Faith and Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:08

Sylvia talked last night on the theme of impermanence, the fact that in our outside life among the people we know, everything is subject to loss, to change, to decay. People have been reporting on this also in the interviews. A number of people have come and said that when their awareness is clear and they turn their attention to a thought, it dissolves. Or when they become aware of a pain in the body, they see the transitory nature, they see the unsolid nature of that sensation. And even turning our minds to different emotional states, when the awareness is clear, sometimes those states dissolve upon looking at them.

Ananda, who was the Buddha's cousin and his attendant for many years, once asked the Buddha, "What do you mean by the world?" The word in Pali for world is loka. It means realm also. And the Buddha replied with a pun. He replied, "It disintegrates." And the word for disintegrates in Pali is paloka. It disintegrates, therefore it is called the world, or loka.

This really refers to all our sense experience, which we can see when we look closely in retreat: the nature of arising and passing, the moment-to-moment level at every sense door that we investigate. When we start to see that momentary nature of all our experience, it can be quite unsettling. As Sylvia said last night, it can lead us into fear, upset. In one particular system of practice, it's said that following this direct insight into impermanence is a period of practice that's marked by fear and dread. And it rather provokes a crisis in the spiritual journey out of which arises a tremendous urge for freedom and that then leads in that very direction.

So this can be very deeply felt in our practice, the immediacy of impermanence and how it takes away the solid ground that we thought we knew, that we thought we rested upon. And out of that can come an urgency to find: is there somewhere in our experience, is there a dimension that isn't touched by disintegration, by transiency, by change? Maybe there is.

After all, impermanence is not what philosophically we could call an ultimate truth. The Buddha, ever precise in his language, said that it was only a characteristic of existence. Impermanence is a descriptor of that which exists. So a really ultimate kind of truth should point to something that's beyond existing and not existing. So impermanence isn't that kind of truth.

In fact, the Buddha pointed in his practice and his teaching for our practice, pointed us to discover some more ultimate meaning or ultimate truth in life that can form a true refuge or true security in our life. And this true refuge and true security he talked of as Nirvana or in the Pali, Nibbana.

The Buddha was loath to be very precise in his descriptions of this state or this dimension, but in one

passage in the Samyutta Nikaya, one part of the Pali texts, he gives 33 synonyms for Nibbana, among which are these: the unconditioned, the truth, the other shore, the everlasting, peace, the deathless, safety, freedom, the shelter, the harbor, the refuge, and the beyond. This is about as detailed as he got to speaking about nirvana, but all these words point to a release, a state of freedom, of safety, of refuge beyond change.

So I wonder in our practice, where might we look to discover or come upon that refuge that is really beyond change? And that's really what I'd like to explore in the talk tonight. The talk really has two themes: the themes of faith and of awareness.

I have to give a little bit of disclaimer at the start of the talk. When the Buddha came upon his enlightenment, you may know the story, he almost didn't teach. He spent 49 days after his awakening sitting in the same spot where he had awakened, just enjoying the bliss of deliverance, the bliss of liberation, and reflecting on the implications of what he'd found. And he thought in that time, "Should I teach or shouldn't I?" And at first he thought, "No, I'm not going to." He said, "There won't be many people who will understand."

And then he reflected and he thought, "Oh, my first teacher – he would understand if I told him about this." And then he, with his psychic vision, turned his eye toward that teacher and found out that he had died a week ago. He said, "Shucks, he's not here to understand. But my second teacher was also very clear and wise. He would understand." And he turned with his psychic vision to his second teacher and found that person had just died that day.

So who was he going to teach? And he said at this point, "This Dhamma that I have discovered is profound, subtle, and hard to understand." Fortunately, as we all know, he went ahead and taught anyway. But I mention this phrase because I won't claim that this talk is either profound or subtle, but it may be extremely hard to understand.

So I ask your forgiveness in advance for that and I really urge you to approach it with a light touch. I'll try to give it with a light touch and I urge you to receive it with a light touch that lets you take in what makes sense to you and leave behind what doesn't. It's not intended to spur a lot of conceptualization, but rather just if parts of it touch on your own practice, open and use that and let go of all the concepts.

The other caveat I have to make about this talk is we're talking about what doesn't have any form, and so there's no right view on this point. Nobody can be definitive in speaking about what doesn't have form, like nirvana.

