Relating With Emotions; Plus Mindfulness, Consciousness And Awareness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:04:26

There are so many topics to explore, so tonight I want to cover two things. I want to talk about relating with emotions, and then I want to discuss a question we've been putting off for a few nights regarding the relationship between mindfulness, consciousness, and awareness. So our evening will have two parts.

I want to read you something from a classical Dzogchen text about thoughts and emotions: "Without following thoughts, in the moment of their arising, relax naturally and rest in the state of mind itself. Without a doubt, thoughts will vanish spontaneously."

Has that been your experience? You just rest in the state of mind and thoughts spontaneously vanish? Not always. I would say probably for most of us, not usually is it that simple. But sometimes you can get the idea from these texts that it should be that simple. But if it doesn't happen like that for you, then what should you do?

A friend of mine, Carol Wilson, whom many of you know, was teaching in Burma last year. She was teaching with Steve Smith and also a Burmese teacher, Sayadaw Ulakana. It was a retreat for Westerners, taught by this mix of Western and Burmese teachers. Some Burmese were also sitting in—the translator and some assistants.

One of the Burmese meditators came up to Carol at the end of the retreat and said, "Wow, it's so interesting for us to hear you talk about how to work with these emotions, because our teachers never talk to us like that." As you probably know, Vipassana has very detailed instructions about how to relate with the experience of difficult emotions. This really isn't done in Asia—it's not done in any Asian tradition that I know of. I think it's a little bit the influence of Western psychology in Vipassana teaching.

"So we really appreciate hearing you talk in detail about how to work with these difficult emotions like anger. Because our teacher tells us, 'Oh, note it three times and it will go away. Note anger once, note anger twice, note anger three times and it will go away.'"

Carol said, "Well, that wouldn't work well for most Westerners. It just doesn't happen like that for Westerners."

And the Burmese meditator said, "Oh, but you see, our anger doesn't go away then either."

And Carol said, "Well, then what do you do?"

He said, "Well, we just say, 'Oh, well, never mind.'"

I think that's a beautiful tribute to the equanimity of the Burmese people. But with Westerners, we're usually not so happy to just say, "Oh, well, never mind." There's a lot of anger here. I'm burning up with it. Oh, well, never mind.

So even though in the practice of Dzogchen we are turning to the innate purity and abiding in that innate purity, other aspects of mind will also arise. So I want to talk a little bit about how to relate to them.

In Vipassana retreats, one of the most distinctive patterns that we see in the silent retreat practice is the purification process of difficult emotions. It follows a similar pattern: over the first several days of the retreat, people's minds will start to calm down and quiet, day by day. You see the slow deepening of the effect of the silence and sustained awareness. Then after a few days, people have often reached some new level of calm or peace and feel the meditation is going fairly well.

And then the very next day, there might be a big explosion. It doesn't happen like this for everybody, but it's a common enough pattern that we've seen it hundreds of times. Every Vipassana teacher has seen this hundreds of times with students. This big explosion could be something related to outside life situations. It could just be the arising of stored energies, memories, the accumulated karmic patterns. It can come from different sources.

But at that point, the meditator often feels that they've gone off track because everything was deepening quite nicely and then it got bombed. They feel like an explosion was thrown in the middle of their practice. The next couple of days might be very chaotic—lots of thought energy, no calm at all, lots of strong energy in the body, sometimes strong emotions accompanying it, no ability to focus or concentrate on even the simplest object. They feel their practice has fallen apart.

But at that point, hopefully they talk to a teacher, and the teacher always says, "No, this is just part of the process. Just stay with what's happening and don't be concerned about it." And then, sure enough, in another day or so, the calm will start to come back in. If the meditator can just stay non-reactive and untroubled by the chaos, then it all just settles back out.

And then the meditator goes to a deeper level of peacefulness and calm than they had been in before. This is part of the purification. There have been a number of questions about old karmic patterns coming up—when we experience them without reactivity, that depletes the karmic bank. And this is the obvious expression of that process within the context of the silent retreat.

