

Thomas Jordan

Self-awareness, meta-awareness and the witness self¹

Developing awareness of ego processes

The dimension of self-awareness focuses on the development of awareness of what is going on in one's own interior. A highly developed self-awareness can lead to the emergence and consolidation of a witnessing self that is not entangled in the contents of awareness. Meta-awareness is a concept that points to the possibility of taking awareness itself as an object of attention. Robert Kegan (1982, 1994) uses the formulation that what has been subject in one stage of development becomes object of consciousness in the next stage. This means that at a particular stage certain types of ego processes are in the driving seat of the person's consciousness without that person being aware of the nature of these processes. He or she is therefore not in a position to review, reevaluate and change the very logic which is running the whole psyche. By becoming conscious of certain aspects of what is going on inside – taking them as objects – these processes become available for reflection and a conscious relationship.

Self-awareness here means awareness of the behavioural habits, emotions, desires, thoughts and images that tumble through our being. Instead of being had by one's habitual behavioural patterns, emotions, desires and thoughts, a sophisticated level of self-awareness means that there is a locus of witnessing in consciousness that can make the behaviours, emotions, desires and thoughts into objects of attention. Before the emergence of a meta-aware position, the attention is fully absorbed by the continuous stream of the contents of consciousness. The five senses, the body and the mind produces percepts, emotions and thoughts. These evoke swift processes of evaluation by the feeling function and the mind, which in turn elicit judgments, feelings, desires, and action impulses. The attention is so bound up with these processes that all that is perceived is the result of the processes. There is no free attention available for reflecting on the processes themselves, and therefore no possibility to actively relate to what is happening. The self is lost in the ego processes, and cannot take a perspective on them. It may be helpful to think of this predicament as a situation where one is simply so occupied with experiencing that one doesn't get the idea to ask such questions as: Why

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do I feel this way now? Do I want to feel like this? What made me draw that conclusion? Do I want to react in this way? Etc.

Development of self-awareness can be conceived as a stage-like process. The first phase is to *notice* that emotional, volitional and cognitive processes are going on in one's consciousness. By patient and careful attention to these processes, one starts to develop an increasingly distinct and differentiated perception of the characteristics of the contents of awareness, and of the processes involved.² Parallel to the development of skill and steadiness in observing these intrasubjective experiences, the witness self is strengthened. The witness self is essentially attention that is not embedded in the contents of awareness, but free from the pressing forces of emotions, desires, impulses and mental interpretations. When this witness self has been established, and has acquired some firmness, the process of disembedding from emotions, desires and thoughts can start in earnest. The second phase of the development of self-awareness is when there is a witness self that can start to *relate* actively to the coming and going of emotions, desires and thoughts. This is a self that can recognize that a certain emotion has been evoked, but is free to make decisions about what to do with the emotion. Should the impulses that the emotion triggers be given free rein? Is the emotion an archaic reaction that one better lets go when it has run out of steam? Is it a subtle and desirable emotion that should be given attention and nurturance? The third phase is entered when the self-sense stably relocates from embeddedness in the ego processes to the witness self position. This is possible through a strong ability to relate to the contents of awareness without being had by them, i.e. well developed non-attachment.

² Many practices have been developed for training awareness of different ego processes in order to emerge out of an unconscious embeddedness in them. Some examples: Tai Chi Chuan, which focuses on awareness of sensorimotor schemata; The Rosen method of bodywork, which focuses on awareness of emotions; Vipassana meditation, which focuses on awareness of thinking; Tonglen meditation, which, among other things, fosters awareness of desires. Some practices stay at the early levels of developing self-awareness, i.e. they aim at increasing the awareness of what is going on in our field of experience. Other practices aim explicitly at facilitating the emergence of a witness self.

