Consciousness, Awareness And Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:03:37

The talk tonight is on consciousness, awareness, and nibbāna. So put your seatbelts on.

We've talked a number of times in this retreat about our basic situation as human beings—the fact that we are sensitive and conscious, and our experience is of different appearances coming and going all the time. Some of them are pleasant and enticing; some of them are painful and repelling. When we are not trained in how to relate wisely to the changing appearances, our conditioned habit of mind is to hold on tightly to what is pleasant and to push away what is unpleasant, while remaining unaware of that very activity—not recognizing what we're doing.

If we look more deeply, we see that this comes from a very deep-rooted instinct, or you could say longing, for some kind of security—looking to stabilize our life experience in something reliable and pleasing. But of course, as we start to investigate, we see that all the temporary things we try to hang on to or control just slip through our hands.

The Buddha pointed to this in one of his suttas from the Saṃyutta Nikāya. He used an analogy: it's like a person caught in the current of a river. The river is carrying them downstream against their will—they don't wish to go where the river is carrying them. So they reach up to the banks of the river trying to hold on, to stop their flow. But what they reach for and cling to are just bunches of grass. The current is so strong that it pulls out the bunches of grass and continues to sweep them downstream. This is our experience in trying to cling to changing objects.

When the Buddha was reflecting on his own journey, he said that when he started, he realized his habit was, being himself subject to death, to look for his satisfaction in that which was also subject to death—that is, in changing objects. As he reflected on that, he developed the aspiration to look for something that was beyond the quality of change. He said, "Seeing that I was subject to birth, aging, illness, death, and sorrow, I sought the unborn, unaging, unailing, deathless, and sorrowless security from bondage—nibbāna." He called this the supreme security from bondage.

This is the state that he realized the night he sat under the Bodhi tree near the town of Gayā and came to his awakening. This is the poem said to have sprung into his mind immediately after his awakening:

Through many a birth I wandered in saṃsāra, seeking but not finding the builder of this house. Painful is birth again and again. O house builder, now you are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters are broken. Your ridge pole is shattered too. My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving.

The unconditioned is one of his favorite synonyms for nibbāna—the deathless element. In attaining the unconditioned, it brought his mind to the very end of craving. In this analogy, the house that was being built was this body being born again and again. The house builder is craving. The rafters of the house are the kilesas, and the ridge pole is ignorance. All of these were shattered on the night of his awakening. The unconditioned was attained and his mind was liberated.

This is the pointing of the Third Noble Truth in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths: dukkha, the origin of dukkha, and the Third Noble Truth—the end of dukkha, which equates to the end of craving and here also to the quality of nibbāna.

The Buddha also said this about his attainment: "This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, subtle, hard to see and hard to understand, to be experienced by the wise." He's basically saying that this quality of nibbāna is indescribable. So in talking about it tonight, I am attempting something that's essentially impossible. You know how the Tao Te Ching says that those who know do not speak and those who speak do not know? Well, since I'm speaking, you already know what category I'm in. That's okay. We have nothing but words to point to these things.

I can't claim that this talk will be either profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So as you listen, please don't worry too much about trying to figure it out. As Heather indicated in her talk last night, figuring out doesn't take us terribly far on the road of insight. Rather, maintain a receptive attitude and let the words come in. Try to feel into the sense of them. You don't need to engage the thinking apparatus too much. If something doesn't resonate, let it go by. Don't worry about it.

In explaining nibbāna, Sāriputta was once asked what it is. The way he described it: "The destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion—this is called nibbāna." The literal meaning is extinguishing. It's as though craving is being compared to a flame that burns us. We feel the burning fire of craving throughout our experience. When nibbāna is understood or even glimpsed, touched, that flame goes out. The extinction is what brings the peace. So you could call it the extinction of craving or the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Those are synonymous.

Nirvana can be understood as a psychological state of complete freedom. That's one way in which it's true, and there are some schools in Buddhism that understand it as nothing more than that. For them, nirvana is only a state of mind—the highest state of mind, the ideal state of mind, but only a state of mind.

