but because I think it is helpful to have a single set of steps to move our attention from focused awareness (with which meditators are most familiar) to natural awareness (with which meditators are usually

least familiar). Flexible awareness practice is a great intermediary step, as it combines elements from each of the other awareness practices at the opposite ends of the spectrum. I've included my three-step guided meditation practice in the appendix, so you can try it yourself.

Sailing, Diving, and More

Here is my favorite analogy to describe the spectrum of awareness practices. It came from a student who has been meditating for some time.

Focused awareness practice is like being a sailor who is trying to keep a sailboat on course. The sailor adjusts the tiller left or right to navigate where the boat is heading. If it goes off course, they move the tiller accordingly. The sailor has a destination and is working to reach it. They may feel mastery, purpose, and clarity.

Flexible awareness practice is like being a scuba diver. The scuba diver is underwater, eyes wide open, observing the array of fish, coral, and plant life that swim by or float in front of them. They can adjust their depth and amount of oxygen to investigate a particular fish, perhaps; they can also relax in one place and notice what drifts through the sparkling water in their field of vision. Scuba divers often describe a deep sense of peace and awe at the exquisite variety of undersea life.

Natural awareness practice—well, it's sort of like being the water itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Her work has been mentioned or she has been quoted in the *New York Times*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Newsweek*; the *Los Angeles Times*; *Allure*; *Women's Health*; and in a variety of magazines, books, and journals. She is also the author of *Wide Awake: A Buddhist Guide for Teens* (Perigee Books, 2003) and the audio



program *Mindful Meditations*, and has published numerous articles on mindfulness. Diana is a member of the Teacher's Council at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Northern California. She has been practicing mindfulness meditation since 1989, including a year as a Buddhist nun in Burma. Currently, Diana's most challenging and rewarding practice involves trying to mindfully parent an eight-year-old. She lives in Los Angeles.

For more information, visit dianawinston.com and marc.ucla.edu.

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