Tracking Thinking (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 1:07:05

This morning we're going to play around with tracking the thought stream. Emma was talking about this last night—the difficulty that thinking can present. The Bard says, "He thinks too much; such men are dangerous." Julius Caesar, Act One, scene something or other.

One important aspect of insight meditation is learning to track the thought stream, the endless flow of thought generated by the mind. The basic principle is universal: a thought is just an event. It's a dhamma—a conditioned event which arises in the mind and ceases. So it's just another meditation object, that's all.

Thought, of course, is completely natural. It's the mind's job to generate them, and if the mind doesn't, we're in trouble—we probably need twenty-four-hour care. So thinking is completely natural and not at all a problem. The problem for most of us—not all of us, but a lot of us—is our relationship to thinking. We have an addictive relationship to thought. This addictive relationship is not natural and it's not necessary. It's this relationship that we explore when we're doing meditation.

What we're dealing with is mind throwing up thoughts. It could be compared to a fire constantly throwing up sparks. Mind throws up little thought moments, whole clouds of them, and the awareness knows all this. Then one of these sparks seems to be particularly interesting. The awareness goes straight to it, grabs it, and starts to turn it into something—most often a story, a narrative. What we then do is believe them. We actually think the story is true, despite the fact that the stories frequently and cheerfully contradict each other.

Have you ever emerged out of a bad meditation thinking, "I am hopeless at this. I cannot do this. I must be the worst meditator in this room." You leave the hall with your head hung in shame. Then the same day you have a really nice sit and you think, "Actually, I'm pretty good at this. It's really no problem, it's quite simple. These other people are probably struggling." You walk out of the hall with your head held high. Now, they can't both be right. At the very least, one of them is wrong. Yet when they're playing, we completely buy into both of them. And we take this as normal.

Why are they so attractive? The answer, of course, is that if you start to investigate when you think, who do you think about? We think about ourselves. We think about others, but we think about others in relation to me—my friends, my enemies, and so on. What the thinking provides us with, which is why we find it so interesting even when it's absolutely batshit boring, is a sense of identity. Thoughts confirm to us: this is who I am, and this is the world that I'm living in. That makes them entrancing and fascinating.

Have you noticed how you can be meditating on the body, and the body is really clean? There's stuff happening—different sensations and so on. But as soon as the most mundane thought pops up—"Will the breakfast tomorrow be like the breakfast this morning?"—as soon as that pops up, we just abandon the body one hundred percent and go straight into the thought. Why is that? What the mind does, which the physical senses do not do, is create stories. Mind is a storyteller. The body does not create stories. Mind creates stories through language.

The body also has language. But the difference between the language of the body and the language of the mind is that the language of the body does not tell stories. The language of the body is sensation. This is why you can always believe what your body tells you. You cannot believe what your mind tells you, but your body never lies.

At the same time, because the body doesn't actually tell stories, it's boring. It doesn't hold our attention. And we would trade in a good relationship with the body for a boring story any time. This is simply human nature.

So tracking the thought stream subverts our deeply ingrained determination to identify with the world created by thought, and it opens us up to a world beyond thought and beyond concept. It helps us enter into the world of emptiness and not-self. This is where the practice fits and why it matters.

Now, notice that when we think, we normally assume that what is important is what we are thinking about—the content of the thought. We assume this is what's important, and we simply take for granted the activity of thinking, how we think. We just take it completely for granted.

But when we're tracking the thought stream, we are not interested in what we are thinking about. What we're interested in is the activity of thinking. You could say that what we're interested in is thinking, not thoughts. This is extremely important.

As a meditator's rule of thumb, I like to operate on the principle that every thought I think is a lie—including the thought that every thought I think is a lie. That too is a lie. Just don't believe them.

There's one interesting analogy that Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj provides which I think fits this aspect of the practice very well. He says it's like a mother watching her child play with a favourite toy. You have the mother, the child, and the toy. The child is engrossed with the toy, completely caught up with it. The mother sees all this, and she's not really interested in the toy. What she's interested in is the child playing with the toy. She's interested in the game.

