The Nature Of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:43

The talk tonight is on the nature of awareness.

One of the things I appreciate about the retreat situation is how simple it is. When things are so simple like this, it brings us back in touch with the basics of our human life. I really would like to look tonight at some of the basic conditions of our existence as human beings. What is our situation? And as always in the Buddhist teachings, we want to look at it with an eye to finding where there is freedom within it.

As a way of framing this, I think a poem from Rumi is quite helpful. He said, "Where did I come from and what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea."

I sometimes feel like that on retreats. No idea what I'm supposed to be doing. You know, you can say, oh, I'm a yogi, I'm practicing Vipassana meditation and this technique and that technique—but it's just another role. Really, what are we here for?

One small caveat about this talk. You may know that when the Buddha was enlightened, he sat near the Bodhi tree for 49 days, enjoying what was said to be the bliss of deliverance. He thought of not teaching. Finally, a being came down from the heavenly realms and implored him to teach out of compassion for all beings, so he did. But he thought to himself, when he considered not teaching, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand. If I were to teach it and no one understood, that would be a vexation for me."

So I can't claim that the talk tonight will be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. If that's the case, don't worry about it too much. Let it come in one ear and out the other, and not get stuck in the middle where things tend to whir around.

I'm going to talk about one particular view of freedom. This is the view from within the Thai forest tradition of Buddhist practice. Not all schools may agree with this, but it's one view. Please don't take it out and get in deep arguments with your Burmese friends over it. It's just one view.

So let's take a look. What does it mean to say that we're a conscious being, that we're a sentient being? What is it like to be conscious? I think to understand that, we might ask ourselves, well, what is it like when we're unconscious? When we're in deep sleep, or if we fainted, then the experience is there are no arisings. Nothing is happening. There's no sense stimulation taking place.

So by contrast, being a conscious being means that we are experiencing things that arise at our six senses—the five physical senses and the sense door of the mind. We take a look at our conscious

experience through the retreat, and we see that we're aware of the breath, of body sensations, of sounds, of tastes, of thoughts and emotions, sights, smells, and so forth. This is, I think, what it means to be a conscious being: that we have experience of things arising at the senses.

The Buddha gave one discourse to the monks in his time. It's called the Discourse on Totality. I'd like to read a section of it:

"Monks, I will teach you the totality of life." Isn't that brave? Someone is going to teach the totality of life. No Western philosopher ever dared make a statement like that. But the Buddha said, "I will teach you the totality of life. Listen, attend carefully, and I will speak. What is the totality of life? It is just the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and objects of touch, the mind and mental phenomena. This is called the totality of life."

It's simple, isn't it? There are just 12 things on that list. But take a look in your experience. Is there anything that's outside that list? Sights and sounds and smell and taste and touch, mental phenomena—basically thoughts and emotions. Is there anything missing?

We like this list because it fits really well, mapping beautifully onto our meditation. As the instructions have unfolded over the days together, you've seen that we've basically brought mindfulness into almost every one of these areas. And so we relate directly with the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, thoughts, and emotions in our experience. In this, we're really examining the whole of life. Through these simple objects, we cover the totality of life.

But there's one other piece that I want to put into the list, one that I really want to draw out, and that is this function of consciousness itself. When we talk about being conscious beings, there's a sense in there that we are conscious of all these things arising. So in the Buddha's list, consciousness is one of the mental phenomena. It's not excluded. They didn't draw it out specifically. It is a mental phenomenon. And of course what we're conscious of are all these different arisings at the sense doors.

So let's take a specific example. When you are mindful of a breath, you're paying attention to an in-breath, you're conscious of it, aren't you? There's the physical sensation of the in-breath, and you're conscious of that. If you were a corpse, the same physical movements might be happening, but the consciousness wouldn't be there. When you think about it, when we breathe, the lungs expand, the diaphragm presses down, the abdomen swells outward. You could make that same movement happen on a corpse. You could stand beside it. You could press down on the lungs. This is what happens in CPR. The diaphragm would move down. The belly would rise. But that being wouldn't experience any conscious knowledge of that breath, because you are conscious. You are conscious of that breath in a different way than a corpse is.

