Awareness Is Like The Unconditioned

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:38

The Buddha said many times that his teaching was all about suffering and coming to the end of suffering. Tonight's talk may seem a little technical and philosophical at times, but I hope you'll hang with me because the intent is really to talk about suffering and the end of suffering.

The Buddha traced our suffering to a lack of understanding. He said that ignorance is the foundation of the way we misperceive the world and ourselves, and because of that, suffering comes into being. He put this in a rather pithy way at one point: "In whatever way they conceive, the fact is ever other than that." Or as one of my teachers said even more pithily, "Everything you think is wrong."

So we want to explore tonight some of the misconceptions that we hold and see how we might understand them differently. As a preface to the talk, I want to quote something else from the Buddha when he was talking about his awakening. He said, "This dhamma discovered by me is profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, sublime, beyond the sphere of logic, subtle, to be experienced by the wise." The talk tonight may not be profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So I invite you to let the words in, see what resonates, and let them go. Try not to argue too much during the talk. You can argue with me tomorrow.

Generally, when we look at ourselves or each other, we see a person. But the Buddha said that one shouldn't really see in this way. The Visuddhimagga said that looking at somebody and seeing a person is not very refined. That one who has closely investigated the mind-body process wouldn't see in this way. They said it's like a skilled butcher who's cutting up the carcass of a cow and going, "cow, cow, cow." A skilled butcher wouldn't do that. The skilled butcher would go, "rump, tenderloin, sirloin, ribs," because they have so much familiarity with the detail of their work.

So the Buddha said we should bring that kind of detail to our own knowing of what constitutes a person. There are a few ways that the Buddha described a person. One is the description that I talked about on the opening night, which we've referred to a number of times: the six senses and the objects of the six sense types—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and objects of mind. He used that very frequently.

But there's another model that comes in, referenced in the suttas and then explored also in the Abhidhamma, that I want to use mostly as the basis for this investigation tonight. We'll follow the Abhidhamma model here. This is a part of the ancient scriptures in Buddhism that dates back to about 200 years after the death of the Buddha. In the Abhidhamma, a person is described as being composed of three components: physical form, consciousness—which we've talked about quite a bit—and mental phenomena, or mental formations.

So I want to talk about each of these three and see if you can get a feeling for what is being pointed to here that is our makeup.

The first is material form. But when material form is pointed to, it doesn't just stop at this body. It includes the whole physical world. So you could say that what we're really investigating is the domain of our experience. Our experience includes the physical body, but it also includes our experience of the rest of the physical world. So this first component of form includes all of that.

It is the physical body, but it is also everything external. Everything that we consider in the world of physical matter is included within this first component of form. So it includes the five physical senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches—as well as the body, which is the base of all those senses.

I think we take it for granted that we know what the body is, but if we stop and ask, do we really? Have you ever been surprised on a retreat at what the body was as you examined it closely? Mostly all we know of the body is primarily through two senses: we see it and we feel it. We also sometimes smell it and taste it and hear it. Those usually don't tend to be too pleasant, so we don't spend too much time on those. But we see the body and we feel the body, so our information about the body comes through those senses already, conditioned by those senses.

When you hear that sound, that is one example of form. This is in the component, part of our experience, that's considered physical matter or form.

I'd like to read from a discourse of the Buddha's that talks about his view of form, and it's maybe a little different than we might be prepared for. This is a sutta called "A Mass of Foam."

"On one occasion, the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayodhya on the bank of the river Ganges. There, the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: 'Monks, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great mass of foam.'"

A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mass of foam? So too, monks, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, far or near, a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?

This is a little radical, isn't it? What substance could there be in the physical world? It's quite a profound question. We'll return to this later.

The second component that makes us up we could call mental formations. We understand these primarily as thoughts and feelings—the constructed events that flow through the mind. This includes the activity of thought, which we're all familiar with by now, and the different kinds of moods and feelings that arise in consciousness.

