The Empty Nature of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:08:15

The theme this morning is the empty nature of awareness. Normally in Vipassana practice, all the instructions and all our attention is directed toward the objects that we're paying attention to: breath, sensations in the body, sounds, moods and emotions, thoughts and so on. But in the meditation that we just did, the big mind guided meditation, there was an instruction to turn the attention not to the objects, but to the awareness itself.

When you make this shift from focusing on objects and then turn the attention to the awareness itself, this creates an inner shift in experience. People describe this shift in various ways: entering something like a hypnotic state while still remaining present and noticing; experiencing twisting, falling, shifting, a bit of confusion; questioning; loss of boundaries; feeling wobbly. In many of these descriptions, the word that comes to mind is groundless—this direction takes away some kind of ground. Others describe it as a kind of relief from the claustrophobic nature of the mind, like stepping outside in the morning.

One particularly insightful observation is that awareness doesn't care what comes in front of it. It could be anger, it could be a thought of universal brotherhood—it doesn't make any difference. Sometimes this quality can be a little confusing.

All these comments indicate that when we turn toward this direction, some kind of shift happens. Perhaps a common feature is a loosening of our normal fixation or what we're usually set upon, placing it into a bigger container. Sometimes it's not clear exactly what that bigger container is, and we might feel a little adrift or tumbling in the middle of that.

By clarifying what this experience is, we can make this a reliable part of our meditation. We can take some of the conceptual confusion out and lean more into that quality of relief or release and the impartiality that emerges. This is a valuable technique that I've found really useful in my years of practice.

It's important to note that Dharma teachers use the word "awareness" differently and have different meanings. Every time a Dharma teacher says awareness, it's always good to ask them what they mean by that, because it's a slippery word. Sometimes it's used to mean mindfulness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma has a book called *Awareness Alone is Not Enough*—but by awareness, he means mindfulness. He's saying mindfulness alone is not enough. What mindfulness needs is wisdom. Mindfulness is a means to awaken wisdom. Wisdom is really what liberates.

Other teachers use this term as consciousness, and this morning in our discussion, that's what I'll use it as. We'll use it synonymously with consciousness, but in a slightly different context. Consciousness we usually

use to mean the knowing of an individual object—sight consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, and so forth. It's that which knows one thing arising. I'm going to use awareness to mean this quality that you were feeling into during the guided meditation: the extent of consciousness, the range of conscious activity, that broad, vast quality. But it's still consciousness.

It was very interesting to me, after doing years and years of vipassana practice, to discover that I could tune into this quality of consciousness itself. It reminded me of something I'd read in D.H. Lawrence. It's fascinating how artists sometimes go really quickly to the essence of what's happening in the mind. Lawrence had a passage—I can't remember it exactly—but it said something like: it's as though we've been sitting by a fire, and we've been really entranced and enchanted by the objects that are illuminated by the firelight, but we've never thought to look at the fire itself.

The role of awareness is to illuminate the objects of the world and of the body, but this is the time we can take a look at the light itself. What is that light of awareness or consciousness? What is its nature? This, in some way, is more or equally fundamental, equally important.

As we investigate this quality of awareness or consciousness, some of the confusion and drifting that was mentioned is an indication that it's not so easy to find this quality of mind. Because awareness is not an object. Consciousness is not an object. Everything else that goes on we can say takes form and is an object: sound, sensation, breath, thought, emotion. Even though emotion is a little insubstantial, we can still take it as an object and pay attention to it. But awareness isn't an object like that. It's what's knowing.

So when you're asked to become aware of awareness, that's a little bit of a double bind, and that's part of the confusion in this practice. Yet it can be really suggestive, and I think many of you felt some shift happen when you made even that attempt, even though it's not a clear meditation instruction.

This is from Ajahn Chah: If you have difficulty finding awareness, it's like you're riding on a horse and you're asking, "Where's the horse?" It's happening all the time. It's filling our world. It's making our world. And then we go, "Well, where is it?"

Ajahn Sumedho put it like this: Just like the question, "Can you see your own eyes?" Nobody can see their own eyes. I can see your eyes, but I can't see my eyes. I'm sitting right here. I've got two eyes, and I can't see them. But you can see my eyes. Looking in a mirror, I can see a reflection, but that's not my eyes—it's a reflection of my eyes. But there's no real need for me to see my eyes because I can see.

