Empty Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 57:05

When I talked a week ago about the deepening of practice, I explored how coming to greater depth in practice is really a question of finding out more fundamentally what's true for us in our experience of life as human beings. When I think about this, I find it very helpful to empty the mind so that we can have a fresh look at this question.

I like to recall a quote that Sally mentioned in an earlier talk, a quote of the Buddha's, where he says: "In whatever way they conceive, the truth is ever other than that." One of my teachers who liked to be provocative put it a bit more directly. He said, "Whatever you think is wrong." That brings it to our attention—whatever we think is wrong, mostly about the idea of self. When the Buddha uses the term "conceive" in this sense, he's mostly talking about the way we conceive of ourselves.

It's hard to keep in mind that everything we think is wrong. It sort of cripples our ability to function, doesn't it? If we can't trust our judgments—what time is it now? Is it time for breakfast or lunch?—we have to trust a little bit to function. But we overly trust. We depend and count on our views being correct, which of course they're not.

This is why in practice such good support is what Seungsahn, the Zen teacher, called the "don't know mind"—really having the openness to realize moment after moment we don't know the way things are. If we knew, we'd be free. Because we're not free, it's proof that we don't quite know yet.

I also like this line of Rumi's that I call to mind again and again. In one of his poems he says: "Where did I come from? And what am I supposed to be doing here? I have no idea." That puts the biggest perspective on our life as human beings. We got born into this not knowing—where did we come from and what are we supposed to be doing? That's really the truth of our situation.

This is helpful to keep in mind when we look at ourselves or another person. We may not really know what constitutes a person. We look at one another and say, "there's a person, there's a person, there's a person." But the Buddha didn't see this way. He said somebody who's really studied the mind-body process wouldn't say that. He said that would be like a butcher, a skilled butcher who's been working for years in his trade, cutting up the carcass of a cow, and as he cuts it into different pieces, saying "cow, cow, cow." The butcher doesn't do that. He says sirloin, tenderloin, rump, ribs.

So someone who studied this mind-body process doesn't say "person." What do they say? They say five aggregates, or they say six inner and outer sense bases. Because we talk about the sense bases a lot in relation to our meditation, I want to talk a little more about the aggregates tonight.

Gil mentioned them in an earlier talk, and this is kind of a refresher. I've found this a very helpful model for bringing greater freedom into my life. It's been the main way that I've been reflecting and exploring in dharma terms for the last few years, so I want to share it a little further tonight with you.

Like the concepts of not-self, the aggregates are not something that we can wrap our intellects around in one evening or one day or one retreat. I think they're concepts that we have to hang out with over a period of time. It's like another map. As we get familiar with the terms and apply them to our experience, we start to see what the Buddha was pointing at. More and more our understanding starts to align with his. His was free from suffering. And as we align our understanding with his, our view becomes freer of suffering also.

The main way that he saw was without the deluded notion of self—the false notion of self. So the aggregates is a way of looking at our experience as human beings. It takes in all of our experience. But it's a view that's free from the mistaken notions of self. It sees us without ego.

In Pali, the term is khandha. In Sanskrit, it's skandha. It's usually translated as aggregate.

Another good translation would be component - these are the components of the human personality. But all those sound a little too technical. In the Pali, khanda just means heap or bundle. If you were gathering firewood and you went out and gathered a bunch of twigs, you would call that a khanda of twigs. It's just a bundle. So it's a very ordinary term. Aggregate seems way too technical. Even component seems way too technical. So I think the best translation is: these are the five kinds of stuff. That's the way I think of it. These are the kinds of stuff we're made of. Nothing more, nothing less.

The five aggregates are material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness. Let me run through them briefly so you'll have a sense of what the map is about.

Material form is the whole physical world. It includes this body, but it's not limited to it. The Buddha didn't put a wall around body and say, "This is part of the being, but the rest of our experience isn't." What is body but sight and touch? It's just another form of sense data, just like the sense data of this platform, the bell, the chair. All material form and its interactions - not just the sight of things, but also smells, tastes, touches, and sounds - come under the category of form, material reality. When you hear that sound, for instance, that sound is in the realm of form. This one aggregate covers the whole physical world; the other four deal with the mind.