These might be the hindrances that Joseph began discussing the other night: doubt or anger, desire, dullness, restlessness. They could equally be the beautiful qualities of the brahmaviharas—love, compassion, or joy. This realm of mental phenomena also encompasses refined meditative states: the presence in the mind of concentration or mindfulness or equanimity or calm. These too are included in this component of mental formations.

For instance, if we're sitting in the hall and we hear the sound of the bell—which usually means the sitting is over—I don't know about you, but often when I hear that sound, I experience a new sense of ease throughout my body. "Oh, it feels so good," and then I think, "You know, I could sit forever." So upon hearing the sound, this mood of ease arises—a mental formation—and the thought comes: "I could sit forever." Both of these belong to the field of mental formations, the objects of mind.

The third component we include in this analysis is the factor of consciousness. We've talked about this extensively—awareness or consciousness or knowing. We've been using these terms largely synonymously throughout this retreat. It's that capacity of mind that receives all sense experience and knows it in this bare, pre-verbal way that makes it part of our experience, part of our sense data.

When the sound arises, it's known immediately. There's no gap. It takes no effort. The way this is understood in the Buddhist teachings is that the sound and the knowing of it actually arise together as one unitary event. Don't think of it as two different things happening. See what occurs if you consider it as one event that has these two aspects: one is the form aspect of the sound, and the other is the mental aspect of the knowing or consciousness. A unitary experience of mind and form combined. We can examine either aspect.

This may seem puzzling—one experience with two aspects. But I'd ask you to look at the base of this bowl and ask: is it round or is it black? It's really one object, but it has two aspects, doesn't it? I'd like you to consider investigating your experience of hearing in the same way. A sound arising and being known is one event, and we can tune in either to the sound or we can tune in to the knowing, the consciousness of it.

Of course, consciousness is present throughout this entire process. There's consciousness of the bell. There's consciousness of the sense of ease. There's consciousness of the thought "I could sit forever." All of these are held within this factor of consciousness.

Why is this investigation worthwhile? Why is it valuable to look in this way? I want to suggest that this approach can be profoundly liberating. Personally, I've found this investigation to be a part of my practice that has brought tremendous freedom over the years.

I began investigating in this way when my older sister died—a sister five years my senior who died at fifty-two, quite young, quite unexpectedly. I was deeply shaken by her death because I had spoken with her just a few days before. She was robust, vital, an interesting and delightful person. Then suddenly, a

few days later, she was simply gone, and I couldn't comprehend how that had happened.

Her death launched me into a profound investigation. I needed to understand what constitutes this mind-body process and what happens when someone transitions from living to dying.

And I'll suggest that investigating these three aspects of our being gives us a very good way to understand what that process is.

What became clear to me as I carried on this investigation is that there's an element we commonly think of as being part of a person that is not in form, is not in mental formations, and is not in consciousness. And that is the "I," the self. What we think of as a self is just an unconscious lumping together of all three of these aspects. But when we tease them apart, we find that there's no center within that collection—no abiding or ongoing entity at the center that receives it all, that experiences it all, that is the essence of this collection. There is only form, formations, and consciousness. There's nothing else. There's no self hidden in here.

This itself is freeing. This is one of the very liberating insights along the path of discovery in meditation. We'll come back to this in a minute. But one of the ways I want to suggest this understanding comes through—of the lack of self-essence—is by investigating each of these three components as an aspect of nature.

So we take the physical body, which represents all form. Take a look at this physical body and think about its origin. It came about because your father's sperm met with your mother's egg, came together in conception, and the cells started to multiply. That body was then grown in the womb, emerged from the womb, was nourished by milk and food and water and air, and grew up in a purely physical process over these twenty, thirty, forty, or however many years. So it's always been a natural physical occurrence from its very beginning.

One of my teachers in Thailand, a great monk named Ajahn Buddhadasa, put it this way. He said, "This body came out of nature, it never departed from nature, and it still belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That'll be a big relief for you."

