



EUDAEMONIA **Awareness, with Robert Strock**

November 18, 2020

Kim Forrester 0:00

If we truly want to thrive, to grow, learn, heal and develop, we must first turn our attention inward and become cognizant of our thoughts, emotions, and intentions. I'm Kim Forrester, you're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. And today, it's time to accentuate the importance of awareness.

Intro 0:24

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:44

Robert Strock is a renowned teacher, psychotherapist, and humanitarian with more than 50 years experience in his field. Twenty years ago, Robert co-founded the Global Bridge Foundation and, more recently, he developed the Awareness that Heals programme - an expression of the tools that Robert has developed over a lifetime of inspired self-exploration. It's my honour and delight to be connecting with Robert today to explore the concept of self-awareness, and to learn how introspection, healing intent, and a friendly mind can help us rise above our challenges and flourish. Robert Strock, it is just such a delight to have you as part of the Eudaemonia podcast. Thank you so much for gifting your time today.

Robert Strock 1:28

Well, thank you for inviting me. I'm very happy to be here.

Kim Forrester 1:31

In your book, Awareness that Heals you outline four levels of awareness, and the first level is the 'awareness of being unaware'. And you regard this as a crucial starting point. How does becoming aware of our awareness help us and what role does curiosity, and perhaps even humility, play if we want to move beyond that particular level?

Robert Strock 1:57

Well, I would say humility, in particular, and curiosity as a secondary component are both crucial, because when we think we're aware of ourselves, and especially when we're very confident we're aware of ourselves - especially in general - it's a very dangerous place to be. To be so confident of our awareness is something that is like almost like putting yourself to sleep, paradoxically. You know? When you're aware that you have an unconscious, you're aware that there might be a tone of voice that is more angry than you think, or that you're coming across in a way to somebody that you

don't think you are, it allows the humility to be there to say, "Oh, perhaps I was unaware, or perhaps I am unconscious, and I'm sorry if I was."

Kim Forrester 2:50

Thankfully, our own minds often give us these little moments of inspiration. Right? And we get what you call 'fleeting awareness' where, all of a sudden, we might actually have something bubble up into our conscious mind. But you write that we may actually avoid focusing on those brief moments of awareness, because we fear the repercussions of what we might find there. How can we recognise when we've had an experience of fleeting awareness? And is it possible for us to, sort of, learn to capture those moments and boldly venture into them?

Robert Strock 3:24

Well, there are several questions there. The fleeting awareness, by my definition, means that it is going in and out automatically and, for whatever conscious or unconscious reasons, we can't afford to stay with it. For example, if we're in a relationship, and we're really aware either we're incompatible, or we have a number of things that we want to say to our partner and we know that it could break up our relationship and we don't want to break up our relationship, we'll have that fleeting awareness go 'phoop'. Or if we're aware we're off in anyway in the world, but it would be too upsetting and we're not disciplined enough, or have enough integrity, or have enough humility to really bring that into a stable awareness, then that's why it stays fleeting. So in one way, gratefully, we have those moments. And in another way, unfortunately, it's virtually impossible to stabilise them unless we're living our lives ready to morph, shift, change, based on what comes to our consciousness.

Kim Forrester 4:34

It sounds like we need not just curiosity and humility, but also courage then, and an intent for healing.

Robert Strock 4:41

Absolutely. Courage, intent for healing, discipline, persistence, really being dedicated to wanting to live the life that we can that's most inspiring and fulfilling and compassionate. And that's a pretty big ask to dominate our lives, unless we're what might be called a bodhisattva, or somebody that truly is here for that purpose. But there aren't too many of those around.

Kim Forrester 5:11

So that intent for healing is really the core of your message in this awareness that heals. The third level of awareness is intellectual awareness. And I would posit that that is, kind of, the level of awareness that most people regard as the ultimate; that most people aspire to. But you say that there's actually a fourth level of awareness, and this is your awareness that heals. How does awareness that heals differ from intellectual awareness? And why is it so healthy, so wise, for us to attempt to attain us?

