Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:36

The spiritual life is about making a journey from a state which is subject to suffering to a state that is free and beyond the reach of suffering.

There are many different words that describe the bare reality of this suffering state. Sometimes it's called bondage. Sometimes it's referred to as states of clinging, grasping, attachment, or the generic overall term of samsara—wandering on through realms of being. This word samsara gives a sense of how deeply conditioned are the habits of mind that keep us in a state of suffering. It indicates how daunting a task liberation might be.

There are also many words that describe the awakened state: awakening, enlightenment, freedom, release, liberation, emancipation, nibbana or nirvana in Sanskrit. Our path is to take the journey from a state of suffering to a state of freedom.

Tonight I want to explore what the path is and offer some reflections on this quality of freedom. The subject of this talk is unentangled knowing.

This phrase comes from the Thai teacher Upasaka Ki, a lay woman who taught from the 1950s through the 1970s. She has a book I highly recommend called "Pure and Simple," which is a collection of many of her dharma talks. She was always very good at pointing to the heart of practice, turning her listeners back to the very central focus of the teachings and of liberation.

This phrase, unentangled knowing, appears in her work within a short verse: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning, cast aside." We'll return to this and explore it further.

For those who are not native speakers of English, "unentangled" is a rare word. To explain it: a tangle often refers to a ball of string or thread or yarn that's gotten all jumbled up, and when you try to pull it apart it just falls into knots. "Entangle" is the verb that describes that condition. "Unentangle" means to unthread or take apart the tangled bits that have all gotten jammed up together.

This word "tangle" is one that the Buddha often used in describing our state of affairs, our state of mind. He said, for example, "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." The idea is that our desires go in so many different directions and contradictory directions that they form a tangle in the world and in our mind.

There's a wonderful question from the Samyutta Nikaya. Someone has come to the Buddha and asked: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside. This generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this

question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

That's really us, isn't it? We are at work disentangling this tangle—the inner tangle in the work of purifying our hearts and minds. And that gives us the understanding to know how the outer tangle has been created. The Buddha's reply was that it was the one who developed sila-samadhi-panya—conduct, meditation, and wisdom—who disentangled the tangle.

In Upasaka Ki's language, unentangled knowing refers to a quality of mindfulness that doesn't get caught up in reactive formations to the experiences of the world that we contact, both outer experiences and inner experiences. It's a mindfulness that is fully present, fully aware, but is not caught up in or bound by the arisings.

We are all dropping into this state very often throughout the day in meditation practice. This is a state that's happening for us repeatedly. There are many moments of this unentangled knowing arising at this point in the retreat. We may not yet have taken the time to notice them.

I want to emphasize this quality of mind, encourage you to start to notice when it's arising in your practice, and especially to notice and feel the element of freedom that's there. Sometimes when the mind is in these free states—and we know they're temporary—we don't take the time or effort to notice the quality of freedom. If we start to notice it, it can really enrich our practice, motivate our practice, and bring a lot of interest and appreciation.

This is happening already with all the meditations you've been doing—meditations on breath, sounds, body, thoughts, emotions. Continue as you're doing, and notice the freedom that comes. Later in this talk I want to discuss three approaches to practice that focus on this unentangled knowing as their central feature.

But before we go into that, I want to talk about how bondage happens, because we can't really understand freedom fully until we know how we get caught, how we get bound.

The Buddha's central teachings are all about this question of how bondage happens and how release happens. The Four Noble Truths are one of the central pointings. There's another teaching where the Buddha went into more detail, which is called the Chain of Dependent Arising or Dependent Origination. There are twelve links to that chain, which could be a whole talk in itself.

We're going to focus on the experiential heart of the teaching. We're not going to examine the first four or the last four links. We're going to zero in on the central four links of the chain because they're very experiential. This is really where the heart of the question lies.

Before we get into that, let me pose a question: what is our basic situation as human beings? Whether we're meditators or people out in the world, what's the basic reality of life for all of us?

Because there's a reality we all share. We're going to die. We are going to die. That's in the future

somewhere. What about here and now? What's our basic situation?

