# Unentangled Knowing

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 1:00:36

The spiritual life is about making a journey from a state which is subject to suffering to a state that is free and beyond the reach of suffering.

There are many different words that describe the bare reality of this suffering state. Sometimes it's called bondage. Sometimes it's referred to as states of clinging, grasping, attachment, or the generic overall term of samsara—wandering on through realms of being. This word samsara gives a sense of how deeply conditioned are the habits of mind that keep us in a state of suffering. It indicates how daunting a task this may be.

And then there are many words that describe the awakened state: awakening, enlightenment, freedom, release, liberation, emancipation, nibbana or nirvana in Sanskrit. Our path is to take the journey from a state of suffering to a state of freedom.

In this talk I want to explore what the path is and also offer some reflections on this quality of freedom. The subject is unentangled knowing.

This phrase comes from the Thai woman teacher Upasika Kee, a lay woman who taught from the 1950s through the 1970s. She has a book that I highly recommend called *Pure and Simple*, which is a collection of her Dhamma talks. She was always very good at pointing to the heart of practice, turning her listeners back into the very central focus of the teachings and of liberation. This phrase, unentangled knowing, was one that she used, appearing in a short little verse: "An inward staying, unentangled knowing, all outward turning, cast aside." We'll come back to this and touch it again.

For those of you who are not native speakers of English, this word *unentangled* is rare. To explain it a little: a tangle often refers to a ball of string or thread or yarn that's gotten all jumbled up, and when you try to pull it apart it just falls into knots. *Entangle* is the verb that describes that condition. *Unentangle* means to unthread or take apart the tangled bits that have all gotten jammed up together.

This word *tangle* is one the Buddha often used in describing our state of affairs, our state of mind. He said, for example, "The world is smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn." The idea is that our desires go in so many different and contradictory directions that they form a tangle in the world and in our mind.

There is a lovely little question from the Samyutta Nikaya. Someone has come to the Buddha and asked: "A tangle inside and a tangle outside—this generation is entangled in a tangle. So I ask of Gautama this question: who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?"

That's really us, isn't it? We are at work disentangling this tangle—the inner tangle through the work of purifying our hearts and minds. And that gives us the understanding to know how the outer tangle has been created. The Buddha's reply was essentially that it was the one who developed sila-samadhi-paññña—conduct, meditation, and wisdom—who disentangled the tangle.

In Upasika Kee's language, unentangled knowing refers to a quality of mindfulness that doesn't get caught up in reactive formations to the experiences of the world that we contact, both outer experiences and inner experiences. It's a mindfulness that is fully present, fully aware, but is not caught up in or bound by the arisings.

We are all dropping into this state very often throughout the day in meditation practice. This is happening for us frequently at this point in the retreat. We may not yet have taken the time to notice it. I want to emphasize this quality of mind, encourage you to start noticing when it's arising in your practice, and especially to notice and feel the element of freedom that's there.

Sometimes when the mind is in these free states—and we know they're temporary—we don't take the time or effort to notice the quality of freedom. If we start to notice it, it can really enrich our practice, motivate our practice, and bring a lot of interest and appreciation.

This is already happening with all the meditations you've been doing—meditations on breath, sounds, body, thoughts, emotions. Continue as you're doing, and notice the freedom that comes. I also want to talk later about three approaches to practice, slightly different from one another, that you might say focus on this unentangled knowing as their central feature.

But before we go into that, I want to talk a little about how bondage happens, because we can't really understand freedom fully until we know how we get caught, how we get bound. The Buddha's central teachings are all about this question of how bondage happens and how release happens. There will be a talk later on the Four Noble Truths, one of the central pointings. There's another teaching where the Buddha went into more detail, called the Chain of Dependent Arising or Dependent Origination. There are twelve links to that chain; it could be a whole talk in itself. We're going to drop off the boring parts—you start in on those twelve links and people start falling asleep in the back. We're not going to go to the first four or the last four links. We're going to zero in on the central four links of the chain because they're very experiential. This is really where the heart of the question lies.