Can you get the flavor of that? We spend so much time cherishing this body and trying to own it, and yet did you have anything to do with its appearance that you can recall? The "I" that takes possession of this body today had nothing to do with its arising, nothing to do with its growth, nothing to do with its shape and form and color of hair and eyes. Just physical nature created this.

Similarly, if you look at the range of mental formations that constitutes what we usually call personality—somebody being a kind person or a generous person or an unkind person or a thoughtful person—these are based on the moods and feelings and intentions that go through the heart and mind. When you think about all these different components, sure, our particular mixture is different, but everybody has kindness. Everybody has some generosity. Everybody has some cruelty, some anger, some

joy, some sadness.

We take possession of these emotions also and identify "my anger," "my happiness." But when we step back just a minute, we see, oh, it's just a human emotion. All humans share this emotion. It's part of our makeup. It's part of the makeup of every one of us. It's part of the human package. So we start to see that this is part of mental nature, or you could say emotional nature, that we carry just by virtue of being human. Again, we didn't create it, we didn't cause it, we didn't bring it into being, but we inherit this package as part of our humanness, and each of us does. So again, just human nature.

And then we come to the third part, this knowing quality, and there the individuality really goes away. Because when you hear the sound of the bell, don't you imagine that your knowing of that is just like my knowing of that, is just like Meoshin's knowing of that? Our knowing doesn't have any individuality at all. There's nothing of "guyness" about that. There's nothing of "patricianess" about the knowing. Again, it's just consciousness—an aspect of the nature of mind, an aspect of human nature, but nothing more than that, something we all share.

So in all this bundle—the body, manifestation of physical nature; the moods, emotions, and thoughts, manifestation of mental nature; consciousness, manifestation of the nature of mind—there's really no individuality. There's nothing we can call a true abiding self. So then we start to see there's not so much difference between us all. Our bodies are so similar, the range of our emotions the same, our capacity for knowing identical. Fundamentally, it's like we're one being that's just been poured into these different vessels, different shaped vessels, and then conditioned in different ways.

So seeing it all as nature takes out some of that identification, some of that grip of the "I." This letting go of the sense of "I" is an aspect of what's called emptiness. In the Buddha's teachings, he used "empty" most of the time synonymously with this understanding that there's not an ongoing abiding entity at the center of this mind-body process—the teachings on the absence of self, even though it sure looks that way sometimes.

He compared this all to a magic show. "Suppose, monks, that a magician should hold a magic show at a crossroads and a keen-sighted person should inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it. It would appear to that person to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance, monks, could there be in a magic show?"

This is a continuation of the sutta that we began with this evening. So it's as though we have all been taken in by the magic show of form, formations, and consciousness, believing that there's an existing self somewhere in there when there isn't actually.

What happens when you've seen a magic show and you've been really wowed by it, and then the person tells you how they did the trick? Does it take away some of the glamour? It takes away the wow factor, doesn't it? In Buddhism, this movement from being taken in by the magic show to understanding it and

losing that wow factor—the dazzle factor—is called disenchantment, *nibbidah*. And in the Buddha's teachings, it is a key component for leading us to quit grasping onto the passing show that is this world. When we understand the way it's put together and we see the mechanism of it, we don't hold on quite so tightly.

So the Buddha continues: "Even so, monks, whatever form, formations, consciousness there is, a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it. It would appear to them to be void, hollow, insubstantial. What substance, monks, could there be in form, formations, consciousness?"

And then he ends with a little verse: "Form is like a mass of foam, and formation's a banana tree." I didn't understand that at first. If you've lived in the tropics, you probably know a banana tree bears once, and then the whole tree dies because it doesn't have a solid core. There's no solidity at the core of a banana tree. It's gone. "Formations are like a banana tree, and consciousness is a magic show, a juggler's trick entire. All these similes were made known by the kinsmen of the sun"—another word for the Buddha.