So I was curious to see if, in doing Dzogchen practice, the same kind of thing would happen or not. Some years ago, I was practicing at Angela Center with Rinpoche. I was in the middle of doing my work meditation in the kitchen and still connecting with mind essence as I was doing it. Right in the middle of my kitchen job, something in my chest just loosened up and came up and out. It wasn't particularly painful, and it was coming out of a period of calm, so I trusted in it. But there was just some deep release.

It didn't come with any memories or words particularly from my chest—it just rose into consciousness and passed out. Then I was left feeling much freer and lighter.

I happened to see Rinpoche a little bit later, and I told him about that. Then I told him how it had evolved. I said, "But the funny thing was, the next day I had all sorts of chaotic thoughts and feelings, and I couldn't focus really on rigpa. My meditation was just all over the map that particular day." I was very familiar with the pattern from Vipassana practice.

What was interesting to me is that his response was, "Yeah, that's exactly how it is. It's exactly how it is when these releases happen in doing rigpa practice—there's a great sense of openness, and then chaos tends to come in and fill the void." That's when I really trusted that this practice also does this deep work of purification of the emotional life, because I experienced it myself.

This kind of purification, I think, is an absolutely essential part of the meditative process, whether through Vipassana meditation or through Dzogchen meditation. Not only does it relieve suffering of old accumulations, but I've also come to feel that it's really necessary for the realization of emptiness—that one cannot possibly perceive the true extent of emptiness without releasing these old karmic accumulations.

Why is that? Because I think these karmic accumulations create a very strong sense of self or ego. They do this both through the body and through the mind. When we have a lot of these stored memories, pains, old hurts that are stored up in the body, number one, the body has layers of tension that make it uncomfortable. But we carry around the history with us through the body. Because those things have been stored and not released, the mind is always a little bit keeping a lid on the unruly bodily energy. So there's a sense of a little bit of tension between mind and body. It also gives more of a sense of solidity in the body because of the tension.

This is experienced, I think, in what Rinpoche has been calling the subtle body. This is a term that we don't use in Vipassana practice, so I just wanted to mention the way I understand the subtle body. The gross body is what doctors know from anatomy charts, what you see if you dissect a human body—that's the gross body. The subtle body, as I understand it, is the experience of the physical body through awareness. In other words, when you close your eyes and you just relax into your felt sense of the body sensations, I believe that's what's called the subtle body.

So in these felt sensations, we don't normally experience the length of the bones, for instance, because I don't think that there are nerves all along there. The subtle body is the way we experience the flow of energy as bodily sensations. Anyone who's meditated for a long time and paid close attention in this way will see there are lots of patterns in the subtle body—patterns of energy movement, repeated ways that we feel the same in different parts of the body again and again. When I was paying a lot of attention to the body, I felt I could have mapped out energy patterns that probably corresponded to acupuncture meridians or something like that. As the consciousness gets very subtly attuned, you can really feel a lot of

detail in the energy in the body. And it also includes, of course, the channels and the winds that Rinpoche has talked about a number of times.

The subtle body is strongly affected by the accumulations—the stored tensions, memories, hurts, traumas, pains that we haven't allowed to come through our system. It gets all jammed up there. So first we feel this sense of self through the body, through its lack of flexibility and freedom and ease.

The second place is in the mind. When these accumulations are there, the mind responds in very habitual patterns because these underlying emotions are exerting a strong subconscious force. So the mind tends to respond in habitual and conditioned ways.

The combination of these two—the stuckness in the body and the habitual patterns in the mind—create a strong sense of personality. They make a sense that this is who we are because it's so repeatable. It seems so repeatable and predictable and ongoing, day by day, month by month, year by year. And so we get the sense this is who we are, that our personality gets stuck in that particular rut. Both these are expressions of being tied to the past.

We're tied to the past because we haven't yet learned how to release it.