In the same way, when we track the thought stream, we are not interested in the contents of our thoughts. This is just the toy we're playing with. What we're interested in is their play and our relationship with that play. It's a different perspective that we take.

The basic method is this: find some aspect of the activity of thinking that is not the content of our

thoughts, and make that the meditation object.

What we're going to do now is play with a number of brief meditation experiments or meditation games. The attitude we bring to this is important. Treat these as games. Do not take them seriously. It's important that we play with these experiments. It does not matter what happens in these games, but it would be nice if we enjoyed ourselves while we played. So have a very light attitude towards it.

This is important, I think, for Dharma practice in general. The Dharma is the most important thing in our lives. The Dharma is far too important to be taken seriously. Do not take it seriously. Do not make it heavy.

In each exercise, we're going to begin by settling awareness in the body, and at some point we're going to direct awareness to some aspect of the thought stream. If we get lost in our thoughts, we drop the thinking, come back to the body, settle, and then return to the mind. This is what we're basically going to do.

So let's just do it first, and then we'll have questions later.

Construct your meditation posture from the ground up. Settle awareness in your body.

And now, stop thinking. Don't think. Just don't think.

Okay, any luck? Show of hands—how many people stopped thinking? Good. What constitutes a thought here? Does it have to be with words? We're going to get to that later. Anything you think may possibly be a thought counts as a thought. How many people failed utterly and indignantly? So we've got a lot of fences here. Partial success. How many people had partial success?

So those of you who had partial success, what was your secret? Because you have just cracked one of the mysteries of meditation practice. How did you manage to go through a period of time without thinking?

"I have a new mantra: don't think."

Does a mantra count as a thought? Yes, it does. And I had to say it at least three times—so three thoughts. Not bad. So mantra, that might help.

"I found that if I very firmly directed awareness to my heart area, there's very immediately a buzzing and very pleasant feeling which is so pleasant that I can just immerse in that."

So if you can immerse in your meditation object enough, the thinking just shuts down. Anybody else have that method? Same. How long can you maintain it?

"Until I notice I'm doing it."

Will that be seconds, minutes, or hours?

"Seconds, probably."

Anyway, the reason I throw this exercise in is basically to show what we're faced with. We're addicted to thoughts, to thinking. It's quite difficult not to think. And we can sometimes, with a supreme effort of will, put it aside for a while. But then afterwards, we go, "Oh, that was good. I didn't think for a while." And we're back in the thinking.

So this is what we're working with. It's the relationship to thinking that we're interested in. And the way into that relationship is to begin to be interested in the process of the activity of thinking.

So let's address your question with our next exercise. Again, construct your meditation posture—lifting up from the ground, opening up the spine, balancing the head, and settling into the body. From there, settle into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking? If you are thinking, and if you know you are thinking, then thoughts must be appearing to you in some way. How do thoughts appear? Do they appear as words? Do they appear as visual images? Do they appear as feelings? Do they appear as combinations of these? Do they appear as something else entirely?

Study the flow of these thoughts. Don't focus on their content—what they are about—but on their appearance, how they present themselves to you. How do thoughts appear?

So how do they appear? How do you know you are thinking?

A word arising frequently as instruction, like "rest" or "relax," and a word arising frequently noting or naming something. So words, basically.

I noticed it was sort of like a reaction to experience.

But what appeared in that reaction?

Well, one of the things was the hearing. Then you start thinking, "Well, what was that?" And sometimes you can go off on a story about it.

And so when you were thinking, how were you thinking? In words? In images?

Words.

So they appear as words, and you can see that they're triggered by certain events. Then up will come the words and some kind of commentary.

I think that if what I'm thinking is in the foreground—but there can be no foreground, yet there is a background. It's like potential thoughts floating around in the background that could come to the foreground and take over my consciousness.

And when there's activity in the foreground, how does it present? How does it appear?

It tends to be a continuity, like a monologue.

So words?

