The Nature of Awareness, Part 1

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:58

Are you ready for a ride? I hope so, because tonight we are making the transition into the awareness part of the retreat. Often these are new kinds of instructions for Vipassana meditators, even seasoned Vipassana meditators. So it may be unfamiliar territory and a little bit of an adventure. But I hope you will take it in the spirit of exploration.

There's a new land that we can explore for some of you. Some of you are familiar, but it'll be a new land for some. And there aren't crocodiles, there aren't alligators or tigers, so it's a safe place. But the best way to approach it is with a spirit of some playfulness. One of the reasons is it's always good not to be too serious in a new style of meditation. The second is it's not possible to be super precise about awareness. It's a big field and it's largely an opening to a mystery. And we're not going to solve the mystery tonight or maybe thoroughly ever in our practice. So have a sense of just open inquiry and exploration, please. And if there are things that don't connect, try and let them just wash over.

We talked about this a little bit a few days ago in the middle of the transition into this retreat, but I'd like to review it right now with everyone. You're sitting here. Let's say your eyes are open. They don't have to be, but let's say your eyes are open. And I want to ask you to look at your experience just in this moment and see what's here. Sally pointed to this a bit this morning in the meditation on choiceless attention.

What's present in your experience right now in kind of general categories? If we want to look at a list of what we might pay attention to, what things should we put on that list? So if your eyes are open, there are sights. If your ears are working, there are sounds. You have a body, so I'm assuming there are sensations. If you're practicing eight precepts, there might not be much of a taste. If you weren't, there might be a little taste from dinner. There could be a smell. There's not much of a smell in this room, but there could be. There are thoughts and there's some mood, right? Might be background, might be a strong emotion. Some kind of emotional tone in the mind.

Is that pretty much it? That's pretty much what's here, right? Does it ever change very much from that? That's kind of it, isn't it? All this fuss about what we call life comes down to these six things. Sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts and emotions, which we'll pair them as mind objects. They're only ever these six things happening. And that's what all the fuss is about.

So the Buddha pointed to this really directly. There's this wonderful discourse he called the discourse on totality. And he said, what is the totality of things? Listen, attend carefully, and I will teach you the totality. That's a pretty strong statement. You know, Einstein never said that. Freud never claimed that. Marx never claimed that. And here's the Buddha 2600 years ago: get ready, here's the totality.

It is simply the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects—thoughts and feelings. If anyone were to proclaim a totality beyond this, that person would be speaking of something outside their knowledge. So this is kind of it.

But I want to point out a little wrinkle in the Buddha's statement, a little different from what we were talking about. We were identifying what's here as sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, thoughts, and emotions. But the Buddha put something else in this list. He put in the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind. You have a sense of why he might have done that?

How would this read differently? How would this feel differently if what he said is the totality is sight, sound, smell, taste, sensations, and mind objects? Would there be something missing for you in that understanding?

Yes, because it requires sense bases to generate those things. If the Buddha had expressed it that way—as just these six things—we would think they're not dependently arisen. They're just kind of there all the time. But by including the sense organs, he's showing that all the phenomena of our experience depend on us having these six sense organs. And that depends on us being in a body.

So he's really showing the link between the body, the sense organs, and our experience. This is a really crucial part of the teachings. We wouldn't be having these experiences if we weren't in a body with functioning organs.

Let's look at a simple example included in this framework: the ear and sounds. There's a sound. I'm going to assume that you have a working ear, and so you could hear that sound. The ear and sound are a pair. And now I want to ask, does the mind play any role in that experience?

If your mind was turned off, would you be having that experience? No. So the mind is right there with it. This is the third piece. If the mind wasn't there, we wouldn't be hearing that sound. There is something in the mind-body relationship—the mind needs to be present for us to experience.

There's one particular aspect of mind that lets this happen. In the Buddha's language it's called vijñāna, and the translation we use is consciousness. So we are conscious beings, we are sentient beings, and that means we can have experiences based on our senses. As we explore awareness, we're really exploring consciousness.

