



Culadasa: Hello, again. In today’s segment, Matthew is going to introduce you to a model of conscious experience that will help you to better understand what’s happening in your mind and what you’re trying to accomplish with your meditation practice.

Matthew Immergut: What I’m going to describe to you is the model of conscious experience. This is the first model that we provide you in the book. There are two other models that we’ll give you along the way: the “moments of consciousness” model and what’s called the “mind system.” Each of these models of mind are interesting in and of themselves, but they also help to facilitate your practice. So as you progress along the stages we introduce new models of mind to help you along the path.

But for today all we’re going to do is introduce to you the model of conscious experience. Essentially, it’s very simple at some level. What is consciousness? Consciousness is what we are experiencing in the moment—the sights, sounds, feelings, thoughts, memories. These are all arising and passing away in our conscious experience. That conscious experience comes to us in two different forms, either as attention or peripheral awareness. We could just say attention and awareness. So whenever we say “awareness,” we also mean “peripheral awareness.”

Think about it this way: whatever we place our attention on dominates our conscious experience and at the same time we can be peripherally aware of other information. So, for instance, right now, you are paying attention to what I’m saying. At the same time, you’re peripherally aware of where you are, what’s going on around you and you’re probably peripherally aware, in the background, of thoughts, feelings, and reactions to what I’ve been saying so far.

To give you another example, just to make it really clear about the distinction between attention and awareness, fix your eyes on something—you can fix your eyes on me or you can fix your eyes on your computer screen or the television, wherever you’re watching.



Put your attention, your visual attention, on that object, and notice how you can simultaneously be aware of other information in your peripheral vision. That gives you another way to think about attention and awareness and this difference between the two. Watch throughout your day the way in which attention and awareness are working. You could be talking to a friend—very engaged in a conversation attending to what they’re saying and at the same time peripherally aware of other thoughts, where you are, and maybe if you’re drinking tea, the taste of the tea. What you’ll notice, what’s very interesting is, if you shift your attention whatever was dominating your conscious experience slips into the background, into awareness, and the new object then begins to dominate your conscious experience.

The reason this is important is because we’re going to be working with attention and awareness in this practice. I should say, before we move on, that attention and awareness are two different ways of knowing the world. They give us two different types of information. They have different jobs, so to speak.

Attention’s job is to isolate, to extract out of the millions of bits of information we are bombarded with moment to moment one or two of those bits of information to interpret, to analyze. Attention is very conceptual and it builds up that raw material into these concepts of reality that we can easily understand. Another interesting thing about attention is that it’s very self-referential. Whatever we put our attention on, we tend to identify with. If I place my attention on a computer, it suddenly becomes “my” computer. If I place my attention on my car, it becomes “my” car. Same with myself: if I place my attention on myself, it becomes “me” or “my” or “I.”

Peripheral awareness is much less conceptual. It doesn’t isolate at all. It’s holistic, it’s relational, it is about the bigger picture—where you are, what’s going on, the context of your surroundings. Right now you’re watching me, but you’re probably simultaneously aware of the house you’re



sitting in or the office you're sitting in. You know where you are, you know what you're doing. Awareness provides that bigger picture, the holistic picture.

In this practice, attention and awareness are used in these very specific ways. Too often meditation instructions come and say, “Pay attention to the breath. Be aware of the breath.” In this technique and in this practice, we're going to keep that specificity of the terms. When we mean attention. When we say “attention,” we mean that focusing, isolating function. When we say “awareness,” we mean that holistic, open awareness.

In this practice, we're working with attention and awareness to develop what Culadasa mentioned earlier is stability of attention and mindfulness. Stability of attention (samadhi) and mindfulness (sati). We're going to work with attention and awareness to increase our stability of attention and progressively, as we move through the stages, increase the power of our mindfulness.

But let's look at these two in a little bit more detail. What does it mean to have stable attention? Having stable attention means you can direct your attention; you can keep it sustained on any object that you choose and you can control the scope, how wide, how narrow. Imagine you want to look at something. If you want to look at something in the distance, you have to keep your attention stable. You have to keep it there to make sure you can figure out what it is and you also need to control the scope, how wide or how narrow you're focusing in to see that thing that you're looking at in all its detail. That's what “stability of attention” means.

