Sue

Are you conscious? Are you conscious now? Are you sure? These are the kind of questions that I hope you will enjoy asking yourself. And that’s why, in the book, we have a set of practices, one or two in each chapter. It’s important because we’re studying this, what it’s like, experience itself, if there is such a thing. So, you could do a whole course on consciousness entirely with intellectual ideas and theories and neuroscience and experiments, but when what we’re talking about is subjective experience, I think we need to get familiar with what that’s like. So, are you conscious now? That’s the first practice. And I suggest, and I’ve done this since I first began teaching consciousness courses in Bristol in the early 90s, I discovered that although I’d been asking these questions of myself for years, in Zen practice and asking and working with koans in meditation, the students enjoyed it too. But it’s difficult to do. I suggest that you take the question and every day for a week or longer, ask yourself hundreds of times every day, ‘Am I conscious now?’ Take time out of anything else. You can do it standing here, you can do it having a cup of tea, you can do it walking about, walking to classes, waiting for things to begin, any time you like. The trouble is, people find it hard to remember, so here are a couple of tips that students have given me for remembering. One is to do it every time you do some particular thing, so for example every time you have a drink, then you remember to ask, ‘Am I conscious now?’ Or every time you go to the loo, or every time you sit down or stand up. Get something and get in the habit. Another possibility is to ask a friend to every time they see you, go, ‘Are you conscious now?’ And you get caught out, going, ah, no, where was I? I was far away. And another trick is to take some stickers and write ‘Am I conscious now?’ on there, and, let’s have some other questions. Let me put this one on the teapot. ‘Did I do that consciously?’ Ooh, did I, was I consciously putting that on the teapot? ‘Is this experience unified?’ I’ll put it up there on the knife. And, ‘Where is this pain?’ is a good one. Actually, with that one I like to go, ah – where is that pain? Here? In my brain? Somewhere else? I don’t know. But if I keep putting the stickers, ooh, I could even put it on my hand, and that will remind me. Have fun with these questions. They’re hard. If you find it difficult to remember, you’re not alone. Everybody finds it hard to remember, but you will find you begin to know an awful lot more about your own mind and what you mean by being conscious.