Rigpa Consciousness and Nibbāna

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:14:27

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When I first encountered these teachings, they provoked a lot of reflection in me. Coming from a Theravadan background and encountering this entirely different dharma model, I found that some points were very consistent and fit well together, while others didn't seem to bear much relationship to each other.

In particular, this concept of rigpa became very intriguing to me. Because of its nature of cognizance, it connects in the direction of mindfulness. I trust you've gotten a sense of that—the cognizance is what knows experience. In vipassana practice, it's mindfulness that plays this role of knowing our experience.

In the other direction, because rigpa doesn't arise or pass—at least the ground doesn't arise and pass, and rigpa is the view of the ground—it also connects to that which is beyond change. In the Pali Canon, the classical teachings of the Buddha, there's only one dhamma that is beyond change. I'm sure you know what that is: the unconditioned, nibbāna in Pali or nirvāna in Sanskrit.

So here we have this piece called rigpa, which on one end of the Theravadan model connects to mindfulness, our basic practice, and on the other end connects to the unconditioned of nirvāna. That's curious, isn't it?

There's one quotation in the texts that points to something similar to this. A questioner came to the Buddha and said, "You've talked about these five physical senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Where do these five physical senses come together? What's the locus, the container or meeting point of the five senses?"

The Buddha said, "The mind."

The questioner thought for a minute and said, "Okay, what's the locus for the mind? What's the container greater than the mind?"

The Buddha said, "Mindfulness."

The man thought for a minute and said, "Well, what's the locus for mindfulness? Where does that come together?"

The Buddha said, "Liberation. Liberation is the locus for mindfulness."

The questioner thought for another minute and said, "What's the locus of liberation?"

The Buddha said, "Nirvāna. Nirvāna, the unconditioned. That which is not subject to coming or going."

The man thought for a moment and said, "What's the locus of nibbāna?"

And the Buddha said, "This is going too far." He refused to answer—one of the few occasions of humor in the Pali Canon.

I hope you get the sense of this connection: the physical senses, the mind, mindfulness, liberation, and nibbāna, each sort of bigger than the one before.

Well, either way you take it, toward mindfulness or toward nirvāna, there are points of controversy between some Theravadan understanding and the Dzogchen understanding.

In the Theravadan understanding, as you go in the direction of contact with objects, mindfulness comes and goes, but even more fundamentally, consciousness comes and goes and is considered impermanent. It's one of the five aggregates. All the aggregates are impermanent, so consciousness is impermanent. Rigpa and the cognizance of rigpa is considered to be stable, ongoing, not subject to change. How do we figure that one out?

And if you go in the other direction, where there's some correlation between rigpa and nirvāna, in some classical understandings, nirvāna doesn't have an element of cognizance to it. We'll get to that later, but typically it's presented as without consciousness in many schools of Theravada. So how does that fit together?

These questions became very interesting for me. More than interesting, they really gripped me. I spent a lot of time trying to understand not only how the languages fit together, but what was true. Really, which one was true? Checking against my experience and other people's experience and reading the texts, which one was I going to believe? What was I going to adopt for myself?

Now, for some of you, this may sound just like philosophical speculation and not very important. But I know there are people here whose practice gets into these realms.

of nibbana, for whom that is not just philosophical talk, but a living actuality, and other people who want to understand the relation of that to the consciousness that meets each moment.

So, at least for some, I know that this is a question of some urgency. Why? One reason is that in the Theravadan understanding, when one has a direct realization of or experience of the unconditioned, that constitutes stream entry. Once one has attained the stage of stream entry, final liberation in terms of arahantship is assured. It says in the text that it will take place in no more than seven lifetimes. And the Buddha makes statements like, once one has attained stream entry, the amount of suffering left in all of one's future lives is very small compared to that which has been undergone before.

So, although this can just be another source for ego clinging—have I or haven't I? You know the dilemma? Have I attained the ultimate state where I didn't exist? These can just be credentials along the way. They can also be very deeply felt issues of concern and things that I feel it's important to resolve within ourselves.

Ajahn Sumedho was practicing—he's told this story publicly, so he won't mind it being shared again—with Ajahn Chah in the early years when he was a bhikkhu in Thailand. Ajahn Chah was his teacher, great enlightened master. He had had an experience and wondered if it was stream entry. So he went to Ajahn Chah to ask. It's kind of a big deal if that happens in your practice career. So he described the experience to Ajahn Chah and asked him to tell him whether it was or wasn't stream entry. And Ajahn Chah replied, "How should I know? I wasn't there."

Which is great. And I think it's the same suggestion as Rinpoche refusing to endorse Rigpa or non-Rigpa for people. So in the end, the only final authority can be our own. But how do we come to make that kind of evaluation? How do we know whether we've deeply touched, accurately touched something that is beyond change?