Ego processes	Subject Being absorbed in an immediate way by the element, in such a way that it dominates one's awareness, and directs reactions and intentions. The element is not articulated into distinct gestalts in awareness, and thus not available for reflection.	Object		
		I. Noticing Noticing and formulating in words or images for oneself or for others.	II. Interpreting/ Evaluating Consciously evaluating the element; forming opinions and assigning values in relation to it.	III. Transforming Intentionally dealing with the element, in order to achieve some kind of transformation of the element, or changing the role the element has in consciousness.
Perceiving: Organizing impressions and images of lifeworld experiences.	Images of experiences fill up one's field of awareness and dominates what one feels, thinks, and wants without being ordered into a coherent story that can be reviewed and evaluated in the mind.	Constructing a coherent gestalt out of isolated images of experiences, thus enabling oneself to reflect on what kinds of experiences one has had and has.	Evaluating the experiences. i.e. forming grounded opinions on various aspects of lived experience.	Intentionally working through and reinterpret one's own experiences, thus making them available for constructive learning, and enabling oneself to reach closure of experiences.
Emotions, feelings and moods.	To be held captive by emotions and moods, such as bitterness, psychological pain, self-reproaches, hate, resignation, inferiority feelings. Lack of formulation of emotions prevents their becoming objects of conscious attention, evaluation and intentional transformation.	Noticing and articulating own emotions, feelings and moods.	Evaluating if it is good/bad, desirable/undesirable that one has certain emotions, feelings and moods.	Intentionally acting in order to transform own emotions and moods, e.g. through diversion, acting-out in constructive forms, seeking out compensatory experiences, consultations with friends or therapist, reinterpretation of causes and consequences, etc.
Thought patterns and interpretations.	To be unaware of one's own thought patterns, and to make interpretations and assumptions without being aware of the active part oneself has in making them, and therefore being incapable of reflecting on the character of one's own mentations.	Noticing that one has a propensity to think in certain patterns, and that assumptions and interpretations are made from a particular perspective, and therefore possibly biased.	Evaluating if the typical thought patterns one has, and if specific interpretations one makes are adequate and desirable.	Intentionally acting to transform one's own undesirable routine thought patterns and ways of making interpretations.
Opinions, likes and dislikes.	Acting on spontaneous opinions, likes and dislikes about others or about events and circumstances without awareness or tempering by reflection	Noticing that one likes or dislikes various persons, events and circumstance.	Evaluating spontaneous opinions, likes and dislikes in relation to one's consciously chosen values.	Intentionally transforming own opinions, likes and dislikes through search for new information, intentional refocusing of attention, or other active reevaluating processes.
Motivation, desires, wishes and intentions.	Letting oneself be driven by spontaneous wishes, desires and intentions without being aware of wherein they consist.	Articulating one's motives, wishes and desires, thus making them available for conscious review.	Evaluating one's motivation and wishes in relation to self-chosen and conscious values.	Intentionally working to transform own desires and wishes in order to align them with own deeply held values.
Behavioural patterns and habitual reactions.	Automatically acting on habitual behavioural patterns and spontaneous reactions without awareness of what is going on.	Articulating and characterizing how one has behaved and what typical reaction patterns one follows.	Evaluating the desirability of one's own habitual behaviours and automatical reaction patterns.	Intentionally transforming one's own habitual behaviours and reaction patterns.

A more detailed look at development of awareness of ego processes

Having presented the general nature of self-awareness and the witness self in the preceding section, we will now take a closer look at awareness in relation to specific ego processes. In this section, we look at ego processes as functions of the self that operate rather spontaneously in our beings, generating streams of gestalts, emotions, thoughts, value judgments, reflexes and desires. Most people never actively observe these processes as they occur. The individual is then, with Kegan's formulation, subject to the perceiving, feeling, thinking, valuing, acting and desiring. These activities are immediate to the individual, making up what the person feels he or she is.

Table XX gives an overview of six ego processes, giving brief explanations of what it is like to be subject to them on the one hand and to take them as objects of awareness (develop self-awareness) on the other hand. In the following, I will discuss each of the six ego processes and point out some characteristic patterns and consequences.