The way that we use awareness in this retreat is more or less synonymous with consciousness. Now some teachers use awareness to be synonymous more with mindfulness. If you followed the teachings of Sayadaw U Tejaniya from Burma, who has a book called "Awareness Alone is Not Enough," he uses awareness more to mean mindfulness, sati.

But in this retreat, we're going to use it more or less as a synonym for consciousness. So we're going to introduce new vocabulary over this week. But of all the terms we introduce, the most important one is

consciousness, vijñāna, the way the Buddha understood it. If you can get a sense for what this consciousness is and what it does, that will really steer you in the right direction to awareness because they're almost synonyms.

A little bit more about this controversy: Should awareness mean mindfulness or should it mean consciousness? Different teachers have different opinions. We're going to use it as consciousness.

You can see how this separation comes about, because the English word "aware" is a very rich word. Like if I asked you, "Were you aware of the thunder last night?" And you'd heard it, you'd say yes. And I'm really just saying, "Did you hear it?" Were you conscious of the thunder? Yeah, I heard the thunder, I was conscious of it.

But if I ask you, "When you spoke to me this morning, were you aware of your motivation in speaking?" Then this becomes more like mindfulness. Are you tuned into the intention, the feeling, the emotion that was behind your speech? That's more like mindfulness.

So awareness in English can go in both directions. And the difficulty is there's no Pali word that needs to be translated as awareness.

And that's why we can make up whatever meaning we want. Some people make up the meaning of mindfulness, and we're going to make up the meaning of consciousness. So just so that part is clear, we're not using awareness to mean mindfulness.

Consciousness is the single most important term that we're going to introduce. It may be new vocabulary for some. This term vijñāna is pretty central in the Buddha's teachings. It's the fifth aggregate. The five aggregates are a way of describing the makeup of a human being. Basically, there's a body, there's feeling tone, there are perceptions, there are mental formations—again, thoughts and emotions—and there's consciousness. That's what makes up a human being. It's like the description from the totality of the six senses, but organized a little differently. It covers the same territory, organized a little differently.

The five aggregates are intended to describe what a human being is. If you thought you were actually a person, no. You're really five aggregates. And there are these beautiful stories about Mara—you know who Mara is? He's sort of the tempter who comes and tries to lead good meditators off the path in the Pali Canon. Mara is coming a lot to the bhikkhunīs at the time, the nuns, hardcore practitioners. And he's trying to get them to think of themselves as persons. And they go, "No, Mara, there's no person here. There's only the five aggregates." And Mara goes, "Oh, the bhikkhunī knows me." And Mara slinks away defeated by the bhikkhunī's wisdom.

So the fifth of the aggregates is consciousness. It's a really integral part of what makes a human being. In fact, if you think about the three most fundamental things in being a human being, there's a body, there's consciousness, and there are emotions. In the Abhidhamma, the classification is more threefold. Rather than five, they kind of combine feeling and perception into mental activity. But these are the three

fundamental parts.

It's interesting—you can look at yourself and you can look at friends or fellow yogis and think, "I'm not seeing a person. I'm seeing a form. I'm getting a sense of their emotional activity. And I see their consciousness." That's what's real. This assumption of selfhood is like the assumption of personhood. When we want to see clearly, we see this makeup, and consciousness is a central ingredient. We're conscious.

The Buddha talked about this in many discourses, but here's a simple example. This is from a famous discourse in the middle-length sayings called the Honeyball: "Dependent on the eye and visible forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is called contact." This is what gives rise to a moment of experience. A visible form, the eye is working, and eye consciousness arises. In the Pali Canon, when the Buddha talked about vijñāna, he usually used it to mean one thing: sense object known through one sense organ. So the visible form known through the eye with eye consciousness. We'll talk about that and then we'll expand it.

Do you get a sense of what this consciousness thing does? One of the ways to think about it is the use of the term unconscious. And I don't mean in the Jungian collective sense, but I mean when we go through periods where we're not conscious, what's that like? I think about things like—reflect on your own experience—deep sleep, if you've ever fainted, if you've ever been in a coma, which hopefully you haven't, or if you've ever been under general anesthesia for a surgical procedure.