So one of the big developments in meditation practice—whether awareness practice, mindfulness, or Rigpa—is that the awareness starts to penetrate these stored accumulations and bring them into consciousness. It's making the unconscious conscious. As it does that, if we can be with them without reactivity, they have the opportunity to move through and truly get released. Truly gone from the system, as though they had never been there to begin with.

When this happens, the mind becomes much more open. Every time one of these releases occurs, the mind regains a little bit of its original space. And with that space come the qualities of the third aspect of Rigpa. Remember that the first is empty essence. The second is nature clarity. The third is that the indivisible union of the two is unceasing compassionate activity.

When the mind gets released from its old habits, that's what opens the door for the third qualities to start flowing out. And when you see somebody like Rinpoche, you can really get a sense. The creativity, the playfulness, the groundedness, the confidence, the trust—all those qualities can flow out once the prison or the bondage of the old karmic patterns aren't confining us so much.

This came home to me in a retreat with Rinpoche some years ago, again at Angela Center. I'd had a lot of insights into what in our tradition, the Vipassana tradition, we call anatta, or not-self, over the years, but most of them had been out of very deep states of samadhi, of concentration, and they'd been rather intense experiences where things had been changing, dissolving, arising and passing quite rapidly, so much so that I could see there was nothing fixed in the mind-body system.

In the middle of this retreat with Rinpoche, I just noticed that there was so much openness and so much

space that there couldn't possibly have been a self within it. Couldn't possibly have been a self. It was all just way too open. I looked for something, and it was clear there was just nothing there. It's one aspect of emptiness. But I don't think this could have happened until a certain amount of that karmic purification had taken place. Because earlier in my meditation career, I looked in and there was stuff jammed up. There was a strong feeling of self or personality that was continuing.

So this experience was quite lovely. It felt freeing. It also felt kind of ordinary. It wasn't accompanied by particularly strong samadhi. It was just in a week-long retreat with a schedule just like this one. But for me it was a different flavor of anatta than I'd had before, yet it was just as meaningful. And that's the kind of openness that can come in the personality when it's not confined by the old patterns.

I should mention that in Tibetan practices, there are specific methods for releasing these old obscurations. The ngöndro, and particularly the preliminary practices of Tibetan Buddhism, are intended to work on this level. And one of the key figures in this is a Yidam, a deity known as Vajrasattva. This statue just to my right of Rinpoche's throne, your left, is a statue of Vajrasattva, the principal deity in the Dzogchen practices. There's also a thangka at the back of the room which depicts Vajrasattva. Usually during Rinpoche's retreats, he either gives instructions in Vajrasattva visualization and mantra practice, but this retreat, for whatever reason, he hasn't. So we haven't been working with it, but I just wanted, especially the Vipassana practitioners, to know that there are a number of tools in Tibetan practices that are specifically designed for purifying the obscurations.

I think it really is an important part. The emotional purification that goes on is not just a sideshow of the practice. It's a really integral and important part of the purification of heart and mind.

So how to work as the emotions come up, if they do come up? Rinpoche talked at the end this afternoon about a few different levels of approach, and I think it would be helpful to review those.

The first approach to take if you're doing Dzogchen practice is just to recognize mind essence even while the difficult emotion is there, and see what happens. Sometimes the thoughts will vanish. Sometimes the emotion will either dissolve or be accommodated within the view so that the sense of conflict with it goes out. Maybe the whole grasping will go out at once, which is one of the possibilities he mentioned. I think he talked about the energy of anger remaining, but the hook of anger going out. So that's a possibility that the clinging really is undercut. Sometimes there's just a weakening of the force. There's still clearly clinging in it, but there's a weakening of the force.

But other times, as you turn to mind essence, if the emotion is really strong and the Rigpa is just not strong enough, you may not feel much impact or loosening or de-identification. The ego clinging in relation to the emotion may still be quite strong.

If that's the case and there's no sense of loosening of the grasping to it, then it's helpful to try a different approach. Rinpoche would call it shamatha with support. We would call it, in the Vipassana style,

mindfulness of the emotion.