1. Perceiving

Perceiving is here used to refer to the organization of incoming information from the senses into coherent gestalts, creating a meaningful order out of a multitude of experiences. Perceiving in this sense is a very ordinary ability which most adults are capable of. However, there are persons who have difficulties in organizing their immediate experiences into ordered wholes, which has profound consequences for their way of being. A person who is subject to the *immediate* experiences reacts in an *unmediated* way to those experiences. Isolated events, for example a quarrel at work, directly evoke feelings, reactions, value judgments, etc. without being put into a context by relating the event to an overall story that can give meaning to many related events. This may sound weird to the reader, so let me explain by referring to my own research interviews with people who had been involved in workplace conflicts. Some persons seem to go through experiences such as a workplace conflict without organizing their experiences into a coherent story of what happened. When they were interviewed, they could not formulate a story of what had happened. They presented fragments of events, mixed up with their own sweeping judgments and feelings. If they attempted to say something general about what happened, it was extremely vague and sweeping and mostly told in a chaotic way. For the listener it was very difficult to understand what had transpired, because the respondent jumped back and forth between isolated events and mixed subjective impressions and judgments with external circumstances. This is not only a question of being unable to formulate a narrative for someone else, but also a

poorly developed ability to make sense of one's own experiences by taking them as objects for reflection. Persons who are subject to their immediate experiences in this way live in a very reactive way and have great difficulties in orienting themselves so they can actively shape the course of their lives. However, for most people the organization of input from the senses into more ordered perceiving is a spontaneous process that functions continuously without the person being aware of the process. Isolated experiences are organized into ordered wholes by relating them to each other in the form of a narrative. Out of a chaos of unsorted and free-floating items of sensory input, an ordered picture emerges that can give meaning to experience in a coherent way. This permits the individual to review what has happened and what happens and start making sense out of it. By making up this story, experiences can be interpreted and reinterpreted, thereby opening the way to take active steps to actively work through emotions evoked by various events.

The first phase in taking perceiving as an object of awareness is to notice that one indeed does experience events and that one's experiencing has certain qualities that can be consciously observed and reflected upon. The experiences themselves then no longer completely fill up the whole field of awareness, but there is a possibility of reviewing the experiences, articulating what they mean and relate them to a larger whole.

The second phase involves a conscious review and evaluation of experiences. This is more than just feeling something about events, it involves looking at experiences with some kind of value set.

The third phase engages intentionality in actively reinterpreting experiences. People who do this notice the nature of their experiences, form opinions about them and take active steps to reflect on alternative ways of making sense of the experiences. This way experiences do not passively elicit certain feelings or thoughts (such as, for example, self-deprecation), but are actively reviewed in order to create a desirable meaning for the individual. This third phase is critical in making learning and self-transformation an integral and central part of daily life. In this phase, the individual also develops an intimate insight into the constructed nature of the meaning we give to experiences. When this happens, we can disengage factual events from the reactions they evoke, thereby freeing the self to give meaning to experiences in an intentional way. The witness self can take notice of events and experiences without immediately becoming absorbed in automatic reactions to them.

2. Emotions and moods

While the number of adults who are subject to their immediate disorganized experiences is rather small, many are to various degrees subject to their *emotions and moods*. The

mammal organism continuously generates emotions in response to outer and inner events – that is simply a fact of existence and a very central and universal part of our experience as human beings. However, the nature of our relationship to the emotional processes can vary considerably. A person who is subject to his or her emotions and moods has no sense of being a self that *has* affective states, he or she is completely engulfed by the emotions. When strong emotions arise in the organism, they fill out the person's field of awareness and completely dominates the experience, which among other things means that they take control over the person's will. There is no internal place where the consciousness of the person can sit down and look at the emotions as something that is a part of one's experience. The looking is, so to speak, done by the emotions themselves. Being subject to emotions often means that it is difficult to articulate for oneself or for others what the emotions are like. They are more likely to be expressed directly in action.