Do you have any clear memories of those times? Do you remember what it was like to be in deep sleep? Remember what it was like to be under general anesthesia? No, there's kind of nothing there, right? As far as we know, that unconsciousness means there was no activity. Or another way I would say it is there was nothing happening for us. I mean the body was still going, but the mind was not checked in as far as we know.

No trace of the mind being checked in. And that's the factor of unconsciousness.

So consciousness is when things are happening. Consciousness is the faculty we all have that allows stuff to happen. And that's all that it is. Consciousness allows stuff to happen in our experience. You might say it illuminates our experience, it brings it forth, it reveals it, it shows the world to us because we're conscious.

This is a very specific meaning of consciousness in the Buddha's language—*vijñāna*. It's not about consciousness raising. It's not about having a friend who has a really evolved consciousness. No. It's just that we're conscious of sights and sounds and smells and tastes and touch and mind objects. It's really simple. It's really basic. There's not even any particular intelligence in it.

Turtles are conscious. Flies are conscious. Mosquitoes are conscious. They have to be or they couldn't find their food. So it's really simple and it's not particularly intelligent.

This mental aspect of *vijñāna* is there with everything we experience. It's what brings our experience to light, what makes things happen in our world. Consciousness expresses as knowing stuff—not conceptual knowing, but knowing the elements of our sense experience. That's what it does. That's its activity. That's what we all have. And all sentient creatures have this.

In this retreat, the aim is to explore this element of consciousness. That's what we're after. We want to understand how it is in our experience. This is not an intellectual description from a neuroscience point of view of how it arises or anything like that. It's experiential—how does it feel? That's what we're going to explore through the awareness practice, using awareness more or less as a synonym for consciousness. And I'll get to the detail of that in a minute.

Consciousness is really subtle. I have a friend who practiced in Burma for years, intensive practice for a couple of years straight with Sayadaw U Pandita. At one point he'd been doing vipassana and then he'd done metta and concentration and all that. Then Sayadaw U Pandita gave him the instruction to practice with the blue kasina for concentration. It's one of the standard concentration objects.

The instruction was: first you get a blue disc to sit in front of, and the color blue kind of imprints on your mind. Then his meditation instruction all day long was visualize blue. That was it. Would you like to do that practice? That's a kind of bare practice. That was his instruction—visualize blue all day long. That's pretty subtle.

Consciousness is even more subtle than that. So as we get into it, it's so subtle that sometimes it's elusive as a meditation focus. It's always happening, but sometimes it's elusive to connect with.

You probably know the story that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he was debating whether to teach or not. And he was inclined not to teach. The reason was, he said, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and difficult to understand. So I don't think anybody will get it, so I'm not going to bother."

Thankfully, a deva came down and said, "Please, there will be people who understand." And so the Buddha said, "Okay, I'll teach." Thank goodness.

It was a close call, and we're still benefiting.

So this Dhamma that he discovered is profound, subtle, and difficult to understand. This talk tonight—I'm not going to claim it's profound or subtle, but it may be difficult to understand. So if it is, don't worry. We have a whole week for this exploration. You don't have to get it all tonight. And we're going to do meditations tomorrow morning that will give a way into the experience, hopefully a clearer way into the experience.

So tonight what I want to do is lay a conceptual foundation for what we're going to be exploring through the meditation.

Awareness, I said, is synonymous with consciousness, but consciousness is just the knowing of one sense object, like consciousness of a sound, or in this moment if your eyes are open, consciousness of the sight that you're seeing.

But I want you to open your attention up right now, in the way that Sally was instructing us this morning, in a wide way. Can you feel that as attention opens up, it can include sound, can include seeing, can include body sensations, can include thoughts, and can include your mood? Can you have a sense that all that can be in your broad—we'll call it awareness?