Robert Strock 5:47

Such a totally crucial question and point. You know? If we're aware, for example, that we're angry and we just get angry, that really is not very likely to help us very often. If we're aware that we're needing something but we don't pursue the need, that doesn't help us very often. So somebody might say, "Well, gee, you just dumped your anger on me." And the person says, "Yeah, I was aware of that." And that seems to mean, "I was aware of that, so that means it's okay." But really what I'm attempting to convey is that, when you are aware of wherever you are emotionally, or in your thoughts, and you have added to that, at some moment while you're in that state, an intention to heal - wanting to care, wanting to be more compassionate, wanting to be more constructive - that's what really morphs into the magic. That's where the real possibilities for personal transformation. And really, I would even say in the non-philosophical way, transpersonal, meaning that you're going to be helping other people as well. Because that intention to heal, for example, if you're angry, it would make you naturally go, "Oops, I want this to be constructive. And so I better figure out 'how can I convey this to the person, so that's not going to actually create more damage and it's going to be more harmless or, hopefully, helpful?" So it might lead us to, for example, ask ourselves, "What do we really need that made us angry in the first place?" And then we might find a way to convey that need the anger really was a representative of. Because when we're angry, there's something we didn't like. And so what is it that we liked? What is it that we want it to like? So when we can train ourselves to bring that intention to heal, it's going to lead us more to what we need, and to express ourselves that way, and to express ourselves sensitively that way, rather than expressing dominantly what we don't like.

Kim Forrester 8:03

A vital component of that process that you just beautifully described, is the concept of 'friendly mind'. Why is it important for us to cultivate a friendlier, more supportive monologue when we're delving into our own emotions, behaviours, and needs? Are we doing ourselves a disservice, Robert, if we attempt to gain awareness, when we do so with a more judgmental or critical intent?

Robert Strock 8:31

Yeah, I would even say it's an oxymoron to say, "Gain more awareness while we're being judgmental", at least in my semantics. Awareness, by definition, means that it doesn't have a judgement, it just has a seeing. And so it's quite crucial that we develop that non-judgmental awareness. So 'friendly mind' is a mind state that is particularly important. It's important at all times but it's particularly important when we're most in great difficulty; when we're buried emotionally. And by buried emotionally I mean, you're depressed at a severe level, you're anxious at a severe level, you're exhausted at a severe level, you're angry at a severe level, and it's kind of like an emotional takeover. And friendly mind is most important because, oftentimes, we cannot control our emotions - in terms of them being there, I don't mean that we can't control expressing them. So if we're very depressed and we don't have a way of shifting that depression, we always have access, potentially, to a mind that is friendly. Now, it's very subtle, and there are a lot of components to friendly mind. So for example, friendly mind when you're really anxious or you're really depressed or you're really exhausted, it can't necessarily be friendly in feeling, but it can be friendly in thought. And it's one area really that was developed particularly when I was in a six year period with a chemical crisis after having a kidney transplant. Where I was really wiped out for six years and I could not feel the feelings that I was accustomed to. So friendly mind said to me, "You know, you're chemically altered. There's nothing you can do besides stay purified with your intention as much as possible, stay present as much as possible, and recognise that you're not being exhausted, depressed, anxious on purpose. And we'll help you search for chemical solutions for best efforts." But you need

to recognise that the friendly mind can be developed, no matter what. I mean, if somebody has dementia, or somebody has an illness affecting their mind, then obviously not. But I'm saying, anyone that's healthy has the ability to have their mind become their ally rather than their enemy, even when they feel lousy. But it's not an easy skill to develop. It requires practice. And I mean, enormous practice because when you're angry, it's almost like being able to be a ventriloquist, where you feel one thing and the mind comes out and says something else. And you learn to devote yourself to the friendly mind - it's one of the best ways to navigate severe depression, severe anxiety. "Are you being anxious to yourself on purpose?", the friendly mind would ask. Of course not. Are you being depressed on purpose? Of course not. Are you feeling the feelings of anger on purpose - I'm not talking about expressing it, now. No, this person or this situation just threw me into an involuntary state of anger. Well friendly mind will say, "You know what, this isn't going to be helpful. And I think you want your life to work out well." And the other feature of friendly mind is, you can't really have a friendly mind unless you're willing to be responsible and accountable in your life, because then it's kind of like putting frosting on garbage. It's like, if you dump your anger on somebody and you say, "Well, that's okay. I love you anyway" and you're injuring people. No, friendly mind requires us to be accountable. And then we have earned the right to have the friendly mind be our ally. It could be called wisdom mind. It could be called friendly mind. But it's a tool that, when you really get that it's an ally for you, it makes you not feel the pressure to get out of your feelings, which in my experience, in 45 years of being a psychotherapist, trying to have people change their feelings is almost always going to create a another level of suffering. Because now you're feeling bad that you can't even get out of your feelings when friendly mind realises that you can change your mind if you're accountable, but you can't very often change your feelings.