These different perspectives are simply metaphors or poems pointing the mind in a certain direction. As such, nobody holds final authority—at least nobody I've encountered.

This view of the unconditioned comes primarily from the Thai forest tradition, and it may differ significantly from what you'd hear in the Burmese tradition. I'll be quoting some of the elders from the

Thai forest tradition—teachers you've likely heard before like Ajahn Buddhadasa, and the group of practitioners that included Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Boowa. But realize that not even all Buddhists in our lineage would necessarily agree with this perspective. That's perfectly fine. You can hold it simply as one person's opinion.

My wife's sisters visited us last year from Australia—their first trip to the United States. For one sister, it was actually her first journey more than about 300 miles from home. So we took them to Yosemite, which is wonderful for foreign visitors because there's nothing quite like it anywhere else in the world.

Of course, they loved it. They delighted in seeing the wildlife—coyotes, deer, smaller animals. We didn't actually see a bear, unfortunately, but we saw their marks every morning. We were staying in tent cabins in Curry Village, where there's a large parking lot with about a hundred cars. Every morning we'd emerge to find that about five cars had been ripped open by bears. Every single morning.

The rangers are quite clear in their instructions: don't leave food in your car, don't leave anything that resembles food, don't leave picnic coolers because the bears know what those are, don't leave hand lotion or scented products. Yet every morning we'd discover four or five damaged vehicles. The bears particularly favored minivans—they'd pop out the back window and crawl inside. I suppose they'd learned that minivans usually contain children, and children often have candy.

So while we saw bear tracks in the morning, we never encountered the bears themselves. It's delightful to visit Yosemite to observe the wildlife, and almost equally entertaining to watch the people. Yosemite attracts everyone. The big tour buses arrive at Yosemite Falls, and out pour visitors who seem to share a universal uniform from around the world: Bermuda shorts and video cameras hanging from their shoulders, filming anything that moves.

Backpackers straggle into the backpacking campground after a week in the backcountry, unshaven and unwashed—quite an appealing sight. Then there are the climbers preparing to ascend El Capitan. It's always fascinating to observe climber culture, which strikes me as a cross between the Grateful Dead and the US Marines. Quite a group indeed, with all these different energies.

I noticed a new group that day, one I hadn't seen in Yosemite before—a diverse collection of young people who looked like they might be on a YMCA training camp. Boys and girls from various racial and ethnic backgrounds had joined hands in a circle, placing one person in the center. That person would fall backwards, trusting the others to catch them. You probably know this exercise—basic sensitivity training, the kind used in team-building to develop group trust. Someone simply closes their eyes, falls back, and gets caught. It's quite revelatory when you experience it firsthand, discovering you can actually trust others to that extent, and that they do indeed catch you.

Watching this reminded me of our practice, because we're constantly falling down in one way or another. Things go well, then we stumble and fall apart.

But the curious thing is that every time we fall down, something catches us. Something holds us in this mysterious way.

As we go through the days and weeks in retreat, I think one of the things we really start to have faith in is that it's okay to fall down in practice. It's okay to stumble. It's okay to lose the thread of mindfulness. It's okay to get lost in the chaos of restless energy, the strong bodily waves that come, the emotional currents that run through us. It's fine to get lost in all of that, because if our intention is to come back, eventually it all settles out and we're there—clear and present again.

So we just trust more and more in this practice that it's really safe, that we can let ourselves go, and we develop more of this quality of just falling back or surrendering.

This sense of trust in the basic safety of our experience is what in Pali is known as *saddhā*. *Saddhā* is usually translated as faith, but it also means trust or confidence—just a basic sense that the universe is a safe place to be. Literally, the root of the word *saddhā* means "to place one's heart upon."

I love this because it goes right to our core. What in our lives do we really place our hearts upon? All of us have different things. Traditionally, it's said that the Triple Gem is the right place to place your heart upon: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These are our refuges. If these connect for you, that's beautiful. They are refuges. They are safety. They can be trusted.

But early in practice, these particular words may not have that deep, heartfelt connection for us. And then we have to tune in for ourselves. Where is that gut sense of trust for us? Can we connect with that really deep sense of trusting in the universe?