These things, in our experience, don't just show up one sense door at a time, right? As I'm speaking, can you feel your body? As I'm speaking, can you see the statue behind me? So our immediate experience is that these can all be present in a moment—sights and sounds and sensations, thoughts, emotions.

We're going to use the term awareness for the consciousness that opens to all these things in a broad space. So consciousness is just one sense object in one moment. Awareness is this broad field that everything can happen in. Can you get a sense of that? Good. And again, we'll bring it out more in the meditation tomorrow.

A sense consciousness, just connected to one thing, will arise when the sound arises, and when the sound passes, that sense consciousness will be gone. Clearly impermanent. But awareness has this quality—I think Sally may have pointed to this—always there. Somehow this big field in which things keep showing up, always there.

So it's not immediately obvious that this awareness field is subject to coming and going. That's part of the exploration that is interesting. Because in the Pali Canon, there's only one element that's not subject to coming and going: Nirvana, the unconditioned. It's the only thing the Buddha talked about that is beyond impermanence.

This makes an interesting possible connection. The awareness isn't coming and going. Nibbana isn't coming and going. Are they related? Not going there tonight, but it's part of the exploration. I hope you get interested in questions like this, because Nibbana is a transformative element in a meditator's experience. It's the single most transformative element. This is what enlightenment is based on. And when there is the direct realization of Nibbana, the mind is purified in a way that doesn't happen through any other cause.

So this question of nibbana, the unconditioned element, is a really important one in the field of meditation in the teachings of the Buddha.

What we're going to practice is looking at consciousness itself, or awareness itself—more or less the same.

Can mindfulness relate to anything in our experience? If it's in your experience, is it possible to be mindful of it? When the Buddha laid out the four foundations of mindfulness, every part of our experience is included in that. So then the question is, can we be mindful of consciousness? Can

consciousness come under the umbrella of mindfulness?

And did the Buddha tell us to do this? Or are we just importing some sort of fanciful ideas from Vedanta or Tibetan traditions? Are we just sneaking in stuff that really isn't part of the Buddha's lineage? We're not.

Because in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, in the fourth foundation—the dhammas—the Buddha gave us clear instructions to be mindful of all five aggregates. So there's the clear instruction to be mindful of consciousness within the Four Foundations of Mindfulness.

And there are even clearer meditation instructions in one of the discourses in the Middle Length Sayings. It's Majjhima Nikaya 121, the lesser discourse on emptiness. In it, the Buddha gives very clear instructions on how to approach mindfulness of consciousness. It's clear that this is what the sutta is aiming at. We're going to do a simplified version of that tomorrow morning in the meditation.

So we have these two places in the Pali Canon where the instruction is definitely to pay attention with mindfulness to the experience of consciousness. The Buddha told us to do it. It may not be easy, but this is what we're going to embark on for this week.

Why? Why should we bother? I'm quite happy with the breath. If I get tired of the breath, I can go to choiceless attention, I can connect with everything in the universe. What's the problem? Why would I want to look at consciousness, or as we're calling it, awareness?

The question I would ask in response is: Is there any limitation in a meditation focused on objects? Is there anything that might be less than ideal when our meditation focus—the focus of mindfulness—is sense objects?

Basically, even in choiceless attention, we are coming quite close in contact with all the sense objects of our experience. Certainly in mindfulness of breathing, we're very intimate with the breath. And even as we expand that to the other senses through choiceless attention, we're coming very close, really connecting with each of the new arisings that is part of our experience. So we're close to objects.

Is there any downside to that? Are objects always pleasant? Are sensations always pleasant? Are thoughts always pleasant? Are emotions always pleasant? No. And yet our meditation is about getting very close to all those experiences. That's what standard vipassana does.

The standard vipassana instructions, as I feel them, always involve us with pleasant and unpleasant aspects of our experience. And if you know something about the Buddhist teachings, this element of pleasant-unpleasant is called the feeling tone, or vedana—the second foundation of mindfulness, and an important link in the chain of dependent origination.

