Nature of Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:10

Sally talked two nights ago about the five aggregates and the fifth aggregate of consciousness, or in Pali, *vij nana*. This aggregate always raises a lot of questions because it's not like the others. Tonight I want to talk in more detail about this fifth aggregate of consciousness and its relationship to other words that we hear in Buddhist dialogue, such as awareness and mind.

There's a fundamental dilemma that has emerged from questions since Sally's talk. The Buddha described all five aggregates as impermanent, and yet when we look, it seems like this quality of consciousness is always there, as long as we're not asleep or knocked out. It seems like consciousness is always happening. So the fundamental dilemma is: is consciousness impermanent or is it permanent in some way?

This is an important question because in Buddhist understanding, there's only one Dhamma, only one thing that's not subject to the law of impermanence. Nirvana, *nibbana*, the unconditioned. There's only one element that's not subject to conditioned arising and passing. So if there's any truth in the supposition or the intuition that there's something in the nature of consciousness or awareness that is unchanging, that means it is related to the unconditioned, nirvana.

The reason this is important is that it's only the realization of nirvana that can completely free our hearts and minds from the fetters that bind us. This suggests that potentially exploring this quality of awareness could lead to some deep understanding or liberating understanding. I want to put that in as a motivation because otherwise this discussion could seem just intellectual and abstract. But in fact, maybe the whole future of your enlightenment is riding on it.

I want to make one disclaimer about this evening's talk. You probably know that after the Buddha became enlightened, he thought that maybe he wouldn't teach. The way he put it was, this Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand. And if I were to teach it and no one understood, that would be vexatious for me. I can't say that tonight's talk will necessarily be profound or subtle, but it may be hard to understand. So I'd encourage you to be in a very receptive mode for this talk and don't try to figure it out too hard. There will be some pointings and indicators to experience. Let yourself ride those pointers and don't worry too much about all the intellectual stuff.

In order to clarify this topic, we'll come at it from a few different angles. I first want to go in a little more detail into this question of consciousness that Sally introduced two nights ago, the fifth of the aggregates. She explained it as the knowing of objects at the six sense doors. This is the important thing to understand: it's the knowing of an object, of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or mental object. It's said that there are six types of consciousness, but we don't need to worry too much about that. Just knowing that it's

consciousness of phenomena will be enough.

The understanding is that consciousness, that knowing, arises with the object and passes with the object. And that's why it's considered impermanent.

Even in the Buddha's day, some of the *bhikkhus* had the idea that what he was pointing to was something permanent and something that would survive the death of the body and then go on to the next life. This *bh ikkhu* was walking around making this statement, basically that this consciousness is permanent and continues. The Buddha heard about it and said, "I want to talk to that *bhikkhu*. Send him up to see me."

So the *bhikkhu* came to see the Buddha, and the Buddha asked him if he was in fact saying that. The *bhikk hu* said, "Yeah, I said that." And the *bhikkhu* said, "As I understand the Dhamma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the rounds of rebirths, not another one." Basically, this is his way of saying it's permanent.

And this is the Buddha's reply: "Misguided man. Have you ever known me to teach the Dhamma in this way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness is dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness. But you, misguided man, have misrepresented us by your wrong grasp."

Then the Buddha goes on to explain that consciousness is dependently arisen because it depends on the meeting of a working sense organ and a sensory object. In other words, if the ear is working and a sound arises, then there is hearing consciousness. But if the sense organ wasn't working, if the sound did not arise, there would be no hearing consciousness.

So the Buddha explains that consciousness is dependently arisen, and therefore it also passes away. Does this make sense? This fundamental understanding from the suttas is unequivocal. If we were to say otherwise, the Buddha would call us "misguided man or woman." We cannot argue with this understanding of vijnana—this is orthodoxy, 2,500-year-old canonical orthodoxy.

Now I want to introduce another word: mindfulness. We've been talking about mindfulness extensively, describing it many times as the knowing of our experience in the present moment. When a sound happens, consciousness reveals the sound, but mindfulness recognizes "a rising phenomenon—sound," something like that. It knows hearing. These two are very different properties.