I had a lovely teaching on this quality from Fred Wahpepah, whom many of you know. He's a Native American elder who teaches at Spirit Rock, often with John Travis, who was here for the first half. Fred leads sweat lodges, which are purification ceremonies in his tradition. The first time I did a sweat lodge with him, just down in the meadow below the dining hall, we all got in. The fires had been in there, the stones had been in there for a while, and it was quite hot. He was explaining to us the spirit with which one enters a sweat lodge, talking about this quality of trust.

He said, "In the Indian language, there's no word for hope. No word for hope. Just not part of the vocabulary." He said, "That's because we know that everything is already all right. So we don't have to think about hope. Everything is already all right."

I thought that was an incredible statement coming from a man whose culture has been more or less destroyed over the last 150 years: "Everything is already all right." It's a strong expression of that faith and that trust.

So the two questions I'd like us to look at tonight in our practice: What does it mean for us to fall, or we could say, to let go? And when we do that, what holds us? What do we let go into? What is it that we can

really trust in?

This quality of letting go—we're really invited to make it moment after moment after moment, because that's what mindfulness is about.

What happens when we're not mindful? What's your experience? Reflect on your experience when mindfulness isn't present. It's usually made up of a lot of thoughts, isn't it? When there's not this clear tuning into the present moment, we're usually wandering back and forth between past and future. Those wanderings are driven—they're not random—but they're usually driven by forces of liking or disliking, of wanting or not wanting.

In a very short way, we could say they're driven by the forces of greed, aversion, and delusion. We could call this shorthand for what the mind does when we're not mindful. As we talked about in the first half of this retreat, greed, aversion, and delusion are our basic strategies of relating with life when we don't have the quality of trusting in the moment. We use these forces of trying to mold our experience so that life will be a certain way, to try to control it.

To give up our hopes and fears is really to give up control. This is the challenge we're invited to in every moment of mindfulness. We're invited to let go of trying to shape our experience and instead open to it just as it is—to be with it without changing it, to accept it, to allow it.

Another way of saying it is that when we stop trying to control the world, we actually give up our individual will. Or you might say more accurately, we refine our will just to be present, to be with what is. We give up that will of trying to shape it, control it.

So in that way, we stop making I and mine. When we stop making I and mine, there's a lot of peace. There's a lot of peace.

Ajahn Chah has this beautiful line: "If you let go a little, there's a little peace. If you let go a lot, there's a lot of peace. And if you let go completely, there's complete peace." This is the letting go of our hope and fear, letting go of control, letting go of I and mine.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, who was one of my teachers in Thailand, explained it a different way. He related this letting go of I and mine directly to the meaning of nibbana, the meaning of the unconditioned. The meaning of the word nibbana is clearly defined as freedom from suffering and as freedom from the mental defilements, which are the causes of suffering. That is freedom from greed, aversion, and delusion.

At any moment that our minds are void of I and mine, that is nibbana.

This is quite a radical statement. Most of the time in the teachings, nibbana is posited as something really far away, some really remote goal that comes at the end of a long, long period of very intensive practice. Six weeks is just kind of the foot in the door. But Ajahn Buddhadasa is making it much more accessible.

"At any moment that our minds are void of I and mine, that is nibbana. For example, at this moment, as you sit reading or listening, you probably have a mind void of the feelings of I and mine because there is nothing engendering those feelings. There are just the words you are hearing for the sake of abandoning I and mine. If there is some voidness—and I merely use the word 'some,' it's not completely or unchangeably void—then you are dwelling within the sphere of nibbana. Even though it may not be absolute or perfect nibbana, it is nibbana, just the same."

I really like this as an entry point. To me, it provides a really accessible way for each of us in our practice to feel the touch of nibbana. You might say the outskirts of the unconditioned. And by getting kind of the whiff of that, we can follow its trail back to the source.

So this letting go of I and mine, letting go of control, takes a lot of trust. It's one of the things that we grow into. Coming fully into the moment is a huge act of trust. I don't know if you've felt this at times, but when you come into this moment very fully, you're sort of naked. You've really dropped your defenses. You've dropped the escape into conceptualization. You've dropped your images of yourself and how you'd like to be or how you usually are. You're just open. Your heart is open to feel what is. That's a very naked place.

When you meet some great beings, you get the feeling of this quality very much from them—that they've kind of released into something greater. It's not just that they've worked on their positive qualities, kind of like building muscles, you know, the bodybuilding school of mental development, but they've actually let go into something.