The first mental aggregate is feeling. This is in the technical sense - the Pali term is vedanā - of the quality of every moment of experience, every sense door, being pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We usually introduce this in the meditation instructions because it provides the lever for grasping to arise. Desire arises around the pleasant, aversion around the unpleasant, ignorance or delusion around the neutral. So it's a key part of our experience. It's the springboard for craving in all its forms.

The sound of the bell that we just heard is usually pleasant in itself because it was manufactured by a

venerable old Japanese company who've been making bells probably since before this country started. And also because of its associations. This may be the most pleasant sound on retreat because it means, "Ah, sitting's over. I can get up now." Very pleasant association.

The third aggregate is called perception - saññā in Pali. This is the factor of recognition. When we hear the sound of the bell, we know that it's a sound, we know that it's a bell, and we know that it's the bell that ends the sitting. All those things come out of memory and are aspects of recognition that the mind applies from experience. It interprets experience to this degree. And this is a fine and necessary function of mind. It's not something we need to get rid of. But it is true that perception can be either accurate or inaccurate.

One time I was doing walking meditation on retreat. My mind was quite still and I was walking and listening to the subtle sounds at IMS in Barre. I thought I heard a marching brass band. The meditation center is two miles outside of town, so there aren't too many marching brass bands on the road, but I was sure I was hearing one. So I stood stock still just to listen, and I could definitely hear the drums. I could hear the bugles, maybe a trumpet or two. I was having a great time listening to music, just waiting for it to get close enough so I'd really get into sort of a patriotic fervor about it.

As I listened, it did get closer and closer, but it didn't get much louder. And as it got closer, I realized that it was actually a garden cart fitted out with bicycle wheels being rolled down a gravel track. It was bouncing up and down, and that was making all the metallic, rhythmical sounds I was hearing. There wasn't actually a brass band, although I was sure there was. I was a little disappointed, but then I thought I could turn it into a dharma story, so I made up for it.

But perceptions can be more difficult when they're inaccurate. The Buddha said that a lot of our suffering comes because we think things are permanent when they're actually impermanent, or we perceive self where there's actually no self.

We perceive happiness where there's actually unsatisfactoriness. So we actually do get in trouble through mistaken perception.

Sometimes our preconceptions about things—with labels and names and terms—blind us to seeing the reality of things. Someone commented in an interview recently that the label of "fear" had kept them from just experiencing the simple nature of fear in the body and mind. There was so much baggage associated with the concept, they weren't able, until they saw this, to just feel it directly. When they felt it directly, it was just light. There was no big deal about it.

They play with this a lot in Zen training. Conventionally, if you ask somebody what this is, in this hall they would say, "A bell." But that puts it in terms of an overall cultural context and memory and past and all that. If you just looked at it fresh, couldn't it also be a planter? A flower pot? A bowl for feeding? Couldn't it be, if you turned it upside down, a really cute hat for a big statue? It could be any of these things.

So in Zen, there are lots of these koans where the master says, "What is this? If you call it a stick, I will hit

you. If you say it's not a stick, I'll also hit you. What is it?" And you're supposed to manifest your understanding. Koans like that are why I never practiced Zen very much. I just had the feeling I'd wind up getting hit a lot. I could never figure it out.

There's another funny story—a lot of you have heard it, but for the five people in the room who haven't, it's so good I just want to share it. The Zen master Seungsahn, a Korean Zen master, uses these kinds of koans a lot. He was introduced by some students to the great Tibetan master Kalu Rinpoche when they were both still alive. They had a very short meeting, their first meeting. In Asia, great masters from different traditions don't meet each other very often at all. This is kind of a phenomenon from the West.

So there they met, and Seungsahn wanted to check out Kalu's understanding. He picked up the nearest object, which was an orange. They were sitting down having tea together. He picked up an orange, held it out to Kalu, and said in a very strong voice, "What is this?" This is Seungsahn's teaching style. They don't do this in Tibetan practice.

So Kalu just kind of looked at him and kept doing his mala. He was probably thinking, "Om Mani Padme Hum. What is this guy on about? Om Mani Padme Hum." Very cooled out.

Seungsahn didn't get an answer. He wasn't used to this. He was the Zen master. He was used to getting an answer. So he held it out again and in his very strong voice said, "What is this?"

And Kalu was doing his beads and turned to the interpreter and said, "Don't they have oranges in his country?"