It's important to understand how our attention moves on a day-to-day basis. What are the spontaneous movements of attention? Most of the time our attention moves spontaneously in three different ways. Our attention moves day-to-day either by scanning, being captured, or alternating. These are all spontaneous movements of attention. They should be familiar to all of you because we are all experiencing them all the time.



Scanning of attention is when attention spontaneously moves to objects of interest, something that might bring pleasure, something that might cause pain, objects of aversion or desire. Basically, our attention is spontaneously moving all day long, scanning the external world, and the internal environment for something of interest.

Being captured: let's say a loud noise suddenly captures your attention—your attention is immediately drawn to something. You're walking on the beach and you stub your toe on a rock—your attention is immediately captured by that pain in your toe. That's scanning and capturing.

The third way in which our attention moves is alternating. This is a little more subtle spontaneous movement. It's subtle in the sense that we don't notice it until actually around Stage 4; there, we begin to actually see our attention alternating. Prior to Stage 4, alternating attention gives us the illusion that we're paying attention to two or more things at the same time. For instance, when you're multitasking or if you are listening to a lecture and doodling at the same time. Often people will say, “Well, I can do both things simultaneously. I'm paying attention to both.” What's actually happening when you're doodling and listening to somebody is your attention is alternating very, very rapidly back and forth. This is another kind of spontaneous movement of attention.

As you progress through the stages, what eventually happens is all of those spontaneous movements of attention are replaced by intentional movements of attention. That means stability of attention. As you progress stage by stage, your attention no longer scans. It stops being captured so easily, and you can stop it from alternating if you choose. Basically that means that you have stability of attention; again, the ability to direct, to sustain and to control the scope of your attention fully. That's stability of attention.



Now mindfulness. You're working through the stages to develop mindfulness and as Culadasa said earlier, “mindfulness” is a translation of the word *sati*. It may be an unfortunate translation, because mindfulness evokes this idea of paying attention or remembering to pay attention. But, as I just discussed, we're always paying attention to something. We can be paying attention without *sati* or with *sati*. There's some qualitative difference between our everyday remembering to pay attention and the qualities of *sati*. In this practice, the definition of mindfulness—when we'll use that term or the definition of *sati*—is going to be the optimal interaction between attention and awareness.

This needs some explanation, but let me say it again: Mindfulness means the optimal interaction of attention and awareness. We have this optimal interaction because there's more power in the mind. That is, as you progressively move through the stages, the mind becomes more powerful. We talked about usually attention and awareness, and an exchange of energy. As attention is taking up the energy, awareness collapses, and vice versa.

But in the stages of meditation you're increasing the overall power of the mind so that these trade-offs don't happen. How do you do that? It's really quite simple. You focus your attention and keep your awareness open. It's that simple, because what you're doing in that moment when you're focusing your attention and working to keep your awareness open is that you're, in a sense, bringing more energy into the mind for those two systems. We have what we could call awareness deficit disorder. We underutilize awareness. We over-utilize attention because it's in our conscious control. We can consciously direct attention. Awareness is not under our conscious control. It's stimulus-driven. It's what they call bottom up. It arises automatically. We tend to under-use awareness and over-use attention.

In this practice we're going to begin to even out that over-use of attention by intentionally exercising and working with our awareness. At first, you may not be really clear about the distinction between attention and awareness. It's simply because we're just not accustomed to



using it. That's another thing we're going to do in this practice: getting familiar with awareness, and working with attention together, so that the overall energy of the mind will increase. That's going to optimize the interaction between attention and awareness and the end result will be powerful mindfulness and stable attention.

One of the ways attention and aware work together is that as attention hones in awareness keeps the bigger picture in mind. Awareness sets the context: what's going on around you, what's happening, why you're doing what you're doing, and so forth. Now let's say one of the two isn't working. Attention and awareness are not working optimally. What will happen if awareness collapses is that we tend to make bad judgments. We tend to interpret situations wrongly. We tend to overreact.

Let me give you a very concrete example that'll help clarify this. Let's say that your partner has had a terrible day at work, really awful. They've been in a fight with the boss, whatever, and they come home—you cook them a meal and they sit down to eat—and since they've had a terrible day, they immediately start complaining about the food you made. Without mindfulness, what will usually happen is that awareness of the bigger picture will collapse and you will get hyper-focused into a kind of fight-or-flight mode. You'll hear their criticism as a personal attack and the reaction will be to start a fight most likely.

