

Who Is Watching the Show?

When a schoolteacher writes "I" on a blackboard and asks the students what they see, most of them will answer that they see the word "I." It's rare for someone to say "I see a blackboard with 'I' written on it." Just as the relatively huge blackboard is ignored in favor of a single letter, we ignore the Awareness that is the permanent background to all phenomena. We tend to ignore this in the same way that we forget the screen on which a movie is projected. It is the unchanging characteristic in all the movies we watch, but it never gets involved in the movie, as such. The movie may depict an ocean, a long winding road, a murder, or a forest fire; but the screen will not get wet, move from place to place, bleed, or burn. Likewise, Awareness remains pure and unaffected by its content.

Awareness is the consistent characteristic in and behind all experience, yet it is also that which most easily escapes our attention. Attention is not the same as Awareness. Our brain is designed in such a way that giving attention to something automatically implies ignoring something else. We see the stars and ignore the space; we read this text and ignore the page; we see the movie and ignore the screen; yet it is obvious that the ignored space, page, and screen are as fundamental to our observations as the stars, the text, and the movie, which hold our attention. This is an important point, as the mechanics of attention often get confused with Awareness. Attention works through noticing something in contrast to something that's ignored, while Awareness is the non-dual space that sustains both the noticed and the ignored. Attention may require effort; Awareness simply is. Everything that comes up is contained in and embraced by this Awareness, including objects perceived as "out there" (rocks, cars, other sentient beings) and emotions, thoughts, and feelings experienced as "in here." In this sense, Awareness is as much in the body-mind as the body-mind is in Awareness. Compare it to a clay pot, which contains space and at the same time is contained by space. Breaking the pot will not affect this space.