So you can get in trouble with this perception thing. But keep checking it out. It's an interesting faculty of mind.

The fourth of the aggregates, the third of the mental aggregates, is called volitional formations or *saṅkhāra* . This refers basically to the kind of fabrications that we generate out of our impulses, out of our intentions—thoughts, emotions, moods, states of mind, and then actions of speech and body. All coming out of intentions that can be wholesome intentions of generosity and kindness and compassion, or unwholesome intentions of anger or greed or fear or confusion. These are the fabrications of mind that are being created moment after moment.

You can experience this as you sit. It kind of feels sometimes like—in the term that Carol quoted the other night in her talk—the tides of conceiving are sweeping over us.

Or sometimes these are called karmic tides. They are the projections of mind that disturb our essential stillness and peace—something we feel really clearly when we sit down and try simply to be with the breath. These outgoing manifestations of movement come again and again. They're sometimes called karmic formations because the intention with them is a key part of their power. It's the intention that determines the wholesome or unwholesome quality.

Another word I like for these is conditioned tendencies. It's a recognition that the mind can be trained either in an unwholesome direction, out of fear or desire, or a wholesome direction, out of wisdom, mindfulness, understanding, and compassion.

So in hearing the sound of a bell, all of these come into play. There's the perception of the sound. Then there may be an accompanying volitional formation of ease or relaxation. I often notice when the bell rings, I think, "Oh, it's so easy to sit. I could sit for another half hour now." But I get up anyway.

The fifth skanda, in some ways the most interesting, is consciousness. The Pali term is vijñāna. It is basically the aspect of mind that knows experience in a very primitive way—the most primitive kind of knowing, before any words come in, before any perception or interpretation. It's just the receiving of our sense experience.

So now as you look toward the front of the room, you might see the white wall, men and women in different colored clothing, the wood of the floor or the platform. The consciousness that's receiving those shapes and colors, that's just holding that bare sense experience, is the consciousness we're talking about as vijñāna—just that bare knowing, the holding or receiving of the bare sense data.

So in the sound of the bell, there's a mental component to your experience. The sound is a physical thing, but the knowing of it is done by your mind. If you were a corpse, that knowing quality wouldn't be happening. Your body would be here, the ear would be here, but the consciousness wouldn't be present. So the knowing of the sound wouldn't take place. You would no longer be a conscious or sentient being. At this moment, because we're conscious and sentient, we know all this stuff of the six senses. So consciousness is a fundamental part of the aggregates. It's with every other aggregate.

In hearing the sound of the bell, consciousness receives the sound. There's a pleasant feeling, and consciousness holds the pleasant feeling. There's the perception that that's the sound of the bell, and consciousness knows that perception as it arises. And if there's the formation of ease or relaxation or the thought, "I could sit forever," those too are held in consciousness. So consciousness is with each of the other aggregates as it comes in.

As we practice over the days and weeks together, we're instructed to pay attention to what consciousness is receiving—that paying attention is the mindfulness property. But then we're instructed not to hold on to it. Let it arise and let it pass away. And this is what all the aggregates are doing moment after moment. The impact of the physical world is coming and going. Our feelings, perceptions, and formations are coming and going. And consciousness is coming and going as it holds each of them.

The idea is that consciousness arises to meet the object as it arises and passes away as the object passes. So all five aggregates are constantly arising and passing, coming and going, nothing fixed in any of them.

I thought the aggregates was a funny list when I first heard it. It seemed really arbitrary. Why did he put feeling and perception up there with body and consciousness? They just didn't seem that central to me.

And over time I realized it really doesn't matter. It is somewhat arbitrary. In another list the Buddha breaks out mind further to note feeling, perception, volition, contact, and attention. It's a list called nāma. It recurs in the suttas quite a bit. So it's broken down more finely.

The degree of fineness isn't important. The important thing is that every aspect of our experience can be slotted into one of the categories, and you can see that they're all impermanent. So that's why it's helpful to play with this model, to check it out against your experience, to verify that—to see if it's true that everything you know and experience is in the aggregates and it's all coming and going. This is the investigation.

Now as we pay attention and let go, pay attention and let go, pay attention and let go, over and over, one of the things that happens is that things start to clear out a little. And in particular, this projective tendency of mind of the sankharas, that starts to quiet down. There's not quite such an insistent train of thought. There may not be quite so much emotional charge around the thoughts that are coming.

