Nature of Awareness, Part 2

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:07

This evening I want to continue the talk on the nature of awareness that we started last night.

But before I get into the content, I just want to mention something about today. You may have noticed some orange-robed gentlemen wandering around the place this afternoon. We had a visit from three monks. We were visiting with them over at Joseph's house for a little bit, and then they took a tour of the Forest Refuge. The senior monk was Ajahn Sumedho. He's been staying at a branch monastery in New Hampshire that's a little over an hour away, and he thought that as long as he's in the neighborhood, he'd like to come by and visit with Joseph. So Joseph invited Sally and me to join them.

Sally and I have had a relationship with Ajahn Sumedho for a long time. I first met him when he came to IMS in around 1978 or 1979. Then when we were living in England, we had the chance to meet with him and we practiced with him on different retreats. He's been an important teacher for both of us. So it was just lovely today to be able to visit and then show him a little bit of this facility. Sorry if any of the talking and visiting disturbed your silence, but he's a very venerable and esteemed teacher. He's one of the few people that I regard as a Western master. I definitely put him in that category. His teachings are highly recommended—books and many talks on the website that are wonderful to listen to. He talks a lot about the quality of awareness. I think his most recent book was called Intuitive Awareness.

It was interesting chatting and getting him to talk about some of his early years of practice. It was not this nice in the early years. He was the first Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, practicing at Wat Ba Pong before Ajahn Chah became famous and before it was very well known or well supported. The food was very simple, the accommodations were rough. He talked about Ajahn Chah giving five-hour dharma talks in the evening, and he would have to sit quietly, basically on a concrete floor covered by a thin mat, through the five hours of the dharma talk.

Then he decided to take a more ascetic route for a while. That was not quite challenge enough. So he asked Ajahn Chah if he could go practice at this remote mountain facility. It was a beautiful spot, but it was way off the beaten track—way out in the country on top of a mountain. There was a little hut, and you had to walk a couple of miles off the road and then ascend on ladders at times up to the top of the mountain. It was beautiful, natural, unspoiled.

He stayed there for about six months practicing. Of course, there was not a teacher there who spoke any English, so he was really on his own. The food, he described using the word "coarse"—I would take that as an understatement. Insects were a staple part of the diet in that part of rural Thailand at the time. There probably wasn't a lot besides rice that was offered to him.

While he was there, he got very ill. He came down with malaria. Malaria, if you haven't heard it described, is a really awful disease with fever and shaking—you feel really terrible. So he got malaria, and of course, way out in the rural mountains, there was no doctor around. He was just struggling through this malaria with coarse food and, he said, swarming flies that would fly into his nose and ears all day long. He was almost too tired and weak to bat them away.

Finally, he was taken down the mountain. He couldn't get down the mountain on his own. He was carried by two men, probably from the village nearby, and they were going to arrange for him to get to a doctor. But meanwhile, while he was waiting, this voice came to him and it said, "Practice anapanasati." So even in his weak condition, he sat up and began paying attention to the breath at the nose, focused all the energy he could, all the attention he could, on that experience. He said in a week he was cured.

He then lived with Ajahn Chah for another few years in Thailand before coming to the West to establish Amaravati Monastery and now many branch monasteries here. So it was wonderful to see him.

He was reflecting that even though the early years of his practice were very difficult, he doesn't remember the pain of it now. But what he's really grateful for is how he's transformed his heart and mind. And now he lives with this great cheerfulness, happiness, contentment from his deep dharma insight. So I find that a really inspiring reminder.

Your time here will go through ups and downs and it will be challenging and it will be difficult at times emotionally and physically. And years later you won't remember that part. You'll be so grateful for all the openness that you've brought into your mind as a result of your dedication to practice. So it was wonderful to see him, a real uplift for our day.

The Nature of Awareness

So, the nature of awareness. We had gotten to the point in the talk last night where we were talking about the mind's nature as having these three aspects: The essence is emptiness. The function is awareness or cognizance. And its capacity, its potential, is responsiveness. That is, when it rests, it has the potential to bring out these beautiful qualities—love, wisdom, patience, equanimity, compassion, and so forth.