As long as you're awake, do you have any choice about being conscious or not? Can you turn your consciousness off? Can you say, "Let me not hear, let me not feel body sensations"? No. Consciousness, although dependently arisen, operates pretty much on automatic pilot.

Can you choose to be unmindful? Are there times when you are unmindful? Rather regrettably, yes. So mindfulness requires some intention or volition. It takes a little work for us to be mindful. Consciousness happens all on its own—the sound arises, we know it. But mindfulness takes effort to be present.

What about this word "awareness"? Where does that fit? Mindfulness and consciousness are central to the Buddhist teachings. Consciousness is the fifth of the five aggregates describing this mind-body operation. Mindfulness is a critical factor in the Eightfold Path—the Pali word is sati. But what about awareness? Does anybody know a Pali term for awareness?

There is none. The Buddha never used another word that we need to translate as "awareness." What has happened through the years of Buddhadharma being translated into English is that different people have used this word to mean different things. That's why it's confusing, especially in the context of the suttas, the original Pali teachings—there's no word that corresponds to it.

Carol has used it to mean mindfulness. This is how Sayadaw U Tejaniya uses it. He has a book titled "Awareness Alone is Not Enough," which you could just as well say "Mindfulness Alone is Not Enough." The implication is that what's needed is wisdom accompanying mindfulness or awareness. But other teachers might use it to mean consciousness.

I want to suggest there's a spectrum of meaning between mindfulness and consciousness, and awareness can be a slippery customer that slides between those two ends. It's a fascinating word in how it slides. On one hand, awareness connotes the spontaneous quality of consciousness. I could ask you, "Is there awareness present in your experience right now?" and you'd say, "Yeah, I'm aware—I'm receiving sense impressions." That would be synonymous with consciousness.

But awareness also has a connotation of some intelligence. "Were you aware of your intention before you said what you said?"

That's a phrase in which "awareness" is used like "mindful." Were you aware also means were you paying attention? Were you noticing? Were you really with it? There's a little bit of a wisdom factor there.

So awareness is this very convenient word that we can toss in to mean whatever we want it to mean—sometimes the automatic nature of consciousness, sometimes the choice-fed or volitional nature of mindfulness. So it's slippery, and when a teacher, especially in this hall, uses the word awareness, it's good to ask what they mean by it.

Now, in some other traditions, like certain Tibetan traditions, they use it more consistently and aligned with their Tibetan vocabulary and understanding. It may have a more precise meaning. But as we use it, it's a little bit floppy.

So tonight, I want to use awareness more or less synonymously with consciousness. For instance, let me just invite you into a meditative state. You don't have to close your eyes, but if this was a meditation instruction, think how this would feel: Allow your mind to become like a big empty sky, and notice that all the appearances simply come and go within the vast space of awareness.

Have you heard an instruction like this before? So here, awareness is being equated with this big space,

and things are just coming and going within it.

But I'm going to use awareness in a little bit different connotation than the word vijñāna or consciousness. I'm going to use consciousness for the knowing of an individual object—the arising of a sound, hearing consciousness; the passing of the sound, hearing consciousness passes. But I'm going to use awareness to mean this broad field in which many different things come and go. What's coming and going is all being known through consciousness, right? There are just lots of little individual acts of consciousness happening in that field of awareness.

So some people have come and said something like this: "Well, when I feel the sensations in my body, I know that's consciousness. But out here, there's just pure awareness and there's no object. There's just pure awareness. That must be the unconditioned—there's no object there."

So I want to take that away right now. There is an object there, and what's being known is physical space. Partly when you rest in this vast space of awareness, what is giving it that spacious feeling is physical space. When you hear a sound, it's at some distance from you, and that sense of distance is built on physical space. So when people are sensing that physical space, it feels like they're not knowing anything, but in fact, you're knowing physical space.