Almost everyone have moments when strong emotions flood the awareness and take complete control of the self. That is not the same as being subject to emotions. The crucial difference is that people who are subject to their emotions are not able to notice what happened when the emotions took control. People who can take their emotions as objects of awareness may not always be able to do this in the heat of the moment, but as soon as the emotions start to calm down they can recognize what happened and reflect on it.

Persons who are subject to their emotions and moods easily become captives of negative affective states, such as bitterness, low self-esteem, hate, depression, inferiority feelings, deprivation or resignation. Since there is no self that can take the emotions as object, evaluate them, and decide to do something in order to change the affective state, the person lacks important instruments to get out of the negative feelings. Luckily there are other ways to deal with negative affective states, such as waiting until they go away of themselves, getting absorbed in activities, acting out, engaging other people to work with the feelings, etc.

The first phase of self-awareness in relation to emotions and moods is to notice and articulate for oneself what emotions and moods one experiences. Hereby the emotions become visible objects in one's awareness, which permits the differentiation of the self from the emotions. By making the emotions an object of awareness, they can become something the person has as part of his or her experience, rather than being something the person is. This frees the self to engage in the second phase, that of actively evaluating the emotions and moods. The self can now look at a particular emotion and decide if it is desirable or undesirable, warranted or unwarranted. If one finds that one would like to change something about the emotional state one is affected by, one can start developing the third phase of acting intentionally to transform the emotions. This involves taking responsibility for having certain emotions, "owning" them, and find out

constructive ways of dealing with them. Many people have found their own tricks for intentionally working with undesired emotions. These can range from simple things like treating oneself to a cake or making faces to more elaborate actions like keeping a diary, looking for a new and more satisfying job, starting psychotherapy or learning a meditation technique.

The firmly established witness self feels the emotions that come and go in awareness, but is not subsumed by them. There is always a sense of there being a self that has the emotions and that can relate to them. Having access to a witness self means that one is not unconditionally delivered to such feelings as anger, loss, deprivation, depression, boredom, etc.

3. *Thinking*

It might be more of a stretch for many people to regard *thinking* as an almost autonomous function that continually produces thoughts than to regard emotions in that way. Thinking is, at least for most people, more closely bound up with the sense of self. However, in the traditions focussed on using meditation and contemplation as important means of inquiry, a conception of thinking as a spontaneous, and sometimes rather obnoxious, process of the mind is a basic notion. Many meditation methods aim at a differentiation from any kind of thinking or imaging in order to experience consciousness in its pure form, i.e. consciousness without any content. This means that these traditions usually do not encourage dwelling on the actual nature of the thoughts produced by the mind. Self-awareness in relation to mentations does, however, involve an awareness of the products of thinking *as* products as well as an ability to observe the nature of the thoughts.

A person who is subject to his/her thinking does not notice that thoughts and more complex constellations of thoughts, such as interpretations of events or even belief systems, are results of ego processes. Such a person therefore tends not to review his or her own ideas, thought patterns, interpretations and beliefs. He/she may act from the unquestioned tacit assumption that the interpretations he or she has made are true representations of reality, rather than interpretations constructed by means of thinking along certain habitual pathways.

The first step in the development of self-awareness in relation to thinking involves noticing one's typical patterns of thinking. Taking thoughts as objects of reflection usually leads to a more acute awareness of how experience is dependent on the way events are interpreted. Furthermore, this is not only something that is valid for oneself, but for other people too. Awareness of thinking as an ego process therefore tends to lead to a dawning realization of the importance of different perspectives, including the

peculiarities of one's own perspective. One may become aware that one's earlier life included an immersion in a particular culture, a particular belief system, a particular type of language, etc. This linguistic environment, in a broad sense, has set the parameters of one's thinking.