So one meaning of emptiness is the absence of an abiding self within this process of form, formations, and consciousness. But this sutta is also pointing to another meaning of emptiness, which is something like insubstantiality, even of the physical world. See the world as a mass of foam. How can that be?

This is very counter to our culture's assumptions. We live in a very materialistic culture, dominated by a firm belief in the solidity and the primacy of physical reality. Not all cultures see this way, but our culture does. So growing up in a Western culture, we come up with the idea that this physical world is the ultimate truth of things. And the ultimate truth is that it has existed for a very long time. We're born into it. And as a result of being born into it, a consciousness develops out of the physical makeup of the body and contacts the physical world, and when we die, we go away and the physical world continues. This is the sort of primary assumption of Western culture.

But other cultures have had different understandings of what constitutes the ultimate reality. There are schools of Indian philosophy that deny that and take the opposite view. They say, no, no, no, no, no. Physical reality is just a bubble arising in consciousness. Consciousness is the ultimate reality. Mind is the ultimate reality. It has existed since beginningless time, and the physical worlds just come and go. World systems play within this vast space of mind or consciousness. In those cultures, this is a more valid view. Personally, I find this view a little more entertaining.

But the early teachings of the Buddha, of the Pali Canon, take kind of a middle way between these two. And he describes consciousness and physicality as mutually dependent. He gives ultimacy to neither one, but says that they lean against each other like two sheaves of reeds, and if you take one away, the other collapses. That's a very interesting thought. Not that body caused consciousness, but that they both depend upon each other, and that is a shift from the Western materialist worldview.

Patricia began to talk last night about some of the implications of this. When she talked about coming out

of our concepts about reality and coming into direct contact with reality and touching the truth of our direct experience. And we start to see the insubstantial nature of experience as we get closer and closer to it. So we start, and with sounds, we soon tune into how ephemeral every sound is. Even the big trucks that roll by pass in a matter of seconds. Smells, as we go into the dining room, very elusive. Tastes flourish and then pass away. Thoughts, so fleeting.

One thought arises and within moments dissolves completely. Emotions emerge so tentatively and vaguely that it becomes difficult to maintain connection with them for long. They come and color our experience like passing clouds, impossible to grasp or hold.

When we turn our attention to exploring the body—and I believe this is what Patricia touched upon last night—we discover something remarkable. Most of us arrive at practice assuming the body is entirely solid. I certainly did. Yet as we experience it directly for ourselves, as we draw closer to its actual nature, we begin to notice something extraordinary: there is nothing solid there at all.

Everywhere we direct our attention within the body, we find only change—pulsation, vibration, flickering, arising, shifting, passing away, appearing and disappearing. We begin to feel through direct experience that the body is simply an energy field, a flowing stream of changing sensations, none of which endure in any solid way. We start to feel this insubstantial, fluid nature of embodied existence.

Yet of all the senses, sight has always proven most challenging for me in recognizing any sense of insubstantiality. We look around a room like this and nothing appears to change. The floor looks utterly solid. The walls appear completely stable. The windows, the doors—all seem permanent and fixed. How might we examine sight in a way that reveals it too could be like a mass of foam?

Indulge me for a moment in some seventh-grade science reflection. Let us turn our attention to how this sight actually arises. We understand from elementary science that vision emerges because light particles—photons—reflect off the elements of this room, travel to our eyes, and strike the retina. This light activity stimulates the retina to send signals up the optic nerve, which travels into the brain and stimulates various brain regions. From this stimulation, somehow—quite mysteriously, as scientists haven't yet solved this puzzle—visual consciousness arises.

That final step remains profoundly mysterious. Yet we know all the preceding steps are absolutely necessary. Consider the implications: what would happen to this solid sight if someone switched off the lights and all illumination disappeared? The sight vanishes completely. Perhaps this sight is not so solid after all.