I want to say also that just as consciousness always has an object, the same is true for awareness, the way I'm using it. Awareness always has an object, so it doesn't exist on its own. Even though it's this vast field, we don't experience it empty of phenomena. We experience it with different kinds of phenomena, and of course they change, but there's always something being known. There is no such thing as awareness without something being known in our normal experience. There are altered states in which that can be revealed, but that's a different talk. For the purpose of exploring our normal experience, awareness always comes with things being known.

So we're going to explore a little bit the nature of this awareness, this human awareness that we have, and every sentient being has. To be a sentient being is to have awareness like this. As we look into this awareness, can you grab hold of it?

If I ask you to find your awareness... Can you kind of locate it and then show it to me? Not really. It's elusive. You know, just like this fifth aggregate, vijnana, is elusive. Awareness is elusive in the exact same way.

The reason is consciousness—we'll go back to consciousness for a minute because it's simpler. Consciousness is not an object. Consciousness is that which holds other objects. Anything we know as an object—a sight, a sound, a smell, a taste, touch, thought, emotion—is being held in consciousness. That's what an object is. It can be known by consciousness, but the consciousness can't grasp itself. So it's tricky to find. It's subtle.

Part of the understanding is that consciousness and the object arise together. And that's what I want to

suggest. When you hear a sound like this, there's only one experience happening. But that one experience which you are all having has two aspects. One is the sound and the other is your knowing of it. And it's really important to see that these are distinct aspects of the one experience.

So how can one thing have these two aspects? If you look at this circular bell, I could ask you, is it round or is it gold? It's indistinguishable, isn't it? There's only one object here, but you can look at it either in its roundness or you can look at it in its goldness. It's the same with any sense experience. You can look at it in its physical aspect of sound—that's in the first aggregate of rupa—or you can look at it in the fifth aggregate of vijnana, which is your knowing of it.

So awareness, the same thing. There's a thing being known and then there's this knowing that we do. So awareness is subtle. It's just consciousness—we're using them synonymously. It's hard to grasp because it's not an object, but we know it's there.

Ajahn Chah was talking about how this factor of awareness is hard to get a hold of. And he said, "It's like you're riding a horse and you're going, 'Where's the horse?'" Because we're aware all the time, aren't we? We know awareness is happening, but it's hard to find. So this is our situation.

Ajahn Sumedho, a disciple of Ajahn Chah, explained it this way. It's 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. But really, there's no 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 really weird, isn't he?" Looking in a mirror, you can see a reflection, but that's not your eyes. It's a reflection of your eyes. There's no way that I've been able to look and see my own eyes. But then it's not really necessary because there's knowing.

So in the same way, we can't quite grasp this factor of consciousness or awareness. But we know it's happening.

Wei Wu Wei was a British student of Zen who wrote in these pithy, mysterious, short epigraphs. And he put it this way: "What we are looking for is what is looking."

So it's tricky. It's tricky.

So I like to think of this factor of consciousness or awareness not as a thing but as an activity. Knowing is a verb, isn't it? So it's something that's happening. Consciousness is a happening. It's not a thing. It's a doing. It's a function. Something in us has the function of revealing or illuminating our experience. A sight goes by, consciousness reveals that. It reveals the world to us. It lights up, it illuminates all the events of our experience. So there's an activity that is the knowing.

So then the interesting question is, what's doing the knowing? Look. The activity is happening. Knowing is happening. Objects are being known. By what? If there's an activity, there must be an agent. What is doing

the knowing?

What I want to suggest is that consciousness comes and goes, so awareness of things comes and goes, but that which is knowing does not come and go. So in a way, we could say that there's a capacity for consciousness that is a dimension of our being, an integral part of our being. It's what makes us a sentient being. There's a capacity for consciousness. It's here.

And I'm going to suggest—there's just a view. I'm going to explain, there are different views. My view is that that capacity for consciousness does not come and go. That capacity for consciousness is unconditioned. This is just a view. I'm going to give you the opposition's view later. But this is our hypothesis. So it is some mysterious dimension within us whose functioning is revealing all the events of our six senses. And that is what is stable—that dimension, that faculty, whatever it is.