It's ridiculous, isn't it? If I started saying, "Why can't I see my own eyes?" you'd think Ajahn Sumedho is getting weird. So we may not be able to see awareness like an object, but we know that it's active, that it's functioning, because we're aware. There's no doubt about that, is there? As you're sitting here, you know you're aware.

Wei Wu Wei is a very interesting writer. He was an Englishman living in Hong Kong who started to get into Chan and Zen writings.

And then he crafted his understanding into these pithy little aphorisms. One of them that he offered is: "What we are looking for is what is looking." This captures the essence of our inquiry. We're looking for this quality of awareness, but that very awareness is what is doing the looking. That's not so easy to find.

Think of awareness or consciousness as this knowing of phenomena—the appearances that arise through our senses. It's not an object because it's more of an activity. Knowing is a verb, and consciousness is performing that function. That's its very nature.

But as you become familiar with this understanding—that consciousness is the activity of knowing—then a question naturally arises: If that's the action, what is the agent? What is it that's doing the knowing?

Joseph Goldstein likes to give this as a meditation instruction. You'll be walking along, and instead of saying "I feel the sensations in my feet or legs," he'll suggest you phrase it as "sensations are being known"—putting it in the passive voice so there's no "I." Sensations are being known. And then he poses the question: Known by what? What is doing that knowing? Can you look and find it?

What happens when you look?

There was a little shift in the mood of the room when I asked the question, "What is the agent?" Did you notice a shift in yourself? What was that shift? How would you describe it?

"Really looking," someone offered. Yes, really looking.

"Imponderable," said Betsy. "A koan."

"Not knowing. More spacious, less me."

Sarah added, "Dropping into it, dropping into awareness."

These are all excellent reflections of what happens. The mind kind of stops. The thinking mind pauses. The ego's constant self-referencing ceases, because this inquiry really is imponderable. And in that stopping, there's an intensified quality of looking and seeing. Like a koan, it brings that heightened sense of interest: What's there?

And yet, did you find anything? Could you locate that agent?

No.

This is actually significant. You may think it was frustrating, but it was actually profoundly significant.

This is from a Tibetan teacher named Shabkar, who was a great yogi in the early 1800s—actually late 1700s, early 1800s. He spent years and years in a cave in the wilderness, and then wrote many wonderful teachings. His book that speaks to me most deeply is called "Flight of the Garuda." This is his account of the looking:

"Now, come up close and listen... When you look carefully, you won't find the merest speck of real mind you can put your finger on and say, 'this is it.' And not finding anything is an incredible find."

Friends, to start with, mind doesn't emerge from anything. It's primordially empty. There's nothing there to hold on to. It isn't anywhere. It has no shape or color. And in the end, nowhere to go.

So this is a kind of discovery in meditation. When we look to find this agent and we don't find it, we just are in this space of knowing or looking or awareness, whatever you want to call it. That's an important move. That movement is a beautiful place to be, meditatively speaking.

There are a number of words in Pali that we tend to translate as "mind." I don't really want to get into that complication. There's citta, there's vijnana—more often translated as consciousness, but sometimes as mind—and mano. Mano is the word that's used in the six sense bases. When it says eye and sights, ear and sounds, and so forth, it says mind and mind objects. That word is mano.

But let's say for the purpose of our conversation, we'll use "mind" to mean this agent that's doing the knowing. So let's just define mind as that which knows. Other things that are part of mind's activity—like thoughts and emotions and feeling and perception—we'll call those the objects of mind, as described in those six senses. So mind is what we're going to use for this discussion. Mind is what's doing the knowing, which is consciousness. Is that clear enough?

The question is, I said a moment ago we looked and couldn't find an agent, and now I'm saying the agent is mind. But maybe it's mind that's unfindable. Maybe there is something, but we can't find it. I'm using "awareness" synonymously with consciousness, which is doing the knowing, which we can feel. We can feel the knowing taking place.

I asked you a moment ago if you knew you were aware, and finally heads nodded. So you know you're aware—that means you know consciousness is taking place. We can know consciousness. You can't find it as an object, but you can feel it happening. So think of consciousness as the activity of knowing. We can feel that knowing is happening.

If you doubt it, think about what it means to be unconscious. When you faint or fall into a coma or go to sleep or go under anesthesia, you're not conscious for some period. What does that mean? It means things aren't happening to you. You lose the awareness of things happening. But as long as you're awake and your senses are functioning, you know things are happening. That knowing is consciousness.