If the experience is pleasant, the mind has a habitual reaction to it, which is to hold on. If the experience is unpleasant, the mind has a habitual reaction, which is to push away. If the experience is neither pleasant nor unpleasant—neutral, in shorthand—the mind has another tendency which is "who cares?" So it's

delusion. It doesn't connect. It doesn't take the pain to connect with neutral experience, because it's not going to bring joy and it's not going to bring pain. I can overlook it. And we do that with people in our lives as well as sense phenomena. Somebody's not important to us? Why bother?

These are the reactive formations of the kilesas: greed, aversion, and delusion. As we get closely connected with sense objects, we are closely connected with feeling tone, which is the basis for the reactive formations.

The interesting thing about consciousness, if we take it as a meditation focus—I don't want to call it an object because it's not a thing, but it can be a focus—is that it doesn't have feeling tone. Consciousness does not have the quality of vedana. You can't even say that it has neutral vedana. It just doesn't have vedana. That's not part of its makeup.

Why is that? Because consciousness doesn't have a flavor of its own. It reveals the flavor of every element that it knows or presents, and it itself doesn't bring anything to it. It's like clear water.

You can put lime juice in clear water—it tastes like lime. You can put tomato juice in clear water—it tastes like tomato. You could put gasoline in clear water—it tastes like gasoline. Don't! Because clear water doesn't really have flavor. It'll take on any flavor, but it doesn't have its own flavor. Consciousness is the same. It doesn't have its own flavor, but it will pick up the flavor of whatever is in front of it.

The way consciousness works is like a mirror. It simply reflects what's there. If something beautiful comes in front of a mirror, it will reflect that. If something unattractive comes in front of a mirror, it will reflect that. The mirror doesn't care—it has no preference. The mirror itself doesn't have a feeling tone; it will just reflect whatever is brought to it. Consciousness is the same.

If we can establish a connection to consciousness, we have stepped out of the whole realm of feeling tone into something that's free of that. In being free of that, we are free of the reactive formations. That's the power of awareness practice. That's the potential freedom in finding the ability to connect to awareness in your direct experience. And again, this is not an intellectual exercise. This is something you can feel for yourself, and the freeing nature of it you can feel for yourself. This is what the exploration is intended to reveal.

We step out of the area of feeling tone and the grasping aversion that goes along with it, but we're not cut off because awareness includes all the arisings. We're not cutting them off. We're just putting our focus somewhere else—somewhere that's not caught up with greed, aversion, and delusion. And that's the freedom of it.

If we need to relate to something beautiful or something unattractive, we can do that. We can switch our focus from awareness to the object. We can relate to hindrances. We can relate to the beautiful sunset. We can relate to people. No problem. We just move out of that focus and back into the focus on our direct experience. We can go back and forth easily. So we're not cut off. This is not a way of withdrawing from

the world. But it is a way of withdrawing from entanglement with the world. That's the promise of this practice.

I want to read a quote from one of my favorite Dhamma books of the last few years. It's called Pure and Simple from a Thai laywoman teacher named Upasaka Kee. She taught from the 1950s well into the second half of the last century, and her teachings have been collected into this book. They're really wonderful, straight and deep Dhamma teachings, so highly recommended.

This is a quote from Upasaka Kee. She's talking also about this tuning into awareness: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward going knowing cast aside."

I'm going to read that again because there's a lot in here. The mind that's aware of awareness—so you've taken awareness, taken consciousness as a focus, being mindful of consciousness, mindful of awareness—doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness.

In other words, you stay connected there. All the phenomena of the world are coming and going, but you don't get involved in them. You know them, you're not cut off, you can connect if you need to, but from a meditation point of view, you don't have to. You know they're there, and you can rest in this awareness.

Doesn't send its knowing outside, meaning it doesn't go to objects. In other words, an inward staying, unentangled knowing. When we stay with the awareness, we aren't getting entangled in the sense phenomena that through their pleasant and unpleasant aspects bring about greed, aversion, and delusion. So we found a place of relative freedom. An inward staying, unentangled knowing. All outward going knowing cast aside.