The Dalai Lama, for me, has this flavor a lot in his playfulness and his spontaneity. He was at a conference about a year ago at Gethsemane Abbey, which is where Thomas Merton lived when he was a Trappist monk. It was a cross-congregational meeting of Buddhists and Christians, all contemplatives, all people who had spent a lot of time in solitude. He was there with all these other heavyweights from both sides, the Buddhist side and the Christian side. And it was such a kind of heavyweight gathering that PBS was filming it to show on television.

The Dalai Lama was the keynote speaker. So the klieg lights were on and the video cameras were rolling and it was going to be broadcast to forty or fifty million people later that day. The Dalai Lama is up there telling about his time at the Abbey. He said, "You know, the way the monks here support themselves is they make cheese and they make fruitcake. Yes, I learned this today. They took me on a tour of the Abbey, and they told me this. And every place they would take me, they would say, 'You know, we support ourselves. We make cheese and we make fruitcake. Would you like to try some cheese?'" And he said, "But all I wanted was the fruitcake." And then he just giggled. "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." He said, "They'd take me somewhere else, and they'd say, 'Would you like to try some cheese?' And I'd think, 'No, I just want the fruitcake!'"

And then he'd giggle again - right there in front of his hosts at the Abbey, in front of national television and all these other dignitaries, just playing with his own desire force, just like a kid, so innocent.

I think there's something there that we can release into and then live out of and trust - something that has this quality of spontaneous playfulness.

There's another teacher I enjoy a lot who comes to Marin fairly regularly named Byron Katie. Some of you may have run into her. She didn't come out of any particular tradition. She awakened, she said, by herself about ten or twelve years ago, quite spontaneously, and has now been teaching her understanding. She's someone who I feel has a lot of wisdom and a lot of love. I like her a lot.

She was telling a story about her husband, who is a recreational vehicle salesman in Barstow, California. As you might imagine, there's not a huge sangha in Barstow, California. In fact, her husband doesn't relate to any of this stuff. It's not his bag of tricks. But because his wife has gotten so into spirituality over the years, he's had to sort of learn to accommodate somewhat.

So this is one story that she told about their marriage. She said they were in a supermarket, just doing their grocery shopping, and she had the idea that she had never in her memory been wheeled through the supermarket in a shopping cart. She thought that was something she would like to experience, and she couldn't think of any reason why she shouldn't. So she said to her husband, "I'd like to get in the shopping cart and have you wheel me through the supermarket. Would you be willing to do that?"

And he said, as she says he often does, "Oh, Jesus Christ, Katie." He really didn't want to do it. But she said that he agreed to do it because he knew that if he hadn't, she would have asked someone else to - and then he would have been even more embarrassed.

So she jumped in the shopping cart and he wheeled her around the supermarket, and she said the most interesting thing was that no one would meet her eye. Nobody would make eye contact with her, as though everybody was used to seeing a middle-aged woman being wheeled through the supermarket every day of the year. Of course.

So Byron Katie, I think, has released into something also. Very trusting. Very trusting.

This other thing that we sometimes talk about that we fall into or release into is sometimes called our true nature. Sometimes it's called our Buddha nature. It's what we share with the awakened ones. It's said that it's in us in every moment already. It's not something that we only attain or only acquire when we reach awakening, but it's said to be with us here and now in every moment. It's only the fact of waking up to its presence that constitutes real discovery.

Ajahn Mahabua gave a pointer to this. Ajahn Mahabua was a kind of dharma brother of Ajahn Chah. They both practiced under the same teacher whose name was Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun was a very fierce teacher in the Thai forest tradition. He wandered throughout the forests of Thailand and Laos for about thirty or forty years. Only very late in life did he ever set up anything like a monastery. Everybody would always want him to stay and teach and be resident, but his whole practice was just wandering through the forests and teaching as he went. A number of the great teachers of the last fifty years practiced and trained under

him, including Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mahabua, who is still alive and still teaching in the northeast of Thailand.

This is from Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of the three characteristics - impermanence, suffering, 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."

I find this really beautiful. His pointing is that the very nature of our mind is undying, that it holds within it all the phenomena that are coming and going, that are subject to impermanence and suffering and selflessness, but that the nature of the mind itself is not subject to this passing. This nature you could also call our basic goodness. It is what we can trust in. It is what holds us.

So let's look a little deeper into what this really is and how we can come to it through our practice. And again, I'll turn to one of Howie's favorite gurus and also one of mine - Calvin and Hobbes.