This is the suboptimal performance of attention and awareness. In that moment, awareness collapsed, because all of the energy was poured into attention. I'll give you another example and a way they work together, attention and awareness work together.

When it hones in, awareness acts as an alert system, so that we don't get startled or taken off guard. The two objectives of your meditation practice are to work with attention and awareness to develop stability of attention and mindfulness. What looks like is you're going to focus your attention. We're moving away from those spontaneous movements of attention, we're directing



our attention towards a defined meditation object. Most of the time in this practice it's going to be the sensations of the breath at the nose, which Culadasa will explain in the next class.

We're going to bring our attention to that meditation object and at the same time we're going to keep our awareness open. We're going to keep our awareness open to both the external environment and the internal environment. This is also called extrospective awareness and introspective awareness.

You're going to bring your attention to the breath at the nose and, especially in the early stages, you're going to not block out anything. You're going to let sounds come in. Your eyes will mostly be closed. You're going to let sensations come in. You're going to let thoughts arise and pass away. You're not going to block anything out. Too often when meditators come to the practice they think that they're going to really still the mind. They're going to silence their mind. They're going to force their mind and force their attention into this kind of hyper-focus and block everything else out.

That's a big mistake. It's a big mistake because that's essentially a fight-or-flight mode. That's the kind of attention we have when there's something dangerous in the environment. What you'll notice today is there's a lot of what's called distracted walking. That is, people walking on their devices and often running into things. What's happening there is again very similar to the first example—attention is collapsing onto the device, onto the phone, and the awareness is completely gone. The alert system, that system that says, “Hey, look out, there's a car coming down the road,” is gone.

This is the new phenomena of distracted walking and it's actually a significant problem. What's happening there is that collapse of the function of awareness. That awareness is disintegrated or fallen away. You've become hyper-focused and therefore awareness can no longer alert you, not



only to the context of where you are, but awareness now cannot alert you to the fact that a car is coming down the road.

Mindfulness reverses this equation. Mindfulness allows it to be so that there's no longer—there's this optimization between attention and awareness so we can hone in on something, but at the same time keep our awareness completely open. The reason we can do that is because there's more energy in the mind. This is the part of mindfulness training that's often left out; often mindfulness is presented simply as a skill. It is a skill, but you also have to be able to develop the raw mental power of the mind so that mindfulness can be used, so that optimization can be used most efficiently.

Think of it this way: the mind is an energy system and attention and awareness draw from that energy system, so there's always a tradeoff. When attention is very focused, awareness collapses and vice versa. The progress of mindfulness through the stages is where these tradeoffs no longer happen. The reason that these tradeoffs no longer happen is because the mind as a whole has become more powerful, more conscious; conscious experience is more vivid. So then, there are no more tradeoffs between attention and awareness.

Too often when people begin meditating, they hyper-focus their attention. They squeeze everything down into or try to will the mind into this singular focus. This is a big mistake. When you force the mind into that position, it's essentially a fight-or-flight focus and it's going to create all sorts of agitation and frustration in your meditation.

In this practice, we're never going to work with willpower or force—we're going to work with skill, finesse, and ease. Again, we're going to bring our attention to the breath at the nose and keep our awareness open. As you progress through the stages eventually you will drop the extrospective awareness. Eventually, you will drop awareness of the surrounding environment and you're going to increase introspective awareness. That introspective awareness is going to



grow clearer and brighter and more powerful. But the way to do that, again, is by, in the very beginning, not excluding anything from your peripheral awareness, working with these two systems—attention and awareness—to create this balance.

One of the ways you can think about it is to imagine carrying a cup of hot tea through a crowded room. If you are hyper-focused on the tea, you're going to run into something. If you're not focused at all, you're going to spill the tea.

What we're striving for in this practice is this ideal balance between attention and awareness, so that your attention is focused on the breath and your awareness is completely open—you know where you are, you know what you're doing, you know how the mind is behaving. This is the aim and this is how we're going to work with attention and awareness.

This is the basic instruction of how to work with attention and awareness and the way it's going to progress as you move through the stages of meditation. As you progress through the stages, just to remind you and to summarize, the two aims are stability of attention and mindfulness. These are the first two characteristics of *samatha* and they demarcate the objectives that you are going to be working towards as you move through this practice.