In Vipassana practice, we spend a lot of time talking about how to relate directly with the emotion that's coming. So to know it for what it is, to open to it without any sense of pushing away or aversion, and to feel it directly in the body and mind with no holding back. So it's not to analyze it, it's not to judge it, it's not to try to make it go away. The central point in this kind of mindfulness approach is to open completely to it and feel it completely just as it is.

So it's leaving it alone. It's not applying an antidote either. It's leaving it alone and letting it express its nature. And what we see when it expresses its nature is that its nature is impermanent. All these mind states that we've trapped out of fear, that we've held onto, all they ever wanted to do was to come out on the stage, dance and sing for a while, and then exit stage right. That's their only agenda.

But because of our fear, we never let them do that. They'd get up on the stage, and they'd give a few kicks. And we'd say, "Nope, I'm going to bring down the curtain on this one. I'm not comfortable with it." And that's how they got trapped. All we have to do to let them pass through is to give them the full stage.

So in a way, this is really what I meant when I talked about the approach of mindfulness. The liberation of the emotions is based in the object. It's not particularly about turning to mind essence, but we trust the emotion itself to live its life, do its thing, and then manifest its impermanence.

So in a way, you could say it's seeing the emptiness of the object. Impermanence is closely linked with emptiness. When we see that things come and go, we know that their nature is not permanent, is not fixed. So they are empty. So essentially, in the approach of mindfulness, we are allowing the emotion to demonstrate its own emptiness. And then it's not our problem. We don't have to actually do anything with it, but let it come, express itself, and go.

The third approach is what Rinpoche mentioned as the antidote. And there are lots of these within the Vipassana tradition. He mentioned a few of the most common ones for greed, aversion, and delusion. But I just want to also mention—sometimes I hear from Vajrayana teachers that an antidote is the main approach of the Hinayana. And I just want to clarify that it's not the main approach for Vipassana practitioners. Mindfulness and seeing the emptiness of the emotion is the primary approach for Vipassana practitioners. Antidotes are applied only if that doesn't work.

So the main practices that we should apply are—I'm talking specifically to the Vipassana practitioners actually—first, to rest in mind essence and see if that will loosen the identification. This is beautiful if it works. Because one does get the sense, even though Rinpoche said this is a very advanced practice, of the thief entering the empty house. When you see the emptiness of self, there's nothing for the emotion to be in conflict with. There's nobody pushing against it. So even if it lingers for a little bit, it's just dancing in empty space, and there's no danger.

And the second one, mindfulness of emotion, is what you all are mostly familiar with. Both these

approaches have a great strength, and I'd say a potential limitation.

I want to talk about why mindfulness of emotions is such a great strength. There's a Burmese story of a hunter who was a great and skilled hunter and knew how to trap all the animals and kill all the animals to provide food. And then one day, somebody came along and said, "Oh, yeah, there are many animals in the forest. I know you've gotten most of them. But you know, there's one really rare bird. And I don't think you've found that." And he described the bird to the hunter. And the hunter said, "No, I haven't."

I've never seen that bird, much less trapped it or shot it. Can you tell me where it is?

And the person said, "Well, it hangs out most of the time in that part of the forest. Go look for it there."

So the hunter knew the forest very well. He went and waited in that corner of the forest, waited a long time, very patiently. No rare bird. But he hung out there for a long time. Then he thought, "No, it's not there. I better go over to this other part of the forest. I'll wait there and see if it comes there."

So he hung out in this part of the forest, day after day, observing the clouds and the light and the other animals and the creatures who came, the way the trees changed with the light, dawn and nightfall. Not there either.

So he kept checking out all the different parts of the forest for this rare bird. Never did find it. But what he said when he finished the quest—when he gave up on the quest—was: "I never did find that bird, but you know, I came to know that forest really well, because I'd spent so much time in every single corner of it."

So the analogy is, the rare bird, you might say, is enlightenment. Maybe we'll get there. Maybe we'll find it. Maybe we won't. But as the hunter did, if we investigate every corner of the forest—which is this mind—in search of enlightenment, we get to know that forest really well.