In the whole tradition of Buddhism, and this came several hundred years after the death of the Buddha, these combinations were first outlined by a later Buddhist school in India known as the Yogacara school. And this combination of the three qualities—emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness—as defining or describing the nature of mind came to be known as Buddha nature.

So you may have heard this term, Buddha nature. This is what it means. It means the nature of our mind is composed of emptiness, cognizance, and responsiveness.

Now, I think Buddha nature is not the best translation of the earlier Sanskrit term. The earlier term is *Tath agatagarbha*. *Tathagata*, you may know, is one of the names—it's the name the Buddha usually used to

refer to himself. It's a Pali word also. And *garbha* means womb in Sanskrit. So *Tathagatagarbha* literally means the womb of the Buddhas.

So this nature that we all have is the womb from which awakening comes. And that is to say that each of us has this nature as the seed of awakening within us. Every human being has this as our potential—this nature. So I like thinking of it as a womb because that shows it as a potential, whereas when you call it Buddha nature, it sounds like it's an existent thing within us. It's our potential in this nature of mind.

So the question is, did the Buddha talk about this in the Pali discourses? In his time, did he talk about these qualities? And I have to say, not exactly. But there are some hints that kind of lean in this direction.

Let's take a look at a couple. "This mind, O bhikkhus, is radiant, but it is obscured by visiting defilements. The untaught ordinary person does not understand this as it really is, so for them there is no development of mind. This mind, oh bhikkhus, is radiant and it is freed from visiting defilements. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is, so for them there is development of mind."

So the Buddha is pointing to the radiance of the mind, which is a synonym for the luminosity, clarity, cognizance that we talked about last night. So here's a pointing to the luminosity of mind, similar to this later description.

And then one that I find even more suggestive is where someone has come to the Buddha who's not a follower, but he's asking what to him is an important question. He says, "Where are the four elements destroyed?" meaning the physical world, the physical world composed of the four elements, where are they destroyed?

And the Buddha says, that's not the right question, because that implies kind of getting rid of existence. The Buddha says the right question is, where do they find no footing? Which is a way of saying, where are they not made solid and substantial? Where can they not land?

So he rephrases the question and then he answers it. He rephrases it: Where do earth, water, fire, and air, the four elements, find no footing? Where are name and form completely destroyed?

So this question has been debated in Buddhist circles for about fifteen hundred years. We're probably not going to resolve it tonight. But I think it's interesting to consider the possibility of something about this field being ongoing.

This is where we get into different ways of interpreting the Buddha's teaching. In the Pali tradition, everything conditioned is impermanent - that's absolutely clear. But this field of awareness we're pointing to might not be conditioned in the same way that objects of awareness are conditioned.

When you rest in this open awareness, does it feel like it's being manufactured moment by moment? Or does it feel more like you're discovering something that's already here, that's been here all along? Like when clouds part and reveal the sky - the sky wasn't created by the parting of the clouds. The sky was

already there.

This is one way to think about this question. Some schools of Buddhism would say this awareness-nature is indeed permanent, not in the sense of being a thing that lasts forever, but in the sense of being the unchanging ground in which all changing appears. Other schools would say no, everything without exception is impermanent, including this field of awareness.

What's beautiful is that for our practice, this philosophical question doesn't need to be resolved. Whether this awareness is permanent or impermanent, what matters is learning to rest in it, to recognize it, to let it be our home base. What matters is discovering that in this field, the grasping mind relaxes. In this field, objects arise and pass away without getting a foothold.

The practical instruction remains the same: get familiar with this dimension of your experience that is like space - open, cognizant, responsive. Learn to trust it. Learn to rest in it. Let it teach you what it wants to teach you about the nature of mind, the nature of suffering, the nature of freedom.

I don't know if you remember from last night's talk, when I asked: sensations are being known—but known by what? In other words, is there something behind consciousness that's doing the knowing? We decided to explore that and call it mind.

What we're suggesting here—what the later tradition suggests, not the Pali discourses—is that this thing called mind, which is Buddha nature, is not subject to arising and passing, but is in some way always there.