Now, I want to come back to experience and kind of practical matters for a minute. When I first asked that question, what is doing the knowing, did you feel any kind of shift inside? Did you feel a little shift in your experience? Because I felt a shift in the room. What was that shift? How would you describe it? What happened?

"Don't know." So this is one very common reaction. This is an important and honest reaction. I look for that thing that's doing the knowing. I don't know what it is.

"Yes, I'm not positing an I, but I am suggesting the possibility of a something. So you're right, I am positing something. It's not an I, and we'll get to that."

"When you said that, the sense that I had was that even though it was something that we were all experiencing, it wasn't personal."

Her comment was that when she turned in that direction, even though it was something we're all experiencing, it wasn't personal. Anybody else? Because there could be a number of things that happen in that moment of shift when you look in that direction.

The question is, am I referring to the citta? It's in that direction. Yes.

So did anybody feel stopping? A kind of stopping of thought or conceptualization? Anybody feel a widening? Anybody feel a heightening of interest? Sense of investigation?

From the point of view of skillful means in meditation practice, this kind of turning—whether there's something there or not, maybe I'm positing something that doesn't really have any reality—opens us up in new, interesting, and mysterious ways. It opens us to something that may be transpersonal, that brings a level of interest and stillness and openness. So as a meditation technique, it could be very useful.

On the metaphysical plane, I recognize there are questions or doubts about whether such a thing exists or not. That's a very fair question. So let me address this from the Buddhist tradition.

This question of whether such a thing is or not has been, in my opinion, the primary fault line in Buddhist philosophy for at least 2,000 years. There are many schools on one side who say, yes, there is something there. And there are many schools on the other side who say there is not something there.

In particular, orthodox Theravadans—strict followers of the Pali lineage, such as followers of the Visuddhimagga and most of the teachers in Burma—will answer the question, no. There's nothing real there. Later in the Mahayana, followers of Nagarjuna, who was a great philosopher in Buddhism around 100 AD, also say no. Nothing there.

But on the other side, if we want to have a football match, there's one team. The other team would be followers of a later Mahayana school called the Yogacara, whose descendants include Chan in China, Zen in Japan, Tibetan schools of Dzogchen and Mahamudra—basically the Nyingma and Kagyu lineages—as well as the Thai forest tradition. If you listen to teachings from Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadasa, Ajahn Mahabua, Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Amaro, you'll hear this referred to again and again.

So even in the Theravadan lineages, there are two different views on this. If you're worried about being politically correct, there is a weight of opinion, scholastic opinion on both sides. What that says to me is I can be a good Buddhist and view it either way. Both ways have their strengths and their weaknesses.

So I regard it as a skillful means. If you find this kind of looking and exploration helpful for your meditation practice, feel free to use it with the confidence that many thousands of practitioners have used this over thousands of years to come to awakening. If you feel that it is positing something unnecessary and you don't want to go there, take that view. Many thousands of practitioners over thousands of years have come to awakening following that view.

I wouldn't get too hung up on the philosophy because either one can take you to freedom. Rather see what suits your own temperament and supports your way of opening and exploring the way things are for you.

So, end of the philosophy.

I want to suggest that maybe what this thing is that knows—that's doing the knowing, the unchanging thing—might be something that we could call mind in a limited sense. This might be what we would call mind.

In this kind of terminology, normally in mind we would include things like feeling, perception, mental formations. I'm going to talk about those as the contents or the objects of mind. And I want to focus on this faculty that knows.

So for the purposes just of this talk, I'm going to call that which knows—this agent that's doing the knowing—mind. And then I want to explore a little bit what this thing we call mind might be like.

First of all, its nature is to know. That's what it does. That's its basic activity or role or function in existence.

But there's another quality that is equally important to this knowing. Do you remember when we did just that short meditation? We talked about the big empty space of awareness.