The second step involves developing an evaluating relationship to one's own thinking patterns. One might notice that some thought patterns that seem to repeat themselves in one's mind may be limiting for oneself or may lead to biased interpretations. One might notice that one's thinking patterns rest on some underlying scripts, such as "people are not to be trusted," or "I am worthless." One might also notice that the belief system one was brought up with and accepted without questioning is actually biased in ways that has blinded oneself to significant aspects of the social environment, for example. Looking critically at these patterns enables the individual to decide what thought patterns are desirable and healthy and what are undesirable.

In the third step, the individual intentionally tries to transform thinking patterns. This may be hard work, because some thinking habits are deeply entrenched and make up central parts of the whole interpretive process of a person. Techniques for changing such habits have been developed in many traditions. Affirmations, such as "I am a strong, positive and capable person" is one way of replacing a negative thought habit with a more constructive pattern. More complex thinking patterns may need more sophisticated approaches. One of the most effective ways of paving the way for transformations of one's belief systems and thinking patterns is to intentionally expose oneself to contrasting systems. This can be done in more formal ways by, for example, studying anthropology or religion. It can also be done in more immediate ways, by paying attention to the thinking patterns of other people, preferably persons who think in very different ways in relation to oneself.

An intimate acquaintance with the nature of one's thinking patterns usually leads to a rather relaxed relationship to the contents of the thinking. One realizes that thoughts come and go, and one realizes that the particular thoughts one has are dependent on one's membership of a specific culture, language, professional community, etc. When this process has gained some depth, the particular ideas, beliefs and thoughts cannot retain their status of being the ultimate basis of one's experience that they usually had before. The thoughts simply do not have the power they had before. The formation of a witness self allows the individual to develop non-attachment in relation to thinking, because there is a sense of self that is stable apart from the concrete contents of the thinking processes. Thinking still goes on, but it is a tool of the self rather than the essence of the self.

4. Feeling

For some reason the English language does not have a verb that captures the ego process of *forming opinions*. One can say "I feel", "I think", "I like", "I dislike" or "I am of the opinion", but all these expressions do not exactly correspond to the spontaneous process of assigning subjective value to something. I will here use the verb *feeling*, which is the word that comes closest to this ego process in English. When I use "feeling" here, it does not refer to affects, emotions and moods, only to the experience that something has a value on a spectrum between positive and negative.

Feeling is a process that is close to the emotions. Brain research has shown that value judgments are made in the limbic system, at first independently of cognitive evaluations. When the senses pick up new information, this percept is run through the feeling function and is assigned a subjective value (in terms of good or bad). When the thinking processes have evaluated the information, a new round in the limbic system may lead to revised feelings about the gestalt in question, a value judgment that also accommodates cognitive interpretations.

People who are subject to their feelings about objects are not aware that their value judgments are their own attributions of qualities to these objects. They often do not make a distinction between the objects and their inherent qualities on the one hand, and what they feel about the objects on the other hand. Instead, they act as if the values they have attributed to the objects are actually inherent qualities *in* these objects. If such a person feels that Andrew is unpleasant, the unpleasantness is a part of Andrew rather than a feeling the person has about Andrew. This lack of awareness of feeling can have far-reaching consequences for behaviour, since people unaware of their feelings might find it warranted to act out their dislikes in drastic ways since the others *are* "bad."

Very many people are subject to their opinions about others, which means that they tend to act on their opinions without any restraint or tempering by awareness of a need for a less subjective consideration of circumstances.

The first step in the development of self-awareness in relation to feeling consists in noticing that one feels in particular ways about people, events and other objects. This means that value judgments are perceived as subjective experiences rather than as the way things are in themselves. Such an awareness generally means that people are able to make a distinction between how they feel about things and how situations ought to be handled. When this awareness has dawned, people usually realize that it is a good idea to respect and conform to social norms about how other people ought to be treated, irrespective of what one's subjective feelings about them say.

The second step means directing attention to the patterns of one's opinions, likes and dislikes, and to evaluate if these spontaneous value assignments are in harmony with one's consciously chosen values and norms. Doing this might, for example, lead to

a decision not to let one's negative feelings about a colleague influence how one behaves towards this person in professional situations.