That's one of the things I really appreciate about mindfulness with emotions. We really come to know very well what anger feels like, what desire feels like, what confusion, restlessness, dullness, pride, jealousy—and then loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, calm, concentration, and so forth. We come to know all the corners of the mind really, really well.

And there's something freeing in that. It may not be the ultimate freedom—may not be enlightenment—but we know the terrain so that, as Rinpoche has said, we don't have to be afraid of ourselves. We've investigated all those corners, all the dark, scary corners. We've been there. We've seen what they hold, and we don't have to worry about it anymore.

I think that's a strength of mindfulness of emotions.

There's a limitation to this practice. There can be, and it's that we may, in doing this, put too much emphasis on the emotion and think that the emotions are really the heart of meditation or even the heart of the release of suffering—that if we know all the emotions well enough, that will in itself be liberating.

This is the danger in mindfulness practice. Mindfulness is always associated with objects, and we can get focused too much on the object and forget that the emphasis is in the awareness.

Particularly when the mindfulness is coupled with charged things like emotions, the tendency for that to happen is greater. So the meditator may develop a habit of ascribing more importance to the emotions than they actually contain and centering the practice around the emotions. That's only a potential danger.

The strength of the approach of mind essence is that it puts the emphasis in the right place, which is the ultimate nature of things. This is really the source of liberation. One of the things I think that comes from this directly is a lot of equanimity—a lot of equanimity, because it takes the focus away from the changing appearances. All the emotions are just kind of transient visitors. The refuge is awareness.

So this takes the spotlight off the transient visitors and puts it back into awareness, which really emphasizes the refuge of awareness, which is steady through all the arisings and passings. In a way, this is a sane emphasis. This is the right emphasis. This is really where freedom comes from—where equanimity comes from.

And as we can rest more and more and trust in the refuge of awareness, we don't care so much about the passing show. Emotions come and go. If we don't latch onto them, they're actually not problematic.

This approach puts us more in touch with that truth. But there's a possible limitation here also. And again, I say possible, not necessary. The reason is that this approach may not always be the one that will loosen the clinging in that moment. But because it's such an elegant approach, we may think it's the only good approach. Or we may think this is the best approach. Or we may think this approach has such a superior view that we won't condescend to use any of the other approaches because they're really kind of lower-class meditations. And so we develop a kind of intellectual superiority that ties us to one particular approach.

The best approach for you in a given moment is the one that will loosen ego clinging—not A, B, or C. And it may change. So I think it's really important to be open to looking at which technique is best right now. And so be willing to try them all, including "stupid shamatha" with a beer, if that's the one that really does it for you.

So I just really wanted to encourage you to give emotions proper respect. They are a really important part of this practice. And just learn to relate to them in a few different ways so that you feel free to choose the way that will free you best, that will work for you in that moment.

Any questions or comments so far?

Someone asked about using the antidote. Rinpoche gave the classical examples. If we're caught in desire—say it's sexual desire—a typical antidote to sexual desire is visualizing the body aging, dying, and then the corpse decaying. So you start to think: well, I may have what I want today, but in twenty years,

what will it look like? In general, this is called contemplation of the unbeautiful aspects.

The typical antidote to anger is loving-kindness. So one can actually turn directly to a meditation of loving-kindness. And the typical antidote to delusion is wisdom—reflection on dharma points. I think Rinpoche mentioned the chain of dependent origination.

Another question: in the Sutta on the Foundations of Mindfulness, the Buddha doesn't talk about the subtle body. The subtle body is not a term that's used anywhere in Theravada literature, as far as I know. So I think it came out of the tantras. I don't think it's in Mahayana either. But I think it's implicitly there in some of its aspects when he talks about body sensations. Body sensations are basically the part of the subtle body that we can connect with directly.

I think generally the idea is that the subtle body only exists when consciousness is functioning within the gross body. So my understanding is that at death, the subtle body moves on or ends and arises again with the new birth—one or the other.