So the question becomes: is awareness part of the unconditioned? Is it related to Nibbana? Is this thing called mind synonymous with Nibbana? Or another way to ask it: does Nibbana have an aspect of knowing as part of it?

There are different views on this question. Some schools say yes. Other schools say no, that's delusion—that's fake news. And because the Buddha never said it explicitly, there are grounds for saying no, it's not like that. But if you look at your own experience, you might feel there's something ongoing that you could say is the source of this awareness.

Different schools have different views on this, and we don't have to settle it tonight. But I want to suggest a way we could see it that reconciles these two perspectives.

Many of you are familiar with this. We're going to do a little thought experiment where we go out to the edge of our solar system. So we're out in space. We have a space suit, we can breathe. Our back is to the sun, but we're on the edge, so we're not seeing other planets. We're looking just out into space. And let's say, for the sake of argument—we can make this up—we're looking into a part of the sky where there aren't any stars. The sun is behind us, we're looking out into space. No stars.

What do you see? It's dark, isn't it? It's just blackness out there.

So is it the black that comes from a black crayon or black spray paint? Or is it the black that's the absence of light? Just the absence of light, isn't it? No light coming to our eyes because we're looking at a part of the sky, of space, that doesn't have any stars. So we don't see any light.

But is there light there? Your back's to the sun. You're on the edge of the solar system. Is there light in front of you? Yes. The sun's light is pervading. Your shadow is negligible. The sun's light is pervading that space, but we don't see it.

Now, imagine that a meteor shoots by in front of you, comes up from below, whizzes by. Do you see it? You do, don't you? Because the sunlight reflects off it back to your eyes. But then it's gone.

So this is an analogy for what may be happening with something that's ongoing and something that's impermanent. The analogy is this: the sunlight pervading empty space is the radiance of Buddha nature, of the nature of mind. It's always there. It's not really subject to arising and passing. Sunlight is always there.

When the meteor flashes by and there's light reflected to our eyes just for a moment, that's the illumination of a sense object that is impermanent. So that's the analogy for consciousness. Sunlight pervading empty space.

Buddha nature, ongoing, not subject to impermanence. The flash of light that comes off the meteor, comes and goes—that is consciousness that knows that particular object so briefly.

One of the things I find interesting about this analogy is that it can reconcile the two views: something ongoing in the nature of mind, and something impermanent in the flash of consciousness. The other thing I find interesting is that it's the same light in both cases. One is reflected and momentary, the other is pervading and ongoing. It's the same luminosity, or you could say cognizance. So in a way, it's saying that we're holding that light all the time, but the only way we see it is when it reflects off a sense object. The knowing of a sense object is what brings it home to us.

So this analogy suggests that the cognizance and the emptiness and the responsiveness that are part of the nature of mind are ongoing. And you could almost say that the light pervading empty space is the unborn, because it doesn't have any shape. It doesn't have any color. We don't notice it. But as soon as it illuminates something, it then shows up—shape and color.

Suzuki Roshi in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* has this very nice line. He says, "It is necessary for us to believe in something that has no form or color, but is always ready to take on form and color. This is Buddha nature." It itself, we can't find form and color, but it's always ready to take on form and color.

And this connection with the unborn is very interesting. There's a beautiful quotation in the Udana about the unborn that goes like this: "There is this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned. If there were not this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned, there would be no escape from what is born,

become, produced, conditioned. But because there is this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned, an escape can be seen from what is born, become, produced, and conditioned."

So the unborn is pointing to the deathless. What isn't born doesn't die. This is a synonym for nibbana. That which is unborn and unconditioned provides the escape from what is born and conditioned, the relief from the field of suffering.

Not only is this found in the later Buddhist schools from India, but it's also found within the Thai forest tradition. We can look at a quotation from Ajahn Jumnian, a Thai forest teacher who's still alive. He says, "The best way to develop a great awareness"—and the actual term he used 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."