Things are how they are. And what are those things? Our basic situation is that experiences keep happening to us at the six sense doors, all the time. Whether you're enlightened or not enlightened, whether you're a meditator or a layperson, wherever you live in the world, as long as your six senses are uninjured, those things keep unfolding for us.

The Buddha gave one discourse that pointed directly at this called the Sutta on Totality. He said, "Listen monks, and I will explain to you the totality of life." He was not one given to modest pronouncements. And he said, "It is simply this: the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. This is the totality of life. Anyone who would describe a totality beyond this would not know what they were talking about."

So we've said a few times—I think Joseph has said it—there are only ever six things happening, and these are the six, the objects of the six sense doors. Can you turn those off at will? No. When we fall asleep, we lose touch with them, but a loud sound in the middle of the night will wake us up, so there's some thread of consciousness still hanging out there, alert, able to be contacted.

But basically these six things, as long as we're awake and our senses are functioning, are coming to us all the time. They're impinging on us. They are contacting us. And so these elements are known in the Buddha's teaching and in this chain of dependent arising. These aspects of our experience are known as contact. There are six types of contact: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. This is where we'll pick up this thread of dependent arising.

So we're constantly receiving these contacts. They are mixed in terms of their pleasure or pain. Some are pleasant, some are painful, some are neither. And that's the quality of feeling tone. Every contact has associated with it a feeling tone, or vedanā, and that's the next link in the chain of dependent arising.

This is a very important point. Why is the feeling tone so important? It's based on the feeling tone that desire and aversion arise. The pleasant feeling tone often gives rise to wanting. The unpleasant feeling tone often gives rise to aversion. The neutral feeling tone often conditions delusion—like, that's not important. That doesn't have enough charge to interest me, so I won't pay attention to that.

So the feeling tone is often the ground for the arising of these reactive formations of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion.

And then when we notice that we can't have it, and that we have to just let it go, there's a death there too. The hungry yogi dies. So there's suffering in the life and suffering in the death.

But let me give you an example that goes the other way. Say you're sitting in meditation and you have a really peaceful sitting. There's some lovely concentration, maybe some joy arising, and the mind notices this and says, "Oh, this is really nice. This is what meditation should be like. I'm finally getting it." And we

take hold of that pleasant state.

In that grasping, we're born as a successful meditator. We have a new identity - I'm someone who can do this, I'm good at this practice. So that birth feels really good. We're happy to be the accomplished practitioner. But of course, in the very next moment, that concentration shifts or changes, as all conditioned things do. The pleasant state fades, and suddenly our identity as the successful meditator dies.

So even when the birth is pleasant, the death is unpleasant. This is why the Buddha said that wherever there is birth, there will be aging and death, and wherever there is aging and death, there will be suffering.

This is the heart of dependent origination - this process by which we continually create new forms of suffering for ourselves through our reactive relationship to experience. Contact arises, feeling tone arises, craving arises, clinging arises, and in that clinging a new self is born that will inevitably suffer and die.

The beautiful thing about understanding this process is that it shows us exactly where we can interrupt the chain. We don't have to go unconsciously from contact to suffering. We can learn to see the feeling tone clearly. We can notice when craving is arising. We can catch ourselves before we move into clinging. This is the essence of mindfulness practice - learning to see these links clearly so that we have choice in how we respond rather than being driven by unconscious reactivity.

It may not be profound unhappiness, but there's a subtle dissatisfaction present. Then, as you continue walking to another part of the building, the aroma fades, the craving dissolves, and your mind naturally returns to equilibrium.

This balanced state is what Upasaka Ki calls "normal." It's an amusing choice of words because it's certainly not normal in worldly terms. But from a Dhamma perspective, this is what she describes as a normal mind—a balanced awareness that remains free from entanglement in desire or aversion.

That example illustrated a mildly suffering existence. But consider instead those times when you sit and experience a truly beautiful meditation. The concentration feels effortlessly present. You rest naturally in the moment as mindfulness flows with strength and clarity. The hindrances remain dormant because awareness is so well-established. There's a profound sense of relaxation, comfort, and ease suffusing the body. You observe each moment with remarkable precision.

When you rise from such a sitting, you think, "That was extraordinary. I must share this with the teacher."