Kim Forrester 13:10

I think many of us understand the benefits of becoming more aware of our emotions and our reactions. However, you also encourage us to seek awareness of our expectations and our standards. Why is it important for us to become cognizant of the standards that we hold ourselves to? And can we use the same process to become more aware of the standards and expectations that we actually project onto others?

Robert Strock 13:35

Absolutely. The standards and the original conditioning that were raised with - I want to get married at a certain time, I want to have kids at a certain time, I want to be successful, I want to be pretty, I want to be sexy - all those kinds of standards. I want to have more money than I do. I want to be taller than I am. I want to have more hair than I do. Those kinds of standards that are young, usually go into the unconscious and a little bit in the conscious mind. So when we're in a disturbed emotion, we'll see that, oftentimes, it's because we have a unrealistic standard that we carry forward. Now I had a man in my men's group that plays golf, and he had prostate surgery - and he had radiation for several months - saying, "God I'm hitting the ball so short. I can't figure out why." And I started to laugh. I said, "You know, you just had radiation. And you have a standard you're supposed to hit the golf ball a certain, far length. And can you really not see that the conditions have changed?" And that's what happens with standards - that the original standards are completely unaware of reality. They're early conditionings that will oftentimes lead us into feeling bad about ourselves because we aren't the physical person we want to be; we aren't the successful person we want to be. It's like harpooning ourselves with a standard. So that's a very, very important thing to be aware of. "What standards do I have that really injure me, especially ones where there's nothing I can do?" It's one thing if you have a standard to say, "I want to make my best efforts during the day." That's not the kind of standard I'm talking about. I'm talking about early standards that are impossible for you to

reach, or are demanding, or have an attitude that is hurtful. So when you can uproot those, one of the internal questions you ask yourself, "Is this really possible right now? Is it really possible for me to do anything with that today, or in the next hour?" And that's how you differentiate between standards that are really there for you, rather than standards that are against you.

Kim Forrester 15:52

That answer leads me to one of my own personal standards and expectations that I feel I've absorbed. And that is that I'm not supposed to ever feel anger or frustration, let alone exhibit anger or frustration. So of course, when I do feel and exhibit anger and frustration, there's an awful lot of shame that comes along with that. You actually write that it's important for us not just to become more aware of our anger and frustration and the many subtle ways that we can actually exhibit those emotions. You say, it's also wise for us to attempt to befriend anger, frustration, and impatience. Can you explain why this practice is important for our well being?