Most schools in Buddhism, however, understand it also as something that has a kind of existence. You could say philosophically an ontological reality—that it is more than just a state of mind, but nirvana itself is an element or a dhamma that is available to be experienced. I believe that the words of the Buddha support this second view more.

Here's a passage from the Udana:

"There is the unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, then there would be no deliverance here visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded. But since there is this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, therefore a deliverance is visible from that which is born, become, made, compounded."

I hope you get the flavor of this. It's as though we look out at the whole of human experience and we see that it's just made up of things that are coming and going, being born and dying, made, compounded, created in existence, formed from other conditions, and then passing away as part of their nature of change. And the Buddha is saying if that's all there was in our whole being, there would be no deliverance possible. But there is this dimension within us that is not born, not become, not made, not compounded. This is the element of nirvana.

So what are its characteristics? The Buddha said that the unconditioned has three marks: it is not subject to arising, it is not subject to passing, and it is not subject to change. So it is not in this sphere of that which is born and dies. It is sometimes called the unborn, sometimes called the deathless, sometimes called the unchanging. This is a dimension within our own being.

Because its nature is beyond change and it's not subject to arising, it has to be here and now. That which is not subject to arising or passing must be in every moment of experience. So it's here now. And that's why the suttas are full of these stories of people who penetrated to that realization in an unexpected moment. They didn't know that opening was going to come to them. They didn't know that realization was going to happen. But because of nirvana's ever-present nature, that is possible in any moment—in a moment of sitting, in a moment of walking, in a moment of lunch, in a moment of looking at a deer. That opening is possible for us.

So why don't we see it? If it's always here, why don't we see it? The reason, as I understand it, is that the kilesas are too gross. In being as gross as they are, these movements of mind—the agitation of craving, of desire and aversion, and the fog of delusion—they cloud our vision and we cannot see that which is the most subtle. Our minds are captivated by bigger movements, and so we don't yet have the refinement of attention to see that which is very subtle.

That's why the act of stilling the mind through the development of mindfulness and the growth of concentration is so critical to the deepening of insight. It is only when the state of mind becomes more refined, more quiet, that it's likely that breakthrough can take place.

The Buddha suggested some synonyms for nirvana. There's one passage in the Samyutta Nikaya where he gives thirty-three different synonyms, ways of talking about nirvana, and I find it inspiring and rather moving to read some of them. Some of the synonyms are: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge, and the beyond. All of these point to that sense of the transcendent nature of nirvana—a transcendent refuge beyond change, beyond the conditioned.

The realization of nirvana is considered the highest kind of happiness available, above sense pleasures and above just the pleasure of concentration and a still mind. Why is that? I think this teaching—that nirvana is the highest happiness—is a profound pointing to an aspect of our nature that is not immediately obvious.

Normally, the untrained mind thinks that the highest happiness is the glitziest thing or the most bubbly kind of high or the most extreme form of ecstasy. But the trouble is that all those things always pass. And if that's really what happiness is, then happiness is only temporary. Moreover, when something that special passes, it leaves a big hole and it leaves us wanting more of it.

So the beauty of nirvana being the highest kind of happiness is that it is experienced as a complete peace—a complete peace that is incapable of being disturbed. Because of the total absence of craving, there is no movement in mind to disturb that peace. And that turns out to be the greatest relief. The experience of the mind which is not even subject to agitation turns out to be the most satisfying domain of happiness.

Moreover, when the degree of enlightenment that the Buddha attained—the full liberation of mind—takes place, one realizes then an experience that I haven't personally had and can't speak about: one is completely beyond the possibility of suffering. The possibility of suffering has vanished from human existence. I can't even imagine the kind of relief and happiness and bliss that such understanding would bring.

So it's an interesting reflection that what we are really looking for most deeply is peace. The Buddha expressed this two different ways in the Dhammapada. He said nibbana is the highest happiness, and he said peace is the highest happiness. I find that very inspiring to contemplate.

How do we get there? This question may have crossed your mind, and I discovered with great pleasure that the whole path leads only in that direction. The Buddha said that this path of mindfulness, the Eightfold Path, is a path that goes in one direction only, and that is to nibbana. He also put it this way: "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines toward the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates the noble eightfold path slants, slopes, and inclines toward nibbana."