Before we get into that, let me pose a question: what is our basic situation as human beings? Whether we're meditators or people out in the world, what's the basic reality of life for all of us?

Because there's a reality we all share. We're going to die. That's in the future somewhere. But what about here and now? What's our basic situation?

Things are how they are. And what are those things? Sometimes there's struggle, but not always. There's dukkha. There's food—yes, food is a good one. The sense doors.

Our basic situation is that experiences keep happening to us at the six sense doors, don't they? All the time. Whether you're enlightened or not enlightened, whether you're a meditator or a layperson, wherever you live in the world—as long as your six senses are uninjured, these things keep unfolding for us.

The Buddha gave one discourse that pointed directly at this, called the Sutta on Totality. He said, "Listen, monks, and I will explain to you the totality of life." He was not one given to modest pronouncements. And he said, "It is simply this: the eye and sights, the ear and sounds, the nose and smells, the tongue and tastes, the body and sensations, the mind and mind objects. This is the totality of life. Anyone who would describe a totality beyond this would not know what they were talking about."

So we've said a few times—I think Joseph has said it—there are only ever six things happening, and these are the six: the objects of the six sense doors. Can you turn those off at will? No. When we fall asleep we lose touch with them, but a loud sound in the middle of the night will wake us up, so there's some thread of consciousness still hanging out there, alert, able to be contacted. But basically these six things, as long as we're awake and our senses are functioning, are coming to us all the time. They're impinging on us. They are contacting us.

These elements are known in the Buddha's teaching, and in this chain of dependent arising, as contact. There are six types of contact: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind objects. This is where we'll pick up this thread of dependent arising.

We're constantly receiving these contacts. They are mixed in terms of their pleasure or pain—some are pleasant, some are painful, some are neither. That's the quality of feeling tone. Every contact has associated with it a feeling tone, or vedanā, and that's the next link in the chain of dependent arising.

This is a very important point. Why is the feeling tone so important? It's based on the feeling tone that desire and aversion arise. The pleasant feeling tone often gives rise to wanting. The unpleasant feeling tone often gives rise to aversion. The neutral feeling tone often conditions delusion—like, "That's not important. That doesn't have enough charge to interest me, so I won't pay attention to that."

The feeling tone is often the ground for the arising of these reactive formations of mind: greed, aversion, and delusion.

Taken all together, greed, aversion, and delusion constitute the form—or you might say the outer expression—of craving. The Pali word is *tanha,* and its literal meaning is thirst. This is the wanting that comes in again and again and again. We want the pleasant. We want not to experience the unpleasant. We don't care about the neutral.

So craving is the next link in the chain, and it refers to the reactive relationship to contacts based on their feeling tone. Then the link that follows on from craving—and this is inevitable—is clinging. Once there is craving, it just takes a little bit longer for it to move into clinging. When we notice a pleasant contact that

the mind is reacting toward with wanting, the mind will go out and take hold of it. And in that taking hold, it makes an object of it. It makes a thing of it.

Say you have an experience of a very peaceful sitting and there's a blissful state in the body. At some point, the mind is going to notice that bliss and like it and take hold of it and dwell on it with thought a little bit. We take the pleasant and we turn it into some kind of object.

So this is the heart of the chain: There's contact at a sense door. It has a feeling tone. Based on that, craving is stirred up—we react with liking or disliking. And then some form of taking hold happens, called grasping or clinging. Although we use the term craving here, which is a desire synonym, actually craving as used here includes both the force of greed and the force of aversion. They're really two sides of a coin, because when we're averse to something, we say, "I don't want that," and what we're also saying is, "I want something else instead." Craving includes them both.

Once we've gone into clinging, suffering is inevitable. That's where the chain goes—from craving to clinging, it leads on to some kind of suffering. Why is that? It's really because in the taking hold of something, we form a new self. A new "I" is born in that taking hold. And wherever there's birth, there will be death. It's a momentary birth and it will be a momentary death, but there is birth and death.