This is a strip that came out around December of one year. Calvin's talking to Hobbes and saying, "You know, this whole Santa Claus thing just doesn't make sense. Why all the secrecy?"

Why all the mystery? If the guy exists, why doesn't he ever show himself and prove it? And if he doesn't exist, what's the meaning of all this? And Hobbes says, "I don't know. Isn't this a religious holiday?" Calvin says, "Yeah, but actually I've got the same questions about God."

That's curious, isn't it? We may have a really deep gut sense of what is trustworthy in the universe—whether we call it the Dharma or Buddha nature or God or whatever, the unconditioned—but do we really know what that is?

It's so delicate because basically this thing can't be seen. It can't be heard. It can't be touched. It can't be grasped. Why is that? It can't be touched because if we could reach out and touch it as an object, then it would be something that had come into existence. And if it had come into existence and we could just grab it as an object of our senses, it would also have the nature of passing out of existence. And then it wouldn't be ultimate. It wouldn't be beyond arising and passing.

So whatever it is that we're looking for of this ultimate nature, it can't be seen, it can't be touched, it can't be heard. It has to be invisible. It has to be intangible. It has to be silent.

This is from a medieval Christian mystic named Angelus Silesius: "God is a pure no-thing, concealed in now and here. The less you reach for that, the more it will appear."

I like this formulation because it brings out a couple of great points. One is that the touching of that is founded upon trust. And trust comes from relaxing. That's why we often say at the beginning of a sitting, "Begin from a place of ease. Relax your body and mind. Don't strain. Don't strive." If we can bring in that quality of relaxation along with the alertness, then we're close to this presence.

The other thing I like about it is that it really points that the ultimate is found in the here and now. We shouldn't conceive of the ultimate as some separate destination apart from what's naturally arising here and now. It's found right in the midst of the here and now.

Suzuki Roshi had this quotation about it. He said, "It's necessary to trust in something that has no form or color, but that is always ready to take on form and color."

This really perplexed me for a lot of years in my practice. Something that has no form or color, but is always ready to take on form and color.

In the Buddhist jargon, form and color are sort of buzzwords. They basically refer to the world of sight. Everything within the world of sight can be described as having a shape and a particular color, like this zafu. What we actually see when we look around the world are not objects. We only learn over time to recognize them as woman or cushion or chair or man. What we really see are just patches of form and color. So form and color is a jargon way of saying the world of created appearances, the world of phenomena.

So it's necessary to trust in something that is not of that world of appearances, but it's always ready to take on form and color.

Now, I come from a scientific background myself, and when I first heard this quotation, I thought Roshi was pointing to something like raw matter—something like electrons, protons, neutrons, quarks, before they got formed into atoms, molecules, wood, leaves, grass, earth, and so on. But when I thought about it more, I thought that can't be right because even protons and electrons have some form and some shape and some qualities of appearing. So I decided that wasn't what he was talking about.

I decided he wasn't talking about anything on that side—the side of matter—but instead he was more talking about something from this side, the side that sees, the inner experience. That he was pointing to something in the nature of our consciousness itself. Because that's an interesting thing about consciousness. It doesn't actually have form or color, but it's always ready to take on form and color.

And gradually, we become familiar with the consciousness of sights. We can also take on sounds, smells, tastes, thoughts, emotions, sensations. Consciousness takes on all those qualities.

So I think Suzuki Roshi was pointing to something on the side of consciousness. But in the Buddha's teachings, consciousness has a really particular meaning. It's one of the five aggregates. The aggregates are considered to be the elements of the human being, including body; feeling tone, which we've covered in the instructions—that quality being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perceptions, that recognition that knows something is a bell or a man or a bench; mental formations, basically thoughts and images; and consciousness is the fifth.

Consciousness, as the Buddha described it, is this quality that knows all of our experience. It's a quality

that's on the receptive side of every facet of experience. It's pre-verbal, but it's that which holds the bare sense data. And you can, as a synonym, think of knowing before any words have come in. So it's just knowing the raw sense data of our experience.

Well, the Buddha said that all our consciousness is also characterized by coming and going. So for instance, when you hear the bell, there's a knowing of that sound, but the knowing passes when the sound passes. Consciousness as the Buddha defined it arises with sense experience and passes away as that sense experience passes.