So we ask the question: what is the agent of consciousness? We can't find it, but we're going to use this term "mind." Maybe it doesn't even exist. Maybe I'm putting a label on something that doesn't even exist, but we're just going to play with that. That's what this exploration is.

So I'm asking you to take a little bit of a leap of faith. If I use the words "the agent behind consciousness," you could grant me that and we'd all know it might be fictitious, because you can't find it. But I just want

to shorten it and use the word "mind" in this exercise.

Other times in general Buddhist language, we might use mind to mean something else. We might use it synonymous with consciousness. But just for this morning, I want to use mind to mean that which is doing the knowing. And then we want to explore whether that might exist or not exist, or if it exists, in what way it might exist.

Someone asked about experiences of hallucinating or being intoxicated, questioning how that relates to consciousness and whether it creates a separate person. The question touches on whether we're really unconscious when we're asleep or when we're drugged. I used that as a simple example of how to think about what being unconscious would mean - the experience of not knowing for a period.

This isn't really central to our discussion of whether there's consciousness present during sleep or dreams, which there probably is. But the general experience of not knowing is something we all touch from time to time. I was just trying to illustrate what knowing might feel like by contrast.

Let me clarify: the period of not knowing isn't really critical to our exploration. Whether you do or don't know isn't the central point. There have been periods when I fainted, for example, and coming out of the faint, there was a time I don't remember anything happening. So that's all I can say - I don't remember anything happening. It's not that nothing was happening. Maybe I was aware of something, but I have no memory of it. So it feels to me like nothing was happening and that I was unconscious then, but I can't swear to that.

If you can relate to the question of consciousness as being awake and knowing things, that's all we need to move forward.

This not finding - looking for the agent that we're calling mind and not finding it - is a sign, as Shabkar said, that there's some emptiness to it. This agent of mind, not findable, not discoverable, so we could say that points to its emptiness, its empty nature.

But knowing is happening. So this agent, what we call mind, you can't entirely say it doesn't exist because knowing keeps happening from it. We say that its nature is twofold: it's empty and it's knowing. These are the two qualities of that agent that we're calling mind - empty and knowing.

There's a quote from the study guide: "This mind, O monks, is radiant, but it is obscured by visiting defilements." The Buddha also points to the sense of the mind being radiant. He doesn't exactly define what he means by that mind, but there is this sense.

This quality of knowing is sometimes described as awareness, sometimes described as luminosity, clarity, or radiance. All these words are used for this power that cognizes. The cognizing power has the ability to illuminate our experience, to illuminate phenomena as they arise.

The empty aspect of this mind is like space, as we saw in the meditation when we talked about this field of

awareness as being like vast space, vast empty space. There are two qualities connected with this emptiness and space-like quality.

The first is that it can hold all the phenomena. Just as space holds all the phenomena of the physical world, mind holds all the phenomena of the sensory world, of the six senses. The second quality, because of its basic emptiness, is that nothing is there from the beginning. Anything that appears in this thing we're calling mind can also go away. Nothing is there from the beginning—it's part of its basic emptiness.

Part of what this means is that any afflictive emotions, any karmic patterns, any ignorance, any suffering aren't there from the beginning, so they can end. This is the side of dependent arising that we've been talking about from the beginning. Whatever is of the nature to arise also has the possibility of ceasing. This is the beauty of this empty quality of mind—anything that arises can also end.

When we do a meditation like this and we look at this nature, we probably see both these qualities together. There's an empty quality, which is like sky or space, and there's a knowing quality, which is the awareness, the functioning that illuminates all the phenomena. These two always go together.

We say that the basic nature of mind is emptiness and awareness combined. Ajahn Buddhadasa said we should call the mind emptiness, but because of its awareness, we call it mind. Its basic nature is empty from the beginning—everything within it can come and go. But because of this cognizing power, its functioning power, we call it mind. These two aspects of emptiness and awareness are always joined. They make up the nature, the basic qualities of mind.