Why is that necessarily suffering? Either it's a pleasant birth and then the death is unpleasant, or it's an unpleasant birth and the life is unpleasant. Let me give you some examples.

Many of you were on eight precepts today. I don't know if you wandered through the dining room at tea time, but there was—I hate to tell you, I probably shouldn't even mention it—there was a really good soup at tea tonight. And if you walked close to the table, you'd probably smell it. It was sweet potato and black bean. It was really delicious.

If craving is arising now, you can notice the contact, feeling, craving, clinging. But perhaps it arose at tea time. You walk in, you're a little hungry because you're on eight precepts. There's a quart of juice over in the corner, but it doesn't really compare to black bean and sweet potato. So you walk by and you get a sniff of that, and you think, "Wow, that really smells good." It's pleasant contact. Desire comes up. You start to think, "I've been hungry since about four o'clock this afternoon. That would really be filling. It's been a little chilly outside. That would be so warming." And you dwell on it a little more, and all of a sudden you notice you have clung.

In that clinging, we have taken birth—maybe as a hungry yogi, maybe as a hungry ghost. But we've taken birth in that form, which is being unsatisfied. We want something that we can't have. So in that, the life of the hungry yogi is a little unhappy. It may not be big unhappy, but it's a little unhappy. Then a while later, you walk on, you go to some other part of the building, you forget the smell, the craving goes away, and your mind is back in balance.

This balanced state is what Upasika Kee calls "normal." It's kind of a funny use of the word because it's not

normal in the world. But in Dhamma terms, this is what she calls a normal mind—a balanced mind that's not caught up in desire or aversion.

So that was a slightly suffering life. But let's take the time that you come in and there's a really good sitting. You notice the concentration is really present. You're effortlessly in the present moment. Hindrances are not arising because the mindfulness is strong. There's a sense of being relaxed, comfortable, and at ease in your body. You're noticing very clearly moment after moment. You get up to walk and you think, "That was a really good sitting. I'm going to tell the teacher about that."

At this point, there's been a taking hold of the beautiful qualities of the meditation—the concentration, the stillness, the ease—and owning them in some way. That is a happy birth.

But by the time you walk and come back in to sit again, it could well change. Sometimes after sitting like that, we rush back into the hall. "I can't wait to sit again." And then we come and sit. The body's uncomfortable, there are a lot of thoughts, a lot of emotions. Where did my concentration go? And then there's the pain of the death of that happy birth.

When we hold on to things, we get born as a kind of self. And we either have a painful life and maybe a happy death, or we have a happy life and a painful death. Clinging leads to suffering, as the chain of dependent arising shows.

Normally, in the untrained person in the world, the mind knows nothing but clinging. It is just in this habitual state of reacting to feeling tone again and again, clinging to one thing until that gets uninteresting, and then clinging to the next. It's like a monkey swinging through the forest—it won't let go of one vine until it sees where it's going to take hold of the next. That's the normal state of human mind. This is not a commentary on anyone. It's just our heritage, the way we have been conditioned.

But a meditator has another possibility. And this is really the whole purpose of our practice. We can let go and not take up anything else, not cling to anything else. As you know, that's not easy. When Skye talked about letting go, she really outlined how hard that is to do. Ajahn Chah said something like eighty percent of the spiritual life is knowing that you're holding on and not being able to let go. And that lines up pretty well with my experience in meditation. It's often what happens.

But sometimes we do know how to let go, and there's no new clinging that begins. This is where we can find that element of freedom here and now.

Often we start to think about the journey, the path, as being very long, and frequently it's described as freedom only at the end of a very, very long period of work—one lifetime or many lifetimes. We sometimes forget that we can experience strong aspects of this freedom in the here and now. When we find that possibility, it can really energize our practice because the fruit doesn't have to wait for many years. The fruit can be seen here and now. It strengthens faith, it strengthens motivation, it strengthens the conviction that the path is working for us. So it's very helpful to start noticing when these moments

come.