Someone asked about the possible drawback of the looking practice, whether it might encourage people to further repress emotions. No, I didn't say that, and I don't see that as a problem. Because if you really do connect with mind essence, you're not going to overlook appearances. You're not going to overlook emotions.

Another question about whether the subtle body is connected with the Vipassana technique of sweeping...

The question is whether the subtle body is connected with the Vipassana technique of sweeping, and definitely that is what is getting experienced through the sweeping practice. The question is why the sweeping practice isn't more integrated for us. I used to teach sweeping on Vipassana retreats, and it's a great technique for some people. For those who don't know, sweeping is the systematic scanning of the attention through the body, experiencing all the sensations that one encounters. But over time, I've just come to trust in the power of one particular technique and kind of following it through for most people. And the people who are interested in sweeping usually will go and find a Goenka retreat somewhere.

I think we clarified the question about whether Rinpoche said that karma was neither created nor exhausted in doing mindfulness practice. We worked through the question and clarified it to the extent that he agreed that that particular karmic pattern was getting depleted if it came up and was experienced without reactivity. So that particular pattern becomes depleted. In the Theravadan tradition, it's not considered that all karma gets depleted through mindfulness. But the Buddha does say that the Eightfold Path, which includes mindfulness—the way he describes it is, it's action that is neither bright nor dark, leading to the end of karma. So it's pretty clear in the text that the Eightfold Path leads to the end of karma, but that's considered at the level of an arhat, that it's ended.

The question was, what version of Ngöndro does Rinpoche do? And I don't know the answer to that.

So, I want to move into part two of the talk. Have people still got a little energy? I want to talk about these terms mindfulness, consciousness, and awareness. And first I want to introduce why they became so interesting for me.

I think I mentioned the other night that rigpa kind of connects in two directions in the Vipassana system. Because it has the nature of cognizance, it connects with what is called consciousness in the Theravada system. Cognizance, consciousness—almost synonyms. Because its nature is unchanging, and it's beyond arising and ceasing, it also connects to the quality of nibbana. In the Theravadan system or the Pali suttas, there's only one unchanging Dhamma, and that is nibbana. So if the nature of mind is of this unchanging nature, then it also links to nibbana. So it links to consciousness on the one hand and nibbana on the other.

Now this is really confusing for Theravadan students, because the Buddha talked about consciousness as something that's impermanent. And I just want to emphasize why that is so.

Consciousness in the Pali suttas is considered to be the bare knowing of an object before any words come in. Just the ability to hold the sense datum. When you hear a sound, just the kind of musical tone of that sound as you receive it is being known in consciousness. Before you apply anything like, "that's a bell," much less "that's the end of the sitting, that's C sharp," or anything conceptual like that. Just the bare sound, completely physical experience—the knowing of that is the factor of consciousness.

And in the Pali suttas, it's taught that the consciousness arises with the object and passes away with the object. So there's currently hearing consciousness happening for us. But as the sound of the bell dies away and no other sound comes in, there's no new hearing consciousness arising. So the consciousness is considered to arise with the object and pass with the object. And that's how it's considered impermanent. And the term for this is vijñāna. Rinpoche has been talking about eight classes of vijñāna. In the Pali system, we have six. All the mind ones are just one consciousness.

So that's the term consciousness. Mindfulness we talked about is the factor—Rinpoche calls it alertness—of knowing our experience. A little intelligence is coming through. So we at least know hearing. There's the physical sound held by consciousness, and as the attention turns to it, we recognize, oh, that's hearing. It's arising at the ear door.

At least that much intelligence is happening—a kind of perception, recognition through the factor of mindfulness. So a little intelligence there. The consciousness doesn't have any intelligence. If you're not asleep and a sound happens, the consciousness will happen. But the mindfulness, not necessarily. For mindfulness, there has to be an awakeness, an alertness, attentiveness. So these are mindfulness and consciousness.