We've been talking a lot during the retreat about when there's not clinging or grasping or selfing, then something shifts within us. Out of that place, which we're calling emptiness of self, there's more space. There's more equanimity. There's peace. There's ease. Also from that empty space, the beautiful qualities of heart come out easily, naturally—qualities like love, compassion, joy, contentment. When we're not bound up in the struggle of grasping and clinging and selfing, another way to that empty place is to notice this basic nature of mind. It's the same kind of space that we're talking about opening up. It's the same kind of inner quality that we're talking about coming to.

As we've been talking about emptiness of self, this looking for mind takes us to the same destination. Another way to empty of self is to notice the mind's basic nature, which is this combination of emptiness and knowing.

It's said that when we can recognize that—you look in, you see it's emptiness, but there's still knowing—then there's a third quality that's active, and that's called responsiveness. Sometimes this factor is described as unceasing compassionate activity. The meaning is that when we are empty of self, when we see that empty nature, then compassion can flow out naturally. Love can flow out naturally. Joy can flow out naturally.

When we recognize this empty aware nature, then it opens up the third aspect of the nature of mind,

which is responsiveness or sometimes called unceasing compassionate activity. That responsiveness rests on the recognition of emptiness and awareness. It's another way of saying when the self is empty and you know it, then these beautiful qualities come out naturally, come out easily.

This is a continuation of that quote from Shabkar: "Mind's nature is vivid as a flawless piece of crystal, intrinsically empty, naturally radiant, ceaselessly responsive." This has the three parts we talked about—intrinsically empty, the empty aspect; naturally radiant, like the quotation from the Buddha, this is the illuminating quality that cognizes phenomena; ceaselessly responsive, which is the opening up of the beautiful qualities of love, compassion, wisdom, joy, and so on.

"When you say ceaselessly, does it imply permanent?"

Let's say always available. But we'll come back to that question. You could say there are actually two different interpretations of this ceaselessly responsive. One is that it's always responding by knowing. I've heard some teachers put it this way—it's always responding by knowing, and that's ongoing.

The other way that I've heard it explained is when there's the recognition, then it responds with the beautiful qualities of love and compassion.

So this threefold makeup includes the clarity aspect, a cognizing aspect, and an empty aspect. The empty aspect is seen by the clarity aspect. These three aspects of emptiness, awareness, and responsiveness together make up what's called Buddha nature.

I want to talk a little bit about what that word means. This concept was not in the Buddha's teachings. It was not in the early Mahayana. It came in the later Mahayana from a school called the Yogacarans, who emerged about the 4th century of the modern era in India. Sometimes they're also called the Chittamatrans or mind-only school.

The Sanskrit word that's been translated as Buddha nature is actually Tathagata Garbha. Tathagata is the word the Buddha called himself—the thus come one, the one thus come. So it means a fully awakened being. Garbha means womb. So it doesn't exactly mean Buddha nature. It actually means womb of the Buddhas.

These three qualities of mind are the ground or the womb from which fully awakened beings come, or from which full awakening comes. But in the original Sanskrit, the sense is more of a potential than of a fixed or abiding quality. When it's called Buddha nature, it feels like it's something fixed here and now. When it's considered as a womb, then it's more of a potential.

So think of it as somewhere in between these two. It means that every human being has this seed or potential of Buddhahood within. And more than every human being, every sentient being has these qualities. The dogs and cats and turtles and birds and cows and worms all have this potential with these three parts.

Sometimes people say that because there's Buddha nature, it means that compassion is permanent or a fixed part of us. But I understand it rather as the potential being there, but it comes out when circumstances are appropriate. Even when someone is quite awakened, it's not necessarily the case that compassion is present in every mind moment.

If an awakened heart looks on suffering, then compassion emerges. If an awakened heart looks on joy, then sympathetic joy emerges. If an awakened heart isn't being stimulated, then perhaps it just rests in equanimity. So there are many different beautiful qualities that come out of this responsiveness. Compassion is one, and that potential is there for every one of us.

So, is this quality of mind permanent or impermanent? Let's go back a minute to consciousness. Consciousness or vijnana is the fifth of the aggregates. Is consciousness permanent or impermanent according to the Buddhist teachings? Impermanent, yes. All the aggregates are characterized by impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self. So this quality of consciousness comes and goes. I would say the same for awareness, the way I'm using it here today.

But when you look at this field, does it seem to come and go? When you look now, is awareness happening? And when you look now, is awareness happening? The knowing of the awareness isn't always happening because it depends on our turning our attention to it. But every time you look for it, is it there?