In this moment, something subtle has occurred. You've grasped hold of those beautiful meditative qualities—the concentration, the stillness, the ease—and claimed ownership of them in some way. This constitutes a happy birth.

But by the time you complete your walking period and return to sit again, everything may have shifted. Sometimes after such experiences, we hurry back to the meditation hall, eager to recapture that state. We

settle onto our cushion expecting the same profound concentration, only to encounter physical discomfort, mental chatter, and emotional turbulence. "Where did my concentration disappear to?" we wonder with dismay.

Then comes the pain of witnessing the death of that happy birth.

When we cling to any experience, we generate a sense of selfhood around it. We either endure a painful existence followed by perhaps a happy ending, or we enjoy a blissful life followed by inevitable suffering when it passes. This is how clinging invariably leads to dukkha, just as the chain of dependent arising demonstrates.

For most untrained individuals, the mind knows nothing but this endless cycle of grasping. It exists in a habitual state of reacting to feeling tone, clinging to one experience until it loses interest, then immediately latching onto the next. It's like a monkey swinging through the forest—never releasing one vine until it spots where to grab the next. This represents the ordinary condition of human consciousness.

This observation isn't a judgment of anyone; it's simply our inherited conditioning, the way we've all been programmed to operate.

But as meditators, we have access to another possibility entirely. This is truly the heart of our practice: we can learn to let go without immediately grasping something else. We can release our grip without immediately forming new attachments.

As you know, this isn't simple. When Skye spoke about letting go, she illuminated just how challenging this process can be. Ajahn Chah once observed that roughly eighty percent of spiritual life consists of recognizing that you're holding on while feeling unable to release. This aligns remarkably well with my own meditation experience—it's often exactly what unfolds.

Yet sometimes we do discover how to let go, and no new clinging arises to take its place. This is where we encounter genuine freedom in the present moment.

We often conceptualize the spiritual path as an enormous journey, with descriptions of liberation only arriving after tremendously long periods of practice—one lifetime or perhaps many lifetimes of effort. Sometimes we forget that we can taste profound aspects of this freedom right here, right now.

When we recognize this possibility, it can tremendously energize our practice. The fruit of the path needn't wait many years to manifest—it can be witnessed in this very moment. This strengthens faith, deepens motivation, and builds conviction that the path is actually working in our lives. These immediate glimpses prove invaluable for sustaining our commitment to practice.

This is why learning to notice when these moments of freedom arise becomes so crucial.

What we're describing is the possibility of breaking the chain of dependent origination that typically leads

from contact to suffering. We experience contact, then feeling tone—but must craving inevitably follow? When a pleasant sensation arises at any sense door, must greed automatically appear? When unpleasant feelings emerge, must aversion immediately take hold?

The answer is no.

When the mind remains present with its object and mindfulness possesses sufficient strength...

We don't have to move into a reactive formation, even though that feeling tone may be there strongly. This is where we find freedom in the chain, and this is what keeps us from moving on to suffering.

So more and more, our meditation is about opening to the pleasant, opening to the unpleasant, but not reacting from greed or aversion. Again, in worldly life, in normal life, the greed and aversion formations are usually accompanied by delusion, because we don't see what we're doing. That reaction is so instinctive, it's not seen and it's not questioned.

In meditation, we also see clearly. There is no greed, there is no aversion, so there is no delusion in that moment. So in the moment of no greed, no aversion, and no delusion—clear seeing—that's a description of a mind that's free. Temporarily, yes, but free.

So it's very helpful to start to look into the mind at this place in between feeling and before there's any craving and feel what that feels like and become familiar with that, because more and more that's where you find your sweet spot in meditation. One teacher said that the whole of the Buddhist path is about resting in the gap between feeling and craving.

This is available at any moment. It doesn't depend on special conditions. It depends on your mindfulness being strong, but anytime your mindfulness is strong, that is a possibility to rest between feeling and craving. And that resting is a place of some freedom.

Really what we're talking about is finding a place in that gap that's not determined by conditioned things. The impact of the six sense doors is conditioned, sometimes completely out of our control. We're all receiving pleasant and unpleasant contact alternately, but our response can be unaffected by the conditioned things around us. Ajahn Chah called that an aspect of the unconditioned mind, the mind that is not bound by external conditions.