So we say there is consciousness with each of these objects—the breath, the body sensations, the sounds, the emotions, the thoughts, the sights, tastes, and smells. So we put that in the equation. Our ongoing experience of life is consciousness with all the arisings, all the sense doors and consciousness of all of

them.

So, I want to ask a question. Are these phenomena permanent or impermanent? Sight, sound, smells, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions. Permanent or impermanent?

They're impermanent. Good. I was wondering if you'd been listening.

Now, what about this consciousness piece? The word in Pali for consciousness is viññāṇa. It's the fifth of the five aggregates. The Buddha said that consciousness is also impermanent. The understanding is that when you hear a sound, as the sound arises, you're conscious of it. When the sound passes away, the consciousness of that sound also passes away. So the understanding is with this term viññāṇa, that we translate as consciousness, it arises to meet the object, and when the object passes, the consciousness also passes away.

So in the classical teachings of the Buddha, consciousness is arising and passing with each sense object. As the object arises and passes, the knowing of it also arises and passes.

So we look back at our basic situation. All the objects are coming and going, and the consciousness of them is also coming and going. Everything's changing. Where is there any security in that? Where is there any refuge? Where is there any freedom?

The Buddha said it was really important to find a refuge in life, a refuge through practice, a true security in what he called nibbāna. These are some synonyms for nibbāna from the suttas: the unconditioned, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

So with this total human experience of impermanence, where is there any refuge? Where can we look to find it?

I want to tell a little story. A couple of years ago, I was visiting in Yosemite Valley.

My wife's sisters had come over from Australia, and it's a great place to show foreign visitors because there's nothing like it anywhere else in the world. You see a lot of great wildlife—deer and coyotes. You hope to see a bear. We didn't see a bear, but every morning we'd go out to our car in the parking lot, and there would be signs of bears because a few car windows would get punched in every night where the bears were looking for food. Fortunately, our car windows were not punched in, but they crawled over the top of our car, and the paw prints were there in the morning.

In addition to the wildlife, there's very interesting human wildlife, too. The buses pull up, and the tourists all unload—Bermuda shorts, video camera, standard outfit. The backpackers coming out of the backcountry haven't shaved, haven't bathed for about a week. Fortunately, they have their own campground. And then there are the climbers, with some of the best rock climbing in the whole world in Yosemite Valley, including a 3,000-foot vertical face called El Capitan. There's always a bunch of climbers with their base camp down in the valley. That's a fun culture to watch, because it's kind of a cross between

the U.S. Marines and the Grateful Dead. There's nothing else like climbers.

So a lot of stuff going on in the valley, but this one was new to me. We were at the parking lot of Yosemite Falls, looking up to the falls, and there was a group of about a dozen young people, young adults in their twenties. They were in a circle, and it looked like there was a leader. I soon figured out this was like a sensitivity training exercise or a team-building exercise. One person from the group would go into the middle of the circle, and at some suggestion from the leader, the person in the center would sort of throw up their hands and fall backwards. Then they would be caught by people on the outer edge of the circle. They would be there to hold them so that they wouldn't hit the ground. This is a standard practice in team building—you learn to trust the members of your team. At least every time I saw it, somebody caught them.

But it reminded me of our meditation practice. Not just because we end up falling down a lot, which we do, but because, interestingly enough, something catches us when we fall down. So I'd like to look tonight at what it means to fall down, or you might say let go, in our practice. And then also, what is it that catches us?

I was reflecting on all the things that you all have let go of this week. There's been a lot of letting go. In some ways, this is very close to the heart of the practice. We let go of old memories. We let go of plans. We come upon body pain, and we want to take hold of it and really work it out. But we learn to let go, or another phrase, let be. We take our hands off and we let it do its own thing. Same thing in coming into relation with difficult emotions. We run into fear, anger, wanting, loneliness. We don't get in and try to work it or manipulate it. We let be. We back off. In a way, we take our hands off the control.

A lot of what's happening in letting go of our thoughts is taking our hands off the control. Thoughts are used to think about the future and fix it to make it safe. Thoughts are used to bring up the past and edit it or rework it to make it less painful. When we let go of all that activity of thought, relation to pain, relation to emotion, it's a leap, isn't it? We're letting go of the ways we usually control the world. And when we do that, we open up in a way.