Because it's said that the actual contact with this element, this unconditioned element, is what allows the bondages in the mind—called fetters in the Theravadan—to be uprooted. Not just temporarily suspended but taken out for good. And in our tradition they are considered to be ten of these sources of bondage and suffering, each of which gets uprooted at a later stage in the development by this contact with the unconditioned element. Because this unconditioned element of nirvana is so free in its nature, it is so completely unbound, that the direct contact, realization of it, experience of it, communicates that quality of unbinding to our individual minds and releases the bondage.

So I want to approach it in both directions—the direction of consciousness on the one hand and nirvana on the other—and talk about how Rigpa is related to each of those.

To do that, I first want to talk about what consciousness is in the classical understanding. I don't think it's different than the Tibetan understanding of the first six consciousnesses, but let's go into it a bit.

Consciousness is the fifth of the five aggregates. They are form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The body and the physical world and the sense experiences are all part of form. So the whole physical world and sight, sound, smell, taste, touches are all in the first aggregate. The other four are all parts of the mind. When you say mind in Theravadan, in the biggest sense it's these four mental aggregates put together. But they could all be combined down to—three of them could be combined into one. Feeling and perception can also be considered as mental formations. So really we could say that mental formations form the first part of the mind. These are mind states, both emotions, moods, refined states of mind like concentration, tranquility, and so on. All come under the category of mental formations. And then the fifth aggregate is this one of consciousness. The Pali is viññāṇa, the Sanskrit is vijñāna.

So what does consciousness mean? Consciousness is that part of the mind that has the barest experience of sense data. For instance, as your eyes are open and you're looking out and you're seeing patches just of form and color, before you recognize it as patterns like man, chair, woman, carpet, bell, just that knowing of the different shapes and forms that are in front of the eye is said to be visual consciousness. Or when that sound reaches you, just the bare knowing of the sound is said to be hearing consciousness.

This kind of consciousness takes place very automatically if our senses are working and we're awake. If we were a corpse or if our senses weren't working, we wouldn't have this consciousness. But because we're awake and our senses are working and something happens, we all have this consciousness. It comes very automatically. We don't have to do anything about it.

And in fact, you can't stop it. If I tell you not to hear that sound, you don't have any choice. So consciousness functions quite automatically.

Consciousness refers to just the simplest knowing before any concepts come in—before you even think "that's a bell," or even before you think "that's a sound," before there's any categorizing at all. There's the bare physical experience, completely non-conceptual. Consciousness is the mental part of that.

So there's the sound, but somewhere you're knowing it, right? You're not a bump on a log. If you were a bump on a log, you wouldn't be knowing it. But you're not a bump on a log, so you are knowing it. That's what it means to be a conscious being or a sentient being. Consciousness is that part of the mind, that functioning of the mind, that is knowing the sound.

There are said to be six kinds of consciousness in Theravada: the five physical senses plus the mind door. So the mind is knowing thoughts, emotions, intentions, feeling tone, perceptions. I think what happens in Theravada is that we combine the sixth and seventh consciousness that the Tibetans talk about into the sixth. What they talk about as sixth and seventh is all just sixth for us. And we don't have an eighth—just sixth.

Sometimes it's helpful to know this, because if you try to find this thing called consciousness, it's kind of unfindable. You can find all the other aggregates—you can find body, feeling, perception, moods, emotions, and thoughts. But try to find consciousness and it's like the eye trying to see itself, because consciousness is what's doing the experiencing. So how is that going to experience itself?

Rinpoche talks about a non-dual kind of knowing, but this is more particular—this is the knowing of an object in Theravada. So what I want to suggest is the best way to think of consciousness, maybe, is as a verb. It's really about knowing. So don't worry if you can't find a thing called consciousness, but if you can just get in touch that the quality of knowing is happening in your experience—this bare sense knowing—that's consciousness happening.

Now, this is one level of knowing. In Theravada, as in Tibetan, there are different levels of knowing. In our meditation practice, the next level up of knowing is called mindfulness.

Mindfulness, in our tradition, is defined as knowing what our experience is in each moment. If you read the Satipatthana Sutta, it says when the practitioner breathes in, he or she knows "I'm breathing in." When the practitioner breathes out, he or she knows "I'm breathing out." When they breathe in long, they know "I'm breathing in long." When they breathe in short, they know "I'm breathing in short." When the mind is influenced by attraction, it recognizes "attraction is present in me." When it's not influenced by attraction, it recognizes "attraction is not present in me."

So mindfulness is all about knowing what our experience is in this moment. That's a little bit higher level of knowing. In the beginning, it's somewhat conceptual. It takes concept to know "I'm breathing in," "I'm breathing out," "I'm experiencing greed or aversion or sadness or happiness," whatever. So mindfulness is a little bit of intelligent knowing.