Here outward going also includes things like body and thoughts and emotions. Even though those seem very inner, the way that Upasaka Ki is using them, they're taking the attention out of awareness back into the realm of sense objects. You get a sense of this? An inward staying, unentangled knowing. This is the promise of the awareness practice. This is where it can take us.

Now I want to explore this consciousness a bit more. We want to get in touch with awareness, but it's a little tricky because it is very subtle. So right now I'd like to ask you, can you feel one in-breath? Just drop into your body wherever you've established a good relationship with the breath. Can you feel one in-breath? And one out-breath?

And now I'd like to ask the question, in this moment, are you aware? And this aware can be bigger than one in-breath. Can you connect with that sense of being aware right now? If you ask yourself that question in the middle of a meditation, sometimes it can make a little shift. Oh, I'm aware. It's kind of opening to the wideness of it. You can play with that.

Sometimes it's not so easy to connect with or find this awareness. And why is that? Because awareness is

what's holding the objects. So just like the hand can hold this striker, this hand can hold this glass, this hand can hold the paper, but the hand can't hold itself. In the same way, consciousness can know all the different objects, but it can't grasp itself. First, because consciousness is not an object like the other objects that we can simply pick up. And second, because it is very subtle. So it's a little hard to locate, but are you confident that you have consciousness? I hope so. So it is here, it's active, it's functioning, and we can't quite grasp it.

Ajahn Chah talked about awareness quite a bit. When I think back over the history of IMS and Spirit Rock and the lineages that are still active and embodied in our retreats here, there are two Asian masters who for me stand out above all the others. That's Mahasi Sayadaw from Burma, whom we talked about a little bit with Choiceless Attention—he developed that technique. And the other is Ajahn Chah from Thailand, great master of the last century. Both of them created, through their students and their followers, probably hundreds of monasteries and retreat centers. I would say this center would not be here if it weren't for Mahasi Sayadaw and Ajahn Chah, both.

Interestingly, both of them came and led retreats here in 1979. It was so extraordinary that we had both of them in the same year. Mahasi Sayadaw was first in the spring, and then Ajahn Chah came in the summer. They knew of each other, I doubt they ever met, and their approaches were quite different. So Mahasi Sayadaw was the one who developed choiceless attention and also the very slow walking style. I'm sure you all have either practiced it or seen it—the style of lifting, moving, placing in walking meditation. It's a real support for developing strong samadhi, which is why he taught it that way. But Ajahn Chah's approach was really different.

He encouraged people to live a simple life in the forest and let mindfulness grow gradually through lifestyle, connection with the Sangha, and simplicity. It was a very different approach.

When Ajahn Chah came here for his first and only visit, there were many students who had practiced in the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition. In the afternoons, they would be out on the front lawn practicing the slow walking meditation—lifting, moving, placing, lifting, moving, placing. This was not a practice you would see in Ajahn Chah's monasteries, where the emphasis was on being natural, though being natural for a long time in the monastery setting.

Ajahn Chah would go out in the afternoon and walk around. He'd approach people doing this formal walking practice and say something to them in Thai. Then he'd walk on, and at another spot, he'd approach another meditator and say something in Thai. In the evening, people asked Jack Kornfield, who was translating for him, what Ajahn Chah was saying when he went up to the walking meditators. Jack said Ajahn Chah was telling them, "I hope you get well soon."

That's probably what this center looks like to people driving by from the town of Barre—what kind of asylum are these people running?

Ajahn Chah's practice was very deep. You may know he spent seven years wandering alone in the forests of northeast Thailand. That's where his teaching came from—that depth of practice and understanding. He came and shared that wisdom, spawning so many great disciples. The lineage continues today, including Jaya, who is a descendant of Ajahn Chah's teachings.