I'd like to invite you to try right now this process of opening up. You don't have to go into meditation, but just as you sit with your eyes open, just lightly go through your experience. First of all, let go of any holding in your body. If there's any sense that you're holding on somewhere in your body or holding on to something in your body, let that go. The body's just relaxed and it's not gripped in any way. Let go of anything you're thinking about. Let go of any mind state that might be problematic or you might be holding on to. Let go of your breath. You're still fully present. What's it like when you go through that letting go?

For me, I always feel a certain vulnerability when I just come into the moment. I think I don't have any protection—there's no more shielding between me and this moment, no covering anymore. There's just this bare openness to whatever's arising in the moment.

I can't control what arises. In fact, in any moment, anything could happen. Anything could happen in the next moment to any of us. And so coming into the moment, we're exposed to that uncertainty. We're wide open. We're really vulnerable.

Being willing to do that, as you've done over and over and over again this week, is a huge act of trust. Where did you find the courage to let go of all the protections and just come into this experience of life, unguarded, undefended, just open?

There's some faith, isn't there, in each of us that lets us do that—that says, when I let go completely, it's going to be okay. That the moment is basically a trustworthy experience. If we can trust in that letting go, then there's some peace in the moment.

Ajahn Chah put it this way: if you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace.

The Buddha said something similar. He said, "The stilling of all formations, the letting go of all attachments—that is nibbana. That is the unconditioned, the deathless." So this sense of stillness, of letting go, of peacefulness—we're coming close to nibbana when we do that.

So let's look back again at our basic situation. We have this openness, and we contact again that truth that life is nothing but these arisings at all the sense doors. It was like this in the past. It's like this now. It's going to be like that forever into the future. Could it ever be any different? When you awaken, is it going to be any different? If you were a Buddha, would it be any different? There are still going to be things coming and going at all the sense doors. That never changes.

So it's kind of like no matter where we are along the path—a beginner or fully enlightened—it's like things are just popping up on a movie screen. You're sitting in front of a screen and the projector is showing you all the elements of your life from birth onward. So there's mother, there's body, there's father, there's grade school. There's graduation. There's career. There's income tax returns. There's mindfulness of breathing. There's the whole Buddhist path. There's Britney Spears. All the elements of life are just popping up in front of us.

Some things are really beautiful and attractive. Mother was very attractive in the beginning of our life, essential. So when things are beautiful and attractive, we tend to reach out and hold on so they don't pass away. And some things are frightening. Maybe the first day of grade school, certainly income tax returns. So we take hold of those things, we grasp them, and we push them away so we don't have to experience the pain of them.

If we hold on to what's attractive and beautiful, because it's impermanent, it's going to pass, but we're left holding on, so there's suffering. If we take hold of something that's frightening, we're suffering already from the fear of it. We've grasped it, it's scary, and we're suffering. So either way, if we get involved in grasping the beautiful or the unbeautiful, we get involved with suffering.

Existence is always a mix of the beautiful and the unattractive. And if we develop that habit of clinging, we will always be involved in suffering.

The second point is that as we make a habit of this kind of relationship to objects, we distort the mind. It almost feels like the very awareness gets bent toward objects because we're so used to clinging to them. It's almost as though it makes a crease in the mind—the mind gets bent over with time out of this habit. That crease sort of perpetuates the leaning forward into experience and perpetuates the grasping. It becomes ingrained.

What happens when we come into meditation is that we start to undo that crease in the mind. We start to restore a proper relationship to arising phenomena through the practice of not grasping at them anymore. This develops because we activate mindfulness. Mindfulness can see the object clearly, and then the wisdom part also learns to see the grasping. We start to learn that if we grasp at anything, we get involved with suffering.

Through the clear seeing of meditation, we start not to cling. The mind starts to find its natural balance and straightens out that fold, that habit of leaning into experience. As we restore this natural state of mind through non-grasping, we come back to awareness's fullness in itself, its self-sufficiency. We get more and more confidence that we can let go, that we don't need to lean into objects for security.

When I look at great spiritual beings, I get the sense that they've released a long way into this kind of awareness. Somebody like the Dalai Lama really strikes me like this. He was honored a few years ago at a gathering in Virginia for Nobel Peace Prize laureates. It was all heavyweights—His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa, Rigoberta Menchú who had done great peace work in Central America, and a few other living laureates. A very dignified and august assembly.