And I'd like to read a little bit from Ajahn Chah on this. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it because there's a lovely expression in this.

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable, material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, liked and disliked. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself.

The tendency to conceive things in terms of self is the source of happiness, suffering, birth, old age, sickness and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind. Not knowing these things, the mind doesn't see the Dhamma. Not seeing the Dhamma, the mind is full of clinging. As long as the mind is held down by clinging, there can be no escape from the conditioned world. As long as there is no escape, there is confusion, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This kind of mind is called the conditioned mind.

The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are, as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So we have that possibility of realizing the Dhamma in relationship to the changing conditioned things at the six sense doors.

What is it like resting in that gap? You could say that resting in that gap means we're not taking birth. Not taking birth, we're not subject to death in this moment-to-moment kind of living and dying. So that is described as a place where we're not turning into a new self or a new I.

This is from the Sutta-Nipāta. There was a chapter where a number of Brahmin youths all came to visit the Buddha, and each youth asked him their own questions, and the questions were collected into this one chapter. This is a youth named Todeyya. And Todeyya asked, "For one who is freed, what is that liberation like?" Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What does it feel like to be you, to have your mind, to have that freedom?

And the Buddha said, "The sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." Becoming is this process of taking birth again as a new self. "The sage has nothing and is unentangled in becoming." That means he hasn't taken ownership at the six sense doors.

Ajahn Chah put this non-becoming in terms of a hall where he was giving a talk. He was giving a talk probably in an open-air sala in Thailand that had basically a roof, a floor, and pillars, but open walls. And he said, "When you look at this hall, the roof is a becoming. Something has taken birth there."

You could take a stand there. The floor is a becoming—it's something constructed, you could take a stand there. But the space that's in between the floor and the roof? You couldn't take a stand there. He said there's no becoming there, and that's what's called emptiness. And he said, to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness—this state of resting between feeling and craving, where a new self is not being born.

Ajahn Chah says this is the place of peace, this deathless place, uncreated, unbecome. It's deathless because no birth is taking place. No birth means no death will take place. And it's always available. It's not that special conditions are needed for it. It's always potential for us.

The Buddha made an interesting comment about the deathless in another sutta from the Samyutta Nikaya. He said that our path, the path that we're walking, has the deathless as its ground, its destination, and its final goal. So when you think about that, the path that we're walking is going from suffering or bondage toward freedom. Does the path partake of bondage or freedom? Here, the Buddha is saying that the path has the deathless, freedom, as its ground. The path is founded upon the deathless. The path is built upon the goal.

In another sutta in the Anguttara, the Buddha says that merging in the deathless are all things. So all things are being supported, held by this deathless state. This becomes quite an interesting point. The mind that is balanced between feeling and craving, that does not fall into craving even though there's feeling, is residing in this place of deathlessness, of not taking birth—and that is the path.

So it becomes very interesting. Not only is it immediately, inherently free, but that furthers the freedom, that grows the freedom. The path keeps unfolding, keeps uncovering more and more of this freedom as we rest there.

Something that's happening when we make that shift is we are no longer staking our happiness on objects. We've given up clinging. We've given up trying to find a lasting happiness through the six sense doors. And something that helps this shift is that we turn from a main concern with objects to a greater concern with the subject.

So I want to talk in the second half of the talk about three approaches to our meditation that are based on this shift from focusing on objects to starting to take into account the subject. It doesn't mean we give up connecting with objects. The objects of the five physical senses are very good groundings for mindfulness in daily life. Even this looking at the subject involves some of the sixth sense door, looking at formations of the mind. So we're not putting away the practice that we've done so far. These are only suggestions of additional ways you might like to try if you find them helpful. The practice we've described so far is completely sufficient for you forever. But if you'd like to try these, they're also good practices.

The three that I'm going to talk about are a practice of checking the attitude, a practice of becoming aware of awareness, and a practice of noticing the empty nature of awareness. I'll talk about each of these.