I get words and images, both. But when they come up, I cut them off by pausing my breath, and that cuts the thread, the slogan, and then the whole monologue just collapses.

So in the foreground, there's a monologue—predominantly words—but which is very fragile. It can be cut off without too much difficulty. But in the background, there's some kind of activity which is not words, but which will produce those words if given the chance.

Yes.

When we start to look at the thinking activity, one thing we see is that there are depths. What we normally call "thinking" is the surface activity of the mind. But that thinking comes from somewhere, and the activity of the mind goes much deeper. One of the interesting things about drawing attention to thinking itself is that we're going into the mind and seeing how it creates meaning, how it creates a world. What we normally call thinking is just the end product, just the surface activity. But as that drops away, we can go deeper, and we're witnessing, as it were, world construction.

In English, we don't really have the language to talk about this. Notice the paucity of language when we're discussing the mind. What does the mind do? Well, it thinks. But what exactly does that mean? This question has popped up this morning—what exactly is that? We don't bother to define it. We just have this general sense of "the mind thinks." We have this very vague vocabulary. Whereas the Buddha has a very precise vocabulary about a whole series of cognitive activities through which the mind creates a world.

So when we start to look at "thinking," we often begin because it presents as a problem—a distraction that requires attention. But what we're actually doing is directing awareness to how the mind creates meaning, how the mind creates a world. And this is really, really interesting to get a handle on.

"I found when I actually focused on your instructions, that created more thinking. And then I got totally lost as to what it was. I just didn't know. I was completely lost."

You were totally bamboozled.

"Bamboozled. But also, what you mentioned there about the mind creating meanings—I think that's true, but I also think it can be a value, you know, to have a life that has meaning."

Oh, absolutely. As we've said on more than one occasion, there is nothing wrong with thinking. Thinking is natural. It's part of the world. It's part of nature. If we didn't think, we would need twenty-four-hour care. The problem is not thinking. The problem is our addictive relationship to thinking. What we're getting a sense of is that relationship. And if we get a handle on it and see this process of meaning-making, it's very useful.

"I had an experience of like a bubbling away, an undifferentiated sort of bubbling away. And at some point I noticed an attitude. I'm guessing that there was maybe a feeling or a sensation that came before the attitude. And I'm guessing also that the attitude would have fueled thinking."

Well, we'll put aside all the guessing. But what we've got is this undifferentiated seething and bubbling away. There's something there. And then emerging from that is an attitude. And that attitude has already given you a stance in the world. Other things will flow from that, of course.

"It's a combination of all those things—feeling, visual..."

And images, words, and feelings. The reason I chose those three is because most people will report their thinking in either one or more of those ways.

"There's also noise, I think—not necessarily like a word, but a rhythm or a sense of noise."

So there's all sorts of different things that pop up, and it's interesting to get a hold of, just to recognize what it is that's coming up.

"When I close my eyes, I still see the room, my body. So that's still thought, right? It's not narrative, verbal thinking, but I'm still thinking."

Would you say you predominantly think in images? It's interesting how different people think in different ways. I'm strictly a word man. And when I come across other fans of the word, I sometimes ask the question: is it a dialogue? Is there more than one voice in there? For some people, it's more than one voice. I haven't come across anybody that's got more than two—I don't see why not. But me, I'm strictly monologue. I do not let anybody else in. It's just me. And I've more than once thought this is why I became a teacher—to indulge in this kind of external thinking.

"For me, with my thinking, I notice when I'm in a good mood, my thinking stream is planning and the future."

And there's an optimistic sense in the planning?

"Yeah. And when I'm in pain, it's often about the past."

And my point of view and justifying myself. So I sort of see thought kind of emerging often from that feeling world. Maybe feelings themselves are thoughts in some way.

Well, feeling is a mental activity, for sure. It's a mental activity that's very embodied. Mental in the sense of mind, but body and mind for the Buddha are intimately interconnected.