So we are all, through our practice, heading in that direction. When we will reach it remains a mystery, because all our efforts, even the best efforts, cannot open that door. What effort can do is take the mind into the territory from which the opening to the unconditioned can arise. The best way of preparing the mind is to develop the seven factors of enlightenment. That creates the kind of balanced, alert, still mind from which this opening is most likely to come. But no effort can make that opening happen.

This was shown beautifully in a story from the Vinaya. After the death of the Buddha, a council was called of all the fully enlightened beings of the time in order to preserve the teachings. The teacher was gone. There would be no fresh discourses given, and they realized it would be very important to remember

what the Buddha had said during his life.

So they convened the council. It was considered the council of 500 arahants, fully awakened ones. There was just one problem. First, it's a very exclusive gathering—only arahants are admitted. But the person who had spent the greatest amount of time around the Buddha and who probably had the best memory was his attendant, Ananda, whom Carol mentioned a few nights ago. Unfortunately, Ananda was not an arahant, so he couldn't gain entrance.

Ananda thought, "I have much to share. I'd really like to be able to join this group of arahants. I'm going to practice with great dedication." So the night before the council was to begin, Ananda was in his hut, sitting and walking all night long, paying close attention, generating tremendous aspiration. His effort was very high. Sitting and walking, his mind seemed balanced, but daybreak came and there had been no opening. There had been no liberation. Ananda was not going to be able to join the council.

With great disappointment, he said, "That's just the way it's going to be. I have to accept this. I might as well take some rest—I'm tired from practicing all night long." So he went to his bed to lie down, and with that relaxation and peace of completing his effort, just as his head was about to touch the pillow, the full awakening came, and Ananda became an arahant. He joined the council the next day and provided us with all those beautiful discourses that begin "Thus have I heard," which comprise the majority of the suttas.

Sometimes relaxation or letting go is the doorway when all the factors have been brought together.

So what do we mean by this term enlightenment? In our tradition, in the Theravadan tradition, what constitutes enlightenment? The way that I understand it—and you'll find differing opinions among different Buddhist schools on this topic—in our tradition, it is the moment of realization of nibbana in one's direct experience.

The mind of the practitioner opens in some way to this unconditioned element that we call nirvana. The veils of the defilements have fallen completely away, so it's a moment of complete purity of consciousness without a flicker of craving. There is the direct touching and knowing for oneself the quality of the unconditioned, with its complete unshakability and its tone of complete deliverance and freedom.

But that penetrating insight, in the teachings of the Buddha, can give rise to four different depths of realization. The first is called stream entry. There's a formula that appears in the suttas again and again to describe someone who has attained the quality of stream entry. It says something like—I don't have the quote right in front of me—"the stainless, immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him or her: all that is subject to arising is subject to cessation." That's a description of that immediate touching of the deathless. All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation. And it may be why the term cessation is sometimes applied to this moment of direct realization.

So one who has touched this level of realization of stream entry finds that some of the fetters binding the

mind are permanently uprooted. These are said to be, in the case of a stream enterer, personality view, attachment to rites and rituals, and doubt—that means doubt about the path and its destination and its ability to reach that destination. But quite a number of other fetters or kinds of bondage still remain. So a stream enterer, even one who has had this direct realization, is not completely liberated. There are still other bondages in place. So the stream enterer continues to practice in order to purify the rest of the fetters.

Now just on a practical and realistic note, the attainment of stream entry is something that happens for Western practitioners today. It happens at centers like Spirit Rock. It happens at centers like IMS on the East Coast. So this is not an impossible attainment for modern Western practitioners of the Dharma.

Ajahn Sumedho is one of the few monastics who has alluded to his own experience of stream entry. He said he was practicing as a monk in Thailand under the guidance of Ajahn Chah, who was a great master, and had an experience where he felt he had touched the deathless, touched the unconditioned. But he wasn't quite certain. Because, I mean, how do you know?