When we reflect further, we realize this sight isn't truly solid but is being regenerated continuously—perhaps dozens or hundreds of times per second—by the constant influx of new photons. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of photons must be stimulating the retina every second, sending fresh signals to the brain, with the brain regenerating the visual picture over and over, many times each

second. Without this constant regeneration, sight would cease entirely.

What we assumed was the real world, when we pause to reflect even briefly, reveals itself as something we cannot truly know. We discover we don't actually live in a solid, permanent world but rather in a flickering representation of the world, constructed by our brain based on ever-changing sensory data and interpreted through our human consciousness.

We don't actually inhabit a real, solid world. We dwell within a flickering representation of the world, generated by our senses and neural activity. That is all there is. We cannot know anything else. Even what feels most solid—the sensation of hardness we experience through our fingertips or sitting bones—is only another sensation arising through the sense of touch.

The floor feels like one of the most solid things we encounter. We often take it as our ground, thinking, "Here is something stable where I can place my faith, where I can rest." Yet when we investigate this sensation closely, we discover it too is only the sensation of hardness known through touch. When you pay careful attention to your sitting bones or fingertips, you begin to feel the change, pulsation, and vibration within that sensation as well. You realize that while there may be a physical ground, that physical ground is also merely an appearance in consciousness, flickering on and off through our senses.

There is no ground to consciousness itself. Consciousness exists like a bubble with nothing supporting it underneath. We recognize this truth when we recall the image of Earth suspended in space—nothing holds up our planet, just as nothing holds up our consciousness.

When we reach this level of seeing, we enter the realm of the emptiness of objects. We truly understand how the Buddha could declare that this physical world is merely a mass of foam—nothing but a flickering appearance in consciousness, utterly without ground. This represents one of the profound senses of emptiness.

This also came home to me powerfully when I was a monk in Thailand. As a monk, I had the great privilege of being able to observe autopsies—a profound teaching opportunity for a Buddhist practitioner.

One day, a friend and I went to the coroner's office in a hospital in downtown Bangkok. We walked into the room adjacent to the autopsy theater, where the body of a young woman who had drowned in one of the canals lay on a metal table. She was to be the first autopsy of the day.

I was thirty-four years old and had never been next to a dead person before. Now I stood inches away from a stranger who had died, about to witness the autopsy being performed. They wheeled her into the theater, and the coroner began the procedure—removing and weighing the bodily organs, beginning with the brain. Her chest was opened, the internal organs examined and weighed, then replaced, and she was sewn up. The entire process took about thirty minutes.

After watching this autopsy and two others that followed, I walked back out into downtown Bangkok to a

large parade ground where I would catch my bus to the monastery. I had been doing intensive sitting practice before coming to the hospital and was in a particularly open and sensitive state. The experience had been profoundly moving.

It was a sunny day, and people were walking through the parade ground—a mother watching her children play on the grass, an elderly woman wheeling a shopping cart full of groceries from the nearby market, a young couple walking hand in hand, radiant in each other's company. I watched them all and saw them in a completely different way.

On the bus ride home, I reflected on what was different about this perception. I realized I was seeing walking corpses. Everywhere I looked, I saw walking corpses. The bodies I was observing were exactly like those I had seen on the coroner's tables, but with one crucial difference: they were animated by a kind of light that shone out through their eyes—the light of consciousness that we possess when alive.

As I watched these people, I understood something about consciousness that I hadn't grasped before. That light shining through their eyes was completely of the present moment—it had no past and no future. Yet because of our capacity for memory, we construct an imagined past based on recollection and project it into an imaginary future, weaving ourselves into the web of time, into the bondage of time, when we don't see clearly how we're constructing it all.

In that moment, I saw that these walking corpses were completely free—that brightness, that illumination, was utterly free of past and future. It was deeply moving because I could see how all of us wanted to secure our lives and well-being in the midst of this foam of the material world, this foam of life, where all we have is the body and this brightness. You can see how impossible it is to secure anything in such a situation.