What we're talking about doing is breaking the chain of dependent origination that leads from contact up to suffering. We have contact, feeling—does there have to be craving? If there's a pleasant feeling at a sense door, does there have to be greed? If there's an unpleasant feeling, does there have to be aversion? No.

When the mind is with the object and mindfulness is strong enough, we don't have to move into a reactive formation, even though that feeling tone may be there strongly. This is where we find freedom in the chain, and this is what keeps us from moving on to suffering.

So more and more, our meditation becomes about opening to the pleasant, opening to the unpleasant, but not reacting from greed or aversion. In worldly life, in normal life, the greed and aversion formations are usually accompanied by delusion, because we don't see what we're doing. That reaction is so instinctive that it's not seen and it's not questioned. In meditation, however, we also see clearly. There is no greed, there is no aversion, and so there is no delusion in that moment. In the moment of no greed, no aversion, and no delusion—clear seeing—that's a description of a mind that's free. Temporarily, yes, but free.

So it's very helpful to start looking into the mind at this place in between feeling and before there's any craving, to feel what that feels like and become familiar with it, because more and more that's where you find your sweet spot in meditation. One teacher said that the whole of the Buddhist path is about resting in the gap between feeling and craving. This is available at any moment. It doesn't depend on special conditions. It depends on your mindfulness being strong, but anytime your mindfulness is strong, that is a possibility—to rest between feeling and craving. And that resting is a place of some freedom.

Really what we're talking about is finding a place in that gap that's not determined by conditioned things. The impact of the six sense doors is conditioned, sometimes completely out of our control. We're all receiving pleasant and unpleasant contact alternately, but our response can be unaffected by the conditioned things around us. Ajahn Chah called that an aspect of the unconditioned mind—the mind that is not bound by external conditions.

I'd like to read a little bit from Ajahn Chah on this. It's a little long, but I hope you'll stay with it because there's a lovely expression here:

"The Buddha talked about conditioned and unconditioned things. Conditioned things are innumerable—material or immaterial, big or small. If our mind is under the influence of delusion, it will proliferate about these things, dividing them up into good and bad, pleasant and painful, liked and disliked. Why does the mind proliferate like this? Because there is still the belief that all these things are oneself or belong to oneself. The tendency to conceive things in terms of self is the source of happiness, suffering, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the worldly mind, spinning around and changing at the directives of worldly conditions. This is the conditioned mind. Not knowing these things, the mind

doesn't see the Dhamma. Not seeing the Dhamma, the mind is full of clinging. As long as the mind is held down by clinging, there can be no escape from the conditioned world. As long as there is no escape, there is confusion, birth, old age, sickness, and death. This kind of mind is called the conditioned mind. The unconditioned refers to the mind that has seen the Dhamma, the truth of conditioned things as they are—as transient, imperfect, and ownerless. When we know conditions as neither ourselves nor belonging to us, we let go of conditions and attain the Dhamma. We enter into and realize the Dhamma. When we attain the Dhamma, we know clearly."

So we have that possibility of realizing the Dhamma in relationship to the changing conditioned things at the six sense doors. What is it like resting in that gap? You could say that resting in that gap means we're not taking birth. Not taking birth, we're not subject to death in this moment-to-moment kind of living and dying. This is described as a place where we're not turning into a new self or a new "I."

In the Sutta-Nipata, there's a chapter where a number of Brahmin youths all came to visit the Buddha, and each youth asked their own questions. One of them was a youth named Todeyya. He asked: for one who is freed, what is that liberation like? Wouldn't you like to ask the Buddha that? What does it feel like to be you, to have your mind, to have that freedom?

The Buddha said: "The sage is without desire. He has nothing. He is unentangled in becoming." Becoming is this process of taking birth again as a new self. The sage has nothing and is unentangled in becoming. That means he hasn't taken ownership at the six sense doors.