Regarding awareness and how difficult it is to find, Ajahn Chah said, "You're riding on a horse and asking, 'Where's the horse?'" Because it's right here. There's nothing more fundamental than awareness. It's right here.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, a chief Western disciple of Ajahn Chah: "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 with two eyes, and I can't see them. You can see my eyes, but I cannot. 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 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."

It's similar with awareness or consciousness. It can't grasp itself, but we know it through its functioning. It's always revealing things to us, so we know it's here. How do we find it? That becomes the puzzle, the exploration.

There's another quote I really appreciate along these lines. There was a writer who lived in Hong Kong, an Englishman named Terence Gray. He'd obviously been deeply influenced by Zen or Chan—probably Chan. He wrote several books consisting mostly of pithy aphorisms, very direct Zen-like pointers. It was clear he had some kind of insight, realization, understanding, which he expressed through these aphorisms.

Interestingly, he wrote under the pen name Wei Wu Wei, which in Chinese means "acting without acting" or "doing through non-doing"—a profound philosophical point in both Taoism and Zen.

Here's his instruction regarding our question: "What we are looking for is what is looking."

That's it. What we are looking for is what is looking.

At first, when I read that, it just sounded like a paradox. I thought, "Well, that's never going to work." But then I simplified it into a single meditation instruction or pointing. I would just drop the phrase into my meditation: "What is looking?"

And that became very powerful for me because it just put me immediately in touch with this quality of awareness. So we may drop this in to a sitting. You're also welcome to play with it. What is looking? Boom.

So this awareness or consciousness really is the knowing of the sense experience. That's what consciousness does. It knows sense objects in the simplest possible way. It's like, the consciousness is just awareness, and then thought comes in and says, "That's a bell," or "That's a C sharp," or "That's the bell to end the meditation"—but that's conceptual. The awareness is before any thoughts come in, before you've

recognized it as a bell or anything. That's what consciousness is revealing: these bare, simple elements of our sense experience.

So Joseph Goldstein has played around with this stuff a lot. And you know how when you're doing walking meditation, it's probably happened to you—it's certainly happened to me—there's often a sense that there's an observer up in the head looking down at the sensations in the feet and legs. And that's kind of how we track the lifting, moving, placing. So there's a very dualistic setup: observer here, sensations down there.

That observer up there is totally unnecessary. And the thing is that it can create a kind of tension. The maintenance of the observer is extra. There's not really any observer there. There's observing, but there's no one there. And so Joseph found that he could short-circuit that kind of duality with the phrase, "Sensations are being known."

So you're just walking, feeling the sensations in the feet and legs, and you just drop in the phrase, "Sensations being known." And then they're just arising in space, not distant from the eyes. The eyes don't need to see it. Just sensations arising in space.

So "sensations being known" can be really helpful. The passive voice is kind of what does it. It takes the doer out of that situation. Try this in walking. Play with it: "Sensations being known." See if you like it.

This passive voice is kind of interesting in other settings too. We could take an action like this: "The bell is being struck." Then we could ask, "Struck by what?" Struck by the striker. We could say "The paper is being cut." Cut by what? Cut by the scissors. And then we could say "The face is being stroked." Stroked by what? Stroked by the hand.

Then we could try "Sensations are being known." Known by what? Could you feel a shift from asking that? What is doing the knowing? Investigate.

So the first answer that comes usually when I ask that question in a smaller group is consciousness: known by consciousness. But the way I understand it, consciousness is the knowing. Consciousness is the activity that reveals. If consciousness is doing the knowing in the simplest way, then you say "known by what," or you could say "conscious by what"—is there something more fundamental than consciousness that's underlying it, giving rise to consciousness?

That's a little bit of a stretch, right? But some Buddhist traditions have said yes, there's something more fundamental than consciousness that gives rise to this impermanent sense consciousness. Something more ongoing.

You know how awareness always seems to be there? Maybe there's something more ongoing, not subject to arising and passing, that is doing the knowing, that is giving rise to consciousness. We'll explore this a little bit in another talk. But I find this a fascinating question of metaphysics—what's really here? What's

here in the depths? So we'll talk about that, just as another way to play.