At some point in the conference, they were taken outside to have their photograph taken as a group. The Dalai Lama was on the upper tier, standing right behind Desmond Tutu. There happened to be a photographer with a quick hand on the lens who captured this particular moment: As they were posing for this very solemn picture, the Dalai Lama reached down and yanked the cap off of Desmond Tutu's head. The photographer snapped the picture just at that moment, so you get Desmond Tutu going, "What? What happened to my cap?" And the Dalai Lama behind him, holding the cap with his face just bursting with this big belly laugh.

What a kid. He's just a kid at heart. So much trust, so much confidence. He's released in something that's not ego. He's released into this awareness, this openness.

When we release into that, we can feel that awareness has an effortless quality. Rodney was talking about this this morning. We don't have to work to be aware. If we just sit here and we're not distracted, awareness does its thing. It reveals all the arisings at the six senses. We point to this when we give the instructions for sounds: Notice how, as you open to sounds, the hearing takes place without doing

anything. We start to see the very nature of the mind is this awareness. We don't have to fabricate it. We don't have to call it up. As you just sit here, there's no way you cannot hear the sounds.

I'm using the word awareness at this point, and I've also talked about mindfulness and consciousness. At this point, people often are curious: what's the difference between mindfulness, awareness, and consciousness? I want to go into this vocabulary a little bit.

The word awareness has no counterpart in Pali. In the teachings of the Buddha, there's no word in the Pali language that we need to translate by awareness. There's the word sati, which we translate by mindfulness, and there's the word viññāṇa, which we translate by consciousness, but there's no third word that we need awareness for. So let's talk about mindfulness and consciousness, then we'll talk about how we use awareness.

The term sati or mindfulness means—I think we've said it a few times—knowing what our experience is. If you're breathing in, you know you're breathing in. If you're feeling tingling in the body, you know it's tingling. If you're hearing a sound, you know you're hearing. If you're experiencing a mood of happiness, you know it's happiness.

So we say that mindfulness has this intelligent quality. It's looking on at our experience and understanding what it is. This is actually the start of wisdom. Ajahn Buddhadasa, who we all spent time with in Thailand, used to talk about this in a word he created: *satipanya*. *Sati* means mindfulness, *panya* means wisdom. He conjoined them, hyphenated them, saying this is mindfulness-wisdom, all one word acting together. So mindfulness has this intelligent quality.

Consciousness is just the bare knowing of the sense data. You hear that snap, and just that bare registration before any word, before you're even identifying it as a sound—just the holding of that, that's consciousness. It's a mechanical thing. It doesn't have any particular intelligence with it. You could say it's stupid, if you like.

The nice thing about consciousness is it's really spontaneous. You don't have to do anything to be conscious. It just happens by itself. The nice thing about mindfulness is it has an intelligence, a wisdom aspect.

In English, we get kind of tricky around this word *awareness*. We use it to bridge mindfulness and consciousness. Sometimes we mean mindfulness, sometimes we mean consciousness. But really, the way I use awareness, I use it to mean someplace that blends mindfulness and consciousness. Because awareness has the spontaneous quality of consciousness, but it has wisdom in it too. When you say you're aware, you realize there's an intelligence there. So you can think of awareness as a spontaneous intelligence. It has both aspects.

In the Thai forest tradition, this quality is often called our true nature. This is from Ajahn Mahabua, the Thai forest master: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three

characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws." Isn't that interesting? "It knows and does not die." So awareness has a connection with deathlessness, which is a synonym for *nibbana*.

How can we connect with this in our practice? Can we discover it? Can we explore it?

For this I want to turn to one of the great philosophers of our age: Calvin and Hobbes. This strip came out around Christmas time one year. They were walking through the woods together, snow on the ground, and Calvin was saying to Hobbes, "This whole Santa Claus thing just doesn't make sense. Why all the secrecy? Why all the mystery? If this guy exists, why doesn't he ever show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this?"

And Hobbes says, "I don't know. Isn't this some kind of religious holiday?"

And Calvin says, "Yeah, but actually I've got the same questions about God." That's good, isn't it? If there's a God, why doesn't he show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this? Good question.