This is from Ajahn Chah, the great Thai master: "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."

One of the things I love about a longer retreat is that as you all come in and talk to us in interviews, we hear more and more of this letting go and peace story. Little peace, lots of peace, really deep peace as the weeks go by, for some. Moments of it for everybody. So whether it's a long-lasting peace or a short-lasting peace, the nature of the peace is the same, and that's what we're concerned about—understanding that peace.

Sometimes when the thoughts are subtle and emotions not so strong, people report, "Oh, there's really not much going on." If we ask them to describe it more closely, basically there's just the sense of the body. Or maybe they'll mention the breath. Or maybe they'll mention sounds. But in that moment anyway, that's about all that's going on.

Let's leave the sounds aside for just a moment, and I want to talk about body and consciousness. This is really a wonderful opportunity for practice when these are the two most obvious elements. When you say there's just the body but you're aware of it, you're also introducing or acknowledging the factor of consciousness—I'm just sitting and I'm with the body and my knowing of it.

It's a very interesting place because these are actually the two most important aspects of the aggregates. If you understand the body and consciousness in the aggregates, you're really getting to the heart of what they're about.

Normally we take this body really personally, don't we? It is as much "I, me, mine" as anything. I look in the mirror and I think, "Oh yeah, that's Guy. I know him." And I associate all the old history and personality and all the stories with this body. I really think that's who I am. And I take pride in it or I'm embarrassed by it, depending on whether I'm looking at the wrinkles and saggy skin or the fact I'm still

able to stand upright and am in relatively good health. I have a lot of charge around the way this body appears, and it's as though I have some pride or shame about it.

It's so curious, isn't it? Why should I be proud if I'm attractive? Why should I be embarrassed if I'm not attractive? Why should I be proud if I'm tall? Why should I feel uneasy if I'm short? Did I make this body? Did I have anything to do with the color of my hair or my eyes or my height? I don't think so. I don't remember that. I think it was my father's sperm and my mother's egg coming together and their genes combining in some way that basically produced this body. And then I woke up in it sometime in childhood. My consciousness started looking out. I started to be able to conceptualize. And that's our basic situation.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai forest master, said it like this: "This body belongs to nature. It doesn't belong to you. It grew out of nature. It's been sustained by nature, by physical nourishment, and it will go back to nature when it dies. Give it back to nature. It'll be a great relief for you."

It's not ours. It came out of nature just the way a flower comes out of nature, just the way a tree comes out of nature. Do we need to go around and name every flower and say, "Oh, I hope you're having a good life. I hope the other flowers like you a lot and really think you're the cutest flower on this bush"? A flower is just a physical manifestation.

This body is just a physical manifestation. It gets joined with consciousness. Consciousness is even less personal. This knowing quality—I don't know this for a fact, but I assume it's pretty much the same in you as it is in me. I don't think there's anything personal in my knowing.

So we have this impersonal body, which is the fruit of nature. We have this impersonal consciousness, which is another of the building blocks of nature. And from them, we fabricate a personality. This consciousness looks out and takes ownership of the body, of our success and failure in school, of whether we were or were not attractive to the opposite gender or the same gender as the case may be. It looks at our job records. It looks at our level of brightness or not brightness. And it forms all these opinions and conclusions based on the past. And it says that's who we are.

It's all constructed. Fundamentally, there's just this brightness. The consciousness is just a brightness that shines out of every pair of eyes here. That brightness isn't anything to do with the past, isn't anything to do with the future. It's alive here and now. It only has its life here and now. But it has a capacity for memory. And because of that, it builds this long, complicated story about who we are, and we believe in it.

When we see the truth of the aggregates, we see the body is a product of nature, the consciousness is only here and now, there's nothing else there. As someone said in an interview the other day, the whole personality is like a house of cards that's been put together on very shaky ground. Seeing the aggregates in this way kicks out the bottom layer of that house of cards that we call personality, and it can just start to collapse, can start to come undone.

This is a very fruitful place to explore in your meditation when there's just the body and the awareness, just the body and the consciousness. What is that like? What is there in that experience? I sometimes like to ask, what is intrinsically present? A lot of the arisings and passings are kind of accidental. A frog chirps at just the right time. A thought of the past happens to come. A moment of sadness or delight kind of wafts up from the heart center. All those are, if not accidental, at least adventitious. They're just circumstantial. What's intrinsically there beyond change, beyond the accidental comings and goings? That's what's intrinsically you. What doesn't change?