In the last few years, a number of us have spent time with a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw U Tejaniya. He has a very refreshing approach to practice, which is not so focused on what we're paying attention to, but more how we're relating to what we're experiencing or contacting. I think you've probably heard Carol talk about his approach a few times in the retreat already.

One of his central practices is what he calls checking the mind. And he says, okay, you're relating to the breath, you're relating to sounds, you're relating to your body, whatever your meditation object is, that's fine. But what I'm interested in is how are you relating to it? If you have a strong emotion in the mind, are you wanting it to go away? Are you wanting something else to be in its place? Are you noticing clearly

what's there?

So his instruction is, while you're doing your meditation relating with thoughts and emotions and physical senses, also notice: is there greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind? Sometimes that's not so easy to see, so he has a simple checklist.

First question to check on greed: am I wanting something else to happen? So often you sit in your meditation—I wish I could be a little more still. You sit and think, I had that really beautiful metta opening yesterday, a strong feeling of love for my benefactor. I'd like to have that again. So we notice, I'm wanting something else to happen. This is the force of desire or greed.

Sometimes we look and the question for aversion is: are you wanting something to stop happening? Yeah, I'd like this pain in my knee to go away. I'd like this experience of fear not to be here. I'd like the restlessness in my body to calm down.

So if we want something to stop happening, that's a sign of aversion. And the third one, delusion, he treats very simply for this level. There are many layers to delusion, but just on this checking, you ask, am I not in touch with what's happening?

Generally by the time we've asked this question we're back in touch with what's happening, so usually the answer to delusion is no. But often the answer to greed or aversion is yes. So he just suggests checking very often—it could be, in the beginning, four or five times a sitting. As the practice develops, it could be ten times a sitting, twenty times a sitting. As this practice gains momentum, this becomes the main place we look, more or less continuously.

And this is very doable. This is not unrealistic or impossible. Our main item of interest is: Is there greed in the mind? Is there aversion in the mind? Is there delusion in the mind in the way I'm relating to what I'm experiencing? This is a very, very interesting path to follow.

If you notice that there is greed, aversion, or delusion, then just become mindful of that. You don't have to make that go away, because that would be aversive. You just notice it's there, but the noticing shifts things. As you know, noticing these formations of mind makes a change in them.

Upasaka Kee puts it this way. Her teaching uses different vocabulary, but it has a really similar emphasis. She says, "Your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's worth checking on. Just keep checking: How am I relating? Am I trying to grasp at the changing factors of my experience?" If so, notice it as greed, aversion, or delusion.

This is the first of the three ways I wanted to talk about.

The second one is becoming aware of awareness. And here's where we make a very conscious shift from

object to subject. Objects are known. What are they known by? They're known by some aspect of subjectness. Now, what is that?

In the Buddha's description of our experience, well, first let me say, Buddhism as a domain is interested in the experience of human beings. That's not true of every field. Physics is interested in interactions between physical objects. Chemistry is interested in the interactions between atoms and molecules. Earth science is interested in the formation of rocks. All those things are interested in objects. Buddhism is interested in human experience all the way through. That means that it's only interested in objects as they're known by a human subject.

So how do we know things? When you hear a sound, you recognize the sound as an object. In the Buddha's language, this is in the field of materiality because it's arising from a material object. But from the point of view of the teachings, the important thing is that it's arising in a human consciousness. This element of consciousness is a critical piece that in ordinary disciplines we often don't talk about. But in Buddhism, it's central.

So when you hear the sound, there are actually two aspects that we want to tune into. One is the sound itself, which has a fairly pleasant quality. It arises, it lasts a certain amount of time, and it fades away. But the second thing is you are conscious of it. Is that clear to everybody? We're conscious of that sound.

The way that I understand it is it's not like that consciousness is in you and the sound is out here, but rather when the sound arises, there's one experience, which is the sound and your knowing of it, which come up together. We can distinguish two aspects of the experience, but I want to suggest there's only one experience happening, which is your hearing of the sound.

So how can it be that there's this material thing called the sound and there's this knowing, which is of the mind, that's happening at the same time? That's kind of the mystery of our existence. Nobody knows how that happened. Science doesn't have a clue.