Ajahn Chah put this non-becoming in terms of a hall where he was giving a talk—probably an open-air sala in Thailand that had basically a roof, a floor, and pillars, but open walls. He said: when you look at this hall, the roof is a becoming. Something has taken birth there. You could take a stand there. The floor is a becoming—something constructed where you could take a stand. But the space in between the floor and the roof? You couldn't take a stand there. There's no becoming there. And that's what's called emptiness. He said, to put it bluntly, we say that nibbana is this emptiness—that is the state of resting.

between feeling and craving, where a new self is not being born, Ajahn Chah says, is this place of peace, this deathless place, uncreated, unbecome. It's deathless because no birth is taking place. No birth means no death will take place.

And it's always available. It's not that special conditions are needed for it. It's always potential for us. The Buddha made an interesting comment about the deathless in another sutta from the Samyutta Nikaya. He said that our path, the path that we're walking, has the deathless as its ground, its destination, and its final goal.

When you think about that, the path that we're walking is going from suffering or bondage toward freedom. So does the path partake of bondage or freedom? Here, the Buddha is saying that the path has the deathless, freedom, as its ground. The path is founded upon the deathless. The path is built upon the

goal.

In another sutta in the Anguttara, the Buddha says that merging in the deathless are all things. All things are being supported, held by this deathless state. So this becomes quite an interesting point. The mind that is balanced between feeling and craving, that does not fall into craving even though there's feeling, is residing in this place of deathlessness, of not taking birth, and that is the path.

It becomes very interesting. Not only is it immediately, inherently free, but that furthers the freedom, that grows the freedom. The path keeps unfolding, keeps uncovering more and more of this freedom as we rest there.

Something that's happening when we make that shift is we are no longer staking our happiness on objects. We've given up clinging. We've given up trying to find a lasting happiness through the six sense doors. And something that helps this shift is that we turn from a main concern with objects to a greater concern with the subject.

I want to talk in the second half of this talk about three approaches to our meditation that are based on this shift from focusing on objects to starting to take into account the subject. It doesn't mean we give up connecting with objects. The objects of the five physical senses are very good groundings for mindfulness in daily life. Even this looking at the subject involves some of the sixth sense door, looking at formations of the mind. So we're not putting away the practice we've done so far. These are only suggestions of additional ways you might like to try if you find them helpful. The practice we've described so far is completely sufficient and could serve you forever. But if you'd like to try these, they're also good practices.

The three that I'm going to talk about are a practice of checking the attitude, a practice of becoming aware of awareness, and a practice of noticing the empty nature of awareness. I'll talk about each of these.

In the last few years, a number of us have spent time with a Burmese teacher named Sayadaw Utejaniya. He has a very refreshing approach to practice, which is not so focused on what we're paying attention to, but more on how we're relating to what we're experiencing or contacting. I think you've probably heard Carol talk about his approach a few times in the retreat already.

One of his central practices is what he calls checking the mind. He says, okay, you're relating to the breath, you're relating to sounds, you're relating to your body, whatever your meditation object is, that's fine. But what I'm interested in is how are you relating to it? If you have a strong emotion in the mind, are you wanting it to go away? Are you wanting something else to be in its place? Are you noticing clearly what's there?

So his instruction is, while you're doing your meditation relating with thoughts and emotions and physical senses, also notice: is there greed, aversion, or delusion in the mind? Sometimes that's not so easy to see, so he has a simple checklist.

First, the question to check on greed: am I wanting something else to happen? So often you sit in your meditation thinking, "I wish I could be a little more still." You sit and think, "I had that really beautiful metta opening yesterday, a strong feeling of love for my benefactor. I'd like to have that again." So we notice, I'm wanting something else to happen. This is the force of desire or greed.

Sometimes we look and the question for aversion is: are you wanting something to stop happening? Yes, I'd like this pain in my knee to go away. I'd like this experience of fear not to be here. I'd like the restlessness in my body to calm down. So if we want something to stop happening, that's a sign of aversion.