The third step is to develop an ability to intentionally transform the spontaneous value judgments one's limbic system has generated. One might, for example, decide that the negative feelings one has about people from a different ethnic group are not in accordance with one's values and one might therefore proceed to work with these feelings in order to undermine their potency or convert them to positive feelings. This can be done in different ways, e.g. by studying the history and culture of this people, by intentionally making friends with individuals belonging to the group, or by directing one's attention towards aspects of this people's culture one respects and admires.

The differentiation of the self from the feeling process results in a freedom of movement in relation to value judgements. The witness self can notice what value judgments are spontaneously generated in the self, but the person does not feel bound by the opinions. They can be allowed to exist without having any important weight in choosing course of action.

5. *Desiring*

The behaviour of human beings is to a considerable extent goal-directed, i.e. it involves *desires, wishes, motives and intentions*. We cannot here go into any detail about the nature of human motivation, for example the relationship of instinct, reflexes, ego development and social constructions in the emergence of desires. It is sufficient to point out that willing/desiring is yet another ego process that may or may not be taken as an object of attention by an individual. This means that the human organism continually generates desires, urges, wishes, longings and intentions whether we want it or not and the question is what kind of relationship we have to these aspects of our experience.

A person who is subject to the desires and wishes that emerge in herself does not notice that this happens, she just takes them for granted as what she wants and acts in order to gratify them as far as possible. However, awareness of own desires and wishes is quite widespread, since these ego processes have a way of drawing attention to themselves in the service of gratification. The real challenge is not being aware of what one wants, but developing a certain measure of non-attachment to desires.

In the first phase of self-awareness in relation to desiring one develops the ability to notice and articulate the desires and wishes. This enables the person to "own" her own desires, i.e. taking responsibility for having them rather than just acting them out.

The second phase involves evaluating the desires and wishes by reviewing their place in a larger context, which might involve others' perspectives and/or an articulated set of values.

The third phase's transformation of one's own desires and wishes is something many people struggle with daily. However, this struggle is often about inhibiting certain desires that are seen as having undesirable consequences (such as fatness, getting trouble with the police or provoking disapproval from others). The essence of the third phase goes deeper, into transforming the objects of desire and eventually into transforming the role desiring itself plays in one's consciousness.

A fully emerged witness self remains stable and unperturbed in relation to the desires and wishes that come and go in one's being. The self is not driven by desires, but can choose what desires to act on and what desires to let go.

6. Behavioural reflexes

A very large share of our behaviour in everyday life is directed by "automated" reactions and habitual behavioural patterns. Much of our learning of life skills occur through action: trying different ways of doing things and settling for a pattern that works, imitation of others or drawing on behavioural patterns that have worked in a familiar context when encountering new types of situations. By trial-and-error, imitation and in other ways we acquire a comprehensive repertoire of behavioural patterns which are often not available to consciousness. Some of these patterns were never conscious, others were conscious when we learned them but then became part of a mostly automated set of behaviours, triggered by certain cues in certain situations. Looking at consciousness as a complex system, the expulsion of a large number of our behavioural reflexes from our immediate field of attention is an economic measure, freeing up attention to focus on non-routine decision-making by screening out processes that do not need conscious attention. However, some of the patterns we have acquired may have consequences we would rather avoid, or there may be more desirable ways of acting than the ones we routinely use. An important part of the behavioural reflexes are active in communication with other people, in the form of body language and voice intonation.

Behavioural reflexes are by nature very peripheral to the center of awareness, and may be very hard to spot. Being subject to behavioural reflexes means that a person's actions are to a large extent regulated by "automatic" behaviour rather than by intentional, chosen actions. Whereas every person draws on behavioural reflexes every day – life wouldn't be possible without them – the extent to which such behaviour dominate a person's way of being differs considerably.