When the Buddha talks about feeling, he tends to put feeling at the foundation, at the very basis. And he says what we feel, we perceive. So feeling affects our perception, how we perceive the world. What we perceive, we think about. So he seems to have a layered thought structure with feeling at the foundation.

Would you add belief to that as well then?

So I'm thinking about thought and why it's come about, and you're saying we're going to do a deep dive into it. It starts off with a belief of some form and then it turns into a feeling and it turns into a thought. It moves from one to another to another.

It's like there's this whole drama going on down there in the mind, most of which we are completely oblivious to. But then we catch certain things when they pop above the surface—that's what we catch. So what first pops above the surface into awareness may or may not be the first thing to have occurred. That may be at the end of a long stream of underwater activity. But then, oh, that's there, and then that conditions that, and then that conditions that. So we're usually operating with just part of the picture.

I suppose I know that I believe there are thoughts, and they are meaningless, generally. And then in my mind I've got a thought that some of them come from a belief of suffering. That's a better word—suffering. And that's where one of the linkages is worth exploring.

We're deeply conditioned by the past. We're deeply conditioned by whatever pain we've gone through. We're also deeply conditioned by whatever pleasure we've gone through. And from that, the mind has learned to respond in certain ways. This is what will shape what's going on.

The mind is deep and immensely complex. And when we're looking at thinking, again, we're looking at what has popped above the surface into awareness. But once we start to pay attention to it, we can then start to go down. Basically, the deeper levels start to open up and we get a better sense of what's driving me. Why is it that I have this belief? What does it do for me? And so on and so forth. So we start with what we conventionally call thinking and we start to go deeper.

I suppose the challenge for me is that most of them are useless thoughts. Then there's a portion which are useful.

You find if you get a handle on the thinking mind as a meditation object, the quantity of thought tends to go down and the quality of thought tends to go up. The thoughts that are really genuine expressions of wisdom become clearer. There's more space for them. They're not being smothered by the rubbish.

But then if I want to go deeper into the thought or the tracking of the thinking, it seems to me as if I have to do it by thinking."

"No, no, no, no, no. That's our habit—always to just slide into the content. We're just watching what the mind does. That's all. And it won't reveal everything at once. This is a gradual process. It just begins to naturally happen. Gradually we start to notice more, but that comes with time."

"I think I have this experience of what arises spontaneously, in which I don't feel that I have agency. And also the experience of choosing to think something, in which I do have an experience of agency. Both can be words or sometimes images. I'm just curious about the relation between what makes this—between

agency and non-agency."

"I don't think it's an absolute border. I think it's more like a spectrum. Sometimes for me at least, it's like thoughts are arising but then I decide to cooperate with them and I'll take them in a certain direction. I would call this reflecting on something. But other times it's more random, just kind of seething around, and I'm not particularly cooperating with it at all. It's moving from one possibility to another to another. So you do get different experiences, and agency is one of them—or what the Buddha calls choice. That is one of the factors that conditions the experience. In the meditation practice, if we're just witnessing it, then the agency is simply to watch. So you get a different relationship."

"What can also condition our experience is hormones. The chemical—if we're naturally producing dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, endorphins, those happy chemicals, that informs our natural state. The thinking mind is not doing that."

"That's right. This is body conditioning mind. Mind conditions body, body conditions mind. The interrelationships are innumerable, and this is what we're always dealing with. This is dependent arising. So all we can do is focus on what's available to us in the present and then see how it unfolds.

"Awareness itself, mindfulness itself—it's like it experiences this vast, complex, interconnected web. And what we want to do is get hold of it and change its direction so it heads towards happiness, satisfaction, welfare, along the path in other words. But how can we possibly get hold of this and change the direction? Well, we insert one thing: awareness. And just inserting awareness in there starts to shake it up, starts to move it in ways which otherwise it wouldn't move. So that's the beginning.

"Then, of course, again, agency comes in. We start to see things and we realise, 'I can do something about this. I can't do anything about that.' And away we go. But it's the awareness itself going in there—that alone starts to shake things up."