Is awareness internal or external? As the guided meditation highlighted, awareness is both inside and outside in one of its ways of being. So I understand it as being kind of beyond the qualities of internal or external.

And to what extent we share it—my understanding is that there is some individuation even within awareness or consciousness, so that there's a kind of individual consciousness, stream of consciousness within each being.

And of course they interpenetrate each other, but there's some separateness to the consciousness.

Tony raised a comment about this awareness being here now, dependent on this organism. If we didn't have the body and the five senses, we don't know what would happen to that awareness. This raises the question: is awareness coming and going? When we fall asleep, is it not active?

Let's hold that question in the background and see if this next piece will help resolve it. What I'm going to suggest—and this is just a model, a way of looking that I don't want to nail down—is that this agent called mind might be permanent, or let's say not subject to arising and ceasing. But the functioning of that agent through knowing objects comes and goes.

This is just one model. Some schools like this approach; some schools within Buddhism hate it. I'm simply presenting one possibility here. This thing we're calling mind may not be subject to arising and passing, but its activity—which is knowing individual things—is always coming and going. The suggestion that

there may be some degree of awareness through sleep, through anesthesia, through fainting, would be supported by this concept of mind being permanent.

And death? That's the big question, another profound inquiry.

Let's say at least for the span of a human lifetime, maybe this mind is not subject to arising and passing. But its activity as knowing is coming and going all the time. Then what happens at death?

First, there are different schools on this basic question. The core Theravadan schools that you might find influenced by the Abhidhamma and the Visuddhimagga—as you might find in Burma and Sri Lanka—would throw this concept out the window, rejecting anything like mind not subject to arising and passing. But other schools—many of the Mahayana schools, certainly the Yogacara, and to a certain extent Chan and Zen schools that have been influenced by Yogacara, including Dzogchen and Mahamudra—would go along with this view that this agent called mind is lasting.

At least—we'll just take it as permanent for the duration of this body, not subject to arising and ceasing.

In Theravadan Buddhism, there is one element that's not subject to arising and passing. What is that? The unconditioned nirvana. The suggestion in these other schools that hold mind as not subject to arising and ceasing is that mind and nirvana are synonymous. That's why this becomes such an interesting question.

What this says is that it's not awareness that's permanent. It's not consciousness that's permanent. Rather, it's the source of—or that behind, that which is doing the knowing—that may be permanent. Another way to say it is maybe nirvana has a quality of cognizance associated with it.

This is difficult to conceptualize, but let me give an example of how you might reconcile these two views. Consciousness is impermanent—we all agree on that. But maybe this source of consciousness is lasting.

Here's an image: Let's say you're on the outer edge of the solar system and you're looking away from the sun. Your back is to the sun. As you're looking out into space, what do you see? Let's say you're looking at an area where there are no stars, just for the sake of argument. What do you see?

Blackness.

Is it the black that's a color black, or is it the black that's an absence of light? It's a total absence of light, isn't it? But is there actually light in that space? Your back is to the sun. The area you're looking at is filled with sunlight, isn't it? It's pervaded by sunlight. So there's light but we don't see it—that could be considered the unborn at this point.

Now let's say from below a meteorite comes streaking through that space. Do you see it? Yes. There's a bright flash of light off that meteorite, which is the reflection of the sunlight off the object back to us. That's the born. That's an appearance. That's an arising in knowing. So in this example, mind is the sunlight filling empty space. Consciousness is that flash of light as the meteorite streaks through. As the

meteorite passes away, what happens to the image of it? Gone. Arise and pass.

This is just an image. Analogies aren't perfect, but it suggests a way that this agent called mind could be lasting, but the activity called consciousness could come and go.

This is the presentation from some schools, and one of the schools that follows this is the Thai forest tradition. You'll find this concept strongly in teachers like Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mahabua, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Buddhadasa. They all express this in different ways.

I have a nice quote from Ajahn Jemnian about this. Ajahn Jemnian is a Thai forest teacher who's been at Spirit Rock for a number of years. This is from a dialogue we had with him in 1997:

"Within this body, there are the six elements: earth, air, water, fire, space, and consciousness. The best way to develop a great awareness—and the word he used for great awareness was mahasati, great mindfulness—is to rest your attention within that knowing space of consciousness, in the pure space of knowing. If you understand and can rest in this pure knowing, that is the place of the deathless. From this pure consciousness that's unmoved by what arises, then you see the phenomena of the world which all have the nature to arise and pass away. Phenomena show their dharmas of impermanence, and this other is the dharma of the deathless."