The first phase of self-awareness in relation to behavioural reflexes consists of noticing that one has certain regularities and typical reactions in certain situations. Such an awareness can open up a new level of understanding of the dynamics between oneself and other people.

The second phase involves evaluating the desirability of certain behavioural reflexes, for example the routine responses one falls into when one is criticized by others.

The third phase is disidentifying from ingrained patterns and working intentionally to transform them, either by replacing them with more desirable automated reactions or by developing the capacity to be fully present in each action and thereby being able to consciously choose responses and actions. The strongly established witness self can observe behavioural reflexes as they arise without identifying with them.

Other elements of the person one can be subject to

Above I focussed on six prominent ego processes, which in reality are not distinctly delimited from each other. These six processes should be regarded as examples of a principle rather than an exhaustive list. As individuals, we can be subject to many aspects of our functioning, at it might be worthwhile to explore what other processes, structures or systems might play a role in how we makesense of experience and orient ourselves in the world of actions. One prominent candidate for inclusion in this analysis is *imagining*, i.e. the images, fantasies, metaphors, etc. that play a very important role for capturing subtle pieces of information and for orientation and direction in a complex and bewildering life world. A second candidate is the *narratives* we make up of who we are as individuals and who we are as the groups we feel identified with. These narratives can be very powerful structuring devices for a person's orientation in life. A third candidate is the *belief systems* we have acquired and constructed. These belief systems offer a broad context for interpreting experiences, forming opinions, colouring desires and wishes, etc. Human life is probably too complex and varied for ever allowing us to construct a conceptual framework that can model its different aspects, therefore any models should be treated with a very light touch.

A graphical summary: the self-awareness mandala

Keeping in mind that the six ego processes discussed above is just one among many ways to define and delimit ego processes, it is important to point out that an individual might have developed self-awareness regarding one or several ego processes more than

for others. The actual pattern is probably highly individual, as is suggested in the graphic below. In this "self-awareness mandala" the six ego processes and three stages discussed above have been arranged into six sectors of a circle with four rings. The innermost circle represents immediate experience without any self-awareness at all. The first ring represents the first phase of developing self-awareness, noticing the respective ego process. The second ring represents evaluating of how the ego process is operating in oneself and the third ring represents an ability to intentional transformation of how the ego processes operate. In the graphic, I have suggested how one might represent a particular individual's pattern of self-awareness by shading the cells where some competence has been achieved. I have arbitrarily chosen to use three different shadings, representing a very high capacity, a distinct capacity and a vague capacity to relate to the ego processes. In the example, we have a person who notices that the ego processes operate and who has developed some propensity to evaluate what is going on. Active efforts to influence how the ego processes operate has been achieved only to a small degree, in the realms of perceiving, behavioural reflexes and emotions.