And the third one, delusion, he treats very simply for this level.

There are many layers to delusion, but just on this level of checking, you ask: Am I not in touch with what's happening? Generally, by the time we've asked this question, we're back in touch with what's happening, so usually the answer to delusion is no. But often the answer to greed or aversion is yes.

So he suggests checking very often. In the beginning it could be four or five times a sitting. As the practice develops, it could be ten times a sitting, twenty times a sitting. As this practice gains momentum, this becomes the main place we look—more or less continuously.

And this is very doable. This is not unrealistic or impossible. Our main item of interest becomes: Is there greed in the mind? Is there aversion in the mind? Is there delusion in the mind in the way I'm relating to what I'm experiencing? This is a very interesting path to follow.

If you notice that there is greed, aversion, or delusion, then just become mindful of that. You don't have to make it go away, because that would be aversive. You just notice it's there, but the noticing shifts things. As you know, noticing these formations of mind makes a change in them.

Upasika Kee puts it this way. Her teaching uses different vocabulary, but it has a really similar emphasis. She says, "So your awareness has to take a firm stance right at the mind in and of itself. When mindfulness is standing firm, the mind won't be affected by the objects of sensory contact. If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out latching onto things, troubles will arise." So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There's nothing else that's worth checking on. Just keep checking: How am I relating? Am I trying to grasp at the changing factors of my experience? If so, notice it as greed, aversion, or delusion.

This is the first of the three ways I wanted to talk about. The second one is becoming aware of awareness. And here's where we make a very conscious shift from object to subject. Objects are known. What are they known by? They're known by some aspect of subjectness. Now, what is that?

In the Buddha's description of our experience—well, first let me say, Buddhism as a domain is interested in the experience of human beings. That's not true of every field. Physics is interested in interactions between physical objects. Chemistry is interested in the interactions between atoms and molecules. Earth

science is interested in the formation of rocks. All those things are interested in objects. Buddhism is interested in human experience all the way through. That means it's only interested in objects as they're known by a human subject.

So how do we know things? When you hear a sound, you recognize the sound as an object. In the Buddha's language, this is in the field of materiality because it's arising from a material object. But from the point of view of the teachings, the important thing is that it's arising in a human consciousness. This element of consciousness is a critical piece that in ordinary disciplines we often don't talk about. But in Buddhism, it's central.

So when you hear a sound, there are actually two aspects we want to tune into. One is the sound itself, which has a fairly pleasant quality. It arises, it lasts a certain amount of time, and it fades away. But the second thing is you are conscious of it. Is that clear to everybody? We're conscious of that sound.

The way I understand it is not that consciousness is in you and the sound is out there, but rather when the sound arises, there's one experience, which is the sound and your knowing of it, coming up together. We can distinguish two aspects of the experience, but I want to suggest there's only one experience happening, which is your hearing of the sound.

So how can it be that there's this material thing called the sound and there's this knowing, which is of the mind, happening at the same time? That's kind of the mystery of our existence. Nobody knows how that happens. Science doesn't have a clue how it happens. Nobody does. But it does happen, again and again and again.

Or you might ask, how can one thing have these two different parts? Well, if you take a look at this bowl, I could ask you: Is it round or is it black? It's one bowl, right? But it has two aspects. It's both round and black.

So in the same way, when a sound arises, it's one thing, but it has two aspects. There's your knowing of it, and there's the sound. This knowing is what the Buddha called consciousness. The Pali word is *viññāna*.

When we start to take that into account in our practice, it begins to shift things. We come into meditation generally from this worldly perspective where we think the world is made up of objects—earth and cars and dollar bills and women and men and parents and celebrities. But that's not what the world is made of. The world is made of our consciousness of all those things. Because it's only through our consciousness of things that we have the possibility of finding freedom in relation to them.