I like this question for a couple of reasons. One, if you felt a little bit of a shift when you asked that question, what it indicates to me is the power of curiosity. It's just wonderful when we don't know something but we want to find out in our direct experience. It kind of brings all the mental energy and interest right together in the moment, and that's a powerful force in the mind. When you really want to know something with all your heart, I've seen that the mind has a way of finding out. If you keep watering that question, watering that inquiry...

And then the other thing is that asking a question like that puts the mind into a very right place for insight. The interest is there, the humility is there to say, "I don't know, but I'd like to know."

There was this wonderful Zen teacher from Korea named Seung Sahn Sunim who established a center in Providence, Rhode Island and developed a lot of disciples and teaching. I think Jon Kabat-Zinn from MBSR and Larry Rosenberg from CIMC both got their start with Seung Sahn Sunim—a powerful teacher. And one of his key meditation instructions was: "Only keep don't-know mind."

Isn't that a wonderful instruction? He wasn't telling you what you were supposed to believe or know. He said, "Just keep don't-know mind." And then when you look at things, it'll be fresh and new. And that's where insight comes from.

So we can look into a question like: Is there anything underneath consciousness? And if we look in a fresh and open way, we may find something, or we may find an absence of something. To me that's really interesting.

I want to go a little bit further. We talked about how this kind of awareness that can include all our sense experiences is broad, includes everything that arises. Is there anything stuck? When you tune into that wide awareness, is there anything stuck or fixed in it? Is everything coming and going? All the sense phenomena coming and going?

Then could there be a self in there? No. Not if there's nothing fixed.

So exploring this factor of awareness is a direct link to the insight into not-self, the insight into anatta, and that means it's empty. The way that Buddha used the term emptiness—its most fundamental meaning is absence of self. So opening up to awareness, the insight into not-self comes for free. It's kind of part of the whole experience.

And then there's another way that it's empty: Can you find a shape for awareness? Can you find a color? Not really. So it doesn't have a structure. It's not a thing. It's insubstantial, and that's another aspect of emptiness. There's nothing fixed in it, no particular shape. It's a lot like space.

Think about the space in this room. There's a lot of space in this room, right? There's a lot of stuff in this room, but there's also a lot of space. There's always room for one more person to come in, more room for

one more zabuton, one more zafu, and so forth. But there's a lot of stuff in here.

It was originally empty. When we moved into IMS, this room was empty. There was actually a little different setup, but it was empty. And then over time, all this stuff was brought in: chairs, zafus, zabutons, statues, railings, platform, window shades, Kuan Yin statue—all of that came in later. But everything that was brought in could be taken out, right? Because the basic space was empty to start with and it could be empty again.

Within awareness—each of our personal awareness—there's a lot of stuff that's like the furniture in this room. The furniture in our awareness is stuff like habits of mind, karmic patterns, attachments, and forms of suffering. None of that stuff is intrinsic to awareness, but we've brought it all in through the habits of a lifetime and through the ways that life has shaped us. So it's kind of crowded. Our awareness has gotten kind of crowded.

But because its basic nature is empty, all that stuff can be taken out. And then the awareness returns to its original empty nature. And that's the project of our Dharma work: to take out all the karmic patterns, all the obsessive, compulsive nature of thoughts and emotions, all the unskillful habits of mind. It's all been brought in, can all be taken out.

So this is where we're headed. We see the possibility. With seeing the empty nature of awareness, now we just need to do the work.

I think I'll stop here for tonight. I'll just close with a very short quote from Huang Po, who was a great Zen teacher many centuries ago: "Buddhas and bodhisattvas together with all wriggling things possessed of life, share in this great nirvanic nature of awareness."

So let's just sit for a minute together.

And from the Thai Master, Ajahn Buddhadasa: "We should call the mind emptiness, but because of its awareness, we call it mind."

Thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking, and then we'll have, again, the close of the evening with chanting. And are people free to leave after the chanting? Free to leave after the chanting. Free, free, free at last.

Thank you for listening.

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