When we talk about faith and trust in Buddhism, it's really helpful to ask: What is it that we have faith in? What do we trust in? You might say nature or pure nature or Dharma or God or something like that. But I wonder if it's possible to connect with it. I wonder if it's possible to feel it so that you know it directly.

I would suggest that it can't be seen through our eyes. Because if it could be seen, it would be an existing thing and it would be impermanent. And similarly, for the same reason, it can't be touched with our body. It can't be heard with our ears. Whatever is unconditioned, whatever is beyond change, it has to be invisible.

It has to be intangible. It has to be silent.

Well, awareness kind of fits that bill, doesn't it? It has those qualities.

This is from a Christian contemplative, Angelus Silesius: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

I'm going to read that one more time. There's a lot in it. "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for it, the more it will appear."

Two things here. The deathless is found in the here and now. Nowhere else. Always in the here and now. The second thing is that opening to it is connected with relaxing. The less you reach for it, the more it appears. So the more we relax—not striving, not doing, again as Rodney was pointing to this morning—the more it opens up, the more we touch it easily.

So what is unchanging? Again, we look at our practice, and throughout the week we've been changing the instructions: breath, body, sounds, thoughts, emotions, tastes. But there's one common theme through all

the instructions, and that is paying attention. So again, maybe the awareness is kind of the thread that links all these arisings together. Maybe the awareness is the unchanging part.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "I met my guru when I was 34, and I realized by 37. That's a good practice. Pleasure and pain lost their sway over me. I was free from desire and fear. I found myself full, needing nothing. I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside beginninglessly and endlessly. There is a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you give it. It is the foundation and ultimate support of all that is."

Ajahn Jumnian is another living Thai master. I think he's about 65 now. He comes out to Spirit Rock every year in late May. So I've had a lot of contact with him over the years, and he is an amazing being. He has more energy than anybody I know 20 years younger, and he's always happy. I've never seen him not happy. He said, in fact, that he has not had any anger for 25 years. Impressive. And you feel that in his spirit. When you just tune into his energy, he's always energized and he's always happy.

He doesn't know a lot of English. He has a translator when he teaches, but this is one of his teachings in English. He's in front of a group and he wants to demonstrate the heart of the Dharma. And he goes, "Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's his transmission. Empty and happy.

Here's a quote from Ajahn Jumnian that he gave in a talk at Spirit Rock: "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the word he used for great awareness was mahasati, literally great mindfulness—"The best way to develop a great awareness is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure awareness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world, which all have the nature to arise and pass away."

Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless. Again, the equation of the deathless with this pure awareness.

Again from Ajahn Mahabua: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. Whatever is true—that is, a natural principle in and of itself—won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind. All that remains is simple awareness, utterly pure."

So we see from all these different sources the equation of awareness with the deathless, the undying, always available beyond change.

But I want to go back to something I said earlier, which was that the Buddha said that consciousness is impermanent. Consciousness arises with the object, and as the object fades, consciousness passes away. So how can we resolve these two? Awareness is the deathless, or consciousness is impermanent. This really concerned me for quite a while in my practice, and so I want to share with you the kind of resolution that

I came to. It may work for you or it may not, but I'll tell you the image that came to me.

I studied physics in college, and there are a few ways to demonstrate a proof in physics. One is mathematically—if you can prove it mathematically, that stands. Another way is experimentally—if you can conduct an experiment that's reproducible, that will establish a principle. And another way is what my professor called a thought experiment, a gedanken experiment from the German. And if you could carry out an imaginary experiment and based on what you know, predict the outcome logically, that could also be a method of proof.

So I'd like us to go into a gedanken experiment tonight on behalf of the Dharma. What I'd like you to do is imagine you're in outer space. You're sort of on the edge of our solar system, and your back is to the sun. The sun's behind you. Now, let's pretend we don't have to worry about spacesuits and goggles and reflectors and all that, but you're just out there. You're looking away from the sun, and just for the purpose of the experiment, let's say you're looking into a part of the sky where there are no stars.

What do you see? Back is to the sun, looking into the sky, no stars. What's your visual experience?

Black, right? Is this the black that's light reflected off a black object? Or is this the black that's the absence of any light? It's the absence of any light, isn't it?