Generally the reports of stream entry from first-hand experience are of quite an altered state of consciousness. And because nirvana is indescribable anyway, words can never map easily onto these descriptions. So you'll even find two people in the same tradition who both feel they've experienced stream entry and the realization of nibbana, but when they talk about their experiences to each other, they sound so different that one will say, "No, I think my experience is valid, but I don't think yours is." And the other will say, "Well, that's funny, I had the same take about your description." So even practitioners in a similar lineage may not agree on the descriptions of what constitutes the realization of the unconditioned.

So Ajahn Sumedho had some doubt. Was this the real thing or not? So he went to talk to his teacher. He described the experience to Ajahn Chah and was sort of saying, "Was this it?" And Ajahn Chah said, "I wasn't there. How do you expect me to know?" I think this is a wonderful lesson. It's very hard for anybody but the Buddha to know somebody else's level of attainment. So it helps to be humble in these areas.

So the stream enterer continues to practice, and the second level of awakening or enlightenment is said to be a once-returner. At this stage, another glimpse of the unconditioned takes place, and the fetters of sense-desire and aversion are greatly weakened, but still other fetters remain.

Then continuing to practice, at the third stage, it's said that sense-desire and aversion are completely uprooted. Imagine a mind that had that degree of freedom, where there was no longer any sense desire and no longer any flicker of aversion. This is said to be the stage that Dipa Ma had attained. I think her teacher let the secret out on that one. I don't know if it's true or not, but she was somebody with an incredible peace and freedom.

Then continuing still further, the fourth stage of enlightenment is Arahantship. And at this, all the remaining fetters are uprooted, including restlessness, conceit, and ignorance. Isn't it interesting that restlessness continues longer than sense desire? The next time you're complaining about having to get through forty-five minutes, just remember, even a near-Arahant could be in the same position.

So it's said that at this fourth stage of awakening, the mind becomes completely unshakable. This level of enlightenment, this fourth stage called Arahantship, is called the unshakable deliverance of mind. The practitioner knows that they have passed completely beyond the possibility of suffering.

If you'd like to read a contemporary account of someone describing his Arahant attainment, there's a very impressive recounting in a book called Straight from the Heart by a Thai forest master named Ajahn Mahabua. Ajahn Mahabua is still alive and still teaching in the northeast of Thailand. He was a disciple of Ajahn Mun, as was Ajahn Chah. So Ajahn Chah and he were Dharma brothers.

He recounted that when he was a monk with about nine or ten vassa—that means nine or ten years in the monkhood—he decided to challenge himself in his practice and decided to sit up all night every night and decided not to move. That's determination. So he did that for a three-month period in practice. He sat up every night, all night, and he didn't move. And he said that the pain was unbelievable. He said he lost his fear of death because he knew that no pain of dying could be worse than the pain that he experienced in sitting up all night, every night.

And then he said at the end of that period of practice, his mind became like a rock. Through the power of concentration and determination that he developed, his mind was completely unmovable, couldn't be swayed by anything.

Then he said, "I got stuck on that concentration for five years." Like why go beyond, right? There is a harbor, but it's a constructed harbor. It's not the harbor of the unconditioned. It's the harbor of really, really good concentration, but it's not the end of the story.

So, I don't know if it was through interaction with a teacher or his own reflection, he realized that he had to investigate further. And he began investigating the presence of craving and the absence of craving. And he would see them come and go in his practice. He was looking at where was craving arising, where was it not arising. And then with that, he also started to notice suffering and the absence of suffering. So that became his meditation.

But after a while, he became dissatisfied with that because he said, "All that is is impermanent. That's not taking me to the deathless. All I'm seeing is more impermanence."

So then he turned his attention to the two things that he felt were not really changing for him, and those were mindfulness and wisdom. He said, "Oh, those are shining all the time." And you'll find this language in the Thai forest tradition. The combination of mindfulness and wisdom is referred to in that tradition as *sati-paññā*.

So he turned his attention then to *sati-paññ*a, and he said that these two factors of mindfulness and wisdom became impartial and impassive. And the mind was not tending to anything. It wasn't interested any longer in changing conditions because it had settled back into the knowing of mindfulness and wisdom.

He said then at a certain moment, "The cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared. At the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom."