I like that he says the pure space of knowing, because that's one of the things we talked about regarding awareness—its purity. It's not affected by the kilesas. It doesn't mind the kilesas. It doesn't acquire them. They don't stain it. Consciousness has a purity when we can tune into it and recognize it. And then it's not giving rise to birth and death. That's why it's a place of the deathless. Phenomena come and go. This other is the dharma of the deathless.

Even more explicitly, there's this quotation from Ajahn Mahabua, another great Thai forest master who died a few years ago. In his book *Straight from the Heart*, he gives an account of his meditation experience leading up to basically a declaration of his arahantship. This is very interesting and very rare because mostly monks don't describe their arahantship. And he doesn't call it that, but if you read the account of his meditations, you know that's what's going on in his estimation.

He says: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics—impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self—the true nature of the mind doesn't fall under these laws."

The natural power of the mind itself is that it knows and does not die. This deathlessness is something that lies beyond disintegration. This is very interesting. Personally, I find this inspiring because it suggests that as we connect with consciousness, as we connect with awareness, we're linking back to this thing that is undying—that is the deathless, that is the avenue to liberation. So you might start to get a sense for that as you practice.

I don't know if you have read Joseph's book called One Dharma, but he became very intensely occupied with this question of which view is right when he first started being exposed to the view that the nature of mind may be undying. Because all his training in the Burmese tradition was there's nothing beyond

consciousness—it's all impermanent and that's it. And so he was really wrestling with this dilemma for a while in his practice and it became, it had him in its grip. And he explains how he sort of resolved it in his own understanding as understanding that both of these views were skillful means. And he could use the view without coming to a solid belief about which one was right. And that was his way through.

And we can do the same. We can use the meditation practice of awareness with the sense of its inclining to the deathless, without having to take a position, a final position, on the metaphysics of it. So I was sitting in a retreat one time with Ajahn Sumedho, and he talks a lot about awareness and its connection to the deathless. He's kind of in that Thai forest camp. And so I went in for an interview with him, and I've gone through the same questioning, and I said, "Ajahn, there's this one view that awareness really partakes of the deathless, which you find in the Thai forest. And there's this other view that it's all impermanent. There's nothing else besides the impermanence of the five aggregates. How did you reconcile those two in your own practice?"

And he said, "Oh, I never worried about that." He said, "This practice worked for me." So we can do that too. We can not worry about it. Use the practices, see what suits you, and you don't have to take a metaphysical stand. I don't think metaphysics liberates anyone. But your own practice from a place of trust.

Another thing that Ajahn Sumedho said, which I thought was interesting, he said, "Western yogis don't trust themselves enough. They need to trust their own experience." This is really true in the practice of awareness because sometimes there are not such clear signposts along the way. You have to trust what's evolving for you, especially in this area.

One of the things you can really trust in is the sense of freedom that comes when you open to this empty awareness. As you connect with it, as you recognize it, as you learn to rest within it, there is a growing sense of freedom that comes. That is really trustworthy. Whether you think it's connected to nibbana or not is up to you. I find it inspiring, but you don't have to feel that. But the freedom is the key point. The way it releases us from entanglement with objects and takes us out of some suffering—that is real.

And it's a little bit like, I don't know if you've ever been in a neighborhood that had a bread factory, but it smells great. You know, you get near the bread factory and you get that fresh bread baking aroma, and you just kind of want to follow the smell to see where the factory is because it gets stronger and stronger. This sense of freedom that comes from empty awareness is like the aroma from a bread factory. Just follow that scent and the freedom continues to grow. That is really trustworthy.

So we talked this morning about specific ways to access this freedom—empty knowing. And I just wanted to talk about a couple of other practice specifics tonight. One is this practice can look a lot like the choiceless attention that we practiced in the instructions from Mahasi Sayadaw. In choiceless attention, we open the mind in a wide way and we notice each arising at different sense doors. We can notice an in-breath and we note it. We can notice a sensation and we note it. We can notice a sound and we note

that. We can notice a mood, we note that.

We can notice a thought and we note that.