Consciousness doesn't take any intelligence. You can't turn it on, you can't turn it off—it's just happening. Mindfulness takes some intelligence, and that's why it's the opening of wisdom.

I think if you look at rigpa also—it might be interesting to ask Rinpoche this—you'll also see two levels of what could be called cognizance. There's the cognizance of the bare sense field that's coming in. It's clarity or cognizance that shows us that. It's also cognizance that knows the nature of emptiness and cognizance combined. So that's a little bit higher level of knowing. It takes wisdom to know that. It doesn't take a lot of wisdom just to know sense data.

That cognizance functions automatically. It takes wisdom to know the union of emptiness and cognizance. So that kind of knowing is also present in Rigpa.

But there's another word we use frequently in dharma discussions—both in Tibetan and Theravada contexts—and that word is awareness. What I found really interesting is that there is no Pali word that needs to be translated as awareness. The entirety of the Buddha's classical teachings can be translated without using the term awareness. Consciousness and mindfulness are the only two translations you really need. For the Pali aficionados, there's one other term—sampajanya—usually translated as clear comprehension, but sometimes translated as full awareness, though it's not necessary. Clear comprehension works fine.

So what do we do with this term awareness, which is so prominently used in the description of Rigpa? I want to return to that question.

But let me say one more thing about consciousness to illustrate the dilemma. It's said to rise with the arising of the sense element. When the bell is struck, hearing consciousness arises, and as the bell fades away, hearing consciousness fades away. This knowing rises with an object and passes with an object.

Someone once asked the Buddha, "Is this the same consciousness that travels to the next birth?" And the Buddha said, "Definitely not. You've misunderstood me." So it's really clear that the aggregate of consciousness is impermanent, arising and passing.

Yet the cognizance of Rigpa is considered to be lasting, not subject to birth or death. So which is true? Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?

You remember when I told the story a few nights ago of asking Mingyur Rinpoche what the difference was between the Madhyamaka view and the Dzogchen view? He said that the Madhyamakas consider that the Dzogchenpas believe in something that doesn't exist. This is the nub of that controversy.

The Madhyamakas would say that the Dzogchenpas believe in the ongoing nature of cognizance when in fact consciousness arises and passes. They would say that's the nub of the confusion or mistake. You'll also find this view in orthodox Theravadan circles. If you try to describe the practice of Rigpa to a very orthodox Theravadan teacher—I'm thinking of Burma especially—they will say, "No, that's wrong view. That's wrong understanding."

You remember also that I asked Ajahn Sumedho about this dilemma. His response was, "I don't know the answer to that, but this idea works for me."

So for those of you who aren't very philosophically inclined and who don't really care about this question, you're welcome to drop it. You can use the notion of Rigpa as skillful means, or you can believe it. Either way.

[A student asks about where the sense of self arises in this model]

The question was, where does the notion of self arise in this level of cognizing? It comes in at an even higher level because it rests on fixation and a form of grasping. There's been some conceptualizing of the object and a singling out of the object and then a latching onto it. So it's even a higher level of concept than mindfulness that just knows what something is. There's been development of some relationship with it as being attractive or unattractive, so the feeling tone is also important.

It arises in the Theravadan model from a mix of a bunch of the aggregates together. And that stickiness isn't seen clearly—the way they function together isn't seen clearly. And that's what creates the mistaken notion of self.

But for those of you who care about these things, how can we resolve it? I was teaching this to a group of senior students a few years ago and couldn't get across the way I was thinking about it or the way I had resolved it for myself. I found myself really turning the question over repeatedly.

That night I went to sleep and woke up in the middle of the night with this image that came to me. This image solved it for me, and this is what I want to share with you. You can consider it a kind of thought experiment, if you like.

When I studied physics in college, we were told that we could prove physical theorems in three ways. One is by physical principles. One is by mathematical proof, tested experimentally in the laboratory. And the third was called a thought experiment, or Gedanken experiment. If you can think it through and there are

no inconsistencies, it's valid. So this is a Gedanken experiment.

I want you to imagine something. Picture yourself way out at the edge of the solar system with your back to the sun. Hypothetically, let's say you don't worry about a space suit or getting air—you're just out there, small. And let's say further that you're facing into a part of the sky that doesn't have any stars. So it's just hypothetical: edge of the solar system, looking out from the sun, sky doesn't have any stars where you're looking.

So what do you see? Black, right? You see black, don't you? Is it the black of the color black, or is it the black that's the absence of any light? It's the black that's the absence of any light, right? There's no light coming to the eye, so the eye sees black.