Take a look at this thing we're calling mind, that which knows the changing phenomena. Is there anything stuck in that entity? Is there anything fixed that has been there from beginningless time? Or is this mind of the nature to allow anything and everything to come and go and pass through it?

Can this mind allow any and all changing phenomena to come and go?

So in that sense, I would say in itself, it's empty. It doesn't have anything that's crowding it up or taking up space, because everything that appears within it is of the nature of arising and passing. So we say its essence is emptiness. In this vast space of mind, nothing is fixed. It's originally, or by essence, empty.

There's another way to arrive at this understanding of emptiness. When you looked for mind—that which knows—could you find it? Could you come up with anything substantial? Something with a personality, red hair, located in one corner of the ceiling? Could you locate it anywhere? No.

This not-finding is actually significant. This is from a Tibetan master named Shabkar, who lived in the 1700s, perhaps the 1800s:

"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. There's no trace of its having been there."

This unfindability—its not being an object—also points to its emptiness. It doesn't have substantial form.

When we consider this thing we're calling mind, these two factors always go together and can't be separated: the emptiness and the awareness. It's always empty, but it's always revealing things. This is the nature of our mind—this union of emptiness and awareness.

Ajahn Buddhadasa from the Thai forest tradition said, "We really should call this mind 'emptiness,' but because of its awareness, we call it 'mind.'" I hope you can see how these two qualities are inseparably together.

Now, how can we make this a meditation practice? This turning to look at what's doing the knowing can become a meditation practice for us. How can we use it practically?

The basic approach is working with what we've got, which is awareness itself. Normally, awareness is directed outward. In daily life, we're constantly keeping an eye on people, places, things, even our own body—which can seem outward in this sense—thoughts, emotions, all the phenomena arising around us. So awareness habitually flows outward.

What would happen if we took that awareness and turned it back on itself? What if we suggested to

ourselves to become aware of awareness itself? Instead of turning out, we would turn in. What would you find? Do you get any kind of shift?

It's subtle. It's like an eye trying to see itself—you realize you're not going to be able to find it exactly. But the exercise of turning, just like asking "what's doing the knowing," might create a shift. That's something to explore experientially.

Meditation. Again, you don't have to close your eyes, but let your awareness become broad and expansive. Within that space, everything arises and passes. Put your attention on that vast space of awareness.

Does that make a shift? What happens when you feel that shift? A thrill? A sense of expansion, moving out? As you feel more spaciousness, what happens to the sense of grasping? Does it sometimes fall away?

Grasping is basically a contraction into smallness. You can feel it as a constriction in the body, accompanied by thoughts of "I." When we move to this more expansive awareness, sometimes that grasping just relaxes.

One of the things this shift accomplishes is taking our attention away from objects and placing it in the knowing itself. This can be a skillful means for releasing any holdings—a doorway to dropping clinging or grasping.

Normally our attention fixates on objects, and we often relate to them through clinging or grasping, creating a constriction of the small self. When we move our attention to the vastness of awareness, we take the emphasis off that fixation. In moving away from the fixation on objects, the grasping can release.

I want to share another comment from Ajahn Chah about this emptiness: "The roof is a becoming. The floor is a becoming. But in the empty space between the roof and the floor, there's nowhere to stand. When there is no becoming, that's where there's emptiness. And to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness."

The suggestion is that as you connect with the emptiness of mind, you're connecting with something unconditioned or undying. One way to understand it as undying is that it's always available—always there when you turn to it. This space is not subject to coming and going. It's deathless.

Now I want to make one more philosophical gesture. We have the Theravadan view from the suttas that says consciousness is strictly coming and going. We have the view from other traditions that says this bigger thing called mind may not be subject to coming and going. Can we reconcile these two? Is it possible to have a foot in each camp and validate both views? That's where I personally stand, and I want to share my way of understanding it.

To do this, I'd like you to join me in a thought experiment. In physics—I majored in physics in college—we were taught that we could prove things in three ways: mathematical proof, experimental proof, or thought proof, called a gedanken experiment. If the gedanken experiment was logical and well thought out, we

could establish things.