The Buddha compared all our attempts to find security to a person caught in a river, being carried downstream by a strong current. Along the bank are clumps of grass, and as the person passes by, they grasp at each clump seeking stability, but each one comes off in their hands, and they're carried further downstream. This is our attempt to cling to what is ultimately passing and transitory.

How, then, do we find any refuge, any release from this predicament? The Buddha began his quest in search of this very solution. He said that as an unenlightened bodhisattva, he recognized that he was seeking satisfaction in the conditioned realm: "I am subject to birth, illness, and death, yet I'm seeking my happiness in what is also subject to birth, illness, and death. Will this ultimately lead to lasting peace?"

The answer, clearly, was no. So he asked himself, "What if I sought my security in that which is beyond birth, beyond illness, beyond aging, and beyond death?" This is what he called nirvana.

He discovered what he was seeking on the night of his enlightenment. It's said that among the first words that came to him after his awakening were: "My mind has attained the unconditioned and reached the very end of craving."

This is the release that he was looking for. This is the security that he was looking for. This unconditioned he also called nibbana, a word that literally means extinguishment or blowing out—the blowing out of the flame of craving and also of suffering.

At one point someone asked Sariputta, "What is nibbana? Can you describe it?" And Sariputta defined it as the destruction of greed, the destruction of hatred, and the destruction of delusion. "This is called nibbana."

The Buddha said there are three marks of the unconditioned or of nibbana: there is no arising, there's no passing away, and there's no change. If there is something within our being, some dimension of our being that is not subject to arising, is not subject to passing, and is not subject to change, then it must be present now. Because it is present in every moment, enlightenment is possible at every moment. Enlightenment is the discovery of, through our direct experience, the nature of this dimension of our being.

Some synonyms for this dimension: the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the refuge, the beyond.

The entire path leads in the direction of the unconditioned. This is from the Buddha: "Just as the river Ganges slants, slopes, and inclines toward the ocean, so too a practitioner who develops and cultivates a noble eightfold path slants, slopes, and inclines toward nibbana."

So how can we understand it within our experience? We've heard of arahants. There are, according to my understanding, beings in the world today who reach this level of complete liberation, full enlightenment, as the Buddha did. Such a person is said to abide in nibbana, to be fully released, fully liberated.

But since most of us aren't there yet, what can we make of nibbana in our practice? Can it be something that becomes a part of our approach to life and to meditation?

I want to suggest two ways that the element of nibbana can come alive for us. One way is to understand that there can be a temporary—what you might say—foretaste of nibbana in our ordinary day-to-day experience. And it is basically at those times when greed, aversion, and delusion go away. So starting to be alive to, awake for the possibility that when we check on our attitude—is there greed, is there aversion, is there delusion present?—none of those factors may be present. And that at that point, the mind free from greed, aversion, and delusion, at least as far as we can tell, at least first approximation, is a mind that's enjoying a little bit of the taste, the flavor of the release of nibbana.

Ajahn Buddhadasa wrote a really lovely little pamphlet, which I think you can find on the internet, called "Nibbana for Everyone"—not just the property of arahants, nibbana for everyone. He said, "Nibbana is a natural condition. It is the cool state of mind without any kilesas or defilements. That is, without the qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion."

This is not the permanent nibbana that the Buddha discovered. It's not the full nibbana of someone who

penetrates directly to the unconditioned and has firsthand knowledge of it. But it is a little bit of a taste that can point our practice in that direction.

In fact, Ajahn Buddhadasa went on to say that we're having many moments of this coolness every day—that we are all experiencing many moments of this temporary nibbana, as he called it. And he said, if we didn't, we'd all be going crazy, because who could stand to be burned by the defilements nonstop all the time?