So the mind is very open and it's connecting at all six sense doors, one after another. Similarly, when we're practicing awareness, we're very open and we notice things. Is this the same practice as choiceless attention? No.

In choiceless attention, we are still mostly interested in the objects. So when an object arises—let's say a sound—we connect the attention there, and that's the quality of vitaka. We connect the attention there and we sustain it. We rub it long enough to really know the nature of that sound. And then we'll recognize it as a bird or a door or a footstep or whatever. But rubbing the sound is what that practice is about.

As we rub it, we know its individual characteristics. We also know its universal characteristics, which are that it's impermanent, it's unsatisfactory, and it's not self. That's why we rub it. We want to get to know the object clearly and closely. So there's vitaka, connecting, and then there's vicara, sustaining or rubbing, just long enough to know each object when it arises. This is the practice of choiceless attention.

In the practice of awareness of awareness, we will still notice objects arising. We don't take the step of connecting and sustaining. We let them arise and then just let them go. We don't direct the attention there to land, connect and rub. We keep the attention on the broad field of awareness. And that's when it feels like things are just kind of coming up, touching a wall, and falling down. Coming up, touching a wall, and falling down. And that's one way that we keep from getting entangled with those objects, with those sense phenomena.

Another question that came up in the hall about awareness practice is basically, how do you know if you're doing it right? And this is kind of the nub of the matter. It's hard to know in the beginning because it's not so clear. And this is where it's really helpful to take one of those techniques for connecting with awareness: turning the mind back, asking who is looking, making the statement "aware of awareness," or simply the question, "Am I aware?"

Take what you get and then trust in that. We have to trust in something here. Trust in that and see where it goes.

Now as you start to rest in that, one of the ways to check if it's authentic is: are you still aware of impermanence? In other words, with the open awareness, are you still knowing objects arising and passing? You don't connect and sustain to them, but is that within your field of experience? Because you could get in this open space and kind of go into trance, where the senses are shut down and you're sort of wrapped up and cut off.

But in the openness, you should still be knowing things coming and going. So if that's true—feels wide, expansive, somewhat settled, but you know things are coming and going—that's a good sign.

So we talked this morning about adding emptiness to the seeing. You want to see awareness, and you also want to see emptiness. And then to see that they're joined—they're not two things, but they're one thing merged or indivisible.

So at first, I think I mentioned, I had to reflect a lot on the emptiness piece. The awareness piece was pretty clear. I was knowing things. I was aware. The emptiness piece was a little harder to find. But it's worth investigating so that you can get some confidence. Because eventually you want to look and see emptiness and awareness with one glance.

So at first you put these techniques in and it takes a few seconds. You say, "Am I aware?" or "aware of awareness" or turning back to awareness—it takes a few seconds. But as you get more skilled in it, it's very immediate. You just have the intention to see it.

And it comes, the emptiness and awareness together. So that's where you want to be aiming your practice—to see the emptiness and the awareness with a glance.

If the emptiness is ripe, mature, and full, there won't be a self in it. That means there won't be grasping—there won't be big grasping in it. This openness reveals the absence of a center that's pulled together by contraction. So when there's opening to emptiness and awareness, it should feel spacious and not contracted. This means there's no selfing, no grasping. It means the kilesas aren't there—greed, aversion, and delusion are absent. Therefore, the mind is getting purified. As you rest in that place, it's getting purified.

When you can rest in empty awareness, the beautiful qualities of the heart come forth as responsiveness.

This brings up a question: Do all beings have empty awareness? This Buddha nature exists in all beings—the emptiness, the cognizance, the capacity for responsiveness. Are all beings manifesting beautiful qualities of heart and mind all the time? No. But as practitioners, you are developing this skill.

In this approach, what makes the difference? All beings have empty awareness. What creates the distinction? Yogis recognize it, and uninstructed worldlings don't. You recognize it as the nature of your own mind. Those who haven't been instructed don't. That's what makes the difference. That's what opens the door to responsiveness.

It's said that there is one nature for beings but two paths. One path simply acts out one's habits of mind and karmic patterns because there is not clear seeing. The other path recognizes the nature of mind and unlocks the door to all the beautiful qualities of heart and mind. This is what leads us out of suffering and into freedom.