"How does the process of naming or labelling in the Mahasi tradition fit in with thinking? Because that's a concept, it's a thought—adding another concept to clarify a concept."

There's an expression somewhere in the tradition: using a thorn to extract a thorn. So it's using a concept to clarify what's going on. Let's say you're meditating and something happens, and there's no thought involved. Then the meditation ends and you might reflect, "Well, what happened then?" When you reflect upon it, you're putting words to it, wrapping a concept around it, and that helps clarify it. As it were, it makes the experience part of the everyday furniture of the mind. Whereas if you didn't do that, it would be some interesting... you'd have a sense of "that was weird, that was interesting," and it would be forgotten. But if you can put words to it, that's what it means. And again, it's all about meaning. This is where it fits. And that can be very helpful.

So again, there's nothing wrong with concepts. It's the addictive relationship that is the problem. Sometimes when you're doing intensive meditation practice and there's a lot happening, you just want to

think about what's going on. Well, that's a valid thing to do. But what I recommend is always, again, agency. You realize there's a lot going on, you need to think about this, and then you make the resolution, the determination: "Right now I will drop the meditation and I will reflect about X"—whatever it is, like you've picked something. And then you think about it very deliberately. You might keep the same posture as you do when you meditate, so it's often very focused, clear thinking. And then when you're done, you make the determination: "Right now I will drop the reflection, drop the thinking, and return to the meditation." So you have a clear border.

And if you want to know when you should drop it, one thing to look for is the slightest hint of repetition. Drop it. Because now the mind is going around in circles. After that, you might want to make a journal note. Then you can go back to it later. Sometimes you go back to it later and you think, "What was I on?" And sometimes you go back and you go, "Wow, that was really good. I really learned something."

So again, thinking is natural. It's part of being human. It's the relationship to it that we're interested in.

But we're talking far too much. There's another question—which has been burning you up for years, now you can finally get an answer. And the question you know you want to ask, but you're too embarrassed, is: where do I think?

So if you sit into your meditation posture, construct your posture, and settle into your normal meditation object. Are you thinking? Turn your awareness to the place where you think. This is similar to finding where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have physical location, while the thought stream may not. People may experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it can be useful to begin there. But don't take anything for granted. Don't assume that you already know. Where do you think? Is there a specific location? Is there more than one location? Does this location change? Or is there no location? Where do you think?

So where are they?

"Thinking appears for me located in head and heart, and that which knows thinking is space, so beyond."

So that which knows thinking is quite wide, and the thoughts themselves appear either in the head or the heart. Is there a connection between head and heart, or are there just some thoughts in the head, some thoughts in the heart?

"They inform each other."

So they influence each other. They collaborate.

Anyone else? Where are they?

"Mine are mainly in my head, but there's a relationship between my solar plexus and my thinking. It's got to do with will, I think. I'm still exploring it. There's a tension here, and often the tension in my head and

that area is connected."

Do you find that if you notice the tension in the solar plexus, that means there's a certain kind of thought? Or is it any kind of thought?

"It's got to do with will, I think. Decision, making a decision or something. Or no, on a more basic level than that—just willing through the world. That sheer... I think thought is given as some sort of solution to operating in the world, and to some extent it is, but to some extent it's not. Yet it seems to be a default: 'I'm going to think my way through this.' And that decision comes from the solar plexus—that sort of force, the energy level."

Yes, this blends into our next exercise, which is: do we think with the body? So this body-mind interconnection with thought.

"You mentioned before better quality and worse quality thoughts. I noticed in that exercise that the worse the quality of the thought, the higher it is in the body. So altitude and poor quality go together. Up here are all the thoughts where the self gets quite entangled, with all the emotion attached to them. And then the commentator I mentioned last night is in the back of the head. And then there's some thoughts that come from the heart, and some that come from the solar plexus."

And generally the quality is better as you go downstairs?

"Yeah, it's definitely better. There's definitely less self in the ones down here."

"At this time in the retreat, I find that my thoughts and my feelings from the heart and abdomen are giving birth to thoughts."