Is the space in front of you actually devoid of light? Your back is to the sun. No, the sun's rays are filling that space, aren't they? So it's pervaded—that space is pervaded by light—but you're not seeing any light.

Now, all of a sudden, a meteor shoots up from below you. It goes zipping across your field of vision. Do you see it? Yeah. There's like this bright flash in front of your eyes for a minute. Where's the light coming from? The sun. The sun's light illuminates the meteor, and then it creates this bright flash in your eye. And then it's gone, right? The meteor arises, flashes, and then it passes through. It's gone, and then you're back with black.

I'm going to suggest that that flashing of light from the meteor is consciousness, and that the sunlight that's continually pervading empty space is awareness, the deathless awareness. Will you buy it?

It's pervading, but you don't see it. The unconditioned, the deathless, the ever-present is there, but we don't see it.

And the only way we know that it's there is that it's reflected when a phenomenon arises. That reflection is the proof that it was there from the beginning.

Now, sometimes it may be possible in a moment of meditation to turn back, face in the other direction, and see the full radiance of the sun directly. That may be possible. But most of the time we don't. We're surrounded, we're pervaded by this unconditioned radiance, but we only know it from its reflection.

So how can we relate with this in our practice? We start to get a sense of this true nature when the

demands of the I are not so strong, when we're not so caught up in liking and disliking, desire and aversion. There's a relative sense of ease. At a time like that, you're really in the present moment. At a time like that, take a look at this quality of awareness, at what it's like when you're really undistracted.

It's been compared to vast space, which is one reason that the sunlight analogy works well. It's been compared to space in that it's very wide open. In fact, do you feel any boundaries or limits in your awareness? Is there an edge to it anywhere? No. So like space, it's unbounded. It feels limitless.

Physical space accommodates all the objects that arise. Our awareness accommodates all the phenomena of the senses that arise. But there's one key difference. This inner space has a quality that the physical space doesn't, and that is the quality of sentience, of consciousness, of cognizance. This inner space of awareness illuminates its arisings. It reveals them. The sights, the sounds, the smells, the tastes, the touch—they're revealed through this awareness. Physical space doesn't have that knowing quality. It's dumb. It doesn't have a consciousness aspect.

What we are most fundamentally is this empty space of knowing, this vast spaciousness whose very nature is cognizance. As we start to let that truth sink in, the power is that it shifts our identity.

Usually we're preoccupied with identifying ourselves with particulars. I'm an angry person, or I'm a happy person, or I'm too short, or I'm too thin, or I'm feeling lonely, or I'm feeling excited. And all these things are what Carol last night talked about as personality view, sakkāya-diṭṭhi. They're all ways that we identify, and because we're identifying with things that are impermanent, we get involved in suffering when we make our personality view hook up with these impermanent characteristics.

So in this shift of identity, we unhook from the particulars. We don't grasp on to the arisings, but we let that sense of our center of gravity shift to this vast, open awareness that holds all the comings and goings, but itself is not coming and going. So we shift our identity to this deathless quality.

This quality—it's a dimension within us that's beyond change. When we make that shift, you can start to feel that in your being. It gives us a place of steadiness. It's the deathless. What else could be steadier? It's consistent. It's beyond change. What could be more consistent? And it's peaceful. It contains the arising and passing, but it itself is not arising and passing.

As we relax in that, it moves us into a place of non-grasping. We don't need to get involved with the particular arisings and passings. We simply let them take place within this vast space. We're still in touch with it. We're not denying anything. We're not out of touch. But we're not holding on to it.

And we start to see that this space of awareness is intrinsically free—free of desire, free of aversion, and free of confusion.

And this is not a freedom that we have to go a long way down the meditation track to touch. We can touch it here and now. It's available here and now because we have it already. It's not something we have to

manufacture. It's our most basic nature. It is the fundamental truth of our existence as sentient beings.

So that means there's a dimension in our being that's already free right now. Not that we have to wait for many, many eons to discover freedom. There's a freedom already active within us. And the more we can realize that, the more we feel that freedom start to permeate our being. The only thing we have to do to be there is to stop grasping. We stop grasping and we're in it. It's that close to us.