So this is a very interesting point in practice when you have the experience of awareness and a lot of what you might call space or openness. Not feeling crowded in by the pressure of thoughts and difficult emotions, but a certain amount of ease and spaciousness. How do we relate to that?

I want to say that there are a number of meditation techniques that are very good at this point. There's no one right way to practice. You can continue to pay attention to the breath. Absolutely fine. It's part of the body. You can open to the whole body experience as you sit and feel the breath within that. You can make the attention really wide, take in all the sounds, sensations within that, and the breath within that. It's also a very relaxing and spacious way to be. You can be with changing objects, as we've talked about in the instructions. An in-breath, a sensation in the knee, a sound, an out-breath, a thought, a mind state. Just letting the attention move easily from one to the next. Connecting and sustaining with each one. All these are wonderful ways to practice. They're all good.

But before applying any technique, I think it's really helpful to just take a few moments and let yourself feel kind of your existential situation. Right in that moment when there's not much going on, what does that feel like? And what does it tell you?

One of the things that comes through for me is a sense of vulnerability.

I'm just sitting there, completely exposed to everything in the universe—everything outwardly. Someone could come up and hit me or push me or kick me or shout at me. And I'm exposed to everything inwardly. Anything can come up from the mind at any moment.

So I have a feeling of real vulnerability, which is not a bad thing. Actually, it's quite a beautiful thing to be that open. We've let down our defenses because we've stopped the train of thoughts. Defenses are mostly about thought. We're kind of open and kind of bare.

And often we can feel the fragility of our situation. We feel that: what is going to support me in this? What is going to hold me up? Is there anything that's really there for me to rely on in this moment?

This is really the domain of faith, as James talked about. Faith is the knowing of what it is that we place our heart upon. What do we really, in a very gut sense, trust in? Not in a belief kind of way, but is it safe to be this vulnerable? And if it's safe to be that vulnerable, why? What is it that holds us?

There's a great guy who teaches at Spirit Rock named Fred Wapipa. He's a Native American who lives in the East Bay. He does sweat lodges here and teaches often a combination of Native American wisdom with Vipassana meditation in the Buddhist path. I had the opportunity to do a sweat lodge with him one time, and he was explaining the procedure and the feeling tone of being in the sweat lodge where you're basically enclosed in this structure of saplings that have been tied together and covered over with blankets, with hot stones put in the middle.

As he was explaining to us how to approach it, he was talking about connecting with the earth and feeling grounded. And he said something that we ought to know: in his language, in his Indian language, there's no word for hope. He said, "That's because we already know that everything's all right. We already know everything's all right."

I thought that was a fantastic statement from somebody whose whole culture has been destroyed over the last 150 years or so. Everything's all right. So do we have that kind of trust? Can we have that gut sense in ourselves that it's safe to open in that vulnerable way, that it's safe to let go?

Because what's happening when we come into this spaciousness is that we're kind of touching an aspect of emptiness. There's not much there at that time. There's no support for ego in that openness. There's no support for the relational self because there's just this space, this empty space. So there's the sense that the space is empty of I or mine. There's not really a support for I or mine.

Now sometimes I think it's possible to kind of find our way into this space through a lot of effort. Strong concentration, diligent application of attention to the breath, very strong sense of not letting the mind move away from the breath—very firm, strong effort can take us to that place. But it's been manufactured contingent on effort and depends on the effort to sustain it. When the effort is stopped, the space will usually crumble.

There's another way into that space, and it's through relaxation. But for most of us, when we start practice, the way of relaxation is blocked by an obstacle or one or more. And these are called karmic knots. Most of us, when we enter practice, have some accumulation of the past that expresses itself in tension in the body and some storing of emotions and maybe memories in the mind. And as we relax, that's what we tend to hit.

So for example, when I came into practice, I had a lot of fear. It was not very specific. I didn't have specific memories. But every time I'd sit and try to open and be quiet, I'd just be seized with a lot of anxiety. In my early years of practice, it was all about learning how to open to this nearly constant state of anxiety and fear that I would find when I sat.