That's interesting. So that becomes clearer during a retreat?

"Yes, because the rubbish that I'm carrying around most of the time from the outside world—that drops away with the practice of awareness, awareing the abdominal area. Realizations and things coming to consciousness."

Anybody fail to find location? And is that because—like if I'm looking for something and I'm looking for it and I can't find it, but I know that somewhere it exists, it's just that I can't find it. So there's that kind of "can't find it." But there's another kind in which basically it doesn't have location. It's just absurd to talk about location. Which one did you have?

"It just doesn't have a location. It's a category error."

Again, you notice the variety of experiences that people have. And one of the advantages of listening to different people's experiences is that it begins to dawn on you that there is no one right experience. It does not exist. There are different experiences. There are experiences that totally contradict each other. But it's just experience. And our job as meditators is to clarify the experience as it presents—not to judge it as

good or bad, right or wrong. All of that is complete nonsense. We just clarify the experience.

I've done this exercise many times. Sometimes I would find where the thought was. Sometimes it would be very, very clear. And sometimes it wasn't that I couldn't find it—it just definitely, location did not apply. The way I expressed it to myself was: thinking is both everywhere and nowhere simultaneously.

So you can get completely different experiences at different times. That's normal. But what we're interested in is clarifying whatever experience presents now. That's the only thing that matters. We're opening up the whole system gradually over time.

We're pretty much out of time. Do we have time for one more? Okay, let's go.

Constructing your meditation posture, settle awareness in your body and settle into your normal meditation object. Are you thinking? Do you think with your body? Or does your body respond to your thinking?

For example, do you feel any tension in your body as you think? You might check for sensation in the area of your face. Is there tightness in your jaw? Is there tension in your forehead? Alternatively, do you relax when you think? Does your posture change when you slide into thinking? For example, you may find you slump slightly. Look for how your body responds to your thinking. Do you think with your body?

"I think with my body."

You think with your body?

"When I have thoughts, I notice my body doing things."

So your body responds, would you say? It's a body-mind activity, not just thinking. Do you first notice the thought and then notice the body's response, or do you notice the body's response first and then notice the thought?

"No, I have the thought and then, because I'm being conscious now, I notice I'm like that."

When you start to see these interrelationships, it's very interesting. If you begin to recognise that when you think, something is happening in the body, then you might train yourself differently. Let's say your meditation object is normally physical. You might actually train yourself to catch it first in the body and then see the thinking.

Sometimes this is what I do. I have a characteristic slouch in my thoracic area, which is associated with tension. It's like the thought energy goes up the spine and locates there. So the first thing I feel sometimes is this movement up the body, and then I notice it, relax it, and the thought is just about to get started. These patterns are interesting because once you see that A conditions B, you can approach it from either A or B and see what happens.

"I had the enjoyable experience of giving my mind free rein to go on a thought journey, imagining enjoyable activities I've carried out in the past. And that takes me right into the sensory, physical experience of the activity, feeling it in the body. It's kind of holistic in the sense that all the senses are involved. I hear sounds, or a sense of the sound, in the space. I find it very interesting because it carries on as a thing in itself. I might decide to think about that, but then it starts happening and I'm just in that experience. It's a very body experience."

Similarly, it might be that if you're completely at one with the body and allow it to completely relax, then that body will not produce thought. Or it may produce thought, but a particular kind of thought. Once we start to see these interrelationships, all sorts of interesting things open up. And interesting things are good because what we want is continuity of awareness, and it's easier to stay aware of what we find interesting.

This is one of the reasons why it's good to have a playful attitude towards the practice. If we're playing with it, it's likely to be interesting. And if it's interesting, we'll stay with it. It won't be, "Oh, I've got to keep going with this in-breath, this out-breath. How many more are there?"

"I wanted to make a comment about the idea of thinking in the body and looking for transitions between one mental state and another, and where that is occurring in the physical sense. The possibility that what feels like a body manifestation is actually a form of thinking—that's really something to ponder. The idea that something's arising that I experience as a physical sensation, but it's some kind of idea."