So the eradication of ignorance is essentially a statement of Arahantship—one of the last fetters to go, and when it is completely removed from the mind, that is equivalent to a claim of Arahantship. So it's a very inspiring passage to read in his books. It really shows us the human possibility and that there are people alive today who have touched, it seems, who have touched that possibility.

Well, this Arahant stuff is all very well and good for people with twenty years in the robes living in the forest in Thailand, but that may seem a little remote for the rest of us. So how can we bring this interest in the unconditioned, this understanding of the unconditioned, how can we bring it alive in our practice today, right now, right where we are?

I want to suggest that there are two basic ways to approach this. The first is to kind of pick up on this description of Sariputra's that nibbana is the destruction of greed, of hatred, and of delusion. That suggests that perhaps we don't have to go so far as destruction, but perhaps the reduction in greed, hatred, and delusion. Now, this is not watering down the Dharma because we know the destruction is where the path is leading. But as a way to get a feel for it, a flavor for it, maybe we could look at this possibility.

So here's one way to relate with it in your practice. When we talk about the end of suffering or when we read that in the suttas, I believe the Buddha is talking about the complete end, the final end of suffering that does never recur again. But it can also be understood as a temporary end of suffering.

So here's one way to look at it. Anytime you're involved in some kind of struggle, of resistance or wanting or friction or conflict, unease in your practice, follow this practice that we've mentioned a number of times in the retreat. Take a look and see if there is in the mind greed, aversion, or delusion. Take a look and see if one or more of those is active. If it is, then understand that the conflict and suffering is as a result of those forces in the mind. And then simply pay attention to the sense of struggle and the presence of greed, aversion, or delusion until it goes out, which it will at some point, either through understanding or through impermanence. It will go out.

So notice what it feels like when you've been involved—struggle, struggle, struggle—greed, aversion, delusion, and you watch it as you get to that point where there is this temporary end. The sense of struggle ends. The sense of ease returns. Feel into that flavor of ease. Look in the mind and notice the end of greed,

aversion, and delusion, if temporary. That is a partial flavor of nibbana. It's not the complete nibbana, it's not the direct knowing of the unconditioned, but it does have that same flavor of release and freedom.

This is from Ajahn Buddhadasa, who is a great Thai master of the last fifty years, a little pamphlet that he wrote called "Nibbana for Everyone." Very encouraging title. "When you hear a phrase like 'nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and believe that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale." I think this might be a Thai saying, but the basic idea is you have this scruffy, multicolored cat, and it would be worth more if it was all black. So you dye the cat all black, and then you can charge more money for it. "You may believe that someone has tried to dye a cat for sale. That means to hoodwink you, to deceive you. But nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any defilements."

Anyone can see that if defilements are with us all day and night, every second without ceasing, who could ever stand them? Under such conditions, living beings must either die or become insane and finally die anyway. Let us consider well the fact that one survives because there are periods when the fires of defilement are not burning. As a matter of fact, we can say that these periods last longer than when the fires are burning. Periodical nibbana keeps all of us alive and well without making any exceptions, even animals at a certain level. We survive because of the nourishment from this kind of nibbana.

So this is from a great Thai master. You can take this to heart and tune into the fact that when your mind is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, you are experiencing this taste—a foretaste of nibbana—and feel the flavor of release that's present then. So that's the first way to make this teaching practical in our own meditation day by day.

The second way is going to be a more extended reflection on the theme of consciousness and awareness. I want to ask: what in our experience is kind of like nibbana? What is like it in the sense of being ever present, able to accommodate all arisings and passings without itself arising and passing? What can accommodate pleasure and pain impartially? What doesn't have an agenda, that is free from craving or struggle? What is unchanging, or you could say beyond time?

First I want to ask on a purely physical level: can you think of anything in the physical world out there that has this kind of quality or even partially has this kind of quality?

I want to suggest that the element of space has something like this—the element of physical space. The space in this room doesn't really change, does it? The air changes, but that's not space. Air is matter. Space is that which matter moves in. So the space in this room is unchanging. It can accommodate all the comings and goings. In fact, it's because of the space that each of us can be in this room. It's not partial. It doesn't care if a Buddha walks in or if a killer walks in. The space is equally accepting of both. And it doesn't change. So in a way, it's timeless—it has that timeless quality.