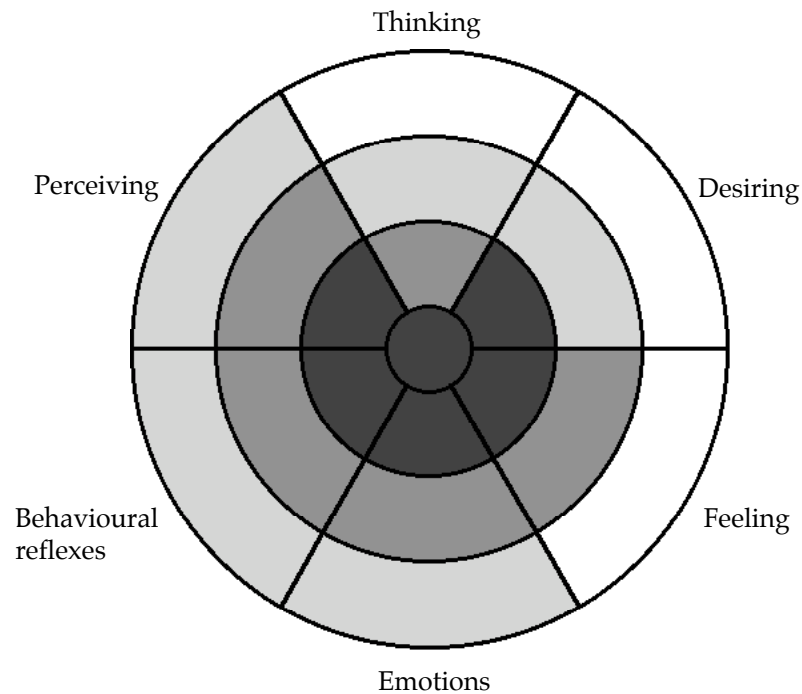


Figure XX The self-awareness mandala: an example

Meta-awareness

When a person has developed awareness of the ego processed in depth, the self can witness the ego processes without being immersed in the ongoing flow of experience. This frees attention for being completely absorbed by the contents of awareness and opens the way for experiencing the nature of awareness itself, apart from all contents. This experience is here called meta-awareness, awareness of awareness. The development of an ability to witness awareness as such is a major ingredient in most meditation techniques. By using different techniques, the activities of the ego processes can be reduced in intensity, which can eventually lead to the experience of gaps in the flow of experiencing of the products of the ego processes, gaps where there is no content in awareness, just awareness itself.

Self-awareness and the witness self: Further considerations

Fully developed self-awareness is in a sense an advanced form of cognition, or perhaps more accurately meta-cognition. There is probably a seamless line of development from the cognition of the own self in its aspect as physical appearance, through a collection of concrete traits, a personality, a complex system of various processes, to awareness of thoughts, feelings and desires. Self-awareness requires a very focused, trained, and steady awareness. It can embrace a wide variety of contents without being lost in them. I find that the word “presence” conveys part of what is involved.

Notice that there are two different aspects of development in this dimension: self-awareness and the emergence and consolidation of the witness self. The former is an ability, which can be more or less acute, and more or less precise. A person may be able to make very exact observations of what is going on in the interior experience, and may be able to process these observations through sophisticated reasoning abilities, which enables the person to interpret and report on the interior processes. The emergence of the witness self means a shift of the self-sense and the construction of and identification with a new platform for awareness, outside of the busy ego processes. These two aspects may be more or less pronounced. A person can have a strong witness self while not having a very sophisticated ability to observe interior processes with precision. Such a person would not be attached to thoughts, emotions and desires, but would not be very acutely conscious of the exact nature of what is going on in the mind and the body. Since Eastern meditation methods usually do not encourage the development of a skills to observe and understand the contents of the ego processing going on, they might be said to be biased towards developing a witness self. People with a long experience of

meditation might have a highly actualized witness self but a rather undeveloped capacity for self-awareness in the sense discussed here.

Now, meta-awareness proper offers an unprecedented freedom to the self. Attention is not bound up in the ego processes and self-needs. However, what is actually done with this freedom is a matter of what kind of meaning-making the individual has access to. This means that even a person with a strongly developed meta-awareness is conditioned by cultural value systems, biographical background, training in particular discourses, moral structure, and many other specific circumstances. A very important practical consequence of the development of the second phase of meta-awareness is that when one has started to relate actively to one's own interior processes, then *all* kinds of life events are perceived as occasions for self-inquiry. For example, an ordinary person who finds herself in a workplace infested with a serious conflict she is powerless to do something about, and that seriously impairs her ability to do a satisfying job, will be absorbed in feeling frustration, in the wish to escape, judgments of others, and possibly a desire to hit back at the troublesome colleagues. A person with some measure of meta-awareness will notice all these feelings, and ask herself: "How do I deal with frustration? What kinds of emotional processes are triggered in me?" She will perhaps think: "How interesting, I am not as patient as I thought"; or "So this is how it feels to be powerless and angry, good to know."

The witness self is one important element of ego transcendence, but there are also other elements. The witness self is something completely different from unitive experiences, which will be discussed in the next section.