We have a strong body-mind duality—we kind of have the assumption of a strong body-mind split. But the Buddha's basic approach doesn't use that. He's more interested in the activity of being aware and that which is aware. And that which is aware could be what we would call physical or could be what we would call mental. But what for him seems primary is the activity of being aware and that which is aware. Change the awareness, you change that which is aware. Change that which is aware, you change the awareness.

So it's coming at it from a different angle. When we translate it into our culture, it opens up possibilities that normally we wouldn't think of because of our habitual thought patterns.

The thoughts felt more energetic in the body, moving through the body, as opposed to that more undifferentiated place, which is more visceral or cellular.

When you talk about this relationship between awareness and that which is aware, is it too much to ask what those qualities are as they come into the body?

The way the Buddha talks about it, he uses the term *nāma-rūpa*. *Nāma* is cognate with our word "name," and it refers to the mind's reaching out to be aware, to name, to experience. So perception, feeling, and a few others have evolved from this understanding. And then there's *rūpa*, which is form. Originally it meant the visible world, the visible form. Then it also became a word for body. But essentially it means an appearance.

So when we direct awareness in certain ways, what appears as a result? And then, given that appearance, how does it affect the way we are aware of it? There's this to-ing and fro-ing. It's like when you have pain, and then you are aware of the pain. The appearance is pain. And then you direct awareness in a certain way, and suddenly it's not pain anymore—it's something else. You change the awareness again, and it's pain once more.

So his view of the universe is quite dynamic. He's interested in the dynamics—how one thing blends into another, how one thing influences another.

Is there a medium in which awareness happens?

A medium? No. I think awareness, in a sense, *is* the medium. When he talks about awareness in its elemental form, the process of awareness includes awareness itself, but it also includes perception, feeling, and several other factors.

One image the Buddha uses—and we've been referring to this term *citta* every now and again, which we translate as "mind" but which covers more than what we normally call mind—is this: Imagine a clear mountain pool of water. You come to the edge and look into it, and you can see all the way through. At the bottom you can see the rocks and the pebbles and the little eddies in the current. You can see the fish swimming around.

Now, the *citta* is the whole pool. The rocks, the pebbles, the fish, the plants—these are the different contents of the *citta*: feeling, perception, wanting, aversion, and so on. The water itself is awareness. It's transparent. In its essence, it's transparent. But sometimes it gets muddy or disturbed, and you can't see through it. This would be awareness when the *citta* is agitated—awareness loses that quality of transparency.

But when the *citta* settles, we can recognize that quality of transparency, or you might see it described as the luminosity of awareness. And it's within that luminosity of awareness that everything happens.

We're going to play with this in tomorrow morning's workshop, so we'll see if we can get a bit of an experiential taste. I provide the esoteric theory, and I provide some practical experience.

You mentioned that analogy earlier in the retreat.

I did, yes. I must be fond of it.

And you would think water is not visible—and yet when you look at it, you know you're looking through water.

I find that interesting. Awareness, whilst it's intangible and hard to grasp, at the same time, you know it.

You can be aware of it. Yes, because knowing is the essence of awareness.

One image—actually not from water, but from a movie—comes from one of the more recent Sherlock Holmes series. In this one, Sherlock Holmes' evil sister is involved. She's locked up because she's brilliant like Sherlock, but she does evil things. And Sherlock goes to visit her.

And you enter into the cell, and there's a visitor's chair near the door, and there's a sheet of glass that keeps the prisoner on the other side. So he sits there and he's talking to her, and she gets up and starts to wander around. And then she steps through the glass. Because it turns out there is no glass. They just tell him that there's glass, and so he assumes there's glass, and it's completely clear, so he doesn't see it. But actually there isn't any. And you can just move through.

To me, that speaks to the nature of awareness. It's one of the things that makes awareness so mysterious—because it's fundamentally not a thing. It's like where things happen.

We won't go there. I'm completely confused.

Thank you very much.

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