So this is one way that you can start to have the flavor of this in your practice. Look for those times perhaps the mind has been struggling with an agenda of desire or some resistance of aversion, some delusion of not seeing or not understanding. And as you stay with that experience, paying close attention, the mind will come out of it. At some point, those kilesas will pass—and feel the coolness of that release, of that transition, and know that that's a little bit of the flavor of everyday nibbana.

What else in our experience might be like nibbana? What has the quality of being ever-present, unchanged, and yet accommodating without disturbing all the arisings which are of the conditioned realm?

On a physical level, space kind of has this property, doesn't it? Physical space can accommodate anything. It accommodates all of us. It accommodates all the furniture. Physical space accommodates the earth. And then, of course, when we turn to the big mind meditation, we tune into that inner space which is pervaded by awareness. So we talk about the empty space of awareness.

So we might say that this inner space of awareness also has some of the qualities of nibbana, doesn't it? Whenever we look for it, it always seems to be there. Everything can come and go within it and it's not obscured. It's not stained. It's not harmed by that.

Its nature is peaceful. Nibbana is often described in the texts as the stilling of all formations. This empty space of awareness has that still quality, doesn't it? Because it's ever-present when we turn to it, I wonder if it has the quality of being the deathless.

But when we think back to those three components that make us up—form, mental formations, and consciousness—the Buddha said all three of those are impermanent. All three are coming and going and so can't be a proper refuge. So if consciousness is impermanent, is awareness any different? It seems stable, doesn't it? But could it be another flickering on and off, like the stability of the walls?

So is awareness permanent or impermanent? Deathless or conditioned? I don't know if this question interests you, but it interests some of us very much. And I think it was essentially the spur that led Joseph to write this really wonderful book that he wrote a few years ago called *One Dharma*. If you haven't had a chance to read it, I highly recommend it. He talks about this from a number of different angles and talks about the response of different schools of Buddhism in answering this question.

I don't want to go into all the different schools tonight because that would take a long time. I want to give you my answer. Realize this is just one person's opinion, but this is what I'd like to talk about.

I want to suggest that awareness actually is synonymous with consciousness and that it's not strictly deathless, but that it serves as a very good approximation to the deathless. You can use it that way as a skillful means in your practice and put a lot of trust in it. It can be a wonderful refuge. Philosophically, when we investigate the actual nature and detail of it, I would say it is not actually deathless. But it sure looks like it, so it works really well.

The other reason that it serves so well as an approximation for the deathless is that it has a direct link, a direct connection to the unconditioned. And that's what I want to draw out with this image.

I want to ask you to do a little experiment—a little thought experiment. Please humor me a little longer. Please imagine that you're on the edge of our solar system. Your back is toward the sun. Your space suit is taken care of, and you have a non-reflective visor. Your back is to the sun and you're looking out into a part of the sky. Let's just say, for point of hypothesis, that doesn't have any stars in it. Your back is to the sun. You're looking into the sky. There are no stars where you're looking.

What do you see? Not a trick question. You see anything? No, it's just black, right? And it's not the color black, but it's just the total absence of light, right? So you're looking into this space and there's the total absence of light, but your back is to the sun. Let's assume your shadow is negligible. Is there actually light in that space in front of your eyes? By light, I mean packets of light energy, photons, electromagnetic radiation.

Yeah, it's full of light, isn't it? Because the sun's light is just streaming out in all directions. So that space in front of you is actually pervaded by the light of the sun, but you don't see it. That light is always there. You could say it's ever-present, but you don't notice it.

Now, let's say a meteorite flies through space in front of your eyes. Don't worry too much about the physics. Do you see the meteorite? Yeah. It's really clear, right? Because it's reflecting the sunlight that's already there back to your eyes.

That's an impermanent arising. It only comes for a second and then it's gone. But it's possible because of this ever-present light that's permeating the space—the infinite space permeated by ever-present light.