So consciousness is one of the five aggregates. It's in the fourth foundation of mindfulness that Sally talked about the other night. And we can make it a focus for our meditation, a focus for our mindfulness.

So right now, let me just ask: do you know that you're conscious? Those of you who are asleep don't need to answer. But for everybody else, do you know you're conscious? Can you connect with that quality of

awareness or consciousness, and recognize it in this moment?

If it's difficult, just remember what unconscious is like. Unconscious is like being asleep and not knowing any experiences. So in this moment, if you're having experiences, you're aware, aren't you? You're conscious.

Rather than turning our attention to the objects that are filling our momentary experience—if your eyes are open, the sights; if your eyes are closed, the sounds, the physical sensations—what if you turn your attention to this quality of awareness itself?

Let me suggest a way to get into this. Let your mind just roam over the objects in the room or in your experience right now. If your eyes are closed, they can roam over your body and the sounds. If they're open, include the events of the room. Take a look around. Let your eyes gaze and travel and see interesting things and uninteresting things.

And now, instead of looking outward, take that quality of attention or awareness and direct it back toward where the seeing is happening. One way this is sometimes expressed is to become aware of your awareness. It can be described as turning awareness back on itself, or as letting the eyes roll back into the head.

When you make that shift from the senses wandering around outside to coming back to look at the source of awareness, does it feel any different? Do you get a little shift in the way that feels?

What happens when we make that move away from outer objects and toward the inner seeing is that to some degree we unhook from the objects. So for some people—if it doesn't work for you, you don't have to do it—it can be a way to consciously let go. We can consciously take our fixation off of objects. It could be body sensations that we're fixating on because they're pleasurable or painful. It could be a sense of space in the room. It could be a sound. But we can unhook, look inward, and in that way let go.

Now, we can't really see awareness, because that's like trying to see your own eyes. Someone read Ajahn Sumedho talking about this. He said, "I can't see my eyes, but I don't need to because I know they're working." In the same way, we may not see the awareness so clearly—consciousness is a subtle object—but the very act of turning in that direction, being interested in the subject rather than the object, lets us stop clinging or stop being so fixated on objects.

I was taking a walk yesterday in the rain, down by the pond below here, and I just stood and watched for a while the raindrops falling in the pond and making their ripples, one after another after another. It struck me that this was a lot like the experience of contact that the Buddha talked about. Our awareness is just kind of open, and then there are all these sensory inputs coming in and landing, coming in and landing, one after another. The surface of the pond is very still if it's not being disturbed. It can be disturbed by wind. It can be disturbed by rain.

It could be disturbed by an animal swimming in it. But if it's not being disturbed, it's very still.

In the same way, our awareness has this ability to be very still and just let things land and touch it, land and touch it. They make a little ripple, but the ripple will die out really quickly—unless we try to grab hold of it. Some of the things that land we get fascinated by. We grab hold of them and fixate on them. That's the way clinging works.

But when we start to feel this receptive quality of awareness, we can simply let things land and ripple. Land and ripple. And that mind can return to its basically placid and tranquil state. When we're not clinging, we're not creating a disturbance. We're not taking a new birth. We're not leading into more suffering.

So if this appeals to you and you would like to play with it a little bit, here's what I'd suggest. Just try this exercise again. Sometimes a visual cue is helpful, so have the sense that you can let your senses roam outside as much as they want, become interested, and then at some point take the attention and turn awareness back on itself, or direct the attention inward to the source of knowing.

Sometimes the phrase "aware of awareness" helps people connect with that experience. See if in doing that anything shifts in you. If something connects and you want to practice with it, then these are the steps you could go through: Take a look back—in other words, become aware of awareness. Notice if anything shifts, and then just rest there. How long can you rest? Until you get distracted, until the mind gets caught up in thinking, proliferating, grasping onto something. And then when you notice it again, you can do the same sequence again. Turn the attention back on awareness, notice what the effect is, and then rest.

