

~ *The Difference between Awareness and Mindfulness* ~

Mingyur Rinpoche

Many people ask me a question: “What is the difference between awareness and mindfulness?” Basically, they are the same. The Tibetan words are *trenpa* and *rigpa*. *Trenpa* and *rigpa* are sometimes translated as “awareness” and sometimes as “mindfulness.” But I choose “awareness” because it is closer to the main meaning of *trenpa* and *rigpa*.

Of course, nowadays, there are many meditation styles that are called “mindfulness meditation.” Many of them are very good and wonderful. And some of them are new age, or people do not know the real meditation practices and just come up with their own. One time I saw an advertisement saying, “Seven days to enlightenment!” with a picture of a person flying in the air. [Mingyur Rinpoche laughs.]

Basically, I can say that there are two aspects here: object-oriented and subject-oriented. Object-oriented means, like what I hear about mindfulness meditation, that it has an object. It always needs an object. It may be the breath, sounds, your body, feelings, thoughts, or phenomena. There are so many different objects, and you stay with the object. If you get distracted from it, you need to come back to the object. So you need concentration. This is good, wonderful. But for some people, it is quite difficult because then the focus will become very narrow, and when you will not let the mind go to various places, it will be like when we say “no pizza” and then more pizza comes, right? Similarly, it is kind of tight for many people.

My lineage is totally open. Awareness is like a lamp. In a candle lamp, the flame has two qualities: one is that it illuminates things around itself — a cup, table, water, trees, vegetables, or whatever things are around it — and everything will become visible. That is the object. The mind has the ability to perceive the object. Not only that, but the mind also has the ability of self-luminosity, self-clarity. This means that the flame is the light. You do not need to use a flashlight to see the flame.

In my tradition, the main focus is on awareness. Objects are not so important. You can take *any* object as support to connect with awareness. Objects are just a reference point. The main important thing is to connect with awareness. Awareness is very open and very vast. Then, whatever phenomena can be a support for recognition of awareness, for connecting with awareness.

Sometimes I make a joke. There are two words: “mindfulness” and “awareness.” “Mindfulness” is a little bit conservative, and awareness is more liberal. [Mingyur Rinpoche laughs.] It is just a joke.

But the word “awareness,” for me, is connected with the subject-oriented aspect. Awareness is the subject. And mindfulness is more connected — this is what I feel — with the object-oriented. It is more focused on the object — for example, the breath is important. But here, awareness is important. The breath is just a reference point for awareness.

Therefore, in the end, all phenomena, or whatever comes to your mind — your experiences, feelings, ups and downs, suffering, *kleshas*, happiness — in the end will become a support for recognizing awareness. Awareness is always present and free. It is beyond and very calm and pure. And this wonderful nature is always with us. It is with me and with you all the time. The problem is that we do not recognize it. It is there with you, but you do not recognize it. Sometimes I say it is like “a bird flying in the sky without knowing the sky, a fish swimming in the river without knowing the water.” This freedom, this presentness, this openness . . . It is awake, present, and wakeful. This wakeful presence of awareness is with us all the time. It is wonderful.

The important thing is that we need to connect with it. You can connect with that awareness through any object, or without an object is also okay. That is the practice of awareness.