Robert Strock 16:36

Yeah, I think those of us that are really alive in a vibrant way, we're all going to experience anger. And anger gets a bad rap, when really what should get the bad rap is dumping our anger on other people. Anger is vitality. Anger is the potential of passion. Anger is the potential of courage. Anger is the potential of strength. But we need to learn how to get clear - why are we angry? What is it that's making us angry? What is it that we need, or needed, that made us angry in the first place? And once we become aware of that, that usually softens us a little bit. And then underneath the anger we'll notice it will frequently have more vulnerable feelings like sadness, or fear, insecurity. And so there's an encouragement, or I encourage in the book, to to really let yourself feel the vulnerability underneath the anger, which will help you soften and will allow you to more skillfully really decide, "Is this something I want to communicate this need that I have? Or is this something that I'm with somebody that's going to be closed under all circumstances, and I need to process it myself?" So the steps are something like being aware of the anger itself, or frustration, and then finding a part of you that wants to care, which we were calling earlier, the intention to heal. And then allow yourself to really feel the anger deeply enough - which I call containment - privately, inside yourself. Or if you have the luxury of a week, go to a place in the beach, or the backyard, or a house where you can really feel it and allow yourself to feel it deeply enough where you can feel the aliveness in it. And then as you're asking yourself, "What is it I really need?", then you let yourself feel the vulnerable feelings as well the fear; the insecurity, the sadness, the loss, the aloneness - whatever it is - rejection. And then you ask yourself, "Okay, what is it I needed? Did I need to communicate that I need someone to be more sensitive to me; that I need to be treated with more empathy, more kindness?" And so then you kind of ask yourself, "How would I communicate? And would it be a wise idea for me to communicate that? 'I would really appreciate it if you could say that a little bit more softly'? Or 'If you would do what you said here, because you said you would do this particular thing, and it hurts that that you haven't done that.'" Would that be okay? Would you be game to do that? And then the last part of it is, when you're asking somebody something like that, you've got to be careful that the original anger doesn't sneak back in. So that you say, "Well, what I need is so and so. And how many times do I have to ask you for what I need?" No. The point here is to try to find what you need, and also to find a tone of voice or a way of communicating where you're expressing the needs sensitively and giving the other person space to respond. And perhaps they may reveal a need they had that was also part of the interplay and you can both talk about your needs and try to navigate, "How do we take care of both of us?"

Kim Forrester 20:00

Robert, that was really powerful. Thank you for explaining that. I feel that there are a lot of us who don't know how to capture, or contain, our anger in such a healthy way. You write about the importance of meditation and prayer and this made me wonder - do you consider awareness as something that you dig around for? Is it an act or process of going in, searching for an awareness of how we feel or how we're behaving? Or is it wiser for us to draw upon meditation and prayer - in whatever way that fits for us as an individual - and create a space of stillness where the awareness can bubble up or emerge?

Robert Strock 20:46

It's such a good question. And it's such an individual answer so I'll try to give a broad spectrum series of answers. If someone's been a meditator and really paid attention, while they're meditating, to what they're experiencing, awareness just bubbles up automatically. I mean it. Or if someone's really been present in their life, or someone's really lived a life that has really been central with goodness, and they don't really have a lot of what we might call shadowy darkness that they can't see, then for those people awareness is something that's just going to bubble up. Because for example, if you're living a good life, and suddenly you're angry, the contrast is going to be more obvious. If you're angry all the time and you're saying, "Well, let the awareness bubble up", it's not very likely that you're going to be able to see the whole scene. So for example, you might see the anger, but it's always because the other person did something. It's never your reaction. It's never originated from you, it's never your responsibility. It's one of the hardest things to do if you aren't someone who's practised awareness for a long time, is when you find yourself frustrated or angry, to see that, "Oh, you know what, no matter what they did to me, I'm in danger of carrying this on." So awareness for people that are, let's say, dedicated psychologically, they have a practice, already, they've been in therapy - let's more accurately say good therapy, because there's a lot of therapy that I would not call good therapy and there's also a lot of meditation that I would call a good meditation. So I'm now referring to, let's say, good therapy, or good meditation, one that really is paying attention to not only being silent, but you would notice your emotions, you would notice your own tones of voice. Good therapy, you're not only being validated, but you're actually noticing where you, yourself, are conveying certain attitudes or qualities - some of which are positive, some of which are not positive. And therefore, you are already dedicated to having awareness be a central part of your life. So for those people, it would be more of a bubble up. And then of course, is people in the middle, too, where people are half committed and live a more, quote, ordinary life, where it's not devoted to awareness. It's devoted, maybe, to surviving, or to succeeding, or to being impressive. And they're really trying to, let's say, create an image or a persona of themselves. And those people, it really probably would require an intentional act of, "I'm going to step back and I'm going to ask myself, 'What am I up to?'" You know, "What am I really feeling? What is my ego? What kind of image is it trying to project? And actually, how is that different from either what my real intentions are or what my real feelings are? Or what my real needs are? And what would it take to be authentic?" Someone that's in the middle would have to be asking those kinds of questions. So, in a sense, I would add another category where inquiry, or asking questions of yourself, is helpful to provoke awareness.