Upasaka Kee put it this way: "The mind that's aware of awareness doesn't send its knowing outside this awareness. Nothing can be concocted in the mind when it knows in this way." That's another synonym for grasping—making up from grasping. "In other words, an inward-staying, unentangled knowing; all outward-going knowing, cast aside." That is, the tendency of mind to look for its gratification through objects has been put down. And there's a contentment, an interest, a vitality in this turning to awareness itself.

When we turn to awareness, it doesn't block out any of the sensory arisings. Awareness is still there receiving them. But our attention is not fixated on the objects. And for some people, that gives a sense of greater space, greater equanimity. It's not for everyone. And again, if this description doesn't appeal to you, there's no need to take it up.

The last quote I'll mention in this section is another one from the French poet Paul Valéry, where he says, "I only refer to my pure self, by which I mean absolute consciousness, through which one turns loose from everything else." That's pretty good intuition for a non-Buddhist.

The third of these approaches that I wanted to mention tonight looks at the empty nature of this awareness. I want to approach this with another question, a simple question. It is not a trick. Do you have

a body? Do you have a mind? It's not a trick. We all have a body, and because we're alive and breathing and walking, we all have a mind.

If I ask you where is your body, it's really clear, right? It's here. Where is your mind? And to answer that, we have to know: what is your mind? Somebody points to the chest—that's a good place to look.

What is the mind? When the Buddha talked about the Sutta on Totality, and he talked about the six kinds of things, he talked about the mind and mind objects. Mind objects we've talked about many times: thoughts, emotions, meditative states, feeling, perception, intention—those are all objects of mind. What's left that could be called the mind in this schema?

How about consciousness? Maybe consciousness or awareness is the mind. I'd like to refine it a little bit by saying that I want to call the mind that which is the source of consciousness, or more simply, that which knows.

Other parts of what we call mind, like thoughts and emotions—those will be mind objects. But mind is going to be the organ that knows in this consciousness kind of way. In this sense, in this language—and it's only language—consciousness is the activity of this thing we're calling mind.

Can you buy this temporarily as a hypothesis?

Is consciousness limited in space? Your consciousness—is it just around your body? Does it include the meditation hall? Does it include the grounds of IMS? Does it include the trees down the road? Does it include the stars?

It's pretty unlimited, isn't it? It seems to be everywhere we turn. There's some consciousness happening.

So where is the mind? Can you find that which is the source of the knowing? Where does this knowing come from?

It's tough, isn't it? I will encourage you to explore. You could ask questions like: Does the mind have any shape? Does it have any color? Does it have any limit? Does it have any boundary? See what you come up with.

If you can't find it, that's also significant, because it sort of says it's empty. We could say it doesn't exist—that's a fine thing to say. But then what is it that keeps knowing? Knowing continues to happen. So in this language, something like the mind is still doing that. We can't find it, but it seems to function. All we can say is it's ineffable.

What if you let your attention kind of evaporate into that ineffable place? What if you let your attention release into that limitless, boundless, unfindable place of mind?

Connecting with the empty nature of mind can also bring in a sense of unhooking from grasping at phenomena.

This is from the Buddha talking to his seven-year-old son, who became a student after the Buddha's awakening. Rāhula—that was the son's name—develop meditation that is like space. For when you develop meditation that is like space, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as space is not established anywhere, so too, Rāhula, develop meditation that is like space.

As you let your attention fill the vastness of this limitless space of awareness, there's a natural letting go of fixation, preoccupation, and clinging to the individual comings and goings of contact.

I'll close with another quotation from the Buddha. This is also from the Sutta Nipāta, in the dialogue with another Brahmin youth whose name is Kappa. Kappa asks this question: "For one stranded in the middle of the lake, in the flood of great danger, overwhelmed with aging and death, tell me the island, dear sir."

And the Buddha replies: "Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbāna, I tell you, the total ending of aging and death."

*Having nothing, clinging to nothing—that is the island. There is no other. That is Nibbāna, the total ending of aging and death.*

---

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