But maybe the unchanging is somehow related to this. It's interesting if we look at the instructions—we start in the meditation instructions with sounds and then we turn to breath and then body sensations and then emotions and thoughts and experience in walking, sights and tastes, until everything eventually is included. All the changing appearances are included, but what's the one thing that doesn't change in the instructions? What's the thread that weaves all the instructions together?

It's mindfulness, isn't it? Whatever the changing objects or appearances, there's always mindfulness at work or at play. So I wonder if the deathless is somehow related to this quality of mindfulness, of awareness.

This is from an Indian teacher named Maharaj: "I met my guru when I was 34 and I realized by 37—maybe that's a practice we should be doing—pleasure and pain lost their sway over me. I was free from desire and fear. I found myself full, needing nothing. I saw that in the ocean of pure awareness, the numberless waves of the phenomenal worlds arise and subside, beginninglessly and endlessly. There's a mysterious power that looks after them. That power is awareness, life, God, whatever name you give it. It is the foundation and ultimate support of all that is, as gold is the basis for all jewelry."

So it's not just human beings that have this quality, that have this Buddha nature. It's said that all sentient beings have this. All animals, all creatures that are conscious have this.

This is from an old Zen master named Huang Po: "Buddhas and bodhisattvas together with all wriggling things possessed of life share in this great nirvanic nature." We share this with all the wriggling things that are possessed of life. This is our connection, our deepest connection to everything that lives—us and the earthworms.

Ajahn Jumnian, who was here last year, gave a talk to the staff and teachers about this unconditioned nature of mindfulness, and he put it this way. He said, "The best way to develop great awareness"—actually the word 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's the place of the deathless. From this pure awareness 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."

This again is from Ajahn Mahabua: "There's no escaping this truth. Whatever arises has to vanish. But whatever is true, whatever is a natural principle in and of itself won't vanish. In other words, the pure mind won't vanish. This vanishes, that vanishes, but that which knows they're vanishing doesn't vanish. This is what's called the pure mind."

So how can we start to get a sense of this in our practice? How can we start to get a flavor for this pure mind?

As Ajahn Buddhadasa pointed to, it's at times in the practice when the sense of I and mine is not so strong, when the sense of self with its demands and its needs and its wishes and its dislikes and its hopes and its fears aren't so insistent. That's the time that the mind has a degree of purity, has a degree of freedom in it. So you can begin to investigate—what's the feeling of those times when the demands of the I are not so strong? Really wake up at that point in time, bring your clear seeing into it.

This true nature emerges as a harmonious union of mindfulness's brightness and alertness with the calm and tranquility that arises when the defilements subside. Both dimensions are essential—the bright, alert energy of mindfulness and the deep tranquility and peacefulness. You can trust in this union as possessing qualities of clarity, fullness, and deathlessness.

This awareness illuminates everything. Sometimes when you sit with eyes closed, listening to sounds, you can feel how it pervades the entire universe. This quality of awareness encompasses the farthest stars and galaxies, all the sounds arising and passing away. Not only does it contain them, but it reveals them, illuminates them.

This awareness itself is empty—it must be empty to hold what is. Yet it's not a vacant emptiness. It's an emptiness pervaded with the quality of knowing, sometimes called luminosity, that illuminates all arisings. What we are most fundamentally is not the comings and goings, those transitory changes. What we are most fundamentally—that which continues—is this empty space in which all appearances arise and pass away and are known.

It possesses two essential qualities: emptiness and knowing. You could say this truly is the nature of mind or the nature of awareness. It's sometimes called our innate wakefulness. We can observe it and see that it's always like this, but we can't grasp it because it's not a thing. We only know it by relaxing into it and feeling its functioning. Through this we come to trust more and more that it is there.

This nature has always been, is now, and will always be, because it's beyond change—beyond coming and going, beyond birth and death. Being beyond change, it's beyond time. In itself, it's timeless. This is another quality of the ultimate.

It functions like a mirror, reflecting anything that appears before it completely and impartially. It reflects the beautiful and the ugly, the painful and the pleasant. It reflects movement as well as stillness, reflecting the defilements as well as the Brahma-Viharas, but it remains untouched by any of these. It's not harmed

by the appearances. Fundamentally, it cannot be stained or corrupted. It's not made brighter by happiness, nor darkened by suffering. In itself, it has none of the characteristics of greed, aversion, and delusion, so it's free from the very beginning. It is that dimension in us which is already free.