Now, is that space in front of you actually free of light? Or does it have light? Your back is to the sun. The sun's radiating. It's full of light, isn't it? It's pervaded by light, but we don't see it. So it looks black.

Now, let's suppose that a meteor flashes up from below and flies in front of your eyes. Do you see it? What's it like? Light. There's a big flash of light, isn't there? And then it goes and it's dark again, right?

I want to suggest that this is an analogy for the relationship between the unconditioned and consciousness. The analogy is that the sunlight pervading the empty space—the ever-present sunlight—is like the unconditioned nature. But we don't usually see it. When an object, a phenomenal arising, comes into that field, it gets illuminated by the unconditioned nature. And that flash, which is only temporary, is consciousness.

Does that make sense? When you're looking out into the sky with your back to the sun, you see black, but that black is actually pervaded with light. There are photons passing through there streaming from the sun, but we don't notice it. As soon as an object passes in front of us like a meteorite, there's a bright flash of light that reaches our eyes and seeing takes place.

The analogy is that the sunlight pervading the empty space is like the unconditioned nature—it's ever-present. But the flash of seeing that happens when the object comes into the field is consciousness. It's illuminated just temporarily, just momentarily, by the unconditioned, the ever-present nature. But that flashing goes away when the object goes.

"I thought I heard Rinpoche say in response to a question yesterday that actually Buddha nature, the unconditioned, is permanent, and that rigpa is a little bit different, but it is this union of consciousness and Buddha nature. So it's more like what you're describing. When you're saying that rigpa is coming in, I'm a little confused because I thought he said something different. He said it was perception."

Yeah, he said Rigpa is the perception of the ground or a piece of the ground and that comes and goes. So in that sense it's true. But Rigpa is often described in the texts as that which is beyond change. Sometimes the vocabulary is not so clear between Rigpa and Buddha nature. So I could also say Buddha nature

throughout this talk. It's pointing to our current word for an unchanging nature. We can substitute Buddha nature and it will work just as well.

This sunlight pervading empty space concept actually occurs in some Tibetan texts. The solar system part doesn't because they didn't have the solar system back then, and the meteorite doesn't. But I had heard that sunlight pervading empty space was used, and that's part of what allowed this image to form. It's actually a classical analogy for the unconditioned nature.

Think about light particles—they don't have any mass. That's one of the curious things about light: it has energy, but it has no weight. And it's everywhere, if you're near a sun.

Someone mentioned dark retreat and how you experience lights even in total darkness. Yes, you experience light. In meditation with eyes closed, we experience a lot of light also. It tends to be a sign of concentration. These inner lights do come in meditation, but it doesn't need sense input. This analogy doesn't require physical light. The physical light is just an analogy for the clarity of mind, and the flashing is just an analogy for the cognizance of objects.

So it could be all inner objects. It could be cognizing an emotion. We don't know it until the natural clarity or cognizance shines on it. That's what illuminates it. It's not physical light that I'm relating to in our experience, but the cognizance of our nature. Light is just a good analogy for that cognizance. Sometimes the word used for this cognizance feature of our nature is clarity or luminosity—it's almost built in.

The term "clear light" that's used in Buddhism relates to this. Sometimes it's talked about as the clear light of the void. I'm not sure whether that's an accurate translation because that term came in a long time ago, and I'm uncertain whether the Tibetans would talk about it that way today. I tend to think that clear light is a slightly imprecise translation of luminosity or clarity, but I'm not an authority on that. It certainly has the sense of unconditioned clarity of our nature.

Here's where the analogy breaks down a little bit, because these things are occurring in physical space.

Here's where the analogy breaks down a little bit, because these things are occurring in physical space. I'm combining the outer phenomena with the consciousness of the individual who's watching. In the real situation, that sunlight pervading empty space is within each of us. It's an integral part of our minds. In fact, to say it's within isn't quite right because it's both within and without.

Here's what I want to suggest: when a phenomenon arises—let's say at one of the five senses—the ground for us to know that is already present within us as this unconditioned clarity. But no phenomenon takes place, no consciousness takes place, no sense experience takes place until that unconditioned clarity meets with a physical phenomenon, which is the sound. In the analogy, the sunlight is the inherent clarity of the mind, but in order for it to be effective or function for us as sentient beings, it needs an object to reflect it. We don't see it. We're not aware of it until an object reflects it back, bounces off of it.

The comment was made that rigpa's not preoccupied with that, and you're absolutely right. If this whole discussion doesn't interest you and isn't necessary, you can drop it.

I guess my experience of vipassana over the years was that I was very confused about the idea of the unconditioned. It really had my knickers in a twist. I had deep experience and understanding, but there was some thorny knot that didn't get untangled there, and that's what drew me to this. In my experience, what's useful about perception theory is that there can be knowing without a knower. I'm not looking at all the details of that, but intuitively, I can at least conceptually grasp that and have a brief experience of that kind of groundlessness, non-positioning. That somehow makes sense, whereas I always felt like I had to annihilate myself.