So I want to suggest that the infinite space permeated by ever-present light is the unconditioned in its aspect of emptiness, which is the space that's not full, and luminosity—that this is always there. When an object arises, that object is illuminated as a flashing into consciousness. So you could say the light and the object are revealed together, but that's impermanent. That's an analogy for consciousness and the object coming up together. And the luminosity pervading the empty space is an analogy for the unconditioned. This is the way I understand our nature.

Some schools don't agree with this view. Some schools do.

As I understand awareness, it always comes with something being known. Without something being known, we wouldn't feel aware. Often it's the body, it's sounds, thoughts, emotions. A lot of times when you feel the spacious extent of awareness, I want to suggest that what's being known is physical space. You can reflect on that a bit. But all of those things can be known because the luminosity is intrinsic to the nature of our experience, to this dimension of nibbāna.

So I want to suggest that nibbāna is the combination of emptiness and luminosity—unmoving, unchanging, and having the capacity to reveal the whole conditioned world.

When we practice a practice like Big Mind and we kind of let our awareness unhook from the individual objects that we may have been fixated on, can you feel how that shifts your center of gravity away from individual phenomena into this kind of mysterious presence of awareness? As it unhooks from the individual phenomena, it opens us up into this at least approximate union of emptiness and awareness.

We aren't exactly seeing the unconditioned in our day-to-day experience. Usually that perception is a shift, an abrupt shift in experience. But we are sort of letting that unconditioned nature come through to us, come through to our intuition. And with it is a sense of peace.

"The tides of conceiving do not sweep over one who stands upon the foundations of wisdom and peace. And when the tides of conceiving no longer sweep over one, they are called a sage at peace. The sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die. They are not shaken and they are not agitated, for there is nothing present in them by which they might be born."

So this luminosity has an unborn quality. It has not come into the manifest world yet. But when an object arises within it, then its light is made manifest. And we are in the conditioned manifest realm. And yet right within it, permeating it, is this unconditioned luminous nature.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa: "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 satipaññña, or mindfulness and wisdom."

Some teachers have a way of manifesting this kind of understanding or this kind of attainment. And I want to close by telling you a story of a meeting with one of these people.

I was in Kathmandu practicing with one of my Tibetan teachers. It was a few years ago. There was a very esteemed senior lama visiting his monastery at that time. The lama's name was Nyoshul Kan Rinpoche. I had some money that a friend asked me to offer to Rinpoche as dāna because the friend was a student of Nyoshul Ken Rinpoche.

So I told my teacher I'd like to pass on some dāna to Kempo, that was his name in short, from this student in the States. My teacher said, "Would you like to offer it to him personally?" And I said, "No, I don't need

to. You can give it to him." In the back of my mind was kind of, seen one lama, you've seen them all.

And then I thought about it, and I thought, "You know, I actually would like to meet him because I've heard so much about him."

So a meeting was arranged, and I was ushered into his room, and he was sitting up in a meditation posture. I was a little nervous because he's such a well-known and esteemed lama. He died a few years ago, unfortunately.

So I made my bows, we had a short conversation, and then my teacher encouraged me to offer the envelope with the donation to Khenpo. So I did, and as I offered it to him, I looked up into his eyes.

And just in that moment, he seemed to go into a deep meditative state as he looked directly into my eyes. His eyes moved slightly apart, and I felt such a stillness in his mind that it wouldn't even be right to say that his mind was still. There was no mind there to be either still or moving. It was just like looking into this deep ocean of peace.

What I actually felt it was like was looking directly into Nibbana. I felt if I could have just kept looking there a little longer, who knows what might have happened. That was the nature of mind. The meeting ended, and I left, but the image has always stayed with me.

It showed me something that I think the Buddha had—a deep presence of tranquility and unmovability that perhaps was the reason that his talks, unlike our own, can enlighten so many people. There was something in that quality of presence, that depth of being, that could transmit understanding beyond words.

So let's just sit together for a moment in that spirit of deep presence, allowing ourselves to touch that same ocean of peace that exists within each of us.

Thank you for listening.

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