Kim Forrester 24:16

I think even when we are asking questions of ourselves, if we are actively searching for an emotion, or an intent, or for a reason that we tend to behave in a certain way, Robert, we can only become aware of emotions and intent and behaviours if there is a contrast. Now you write in your book that we do need contrast to become aware of our tone of voice. And it strikes me that contrast may also

be necessary in other facets of awareness. If someone has lived their life living out a particular thought pattern, a particular emotional pattern, and these are lifelong reactions that have been integrated into their identity and into the way that they live their life, it may be difficult to even become aware of what that emotion is - because there's no contrast. How can we become more aware of our deeply entwined, deeply unconscious responses when we have little or no contrast of any other way of being?

Robert Strock 25:21

You know, the question makes me want to smile and cry at the same time. It makes me think of the world and in so much of what's happening in the world where a person's been raised a certain way - I won't mention any names, like our president - have been raised a certain way, where there's such a conviction that winning, never admitting that you're wrong, wanting wealth, wanting power, wanting control. Where if you're raised in an extreme environment like that, it's not only hard, I would say it's virtually impossible. That's an extreme example. Let's take a more moderate example where you've been raised in a family where there's been a lot of anger, or maybe even a little bit of emotional abuse and you're used to being critical of yourself. And that criticism has, it's almost like a musical sound to it. And that's the sound that's sort of your identity. "Why'd you do that? What's wrong with you? You know better than that." And that attitude is something that you think is you. And so yes, it's very important to have a contrast. It's one of the most important reasons to seek out a therapist, a meditation teacher, a quality friend, a member of your family that's the one that you revere the most, and ask for honest feedback. And try to see the contrast. Because most people are at least a little bit aware, but they're not usually dedicated to the awareness. And so once you get a taste that awareness is your friend, because what it does is it allows you the opportunity to really have an improved quality of life. A lot of people are afraid of awareness, because they think if they're aware, they're going to just judge themselves more. So they haven't made that distinction. Because awareness would see, 'Oh, you're judging yourself.' If you're in a mainstream attitude of judging yourself, you'll judge yourself for judging yourself, and it'll keep going on and on and on. But if you're with somebody who has a more neutral, caring awareness, they're not going to want to support you either judging yourself, or judging others, or dumping anger. And so they would represent the contrast. So it's really good for everyone to say, "Who do I most trust and how can I expose myself to that, and allow myself to grow into that contrast of trust, or character, or integrity, or kindness, or compassion?"

Kim Forrester 28:08

Robert, the Eudaemonia podcast is all about flourishing and, before your illness, you enjoyed a wonderful sense of well being. How has your understanding of awareness that heals changed your ability to flourish? Has it restored your sense of well being to where it was before? Has it altered it or even enhanced it?

Robert Strock 28:31

That's a great question. I mentioned it briefly earlier that, for six years ... first of all, for the first six months after my kidney transplant, I had a very unusual reaction with the medications and my body received the medication like it was speed. So I slept an hour a night for six months. I know it's hard to comprehend that, or even to hear that - but six months, an hour a night. So I was in a chronic state of exhaustion. And so I couldn't feel love. I couldn't feel peace. I couldn't feel joy. I couldn't feel lightness. I couldn't feel play. So I asked myself in that first month, "What can I do? What am I capable of?" And that's where friendly mind really deepened. And so it allowed me to gain a new