I can appreciate that because it's very hard to get any kind of conceptual model on what the unconditioned is in the Theravadan view because it's so little talked about. In the later part of the talk, when we get into the nirvana piece, that's actually what I want to go into—there are four different ways of looking at nirvana. I want to unfold those, and whether it comes with knowing or not is an integral part of that question. So we'll get there.

Let me continue a little bit longer before we open up for questions. There are many questions on this topic, and there's some material I want to cover first.

This is the model that for me resolved the dilemma because it illustrated consciousness as being temporary but arising out of a base that was unchanging—a base of cognizance that was unchanging. If you really want to mess the analogy up a little more, you can think—and I'm not going to take questions on this statement; this is just for play—imagine that perhaps the way to perceive the unconditioned nature directly is to turn back to face the source. That's all I'm going to say about that.

Where does awareness come in? In the Tibetan tradition, this aspect of natural clarity, which is not subject to arising and passing—illustrated by the sunlight in the analogy—is often called primordial awareness. Primordial because it's been there from the very beginning and it's not subject to birth and death. I think it could be helpful to capitalize the P and the A in that description, just so you remember that it's an aspect of the unconditioned. It's not an awareness of changing objects, but it's been there forever in this view—forever.

Do you see how this model of consciousness has an element that's conditioned because it depends on the object being present, but it also has an element which is unconditioned, which is a reflection of that underlying luminosity? I was interested to hear when Ajahn Jumnian came one time, someone asked him, "Is consciousness conditioned or unconditioned?" His answer was, "It has both aspects. It has a conditioned aspect and it has an unconditioned aspect." You'll find that the Thai forest tradition is very much in line with this view and this analogy. They're right there.

The other question is, as was asked a minute ago, how does this connect with the unconditioned or

nirvana? That's what I'd like to talk about next.

I'll start with a quote from the book I mentioned the other night, Self-Liberation, translated by John Reynolds: "This self-originated primordial awareness has not been created by anything."

Amazing! It does not experience birth, nor does there exist a cause for its death. Amazing!

This makes it clear that the primordial awareness is not subject to coming or going, not subject to birth or death. As I said, in the Theravadan canon, there's only one dhamma, there's only one element that fits that description, and that is nirvana.

So the question is: is awareness an integral part of nirvana or not?

As we get into the territory of nirvana, I want to make one distinction here. When the Tibetans talk about nirvana, as I understand it, they talk about it to mean the mind state of a fully enlightened Buddha. That mind state is characterized by a quality of omniscience that can know anything it turns its attention to.

When the Theravadans talk about nibbana—same word—they use it in two ways. One is the mind state of an arahant who has become fully enlightened where all the defilements have been released, but who may not have omniscience, generally does not have omniscience. It's a liberated mind in either case.

But the other way that nibbana is used is as a synonym for the unconditioned element itself. So we often say that one can realize nibbana, or one does realize nibbana at the stage of stream entry. There's a direct experience or realization of this unconditioned element so that one knows what that is from firsthand experience. So just get the sense that they're a little bit different.

I'll talk about primarily the second sense of the unconditioned element. What is the unconditioned element? How is it understood in different Buddhist traditions? How is that experience described? Because people here—I know meditators here who have had a range of experiences that come close to these descriptions.

The first view is that nibbana has no ontological reality at all. Let me just say what I mean by that. Ontology is the study of being, existence, whether things exist or not. Ontological reality means something has some form of existence. So this term nibbana could or could not have some form of existence.

This school of thought says that nibbana is not a separate place or object at all or element, but it is only the state of mind which is free of greed, aversion, and confusion. Can you appreciate that understanding? It's not a destination. It's not something that is a separate dimension of our reality. It's just a normal state of mind where greed, aversion, and delusion have been completely uprooted, never to arise again. Nothing metaphysical about it at all, nothing transcendent. I mean, it's a very exalted state of mind, but it's not beyond the five senses.

Now, I think that this view is somewhat close to the view of the Madhyamaka school, Nagarjuna's school,

who kept cutting out any postulates of existence. I don't know this for a fact, but that's my suspicion.

I also want to relate it to the term rigpa and just raise a point. We talked about rigpa as empty cognizance, or we could say it as a verb: empty cognizing, because we really only know cognizing by its activity, don't we? So when we talk about it as a verb—empty knowing—but then we give it a name, rigpa, it turns it into a noun. Once we've turned a verb into a noun, we tend to ascribe an ontological reality to it. But is it necessarily there?