So there's that sense that the knowing continues because it's the activity of what doesn't pass. All the phenomena come and go. When we rest in the knowing, then we touch that peace. We have that peace that is unchanging.

Yes, that's a good question. The question is, within this faculty of mind, there's another quality—which is a will or intention—that chooses which phenomena to notice. What is that faculty, or how does that work beyond conditioning?

Many of those choices of volition are strongly conditioned. Maybe all are strongly conditioned. But it's certainly a central quality of being a sentient being. It's a really key part of the path also, because it's through that quality of intention or volition we not only direct our attention, singling out what to attend to or be aware of, we direct our actions of body, speech, and mind. So that becomes the whole field of karma or volitional action.

I'll talk about that tomorrow night—what this whole field of karma is and how through practice and sustained attention that force of intentionality gets smoothed down somewhat, gets refined and gets developed out of more wisdom.

Yes, I mean, it's quite possible. The comment was that in that video where the gorilla appeared but some people didn't notice it, likely that information was fed into our brain and our neurology and was known at some level, but we just didn't tune into or perceive it.

And maybe, therefore, knowing is permanent.

I think I would say that it may be the activity of knowing is permanent, but what is known keeps changing. And so with each one, there's kind of a new moment of knowing, new moment of knowing, new moment of knowing. But the activity may be ongoing out of this unceasing, the unceasing nature of the agent or the mind.

Yeah, thank you.

Let me just finish up one piece and then we'll open it up for general questions.

So the question is then—some people like this model, some people really don't like this model. Whether you believe it or not, it can still be a skillful means in meditation. In other words, this guided meditation that we did this morning on the big mind can work whether or not you believe there's such a thing as Buddha nature, whether you believe there's any ongoing quality to mind.

And the way that you can use it, if that meditation is helpful, is basically to tune into the quality of awareness. And if you can see the awareness and the emptiness together—this spaciousness, this lack of fullness, the fact nothing's been there from the beginning—you kind of understand that everything that's arisen can or will pass away, then that's another avenue to this emptiness of self or freedom from clinging.

So one of the main things that happens for me when I turn back to look at awareness itself is clinging drops. If it's very strong, then it won't. But in a lot of cases, if the clinging is weak to medium, and I turn back and look, that drops the clinging. So it can be simply a skillful means to empty the self through releasing some kind of grasping or clinging. So please try it in that way if this appeals to you.

How could you do it as a meditation practice? At any point—there doesn't need to be clinging there first—at any point, you can do that turning toward awareness. And there are a few ways to do it. One is to kind of look back. You know when Ajahn Sumedho talked about not being able to see his eyes? What would it be to look at what is seeing? So you can ask, who is seeing? And that's kind of a way to get back to that sense of awareness.

Another way is this spaciousness that we talked about with the big mind meditation. Getting in touch with the big field of awareness. The space-like quality. Sometimes a word that works for people is simply "aware of awareness." That does that turning. Turning back. So explore some different ways, see what works for you.

And then if you want to practice with it as a practice, you can make that turning, kind of notice that empty, aware presence, and then just rest there. And as you rest there, as Ajahn Jimnian was describing, everything can come and go. But this place of knowing—as he said, is the place of the deathless. That's always available. Anytime you want to drop into that, that's there. So it has kind of an undying quality.

So in that place of rest, everything comes and goes, but you're not moved. You're not stirred by them.

Then, sooner or later, some kind of grasping will happen again. Some kind of configuration of self will come. When that happens, notice it. Sometimes just the noticing of it will release it and you're back into that emptiness. Other times that won't happen. In that case, turn the attention back to awareness again.

So develop a technique. This part of it is a technique of turning the attention to notice awareness. Once you've looked, then some seeing happens. This is the moment that's like the koan or the not knowing or the just looking. Then just rest there. You don't need to do anything from that place. But awareness still happens, knowing the things arising and passing.

So that's a sequence. Notice the awareness, the empty quality, rest there. If a formation of clinging or grasping or selfing happens, turn and look again and rest again. So that's a way to use this as a meditation technique.

Okay, so at this point we can open up if there are questions.