And I remember one time I was doing standing meditation out of doors. I'd gone over to England to do a retreat, and it was early summer. I think it was May. I was practicing in a retreat center that was in Wiltshire at the time.

And it was one of those beautiful English twilights. I was standing, I think, right before tea time. The air was soft, and the late afternoon light was golden, falling on this beautifully cultivated garden with apple blossoms and flower beds and a lawn that looked like it had been rolled for the last five hundred years.

I was doing standing meditation under a tree with my eyes closed and I was just full of fear. I stood there trying to relate with the fear, getting wound up about why I had all this fear and where it was coming from and how I was going to get through it. At that moment I thought to open my eyes and I looked out on this beautiful English garden with apple blossoms and birds in the trees and that golden light. And I thought, "Hmm, pretty scary place, isn't it?"

I just had to laugh because my reality inside was so different from the true nature of the world around me.

These karmic knots, when we haven't faced this frozen energy, keep us from seeing the world as it is. They keep us from seeing the spaciousness that's really there, that's really our basic situation. For many of us, the first years of practice are occupied with the loosening and releasing of these karmic knots.

They carry with them a very powerful sense of self. I think it's very hard to really understand anatta, the truth of not-self, when these karmic knots are active. There's so much history and emotional charge and usually discomfort around them that we tend to constellate the ego around these knots.

Once these knots are loosened and that energy is released—and when it releases it can be just gone—then it becomes effortless to sit and open to this spaciousness. Years later in my practice, that anxiety has for the most part simply disappeared. At times—not always, but at times—it becomes just effortless. Someone simply intends to let go of thought and that open space is available. Then the sense of anatta comes through much more clearly, much easier to access.

But this work of loosening the karmic knots is honorable work. It's important work that shows us impermanence, not-self, and dukkha. We learn tremendously from doing it. It's a valuable and noble part of the practice cycle for many people.

So in that sense of openness, what do we become aware of? I asked someone the other day who was describing an experience of that kind of openness, and the answer was, "I'm aware of awareness. That's what I'm aware of."

This is an interesting situation, and I don't know if you have turned your attention in this direction, but it's a fascinating avenue to explore. What is awareness? What is consciousness? What are these qualities of mind?

This is tricky ground because consciousness is what holds everything else. Can consciousness see itself? Is consciousness an object that can be known with consciousness? Is it dualistic in that way, that one bit of consciousness holds another bit of consciousness as an object? Or is it more like the eye trying to see

itself? Can the eye ever see itself? It can't, can it?

Ajahn Sumedho was talking about this on his retreat last year. He said, "You can look in the mirror, but then you're seeing a reflection of the eye. But the eye can never see itself." So how do you know you have an eye? We know by its functioning. Because there are sights, we know that we have an eye that's working, although the eye can never see itself.

I think it's like that with consciousness. It can't hold itself as an object, but maybe we know it by the fact that we're sentient beings and consciousness is working to receive all the impressions. You know you're not just a bump on a log, right? I hope. Maybe by this point in the talk, half of you are, but hopefully you're not.

This becomes really interesting. You can explore this in your practice as you get intimate with any object, like the breath. Attending to the breath usually means attending to the physical sensations of breath. We feel its qualities of being rough or smooth or hard or fast or slow. But you can also, in that moment of experiencing the breath, start to tune in to the knowing side of the experience.

Like all sense experience, what's happening here involves two dimensions. The physical—in this case, the bodily sensations of breath—and the mental, which is the knowing of it, the consciousness. You are receiving that as a mental experience.

So start to try to intuit what is knowing the breath. What does consciousness feel like for me in this moment? One cautionary note: don't try to locate it in the head. There's no reason to assign consciousness to the head. More likely, look for it right alongside the physical sensation—there with the physical experience of breath. The two arise together and pass together.

When we start to look in this way, we see that every object arising in our experience is conjoined with consciousness, never separate. Another way to say this is that every object that's arising is arising in consciousness. Or simply, it's only an appearance in consciousness.

Normally we take this world as so real. This is the materialistic worldview, the nineteenth-century scientific perspective: a solid external reality within which we're entrapped. This is the ultimate truth of existence—the solidity of this material world. Our consciousness is just an accidental byproduct of evolution, some random mixing of chemicals in the primordial sea.