This is also what's pointed to even by some of the Dzogchen texts which say you can't find it. Remember that section from Shabkar that I read last night? "Look for mind and it isn't to be found. It has no form or color." But I don't want to make a big deal of this. This is just more a kind of interesting question. I actually think—well, I'll get to my opinion later. It's not so important right now.

Here's the second description of the unconditioned element. This is the view of many orthodox Theravadan schools, and I'll ascribe it particularly to the view of the Visuddhimagga, a 6th century text which is very influential in Burma and Sri Lanka, and particularly associated with the school of Mahasi Sayadaw.

So in this view, nibbana has an ontological reality. It exists to some degree. It doesn't exist like ordinary things exist. It exists on another kind of level, a more subtle level—just the way that light exists in a lighter way than mass exists. But it nonetheless has some ontological reality.

And here's a description of it from the Pali Canon. This is from the Samyutta Nikaya.

Bhikkhus, that sphere should be realized where the eye stops and the perception of form fades away. That sphere should be realized where the ear stops and the perception of sound fades, where the nose stops and the perception of odor fades, where the tongue stops and the perception of flavor fades, where the body stops and the perception of tactile sensation fades, where the mind stops and the perception of ideas and phenomena fade. That sphere should be realized.

It's clear that this is talking about the unconditioned. This is a pointer you'll find many places in the Pali Canon to a quality of mind, or you could call it a state called cessation. There are different interpretations of what constitutes cessation, but one way of describing the unconditioned is as a state of cessation.

This was echoed also by a Zen master—I think it was Dogen—who talked about enlightenment as being the dropping off of body and mind.

So it's very clear from the descriptions in these teaching lineages that this is an experience that meditators have. It is, in their view, the goal of meditation practice because it is the contact with this dimension that does the uprooting of the fetters, the forms of bondage. But their description of it is that all five senses are suspended and even consciousness is suspended. So one way of saying it, if you want to say it accurately, is that the four mental aggregates go away, at least for a moment or a few moments.

People who experience this in their meditation practice describe it as a gap. There is knowing, knowing, knowing. And the next thing they know, there's been some interval of time and they start knowing again. But they know that there's been an interval of time. But there is no memory of what happened in that interval of time. Maybe if they're really acute, they can get right on the far edge of that gap coming out of it. They get a little bit of a whiff of a memory of an aroma that existed there. And so they have some little sense of that unconditioned peace and stillness, maybe. But sometimes they come out of the gap and they don't have any memory at all.

In some schools, this is considered an enlightenment experience. In the Theravadan model, there are four levels of enlightenment, so this is not full enlightenment in the Tibetan sense. But it could be an experience of stream entry.

In this state, even consciousness goes away. So there is no direct knowing of this state for the meditator. It's very much an altered state of mind. It's a very unlikely state to happen in daily life. It usually requires a lot of concentration and a lot of mindfulness and a lot of equanimity for the mind to have that experience. So you could say in many ways this is a classical description of enlightenment from an orthodox Theravadan point of view in some schools: that the cessation is of all four mental aggregates. The physical aggregate, of course, is still there. The body doesn't go away. But because consciousness isn't there, there's no experience of the body. So experience just stops for a while. And that is when it's said that the mind opens to the unconditioned.

Now, there's another description that you find in the Theravadan tradition which still has a quality of cessation to it. But in this view, consciousness doesn't cease. So the other three mental aggregates do. Feeling, perception, and mental formations are absent, but consciousness is still present. And in this view, what consciousness takes as its object is the deathless element. There's a direct realization of nibbana, of the unconditioned, in this view. This is commonly the way it's described in the Thai forest tradition.

There's a great story of a teacher who was a contemporary of Ajahn Chah named Ajahn Mahabua. I think he's 93 years old now. He's still teaching in Thailand, but he is old. He was a very, very dedicated practitioner. When he came into, I think it was about his tenth rains retreat—that means the three-month period when the monks don't move around and they usually do more retreat—he'd been a monk for ten years at that time. He decided to make a vow to sit up all night without moving. Every night of the rains retreat. So that's what he did. Every night he'd just sit up in meditation all night long. He said the pain was unbelievable. But he was very determined and he stuck to it. He said that after he did that he lost his fear of death because he knew no pain from dying could be worse than the pain he'd experienced from this period of practice.

These old masters didn't have chicken hearts. They really went for it wholeheartedly.

He said that after that intense period, his concentration was unshakable. "From that point on, I kept making progress until my mind was like rock. In other words, I was skilled enough in the solidity and

stability of my concentration that the mind was like a slab of rock. It couldn't be easily affected by anything at all."

Then came an interesting development: "I was stuck on that concentration for five full years." He loved the stillness so much that he didn't want to give it up and didn't think to look for anything greater, anything beyond that stillness because it was so unmoving. Then he realized that he was stuck. It only took him five years to recognize this!