So that's why we put the emphasis on elements like relaxing, trusting, ceasing from wanting, ceasing from aversion. When we move into that non-activity, we drop into the nature of mind and we're in that pure, deathless awareness.

It's sometimes compared to a mirror, because a mirror will reflect anything that's put in front of it. You put something really beautiful in front of a mirror, it reflects it perfectly. You put something really unappealing in front of a mirror, it reflects it perfectly. The mirror doesn't care. It's completely impartial. The same way with awareness. It can hold everything, and it really doesn't have a preference for the beautiful or the unbeautiful.

Anything you put in front of a mirror doesn't harm it. Anything that takes place within pure awareness never actually harms or corrupts the purity of that awareness. It can cover it over, but it can't really break it or affect it.

For me, this has been a really inspiring part of my path for the last several years, to realize that this intrinsic freedom is available in any moment when I put down grasping. It's felt here and now. And as we feel it, it furthers the path. So we don't have to wait for many, many lifetimes to touch an element of freedom.

Rumi has a poem about this state and also about how when we get identified with particulars, it leads into bondage. It's called "Tending Two Shops":

Live in the nowhere that you came from, even though you have an address here. That's why you see things in two ways. You have eyes that see from that nowhere and you have eyes that judge distances, how high, how low. You own two shops and you run back and forth. Try to close the one that's a fearful trap, getting always smaller. Checkmate this way. Checkmate that. Keep open the shop where you're not selling fish hooks anymore. You are the free-swimming fish.

Each of us really is the free-swimming fish of awareness, but we tend to put our identity again and again in the transient. When we start to put the identity into the deathless, then we move into that place of refuge. And when I say put the identity there, we don't have to make an "I" about it. It's not like we found a new location for the self. There's no reason to put the "I" around awareness because there's nothing individual about this awareness. This awareness is completely impersonal. It's a building block of the universe. It's the same in all sentient beings.

Huang Po said that human beings and all wriggling things are possessed of this great nirvanic nature. So us and the frogs and the worms—it's the same nature. So we don't have to make an "I" out of it. It's not a Guy nature or a Carol nature or a Rodney nature. It's just nature. So just awareness.

But that's where we start to find our center of gravity. When we connect again and again with this spaciousness and cognizance, spaciousness and consciousness, and recognize it as our nature, then it's said that all the wholesome qualities of the heart and mind flower from that recognition.

And so it's said that the union of emptiness and consciousness is unimpeded warmth, unimpeded caring. So this emptiness, this knowing, is not a cold place, but it's a place that unfolds all the beautiful qualities of heart and mind. And how it unfolds them depends on the situation. If we're with someone who's suffering, the unfolding is compassion.

If we're with someone who's happy, the unfolding is sympathetic joy. If we're just with ourselves and in touch with the emptiness, the unfolding may be equanimity. If we're in a big crowd, the unfolding may be loving kindness. If we have to make a decision, the unfolding may be wisdom. All the qualities come out just as they're needed from this space of emptiness and cognizance.

Once you get the intuitive sense of this, you can make this a practice. We sometimes say that this practice is that of resting in awareness. But sometimes this is misunderstood. People think that they're going to find a destination of awareness that's separate from the comings and goings. So they look to freeze some experience that's separate from phenomena. That's not it.

The awareness continues to illuminate all the arisings. So you don't look for someplace different than that. You look for the space that holds it all. And you're still in touch with the moment and with change. All of it happens within this space, but there's a sense—there's a pervasive sense of ease, openness, relaxation, and stillness.

This is again from Ajahn Buddhadasa: "This emptiness is self-existent. Nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. This is the eternal state, for it knows neither birth nor death. Once the mind is rid of delusion, it discovers its primal state, the true original mind, which is satipaññā, mindfulness wisdom."

And this expression of trust in this true nature, of openness and relaxing in the true nature, becomes a practice all of its own. It is the practice of faith in each moment, opening to that vulnerability, the bareness, the nakedness, and the trusting in life to hold us. This really is tuning our being to the flavor of nibbāna.

I'll just close with a quotation from the Buddha. He was talking to a monk named Piṅgiya, and he was talking to him about the power of the practice of faith. He said, "Piṅgiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakkali, Bhadravudha, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.