So it's all about this recognition—recognizing awareness first, and then the union of emptiness and awareness. That's what unlocks the door.

When we went through the techniques this morning, we talked about turning to awareness and

recognizing it. Start to add in there: recognize the empty awareness. See emptiness and awareness together, and then rest.

The fourth step is release. As you're resting, you don't need to try to make it stay longer. You don't need to try to prolong it. If you did, that would be a form of desire. What we're trusting in this practice approach is the purification of heart and mind that comes from resting in the nature of mind. We're trusting the nature of mind to do the work.

Our only work is to turn and recognize it. We can't even say that we do the recognizing—we turn, and recognition either happens or it doesn't. All we can do is turn. But as we become more familiar with it, recognition happens more and more often.

Once you've recognized, just rest. You let go of effort, let go of trying, let go of doing. Just rest. In that, you're trusting this pure nature to do the work of the path for you, on you.

It used to be, when I was starting out, I would say to myself, "Okay, I'll rest and I'll stay there as long as I can." But then I realized that wasn't the right way to say it. I changed it to "I will stay as long as it stays"—because it's up to the thing and not up to me.

So don't make this attempt to escape from phenomena, but rather recognize that awareness is the space in which phenomena appear. The sounds, the sensations, the thoughts—they're all arising within awareness itself. You're not trying to get away from them; you're recognizing the open space that holds them all.

Another near relative that can arise is making awareness into an object of concentration. This happens when you focus on awareness as if it were a thing you could grasp or hold onto. But awareness isn't an object—it's the knowing itself. It's not something you concentrate on; it's what you rest as. This is a subtle but important distinction.

Sometimes you might find yourself in a very peaceful state, and you think, "Ah, this must be it." But if you're holding onto that peaceful state, trying to maintain it or make it last, then you've moved away from the effortless resting we're pointing to. The peace is lovely, but don't make it into another project for the mind.

Another thing that can happen is what I call "awareness as a mood." You create a particular feeling or atmosphere and think that's the recognition. But the nature of awareness isn't a mood or a feeling—it's what's aware of all moods and feelings. It's more fundamental than any particular state.

And sometimes there can be a subtle sense of "I am aware" or "I am the awareness." But even that "I am" is still a thought arising in awareness. The recognition we're pointing to is prior to any sense of self, even a spiritual sense of self. It's the pure knowing before the "I" claims it.

So as you continue to practice, keep refining. Keep letting go of anything that feels like effort or doing. Keep returning to that simple recognition and rest. Trust that this pure nature of mind knows how to

reveal itself when you get out of the way.

The beauty of this practice is its simplicity. We're not trying to create anything or achieve anything. We're simply recognizing what's already here, what's always been here. And in that recognition, we rest. That's the whole practice.

And that's really awareness. That's a kind of attempt to dissociate, to disconnect from phenomena.

So that's why it's important to see that when you're resting in awareness, you're still noticing objects. You notice them coming and going. So you're not separate. Awareness and objects are always there together. Consciousness comes with objects. Awareness is the field of consciousness. So they come together.

But then the question comes up: okay, I feel my awareness out here. What object am I aware of? Space. Sometimes we're aware of physical space. That's the object that's being met with awareness. So awareness always comes with objects until some altered state happens. There are altered states where that changes, but ninety-nine point nine percent of the time, awareness comes with objects.

Another way that sometimes people misunderstand the practice is they say, "Oh yeah, I'm doing that practice that you talk about, but I'm just being. I'm doing the practice of just being. That's what you're talking about, right?" No. Dogs and cats and babies are really good at just being. But in dogs and cats and babies, the recognition of empty awareness is not happening. The light of mindfulness is not turned on. The light of wisdom is not turned on.

So there's more going on here than just being. The key is the awareness. The awareness is smart. The wisdom comes in through the cognizance, through the awareness. And that's really what we're growing. So just being doesn't really do it either in mindfulness practice or in awareness practice.