At that point, he realized what he needed to use was what in that tradition is called *satipañña*—mindfulne ss wisdom. It's very similar in its nature to rigpa. It's the combination of cognizance and wisdom.

"At that point, things went easily because my concentration was fully prepared," he said. He began by turning this wisdom way of looking onto four factors: desire and non-desire, suffering and ease. These are basically the four parts of the Four Noble Truths. So he was investigating the Four Noble Truths non-stop. And then he saw that they were all subject to change. Desire and non-desire kept alternating. Suffering and ease kept alternating. So he decided that wasn't the place to look.

"At that point, I let go of everything else but mindfulness and wisdom. They became impartial and impassive and the mind didn't tend to anything." And then here's the quote of this special moment:

"At that moment, the cosmos in the mind over which ignorance held sway trembled and quaked. Ignorance was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place, the pure mind appeared at the same moment that ignorance was toppled and eradicated through the power of mindfulness and wisdom."

When he describes the pure mind, it is this faculty of mindfulness and wisdom combined—the faculty of knowing and intelligence, which is very much like rigpa. So this is a description that meets very well with the Tibetan understanding.

The *satipañña* he turned on itself.

Here's another reference from the Buddha's words from the Pali Canon: "Consciousness without feature, without end, luminous all around." Sound familiar? "Here water, earth, fire and wind have no footing. Here long and short, coarse and fine, fair and foul, name and form are all brought to an end. With the stopping of consciousness, each is here brought to an end."

So this is another style of cessation. There's cessation of all the sense activities. There's cessation of thought formation, even of the possibility of thought formation. But consciousness remains, and the only thing it's conscious of is the undying, the absolute, unmoving stillness of the unconditioned.

That's the third of these four models of nirvana. That quote was from Digha Nikaya, Sutta 11.

The fourth of these models is that the realization of the unconditioned can take place in a state where all the senses are functioning, but where the poisons—greed, aversion, and confusion—have ceased. So the

cessation is of any kind of grasping or misunderstanding, any degree of ignorance or grasping. Everything else is functioning, but there's a clear perception of the deathless. This is more like the view of Dzogchen.

You can also find references in the Pali Canon that support certainly number three, where consciousness is present with the unconditioned.

One interesting way to find out whether awareness is permanent is to ask: what happens when a fully enlightened being dies? Is there any consciousness that continues, or is there not?

Well, it's a little controversial in this room. He said the wisdom stream continues. And I said, "You mean as a specific, particular individual?" He said yes. And he looked and he said, "You're free. You're free to manifest." So, and then he said, "Buddha nature is not alone. Not one big thing. Everyone has their own specific thing." Interesting.

The comment was that what Rinpoche said when the question was asked this afternoon was that you're free—the consciousness does continue, but it's a wisdom mind stream only. And it's not that it merges back into a universal blob of mind, but the mind stream stays individual. And if you want, you can manifest again, meaning presumably take birth or manifest on wordless planes.

Interesting. So in the Pali, that is what I thought from the Tibetan point of view too. In the Pali suttas, this question gets touched on when you ask the question: what happens when an arhat dies?

There's this interesting passage where somebody is very close to liberation, but they can't quite get there. So they're practicing, practicing, practicing. This bhikkhu's name is Godhika. He gets close to liberation, has a temporary liberation, but then falls back into samsara, suffering. Practices, practices, practices, achieves temporary liberation, falls back into samsara and does this a number of times.

Because he's unable to sustain his liberation, he gets discouraged and commits suicide. The euphemism in the canon for committing suicide is that Bhikkhu Godhika used the knife and took his life. He was just practicing out on a mountaintop somewhere on his own.

Then the other bhikkhus came to the Buddha and said, "But Godhika used the knife. Isn't that really bad for him?" Because you know in Buddhism, one isn't supposed to take one's own life. It's still killing a human being, and so it goes against the precepts.

And the Buddha looked with his psychic vision and he said, "No worries. Because just before Godhika died, he attained arahantship. So he was released." Just before the moment of death, even though he had used the knife already.

Then he said, "Did you see near where Godhika was staying—did you see a black cloud swirling around there?" He said that was Mara searching for the consciousness of Godhika. Mara is the one who comes and tempts practitioners away. He was trying to find the consciousness so that he could drag that practitioner, drag their spirit back to a lower realm or away from practice or away from the liberating Dharma or

something like that, so he wouldn't be reborn in a good place.

But the Buddha said, "Mara was unable to find Godhika's consciousness. Because he had attained arahantship, his consciousness was unestablished."

So the Buddha didn't say that his consciousness didn't exist anymore. He said that that dead Arahant's consciousness was unestablished.