So the question arises: do you take yourself to be free here and now, or do you take yourself to be bound? If you identify with the transitory, there will be bondage in that. That will be subject to birth and death, and what's subject to birth and death is subject to suffering. If you take yourself to be this limitless and pure, empty knowing, then in that there's already freedom. Freedom doesn't need to be created—it only needs to be seen and trusted.

Once you gain an intuitive sense of this quality of mind, you can simply relax into it. You can start to rest in it.

This comes from Ajahn Buddhadasa again: "When you hear a phrase like 'Nibbana for everyone,' you may shake your head in disbelief and understand that someone has tried to dye a cat just for sale." Perhaps you don't get the image—it's like painting up a cat. Maybe the cat is partly orange and partly gray, but you spray paint it all black so you can sell it and get a higher price. If you're a teacher, you'd dye a cat for sale if you wanted to appeal to your students. So he's saying that you might think I'm just trying to dye a cat for sale. You might not have any interest in the subject, but nibbana is a natural condition. It's the cool state of mind when the defilements are absent.

When can we tune into that in our practice? When does the mind feel really cooled out? When does it not feel churned up by the forces of liking and disliking, the forces of greed and aversion? We can trust in that. That can become its own path. It's enough simply to rest in that and trust that in resting there, we are actually tuning ourselves to the unconditioned. We're tuning to Nibbana, and we can trust that this will carry us to freedom.

In the Satipatthana Sutta, the Buddha advises us to reflect again and again on our own death and what will happen to our body after death. In traditional Buddhist countries, practitioners are encouraged actually to go to cemeteries and charnel grounds to observe corpses that are decaying in various stages of dissolution. We can't do that anymore today because of cemetery regulations and health codes. So the modern day equivalent for practitioners in Thailand are autopsies. As a monk or a nun, you're permitted to go to hospitals and observe autopsies being done.

I took advantage of this a couple of times when I was a monk in Bangkok and went down to a hospital, Siriraj Hospital, near the parade grounds in downtown Bangkok. I was thirty-two years old at the time and had never been next to a dead body. Now I was next to several dead bodies. I could walk right up to them and touch them. When the coroner came, we took seats in the operating theater, and he put one of these dead bodies on the stainless steel table and began to take it apart.

Coming from not even having seen a dead body to watching it being taken apart was completely shocking

for me. I felt like I was getting blown away by observing that. But it was also fascinating. I couldn't take my eyes off the process. So I watched as the coroner dissected one body, which took about twenty minutes and involved removing all the internal organs, including the brain, and weighing them. He sewed the body back up, then went to the next body. I observed this for several bodies in a row.

Then we went out to catch a bus back to the monastery. We were waiting at the parade ground, which is a really busy part of downtown Bangkok. I was watching all kinds of people go by—young people and students and couples walking hand in hand and older people who had come down to the marketplace to do their shopping, dogs running across the grounds. I had just come out of seeing these bodies taken apart, and the phrase that came to my mind as I was looking around at everybody walking by was: all I could see was walking corpses. I could only see walking corpses.

I thought to myself later, what did I mean by that phrase? That's such a strange phrase, a walking corpse. What did it mean to me? When I looked at everybody, I could see that the body was no different than those bodies that I had just seen on the autopsy table. No difference at all in the physical form. But these bodies at the parade ground—there was still a brightness that was shining out through the eyes. I was really struck and in touch with that brightness, that vitality of the life force and of consciousness that was still shining, that I could see in their eyes.

As I got in touch with the characteristics of that brightness, I realized that brightness was completely of this moment, of this present moment. It didn't have any past and it didn't have any future. And that most fundamentally, that is what we are. We are this body that is alert with this present moment brightness, completely of the present moment.

But this brightness has a capacity to receive sense impressions. And because of that capacity and another peculiar capacity of storing them up, which we call memory, we're able to construct a past. And out of the construction of the past, we're able to project a future. So these things aren't intrinsic to that brightness, but they're sort of built out of the components of it.

This brightness is that resting place. This brightness is that pure awareness that is beyond time, beyond birth and death. And when we rest there, that has the quality to hold us, to be our safety, and to carry us through this whole journey to freedom.

The Buddha was talking to a monk in his day about this quality of trust or faith. The monk's name was Pingiya. This is what he said about it:

"Pingiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakkali, Bhadravudha, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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