And then one other thing that comes in is exactly what was mentioned in a question this morning about feeling that there's a center to the awareness which is in the head. This is a really common experience that probably all of us have or have had. And it's just our conditioning coming through that we identify with—basically we identify with consciousness and construct a sense of "I am the observer." And that "I" tends to get located in the center of the head.

So it's very deeply conditioned. It's a rare moment, I think, when that isn't present to some extent. But as meditation deepens, as wisdom deepens, as we explore that sense, as we look at locating the center in other places, we realize that it's just a construction. And there can be moments when we're free of it.

One thing that can be interesting to try in playing with this—don't get the sense that you're wrong if you have a sense of an observer. It's just part of the karmic conditioning playing out the same way we still have greed, aversion, delusion, the same way we still have hope and fear. It's not a huge deal. As meditation deepens, it can change.

But if you want to play with it, one of the things you can do is take the awareness, wherever it's being

directed, and turn it toward the observer. And just ask, "Oh, who's looking?" And then you'll see if there's anything there or not. Perhaps.

In the last minutes I want to talk a little bit about integrating the practice we're doing now—the awareness practice—with our earlier practices of breath and metta, or any other practices you're doing: choiceless attention, or body sweeping, or compassion practice. And we'll put these all in the category of object-oriented practices. These are practices where we're bringing our attention to objects, whether it be the breath or sensations or metta phrases.

But we're moving now into a phase where we're putting our attention into formless practices. The awareness practice is a formless practice. You will find it really helpful in this last part of the retreat to work with integrating these two types of practice. They're both really valuable practices.

So what is the value of an object-oriented practice? It gives a really good place to collect the mind around, to collect the attention. An object gives something for concentration to develop around. And the purpose of concentration is stability, and the purpose of stability is insight.

So when you're with the formless practice, what's the risk? Moving into space can lead to spacing out.

There's not a clear enough focus sometimes and the mind goes off thinking, thinking, thinking, drifting, drifting, drifting. And as we said early on, distracting thoughts are not just a distraction. They are the feeding ground for the *kilesas*. When we go into distracting thoughts, we go into past and future. We go into hope and regret. We go into fear and worry. So these excursions come with a price. The price is they stir us up.

When you are with the awareness practice and you find your mind getting distracted and lost in thought, that's a good time to come back and collect with an object-oriented practice. It could be any—breath, body, choiceless attention, body scan, *mettā*, compassion, any of those. Once the attention has gotten stabilized again and you feel you're pretty present, open up again to empty awareness.

So in these remaining days of the retreat, have as part of your intention: I'm going to learn how to integrate these two. I'm going to know when I need to be with objects and when I can really go formless and still stay present. The staying present is the key thing.

Just one other point about this formless practice. When you open up to true emptiness and awareness, it happens in a place without grasping. That's part of the emptiness. The self is not being constructed out of grasping at that point. And then from time to time, of course, grasping will come back again. That's just what we do—so deeply conditioned.

So you can make, in a way, a focus of your practice: Are you in a place of openness, emptiness, and awareness? You'll feel this as a free, relatively free place—ease, peace, settledness. And then notice when the grasping happens. You'll feel it as a physical contraction, taking hold, fixating, obsessing, clinging. And

so your practice can be a noticing of: is there openness or is there contraction? Freedom or clinging? Clinging always leads to suffering, gross or subtle. So that can become an interesting exploration. You just watch. The mind's going to go back and forth so many times. Openness, grasping. Openness, grasping. We can learn from that.

I want to close with a quote from Patrul Rinpoche, who was a Tibetan yogi and teacher from the 19th century. He summed up the practice very nicely:

"Don't dwell on the past. Don't invite the future. Don't alter the innate wakefulness. Don't fear phenomena. Apart from that, there's not a damn thing."

Let's just sit for a minute.

"There is this unborn, unbecome, unproduced, unconditioned. If there were not, there would be no escape from what is born, become, produced, conditioned. But because there is, there is an escape from what is born, become, produced, conditioned."

So we have about thirty minutes for walking practice and then the last sitting of the day with the chanting. Thank you for listening.

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