How that happens nobody does, but it does happen again and again and again. Or you might wonder, how can one thing have these two different parts? Well, if you take a look at this bowl, I could ask you: is it round or is it black? It's one bowl, right? But it has two aspects. It's both round and black.

So in the same way, when a sound arises, it's one thing, but it has two aspects. There's your knowing of it and there's the sound. So this knowing is what the Buddha called consciousness. The Pali word is viññāṇa.

When we start to take that into account in our practice, it starts to shift things. We come into meditation generally from this worldly perspective where we think the world is made up of objects. Yeah, the world is made up of earth and cars and dollar bills and women and men and parents and Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, all that stuff. That's not what the world is made of. The world is made of our consciousness of all those things, because it's only through our consciousness of things that we have the possibility of finding freedom in relation to them.

So consciousness is one of the five aggregates. It's in the fourth foundation of mindfulness that Sally talked about the other night. And we can make it a focus for our meditation. We can make it a focus for our mindfulness.

So right now, let me just ask: do you know that you're conscious? Those of you who are asleep don't need to answer. But for everybody else, do you know you're conscious? Okay. Can you connect with that quality of—we could call it awareness or consciousness—and recognize it in this moment? Yeah. No? If it's difficult, I'll just say: remember what unconscious is like. Unconscious is like being asleep and you're not knowing any experiences. So in the moment, if you're having experiences, you're aware, aren't you? You're conscious. Yeah. Okay.

Rather than turning our attention to the objects that are filling our momentary experience—if your eyes are open at sights, if your eyes are closed you're hearing things, you're feeling your physical sensations—what if you turn your attention to this quality of awareness?

Let me suggest a way to kind of get into this. Let your mind just roam over the objects in the room or in your experience right now. If your eyes are open, they can just roam over your body and the sounds. If they're open, include the events of the room. Take a look around. Let your eyes just gaze and travel around and see interesting things and uninteresting things.

And now, instead of looking outward, take that quality of attention or awareness and direct it back toward where the seeing is happening. One way this is sometimes expressed is "become aware of your awareness," or it can be described as turning awareness back on itself, or it can be described as letting the eyes roll back into the head.

When you make that shift from the eyes wandering around or the senses wandering around outside and then coming to look back at the source of awareness, does it feel any different? You get a little shift in the way that feels? Okay, keep playing with it if you like.

What happens when we make that move away from outer objects and toward the inner seeing is to some degree we unhook from the objects. So it can be for some people—if it doesn't work for you, you don't have to do it—it can be a way to consciously let go. It can kind of consciously take our fixation off of objects. You know, it could be body sensations that we're fixating on because they're pleasurable or painful. It could be a sense of space in the room. It could be a sound. But we can unhook, look inward, and in that kind of let go.

Now, we can't, of course, really see awareness, because that's like trying to see your own eyes, which someone read Ajahn Sumedho talking about. He said, "I can't see my eyes, but I don't need to because I know they're working." So in the same way, we may not see the awareness so clearly—consciousness is a subtle object—but the very act of turning in that direction, being interested in the subject rather than the object, lets us stop clinging or stop being so fixated on objects.

I was taking a walk yesterday in the rain and walking down by the pond down the hill from here, and I just stood and watched for a while the raindrops falling in the pond and then making their ripples, one after another after another. And it struck me that that was a lot like the experience of contact that the Buddha talked about. Our awareness is just kind of open. And then there are all these sensory inputs just coming in and landing, coming in and landing one after another. The surface of the pond is very still if it's not being disturbed.

It can be disturbed by wind. It could be disturbed by rain. It could be disturbed by an animal swimming in it. But if it's not being disturbed, it's very still.

In the same way, our awareness has this ability to be very still and just let things land and touch it, land and touch it. They make a little ripple, but the ripple will die out really quickly unless we try to grab hold of it. Some of the things that land we get fascinated by - we grab hold of and fixate on. That's the way clinging works. But when we start to feel this receptive quality of awareness, we can simply let things land and ripple, land and ripple, and that mind can return to its basically placid and tranquil state.

When we're not clinging, we're not creating a disturbance. We're not taking a new birth. We're not leading into more suffering.