And there's another great passage that illustrates what unestablished means. And this is what I want to finish with.

Buddha said, "Suppose you have a building and it has an eastern window and of course, four walls. So the sunlight comes in through the eastern window. Where does it land? On the western wall." And sunlight lands on the western wall.

And the Buddha said, "What if there were no western wall there? Where would the sunlight land?" And they said, "On the earth."

"What if there was no earth there, but there was water? Where would it land?" He said, "On the water."

Finally he said, "What if there was no water or earth there?"

Where would it land? And at that point he said it would be unestablished. The sunlight would be unestablished. Sunlight in empty space? Remind you of anything?

So finally tonight I want to describe one meeting I had with Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, whom Sogyal Rinpoche has mentioned a few times. Nyoshul Khenpo was a teacher of Sogyal Rinpoche and his picture is on the altar if you haven't looked yet. There are photos on this side of Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche and Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, our Rinpoche's father. You might like to take a look.

One year, Sogyal Rinpoche had not been able to come to America and I was missing having contact with him, so I went over to Kathmandu. I spent a few weeks there and would go up to his monastery for teachings and practice in the shrine room. I practiced in my hotel and had some contact with him over a couple of weeks, which was a very wonderful experience.

Then one day, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche was in town and staying at Rinpoche's monastery outside of Swayambhu. Rinpoche asked, "Would you like to meet Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche?" I said, "Well, I have some dana to offer him." A friend of mine had heard that he was staying there. He was a teacher of hers and she said, "Would you offer Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche some dana on my behalf?"

I said, "I don't need to meet him. I'll just give you the dana and you can offer it to him coming from my friend." Sogyal looked at me like, are you crazy? I just said, "I don't need to meet him." I thought, you know, met one rinpoche.

But then I reconsidered. I said to Sogyal Rinpoche, "You know, I really would like to meet Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. It would be great if I could go in and present the dana." So he arranged it for me.

I'd heard so many things about this great teacher, great bodhisattva. I was quite nervous going in to meet him. Also, I'd been meditating for a couple of weeks, so I was pretty open at that point.

I went in and we had just a little chit-chat. I was introduced and he was there with his wife who looked after him. Then there came the moment for me to present the offering. I went up and bowed three times prostrate on the ground, then held out the offering to him. He took it and then I looked up into his eyes.

As I said, I was a little nervous. Looking into his eyes was an experience that I will never forget. As I looked into his eyes, he seemed to go into his meditative state. He was a highly accomplished Dzogchen practitioner—he passed away a few years later. His eyes seemed to just widen a little bit, and his gaze was really in the distance. All movement in his mind ended. There was some kind of cessation that happened.

As I looked into his eyes, I felt like I was looking into nirvana. I felt if I had just been able to look into them a little longer, something might have happened. It was so still looking into his eyes that it wasn't right to say that his mind was still. It more felt like there was no mind there to be still or not. There was just an absence of possibility of movement.

In that gaze, I felt so exposed, I got even more nervous. I felt like he was just looking right into the middle of me and seeing my anxiety. At that point, I sort of came out of that little spell, said goodbye, made my bows again, and left. But that gave me the transmission experience.

And the last fetter to be uprooted is ignorance, which is ignorance of the Four Noble Truths and the nature of reality.

So that's the traditional Theravadan understanding of the stages of enlightenment and what gets eliminated at each level. What's particularly interesting to me is that restlessness is considered one of the final fetters. When we experience that fidgeting or mental agitation during meditation, we might dismiss it as a minor irritation. But in this framework, the complete elimination of restlessness is actually a mark of the highest realization.

The progression makes sense when you consider it deeply. The earlier stages address our fundamental relationship to existence itself—our doubts about the path, our belief in a solid self, our attachment to external rituals for purification. Then we work with the grosser forms of attraction and aversion. The later stages address increasingly subtle forms of clinging—to refined spiritual experiences, to any sense of being someone who achieves something, and finally to any remaining ignorance about the true nature of things.

This systematic approach appeals to the analytical mind, but I think it's important to remember that these descriptions are pointing toward something that ultimately transcends conceptual understanding.

Whether we frame awakening in terms of the elimination of fetters, the recognition of our primordial nature, or the direct seeing of emptiness, we're always using provisional language to point toward what cannot be fully captured in words.

What matters most is finding the approach that resonates with your temperament and circumstances, then practicing with wholehearted dedication. The various traditions offer different maps, but the territory they're pointing toward is the same fundamental freedom from suffering.

All right, let's take our break here.

All conceiving of self is gone. And the final one is ignorance. Ignorance is completely plucked out of the mind. And at that time, the mind is purified completely of any unwholesome states—greed, aversion, and ignorance.

That's a good place to end. Thank you for listening.

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