[Question from Sarah]

So I'm wondering if there's a next step. Because for me, the last few years has been about not just noticing awareness, but then going to "and who am I?" And then noticing that I am that awareness. So then I'm still sensing a duality in this approach here. And I'm curious if there's then, coming to "and who am I?" in that?

I mean, earlier, it's funny because earlier I was going to say, well, how about using the word mystery versus mind as the agent? And then you used the word nirvana. I was like, okay, that's closer for me. So for me, it's the mystery. And then what am I? I don't know.

That's been the exercise and the inquiry for me for the last ten years—who am I? And then realizing that. And I can go in and out of that, but coming back to the awareness still feels like duality versus, well, who am I? Oh, I am that. And then that eliminates the duality for me.

So the question or comment was about awareness introducing a duality. I guess I see it a little differently. I think that awareness and what it knows seem to always come together. There's always awareness and something being known together. Like we were talking about the bell—is it round or is it gold? It's got two aspects, but there's just one thing happening. So I don't see the intrinsic duality of awareness and phenomena. We can discriminate the two sides of that, but they come as a single experience. I guess that's the way I would express it.

So you see it as the same? You're saying that we're saying the same thing?

Well, I'm not sure that we're saying exactly the same thing, but regarding the duality—maybe you could say a little more about what duality you see in this description with awareness?

I guess I just see there's still a separation between this idea of me and then awareness. And so how does one reconcile that? And to reconcile it, I ask the question, who am I? And then that helps bring the... It's

like duality disappears. Boom. I actually am that awareness. I am the phenomenon that is there, that is resting in that, that creates everything too. Like, yeah, there's just all of a sudden no separation. Not that I live in that place 24-7 at all. But the inquiry for me goes to who am I versus going back to what is awareness. It feels like there's still like a millimeter of separation going on.

I guess I'd say from a Buddhist point of view, the "I"—if we say "I am awareness"—the "I" isn't actually necessary. There's awareness and there are phenomena, but we don't have to place the "I" either in the phenomena, which is what we usually do—this body is me, that car is mine—or in the awareness.

There's a tendency in doing this kind of practice to identify with the witness or the awareness. And we say, "Oh, now I realize I'm not the objects, but I'm the consciousness." But from the Buddha's teaching, that would just be identifying with another aggregate—identifying with the aggregate of consciousness rather than the individual objects that consciousness is illuminating.

And that's why in the Buddha's description of the aggregates, there's not a need to place an "I" anywhere. So we don't have to say that we're the objects.

We don't have to say we're the owner of the objects. We don't have to say we're the consciousness. We don't have to say we're the owner of the consciousness. It's just all these different factors of mind and materiality coming and going and interacting. So I would look at it from this perspective: Is the "I" a necessary piece of that equation? Perhaps it's not.

A participant asked about free will and volition: "Given that intention is conditioned and everything else is conditioned, how does that leave space for free will? I have heard in Buddhist talks that there is space for free will. How is that possible, even given that everything is conditioned?"

This is obviously a profound philosophical question that has persisted through the ages. The more one investigates this factor of volition, the more one sees its conditioned quality, which really starts to undermine one's belief in free will.

But if one goes in the other direction and says that everything is deterministic, the Buddha analyzed this position and noted that it leads to a lack of effort. We give up trying because there's an idea of fatalism—we feel we can't influence the stream of intention, and therefore of karma, and therefore of outcome. So that's not a useful view to hold either.

What I've found on the path is that it's useful to act as though there's choice. We discover that one of the factors that influences volition more and more is the factor of wisdom. As we understand how the path works, then that understanding starts to bear on the arising of volition and the discernment about which volitions to follow and which to drop. The practice works if we act as though we have that choice.

The growth in the factor of wisdom and the spaciousness of mind that comes from meditation gives us more of a feeling of choice, and then the path unfolds. So without being able to resolve totally the question

of free will or not, it's skillful to act as though there's choice.

Another participant observed that the very fact that we're talking about conditioning and developing the mind would suggest free will, which is what we're exploring in this retreat—conditioning the mind in wholesome ways, training it in wholesome directions.

A final question came about where Nagarjuna would stand on the idea of a permanent mind. I think he would toss it out completely. The one Mahayana school that doesn't tend to endorse this view are the Madhyamikas, who are followers of Nagarjuna. He was pretty relentless in his pursuit of emptiness.

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