Now we know if we think cosmologically, maybe this space was created at the Big Bang. Maybe it's not really permanent. But for our purposes, it's permanent enough. So as an approximation of the

unconditioned, physical space has some of those qualities. Ajahn Sumedho has a nice teaching in one of his books where he says, "Contemplate space." And he says this to disillusion us a little bit—that the unconditioned is about as exciting as space. It removes a little bit of craving, perhaps.

Now, there's one other thing that in our experience might approximate this quality of the unconditioned. It's not the unconditioned, but you can use it as an approximation. When we've had the big mind meditation on this retreat, you probably remember that the first instruction is to feel your awareness as being like a big clear sky or like empty space. Do you remember that instruction?

So then we feel this vastness of awareness in which all the appearances arise and pass away. Does that awareness seem to be coming and going? There's a way in which it feels kind of stable, doesn't it? And it's as though in this big mind meditation, what we're seeing is that the space within our awareness is just pervaded by the quality of knowing. So it's kind of like this big mind meditation reveals this property in us that's like the marriage of space and awareness. The space brings this sense of emptiness—there's nothing there from the beginning, therefore anything can come in. Body can come in, thoughts can come in, the appearance of other people, sounds. Anything can come in this space of awareness. So it has that same empty quality as physical space. But this space of awareness is always knowing. You could say it's pervaded by knowing. So we sometimes call this just the quality of empty knowing.

We sometimes call it the cognizing power of emptiness. And we sometimes call it the nature of mind.

In some ways, this is most fundamentally what our human experience consists of—this empty space of knowing in which things are always coming and going and being known. The things come and go, but this empty space seems to always be there, doesn't it? Every time you turn and look, isn't that empty space there revealing things?

I want to suggest that this awareness is also an approximation of the unconditioned when joined with this sense of space. This union of space and awareness is an approximation of the unconditioned. But is it really unconditioned? Is it really unchanging?

The word we've been using for knowing recently and throughout the retreat is consciousness. We talked about consciousness as one of the five aggregates—the quality of mind that has the ability of holding or receiving, feeling, sensing, knowing any object at any of the sense doors. And you remember that the five aggregates are all characterized by impermanence. We talked about how consciousness arises with the object and then passes away when the object passes.

So is awareness the same as consciousness or different? Are they impermanent or permanent?

I don't know if you care about this question, but I care passionately about it. This became a very big deal for me at some point in my practice and was something I really deeply needed to understand. If this is the deepest aspect of ourselves, I wanted to know to what extent it was permanent, reliable, a refuge like nirvana, and to what extent it was just coming and going like everything else—and therefore unstable and

unreliable.

I went into quite an investigation of this, and I want to share with you the reflections that came to me.

We need to distinguish between three terms: mindfulness, consciousness, and awareness.

We've talked about mindfulness as this aspect of intelligence in our mind which can know what we are experiencing. If you remember, we said at the beginning of the retreat that a black Labrador has experience, but he can't tell you what he's experiencing—and I don't think he can tell himself. He's just caught up in eating and smelling and chasing and running and feeling pleasure and feeling pain, but he can't go, "Oh, this is craving. Oh, this is satisfaction. Oh, this is hunger."

Mindfulness is the quality that we humans have that can know that. "This is an in-breath. This is a sound. This is a sensation. This is the hindrance of sense desire. This is a thought of ill will." We can know that, and that's mindfulness. It's the opening of wisdom because there's intelligence in that understanding. That's why the term sati is often combined with paññā—mindfulness-wisdom—together in Thai forest tradition.

Consciousness is this quality that just knows the bare experience of objects arising. It just knows, on a very pre-verbal level—the most simple pre-verbal level—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, a mood. Animals have this. Humans have it. You can't turn it off. It's automatic as long as you're awake. It doesn't require any intelligence and it doesn't have any wisdom. So mindfulness has wisdom, knows what's happening. Consciousness is automatic, pre-verbal.

So what's awareness? Well, the curious thing is there's no word in the Pali canon that needs to be translated by awareness. There's not even a word that's asking to be translated by awareness. So awareness is like this free word that we have in English that doesn't have a reference to the language of the Buddha—therefore we can make it mean whatever we want. It's a little bit like the joker in a deck of cards. This term awareness is kind of a joker in dharma language, at least in our tradition. Some of the Tibetan traditions define it much more clearly, but in our tradition it's a wild card.