In the Pali suttas, there's no term that needs to be translated by awareness. You can translate the whole Pali canon and not use the term awareness. So let's hold onto awareness for a minute. And just say that

the dilemma for somebody who's coming out of the Pali suttas is the concept that Rigpa, with its emptiness and its cognizance, is unceasing. Well, how can cognizance be unceasing when consciousness is coming and going? How can we reconcile those two?

In fact, if you take the Rigpa model to certain Asian teachers, especially in Burma and Sri Lanka, they will reject it flat out. You remember I told that story about asking Mingyur Rinpoche the difference between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view? He said, basically, the Madhyamaka people—the followers of Nagarjuna—think that the Dzogchen people are making something up that's not really there, which is essentially the cognizant nature as an enduring thing. But Mingyur Rinpoche said that they just don't quite understand it right the way we hold it.

This same dilemma will happen today many times, I think, as the Theravadan teachings and the Dzogchen teachings come into more and more contact. It became a subject of a lot of concern for me. Maybe nobody else cares philosophically, but I did.

It was interesting—Ajahn Sumedho was here teaching, I think it was two years ago now, and he talks very much from a Dzogchen point of view, even though he's in the Thai monastic scene. He has that same take on awareness as the ongoing refuge. And somebody asked him that question: "But the Buddha said consciousness is impermanent and comes and goes." And he basically said, "Yeah, that's true, but this works for me." He was totally unconcerned about the philosophical dilemma.

I just want to point out that's one approach that as practitioners you're welcome to take. That cuts through all the debates.

One way to resolve it is just to say the Rigpa model is a skillful means. If I turn to mind essence, I can always find some cognizance there. And whether it's really permanent or not, it works as a meditation technique. You bypass the philosophical dilemma. And I think that's absolutely honorable. So for those of you who would like, feel free to bypass the philosophical dilemma. But for me, that wasn't enough.

So let me finish this train of thought, and then I'll take questions.

I was teaching a class for senior Vipassana students a few years ago, and we were discussing this question. I couldn't figure out a way to explain it. I went home and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, I woke up, and the resolution came to me. This is the image that I want to share with you tonight.

In Tibetan texts, they often talk about the clarity aspect as sunlight pervading empty space. The emptiness aspect is like the space. The clarity aspect is like the sunlight. And that played a part, I'm sure, in my image.

But this is the image that came: Let's say you're out on the edge of the solar system and you're facing away from the sun. And don't worry about a space suit or helmet or goggles or anything. It's just naked awareness on the edge of the solar system. You're facing away from the sun. Let's say you're looking into a

part of the solar system that doesn't have any stars. What do you see?

"Your shadow?"

That was indeed a good thought—a very good thought. This is not a trick question. What do you see? Exactly—it's totally black. But here's the key question: is it the color black that's coming into your eye, or is it simply the absence of light?

You're not seeing any light at all. Yet is there, in fact, light in front of you? The sunlight is pervading that empty space before you, but you're not seeing it.

Now suppose a meteor flashes from below, up in front of your eyes, then passes out above you. Do you see the meteor? Yes—in fact, you see it as a bright flash of light. That light is actually reflected sunlight, and it only comes to your eyes because an object has arisen that can reflect it.

So in this analogy, the sunlight pervading empty space is the nature clarity. The meteor is a phenomenon like a sound. The reflected light is the consciousness that illuminates that appearance. As soon as the meteor is out of sight, do you see any more light? Gone.

The sunlight pervading empty space is always there, but we don't know it until some phenomenon comes along that can reflect it. Then what's reflected is the phenomenon. The knowing of that comes and goes with the phenomenon, because that's the reflected clarity of the sunlight—that's the consciousness aspect.

In this model, consciousness comes and goes, but it's based on the ever-present clarity, which is otherwise invisible. Sometimes I add to this analogy that the sunlight pervading empty space is invisible, but sometimes the meditator can turn back, face the source, and see the light directly.