So if this appeals to you and you would like to play with it a little bit, then here's what I'd suggest: just try this exercise. Sometimes a visual cue is helpful, so have the sense that you can let your senses roam outside as much as they want. Become interested, and then at some point take the attention and turn awareness back on itself, or direct the attention inward to the source of knowing. Sometimes the phrase "aware of awareness" helps people connect with that experience. See if in doing that anything shifts in you.

If something connects and you want to practice with it as a practice, then these are the steps you could go through. Take a look back - in other words, become aware of awareness. Notice if anything shifts, and then just rest there. How long can you rest? Until you get distracted, until the mind gets caught up in thinking, proliferating, grasping onto something. And then when you notice it again, you can do the same sequence: turn the attention back on awareness, notice what the effect is, and then rest.

Upasaka Ki put it this way: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." That's another synonym for grasping - making up from grasping. In other words, "an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing, cast aside." That is, the tendency of mind to look for its gratification through objects has been put down. And there's a contentment, an interest, a vitality in this turning to awareness itself.

When we turn to awareness, it doesn't block out any of the sensory arisings. Awareness is still there receiving them. But our attention is not fixated on the objects. And for some people, that gives a sense of

greater space, greater equanimity. It's not for everyone. And again, if this description doesn't appeal to you, there's no need to take it up.

The last quote I'll mention in this section is another one from the French poet Paul Valéry, where he says, "I only refer to my pure self, by which I mean absolute consciousness, through which one turns loose from everything else." That's pretty good intuition for a non-Buddhist.

The third of these approaches that I wanted to mention tonight looks at the empty nature of this awareness. And I want to approach this by another question - a simple question. It is not a trick.

Do you have a body?

Do you have a mind?

It's not a trick. We all have a body, and because we're alive and breathing and walking, we all have a mind. If I ask you where is your body, it's really clear, right? It's here. Where is your mind? And to answer that, we have to know: what is your mind?

Somebody points to the chest. That's a good place to look. What is the mind?

When the Buddha talked about the sutta on totality, and he talked about the six kinds of things, he talked about the mind and mind objects. So mind objects we've talked about many times - as thoughts, emotions, meditative states, feeling, perception, intention. Those are all objects of mind. What's left that could be called the mind in this schema?

How about consciousness? Maybe consciousness or awareness is the mind. I'd like to refine it a little bit by saying that I want to call the mind that which is the source of consciousness, or more simply, that which knows. Other parts of what we call mind, like thoughts and emotions, those will be mind objects. But mind is going to be the organ that knows in this consciousness kind of way.

So in this sense, in this language - it's only language - consciousness is the activity of this thing we're calling mind.

Can you buy this temporarily as a hypothesis?

Is consciousness limited in space? Your consciousness, is it just around your body? Does it include the meditation hall? Does it include the grounds of IMS? Does it include the trees down the road? Does it include the stars? It's pretty unlimited, isn't it? It seems to be everywhere we turn. There's some consciousness happening.

So where is the mind? Can you find that which is the source of the knowing? Where does this knowing come from? It's tough, isn't it? I will encourage you to explore. You could ask questions like: does the mind have any shape? Does it have any color? Does it have any limit? Does it have any boundary? See what you come up with.

If you can't find it, that's also significant because it says it's empty—we could say it doesn't exist. That's a fine thing to say, but then what is it that keeps knowing? Knowing continues to happen, so in this language something like the mind is still doing that. So we can't find it, but it seems to function. All we can say is it's ineffable.

What if you let your attention kind of evaporate into that ineffable place? What if you let your attention release into that limitless, boundless, unfindable place of mind?

Connecting with the empty nature of mind can also bring in a sense of unhooking from grasping at phenomena. This is from the Buddha talking to his seven-year-old son who became a student after the Buddha's awakening: "Rahula, develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like space."

As you let your attention kind of fill the vastness of this limitless space of awareness, there's a natural letting go of fixation, preoccupation and clinging to the individual comings and goings of contact.

I'll just close with another quotation from the Buddha. This is also from the Sutta Nipata in the dialogue with another Brahmin youth whose name is Kapha. So Kapha asks this question: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replies: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing. That is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbana, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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