You'll notice that different teachers will use it differently. Sometimes it's used to describe this intelligent quality of mindfulness: "Are you aware of your experience in this moment?" Meaning, do you know what is happening? "Yeah, I'm experiencing joy, or I'm experiencing metta."

At other times, awareness is used like consciousness, where there's this empty space of knowing that is stable and functioning all the time. "Oh yeah, awareness—it's just that field of knowing that's with me always." Notice that it's a slippery customer, and it can slide between meaning mindfulness or meaning consciousness, depending on who's using it.

So let's return to the original question: Consciousness and awareness—permanent or impermanent? I ask you to conduct a thought experiment with me. I majored in physics in college, and we were taught that we

could prove things in one of three ways: we could carry out a physical experiment, we could carry out a mathematical proof to establish a certain law, or we could carry out a thought experiment called a *gedank enexperiment*. If it was built on valid assumptions, that proof was considered reasonable.

Here's a *gedankenexperiment* on the nature of consciousness and awareness. I want you to imagine that you're in outer space on the outer fringe of our solar system, but you're facing away from the sun. You're looking into outer space. The sun is behind you. No planets are in front of you. And for hypothetical purposes, let's say you're looking into a part of the sky that has no stars.

What do you see? Not a trick question. Anyone?

"Nothing."

What's the color?

"Black."

It's totally black, right? And it's not the black of some beautiful dress—it's the black that's a complete absence of any light. No light is reaching your eyes.

But the sun's behind you. And let's say your shadow is negligibly small. Is there light in that space? By light I mean packets of light energy, photons. Are there photons in that space in front of your eyes?

There have to be, because the sun is streaming them out in all directions evenly. So that empty space in front of you is actually pervaded by sunlight, but you don't see it.

Now, let's assume that a meteor comes up from below and passes right in front of your eyes. Do you see it?

"Yeah."

Because what you're actually seeing is the reflected sunlight that bounces off the meteor and then comes back to your eyes. Then the meteor streaks through and it's gone. No more meteor. Again, you're seeing black.

I want to suggest that this is an analogy for the way consciousness works. The light that gets bounced off the meteor as a result of its arising is the light of consciousness. It arises, persists for a little while, and then passes away. But I want to suggest that this underlying phenomenon of sunlight pervading empty space is the unconditioned. Because it's always there, but we don't see it.

I want to suggest that this sunlight pervading empty space is not itself consciousness or awareness, but it's our innate capacity for knowing. Because of this, it's sometimes just called the factor of cognizance or the quality of luminosity. But it is not perceivable except in moments of altered states of mind, altered states of perception. There is no direct realization of this unconditioned luminosity unless there is that moment of breakthrough which is a direct realization of the unconditioned. It's there, but we cannot perceive it.

Yet everything that we perceive is only perceived because of the activity of this luminosity.

So in truth, there is no awareness without an object there to be known. And yet the capacity for awareness is that luminosity which is stable beneath all the appearances.

This is one way of understanding the unconditioned. There are a number of Buddhist schools that see it this way: the Thai Forest tradition, the mind-only school of Mahayana philosophy, the Dzogchen and Mahamudra traditions within Tibetan Buddhism.

There are other schools that deny this intrinsic luminosity—some of the Theravadin Orthodox schools based in the Visuddhimagga, some of the pure Nagarjuna schools, followers from the Mahayana and Tibetan traditions. So this is a little bit controversial, but I like it. It's my personal preference as a way to understand the unconditioned and the nature of consciousness.

So consciousness is impermanent, but it is in a way a link to the unconditioned nature of mind. When we are involved in our normal routine of life with our untrained mind—and even the mind we bring to meditation—we tend to glom onto the objects that are coming through. As Sally talked about, there's contact, feeling, craving, and clinging. We fasten onto an object, and notice how in that the mind shrinks down, becomes obsessed with one of the arisings, and there's suffering, contraction, unease in that grasping.