So in this experiment, imagine you're standing on the edge of the solar system with your back to the sun. We won't worry about spacesuits and vacuums—that's taken care of through new technology. You're looking away from the sun, out into space, into a part of the sky where there are no stars. The sun is at your back, you're looking into a starless portion of sky.

What do you see? Nothing.

What color? Yes, it's just black, isn't it? The black of the night sky where there aren't any stars. So you're looking out away from the sun, totally black.

Is there light there? Right. There is light, isn't there? Because our back's to the sun. So the sunlight is actually pervading that empty space. But we don't see it. It's full of light, but we don't see it.

So as you're looking into that blackness, which is pervaded by sunlight, let's say a meteor flashes up in front of your eyes. Do you see it? Yes, because the light gets reflected off an object back into our eyes. Then the meteor goes away. Any more light? You don't see it, do you?

So the light only gets reflected back if there's an object that does the reflecting.

I want to suggest that this sunlight pervading empty space is the cognizant or aware nature of mind. And the flash of light that comes when the object appears—the meteor—is the impermanent flashing of consciousness. The impermanent flashing of consciousness couldn't happen unless the steady sunlight, which was always there, was in place.

So that sunlight pervading empty space is what I'm calling the illuminating power of mind. But the temporary flash that comes and then goes is this impermanent factor of consciousness that only knows because an object is present for a brief period and then passes away.

Ajahn Jumnian, who's another Thai forest teacher, said that because of this relationship, consciousness has both conditioned and unconditioned aspects. Can you kind of get that feel? It couldn't happen without the light that's always there. But nothing gets revealed until there's a condition for it to be reflected back.

So the source of consciousness is ever-present, but it can't function without an object. So that's the way I hold it. Both traditions can be right in their own way and make sense in their own way.

For us as meditators, then the interesting question comes to be: if this skillful means connects for us, how can we access it? Tomorrow morning, I'll lead a longer meditation that's on this theme of turning the mind to the awareness. But I'd also suggest that you can play with it in a few other ways.

For some people, this notion of taking the awareness which is normally out and turning it back on itself can be very evocative. You can even think of a hand gesture that does that turning for you.

I don't know if any of you have heard of a British writer named Douglas Harding. Harding was a follower of Ramana Maharshi and was in India contemplating the question, "What am I?" or "Who am I?"—a question that Ramana Maharshi, a Vedanta teacher, used a lot. And he'd been contemplating this question for months. This is another question that kind of turns in that direction.

One day he was hiking in the Himalayas. Because he'd been asking this for so long, the inquiry was just kind of going on. All of a sudden, his mind stopped. The thought activity stopped. And he came to this place of deep peacefulness.

Then he said what he did was he looked down. And he saw, of course, his body. He saw his two trouser legs disappearing into his shoes. He saw his two sleeves disappearing into his arms. And then he tried to find what was above that. He looked and he realized, "I have no head."

He said where he was expecting to find a head, he only found the vast space of the world, completely full of mountains and trees and rivers and snow. And that was the title of his most famous book: *On Having No Head.*

So again, this image—you look at the body and you get up here, you look back, and it just opens into the world: the vast empty space of knowing.

Another way that is helpful for some people to go in—maybe you're in the middle of a thought and you ask the question, "Who's thinking?" You're in the middle of feeling some emotion and you ask, "Who's sad?" And that also can kind of light up that empty space. So we'll talk about that a little more tomorrow morning.

I want to close today with a couple of quotations—one poem and a quotation from the Buddha. A lot of the maturing of dharma practice is coming to integrate this understanding of our nature as being empty and aware with the understanding that we're a human being in a separate body and responsible for our actions. We need to be able to see from both ways: to see the emptiness and then to see the responsibility of a human individual.

This is Rumi's discussion of that integration:

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

And then I'll close with a quotation from the Buddha on the nature of the unconditioned:

One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no desire. There being no desire, there is no coming or going. There

being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here, nor a there, nor an in-between. This, just this, is the end of suffering.

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

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