ally, which really you might call wisdom. And there were a couple elements with wisdom that were really absolutely crucial. One of them was intention - that even if we feel lousy, we can still look at that place inside and say, "What are your priorities? What are your intentions? What really matters to you? How can you put your focus on what really matters to you, so you can have a chance, no matter how lousy you feel? So at least you can be the good person, or of value, even though you're not going to get to experience the fruits of your value." So it was a combination of awareness, the intention to want to be a constructive influence, and then the third part was really using an element of will, which really required focus and persistence. Because if I just went with my feelings like I had been used to - sharing with my close friends, my feelings, and then that process would help me, or being able to communicate or receiving empathy, and caring, and compassion - I realised that the empathy no longer worked. That my chemistry was altered, and ordinary, prior ways that I could use - meditation didn't work, prayer didn't work - nothing worked, if you defined work, as feeling better. So then it became clear to me, my identity is not what I feel. Which is really, really an unusual way of looking at it, especially if you look at it closely. I would say it has more to do with your character, what your intentions are, what your awareness is, and how much you use your will to be connected to your heart. Now, the full answer to your question was, in addition to doing that, I also went on 300 chemical experiments, trying to, let's say, alter chemistry with chemistry. Initially, it was "How am I going to sleep?" So I found one medication that allowed me to sleep for three and a half hours a night, after six months. And then gradually over the next ten, twelve years, I was able to sleep five hours. And then, three years ago, I found a combination of dosages of five medications that allowed me to sleep eight hours a night. And then I found something that would help me get out of the fog and the sedation from the night before. So it's a combination of chemistry, and the inner work. And I think it's important for people to realise that. Because a lot of people do have chemistry, that, especially if you notice that from birth, "I've been depressed or from birth. I've been anxious", where they can be helped. And they can work til they're blue in the face, or meditate so they're blue in the face, and they're going to stay blue in their heart. You can kind of tell whether or not you really need some chemical support, or whether you can just do the inner work. But I think it's very helpful to know that both need to be considered, depending upon your individual situation.

Kim Forrester 32:38

Become aware of our physical needs as much as our emotional, psychological, spiritual needs.

Robert Strock 32:43

Exactly. Our physical needs, our chemical needs, our neurological needs. Yeah, all of it.

Kim Forrester 32:48

Robert, my final question is one that I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. Can you offer my listeners a simple 'morning reminder', I call it. This may be a practice, a mantra, an affirmation - something that my listeners can start using today to perhaps start connecting with an awareness that heals?

Robert Strock 33:08

Yeah, I think the simplest thing is to first, when you wake up in the morning, just spend 20 seconds, ask yourself, "What am I likely to be facing today?" So you kind of take a look - "I'm going to meet this person. This person's challenging for me." Or "I'm going to get together with friends", or "I'm

going to have to do some busy work that I don't really like." And as you look at the one, or two, or three things that are most challenging, ask yourself, "What quality do I most need, like patience, or tolerance, or kindness, or acceptance, or appreciation? And what tone of voice would be most beneficial to deal with the people in my life that will enhance my quality of life?" So it's really a combination of tone of voice, and quality. And it's important to realise that tone of voice can also be an inner tone, where you're wanting to support yourself. And sometimes it helps with words to say, "I want to be kinder toward myself", and then have a long exhale. So it's 'what tone of voice and what quality do I particularly want to bring in throughout the day?' And hopefully, you'll remind yourself of that question, especially as you face some of the things that you came up with.

Kim Forrester 34:35

And what a wonderful, simple little practice that we can all start integrating into our morning. Thank you for that, Robert. Robert Strock, if people want to learn more about you and the work that you do, and check out your latest book, Awareness that Heals where can they find out more?

Robert Strock 34:50

Amazon is selling the book. There's also two websites that could be gone to, that have a broad range of things. One is www.awarenessthatheals.org and the other one is www.robertstrock.org. And I think it's important to note that they're both orgs and not coms. They really are designed to create a world that hopefully can move toward peace and cooperation, and not so much toward just a self-centred life.

Kim Forrester 35:22

Robert, your contribution today to the Eudaemonia podcast has just been so inspiring and thought provoking, and I want to thank you from my heart, sincerely, for gifting your time for being here today. I truly appreciate it.

Robert Strock 35:34

Well, thank you for for the very kind words, and I wish you and really everyone just as much peace as possible, and to really live the quality of life that's the highest potential.

Kim Forrester 35:45

As Thích Nhất Hạnh teaches us, "Awareness is like the sun. When it shines on things, they are transformed." You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe and check out www.eudaemoniapod.com for more inspiring episodes. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself, and activate your ability to heal through awareness.