Then the instruction comes from the big mind point of view: turn your attention instead to the empty space of knowing. What this instruction does is give us permission to unfasten from all the arisings and from the tendency to focus on and attach to the individual arisings, and open up to this empty space. In doing that, notice how it feels. Someone just in an interview yesterday was talking about how there was a stable experience of that equilibrium that lasted quite a bit of a sitting, where there was just a sense that everything could come and go and there was no inner disturbance from any of it. Because in a way, our center of gravity has shifted into this other dimension which is close to the unconditioned or a link to the unconditioned.

So the shift away from grasping into knowing—truly, it doesn't matter whether the knowing is in a small way or a big way, but somehow the big way helps us. This is from Ajahn Maha Boowa: "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. The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration."

Ajahn Buddhadasa puts it this way: "This emptiness is self-existent. Nothing can touch it, concoct it, or improve it. This is the essential 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 sati-pañña."

So as we shift into this space of knowing, start to feel the release, the accommodating power, the lack of

change—you could say the timeless quality that comes from moving in that direction. The center of gravity shifts from a fixation on one individual arising into a space of emptiness which is not focused or fixated on any one particular thing.

And then we see that the path starts to come closer and closer to the goal. When you think about the goal of this practice, you could say the awakened mind. Isn't it a mind that stays in balance and knows all the arisings and passings? And yet, the path we are walking or describing is also a state of mind that stays in balance, spacious, equanimous, and knows all the comings and goings.

So we describe this as the quality of resting with awareness. I don't so much like the term "rest in awareness" because it gives an idea that awareness is something separate from the things we're aware of, as though awareness is a destination that we can touch or hold and we can move out of engagement with the arisings and passings. That's a way of detachment under which there's a little bit of aversion to the becomes, to the made, to the compounded, to what appears. We realize that awareness arises together with all the arisings. But we can rest in that state with awareness.

This is from Rumi: "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 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."

I had a very strong manifestation of this on a visit to Kathmandu one year. I had gone over to sit with my teacher at his monastery, and while I was there visiting, this very great Dzogchen master was also visiting, named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who I mentioned in an earlier talk—one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last fifty years. I was in touch with some friends in the U.S. One of my friends who is a student of Khenpo Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche asked me to give him some dana, and I had some extra cash. So I put some money in an envelope, wrote his name on it, and asked my teacher to please give it to him on behalf of my friend.

My teacher said, "Would you like to meet Khenpo?"

And I said, "No, I don't need to. You just give it to him." I thought, seeing one lama, you've seen them all.

And then I reconsidered. I thought, I've heard a lot of great things about this teacher.

Why don't I make that little effort and meet him? So I went to my teacher and said, "No, I would like to take the envelope and present it to Rinpoche myself."

He said fine and set up the meeting. Rinpoche was seated on a cushion, wearing an ornamental robe of some kind, sitting up very straight. I was nervous about meeting him because I'd not only heard what a great teacher and practitioner he was, I also felt this was somebody who could really see through me. I felt

I was always exposed going in front of him.

So I was a little nervous, but we made small talk through an interpreter, and then the time came for me to offer the dana from my friend. I went up, and as I got close to him, he touched my head, which was very moving. Then I extended the envelope with the money to him, and he took it from me.

At that point, I was looking right into his eyes, but I was a little nervous, and he did a transmission thing. He dropped into his meditative state. I could feel the change when he did it. His eyes moved slightly apart as though he was looking into a very great distance, and his mind became completely still. As I was looking into his eyes, I felt like I was looking into an ocean of the unconditioned.

I had never seen anyone that still. I didn't even know it was a human possibility to be that still. When I thought about it later, I thought I couldn't even say that his mind was still. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. That's how complete his absence of craving was.

I felt if I could have just kept looking into his eyes a little longer... but I got nervous. He was so unguarded and so undefended, it brought up my own nervousness and kind of fear of exposure, and my ego reassembled. And I remain unenlightened to this day. But it was a very inspiring moment.

It reminded me of another quality that the Buddha probably had that was part of the reason why people were going off right and left around him into full liberation.

So I'll close with this quotation from the Buddha: "One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering."

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

Thank you for listening.

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