This is what the sunlight analogy captures beautifully. The light—which is neither a particle nor a wave, having a somewhat in-between existence without mass—is of that nature. There's no object involved. But it's only when the object comes that consciousness can arise, dependent on that underlying cognizance.

Exactly. Consciousness is turning on and off, although the sunlight—the underlying clarity—is always there. We become lost in the reflections of the clarity, you might say.

But how are you going to become aware of its pervasive nature if you don't turn around to see the source? All you would see are the reflections dependent on phenomena. I'm not saying you see anything visually, but you become aware of the awareness.

You become aware of it. I suppose the question could come up: where did that light come from? And then the deduction—it must be ever-present. But all analogies break down at some point, and this may be that point. But I think there is something about turning in the direction of the radiance that's kind of important.

"Right, and I think that's where the analogy breaks down. We've got a dualistic setup in the analogy from

the beginning."

Lee raised another question: "I don't think I buy it. What do you mean by 20 years? I don't think so. That's a thing that exists. That's for a thing that exists. But because... it does not fit into either category of existing or not existing. Just like a light particle kind of doesn't have mass."

Again, this is where the analogy breaks down. But the understanding is, I'd say, also the same for nibbana. If you want to go to classical Theravadan view, nibbana also cannot be said to be an existent. And yet you can't say that it's not something. The Buddha clearly said there is this unborn, there is this unproduced, this unmade. Without it, no escape would be possible from what is produced and made. So I think it also transcends the categories of existence and non-existence. And I think the ground has that same ontological status.

Bill asked about the analogy: "I'd be interested in your comment that you said throughout, that the natural clarity recognizes its own emptiness, not the view of life, if I understand that."

Right, right. Again, this is where the analogy breaks down. Because, let's face it—anytime we use physical objects for the analogy, there's no sentience there. But any analogy will only go so far. So I can't put sentience into sunlight. Problem solved, then.

So the way I tend to use awareness now is through the sunlight analogy. The clarity aspect of sunlight pervading empty space is what I tend to call awareness. And you notice that it has within it both the functions of consciousness and also of mindfulness, of recognition. It's got enough wisdom that it recognizes.

So personally, I—and I think Joseph also—use awareness as a word that bridges mindfulness and consciousness. It includes both mindfulness and consciousness. And when you think about the way we use awareness in English, it has both those qualities. It's smart, but it also just keeps happening on its own. Like you don't have to force consciousness of hearing, you don't have to force awareness of hearing. But just like mindfulness has intelligence to know that's a sound, awareness has a sense of intelligence. So that's the way I tend to use it now.

Michael added a footnote: "The word that you're trying to say, like cognitive, literally means 'humanopathy.' So there's some analogy in that."

There is.

Yeah. Thank you for that comment. Could everybody hear that in the back? Yes, I appreciate the linguistic insight. I'm not throwing the analogy out just because it's not perfect—no analogy ever is. I just want us to return to the essence here.

For me, this sun and cloud metaphor beautifully explains how the underlying luminosity of awareness could be enduring while consciousness comes and goes. That's what I want us to take as the essence of the

analogy—this understanding of the relationship between the changeless ground of awareness and the fluctuating movements of consciousness.

Jude, you had a question?

I haven't had a chance to explore this with Bhante Gunaratana yet. I actually tried to speak with him last month at the end of April when we were both in Massachusetts. We'd both been sitting in retreat there for some time. At the end of the scheduled retreat period, he wanted to continue sitting for a few more days, and so he declined the invitation to speak with a few of us who were hoping to engage with him about these questions. So I didn't get that opportunity.

But it's interesting to know about his perspective. I've heard he's quite open-minded—he's a Sri Lankan monk with a very receptive approach to these teachings. Yes, he is indeed. I understand he's teaching a retreat here in June, and also offering a daylong program. Our publicity director has more information about that if you're interested.

The website information is available as well. We should probably stop here for this evening.

This talk was given by Guy Armstrong at Spirit Rock Meditation Center on May 11, 2003. It is an offering of the Dharma Seat.

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