The Buddhist worldview is different. All that we see is only an arising in consciousness. One of my Tibetan teachers put it like this: "When you see in this way, you see that everything that appears has no real existence whatsoever. It's only an appearance in consciousness."

So the functioning of consciousness comes to be much more central in our view of our situation. Maybe this is more like the center of who we are—this aspect of consciousness.

Then I'll return to an earlier question: Is there anything fixed in that consciousness? Is there any object

that's always there? Or is every object—sensation, sound, thought, emotion, breath—coming and going? They're all coming and going, aren't they? Because of that impermanent nature, we say that essentially the space is empty. Our basic situation is that the space is empty.

You might check this out. Just right now as you sit, eyes open or closed—it doesn't matter—take a look back at what your consciousness is like. Take a look at the nature of consciousness itself. Is there anything fixed within it? Or is it basically empty?

As you investigate, you'll probably find there isn't anything fixed. Everything comes and goes, so there's this basic emptiness. But this emptiness isn't a void completely. We're also conscious. And as Gil mentioned in his talk the other night, we don't have to do anything special for this consciousness to happen. It happens by itself.

So maybe our most essential nature is this combination of emptiness—this empty space—and consciousness. Maybe that's mostly who or what we are.

Now if that feels like a cold thing, then it's not going to be very inviting to open to that. This is where metta practice has a great contribution to make. When we practice metta, we warm up that empty space. You might say that the function of vipassana is to show us that emptiness, and the function of metta is to fill it with warmth.

When it gets filled with warmth, it starts to feel really inviting. It starts to feel rich, happy, sweet, juicy. And then we want to open to it. Even though there's vulnerability, we want to open to it more and more.

Ajahn Jumnian is a great Thai teacher who comes here about once a year. He did a lot of metta practice in his youth.

He's done a lot of vipassana practice and has one of the greatest energies I've ever encountered. I encourage you to meet him if you haven't. He's one of the happiest people I've ever known.

He doesn't know many words of English, but he does know two, and he teaches them often. He does this sort of transmission where he points to the space and goes, "Empty, empty, happy, happy, empty, empty, happy, happy." And that's one of his key teachings. This emptiness is so happy when it's pervaded with the warmth of metta, of loving-kindness.

So we could say that there's the emptiness, there's the knowing, and there's the warmth. These three things together make up our essential being. And this is what many of the sages in this tradition have called Buddha nature. This can become our real refuge as we open to that spacious place of knowing within us.

This is from Ajahn Mahabua: "Although all phenomena without exception fall under the laws of 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 our basic goodness.

There's a little bit of a conflict here, because when we talk about consciousness, we talk about it coming and going. And when we talk about this knowing, as Ajahn Mahabua talked about it, he talks about it not dying. How do we resolve that? Can we take refuge in something which is coming and going? Does that make any sense, to take refuge in what is impermanent? Or can we only take refuge in what is lasting, in what doesn't die? Isn't that a better refuge?

I asked Ajahn Sumedho this question when he was here last fall, and I liked the way he answered it. He said, "Well, when I sit down and I turn my attention there, it seems like my awareness is steady. So that works for me." I love this as a skillful means. And we can talk more, if you're interested, about the metaphysical resolution of this dilemma. But for now, I really encourage you to check and see if it feels like that awareness is something steady as you sit. And if it is, to trust in that, at least for the time being. It worked for Ajahn Sumedho, and he came out pretty good. It can work for us.

So trusting in this sense of the effortless knowing that happens within this space of emptiness.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "I met my Guru when I was thirty-four and realized by thirty-seven. 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 is 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 for all that is."

Trusting in this refuge of awareness is really trusting in not doing. It is trusting that the capacity of this space will bring out the flowering that we need, whether that flowering is in terms of metta, compassion, joy, wisdom, devotion, or warmth—that it will all come out of this openness and trust. This kind of opening and trust can really be a path all of its own.

And I'll close with a quotation from the Sutta Nipata. An unusual quotation from the suttas because the Buddha doesn't point to this a lot. This is almost a devotional path that's being expressed here, but it is found in the suttas. The Buddha's talking to a bhikkhu called Pingiya, and he says, "Pingiya, other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. Vakali, Bhadravuda, 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. "Other people have freed themselves by the power of trust. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

Thank you for your attention.

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