# What is Awakening? (Part 1)

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:12:24

In this next talk, I would like to explore the question: what is awakening? I want to examine the experiences and ideas of what enlightenment, liberation, and awakening might mean. Again, I hope this will be helpful for you. Some of it will be similar to the previous talks on this retreat—advice or information or clarification or outlining possibilities, pointing out and indicating possibilities for us as human beings, as practitioners.

Alongside all that, I'm partly hoping to open up the discourse around this and open up our thinking around these notions—awakening, enlightenment, liberation—using these terms interchangeably for now. I also want to open up our questioning. If you listen, you will hear that there are actually several questions interwoven in the questions I'm opening up. There are several questions, and they're connected, weaving in and out of each other.

Teaching, as I'm pretty sure I've said before, is always contextual for me. Teaching happens in a context. It's informed and conditioned by that context. It has to be. In a way, it's conveying what a teacher has received from the tradition, from different traditions, from their teachers—in all different forms and from all different directions perhaps. It's also a conveying of what one has discovered for oneself, the possibilities there, and what might be helpful from one's own experience. And it's also, of course, a response to the student or students—what has been coming from the students towards the teacher or what is witnessed there.

So, as I said, I really hope this is helpful. Sometimes a teaching is helpful only at a certain time, at a certain point in one's practice. It might be that we hear certain teachings and it's just not the right time for us to hear them. They don't impress us, we don't understand, they don't make much sense, or they just seem silly to us, or they don't fit with another idea we're more favoring at that time. So really, whether it's helpful also depends on whether it's the right time to hear a certain teaching—at a particular time in your life, in the development of your practice, in your journey.

So what is awakening? If one listens to or reads different teachers, listens to practitioners, or asks a range of teachers or practitioners "What is awakening? What is enlightenment? What is liberation? What does it mean to you?"—you will surely get these days a very wide range of answers, a very wide range of notions and responses there. You will also encounter many practitioners who don't really think about the notion at all. It's not in their vocabulary, or they make very little reference to it, or perhaps it only really means moments of mindfulness or moments of wakefulness—therefore moments of awakening. It's not really in their map, in their orientation. They're not really referring to it; it's not really a reference point for their

practice and for their thinking and discourse.

But there is really a wide range. Perhaps in Buddhist circles, because of the centrality of the Four Noble Truths—which we've been discussing a little bit in the previous talks—dukkha, and then the third truth, the ending of dukkha, the cessation of dukkha, liberation or freedom from suffering might be the most common sort of nutshell response to this question of what awakening means. But then that just begs, for me, the next question: What does that mean? Freedom from suffering? Liberation from suffering? What does that mean? What would it look like? What do you mean by suffering? What kind of suffering?

To me, just that much is interesting. The fact that there's now such a wide range—I've touched on this before—but that social fact, if you like, is very interesting to me. It marks our age, and it marks the Dharma in our age, and it marks the Insight Meditation community as well.

I'm going to talk now about this kind of material, and obviously I can't help but communicate some of my thinking on the subject—my current thinking, my current approach—and of course that's going to be conditioned by, reflective of, an outcome of my journey with all this. But I want to—it's not about me—and I want to hopefully say enough that opens up this territory for anyone. Obviously it's going to be reflective of and informed by how I have related to this question in the past, which has, along with other factors, conditioned how I'm relating to it right now.

But I don't mean to communicate anything final. I don't mean to give you a categorical, final, authoritative answer to what is awakening. In a way, that's part of the very point that I want to communicate.

The relationship and the way we relate to the notion of awakening—the very idea we have of it—evolves. This is, again, a point of view. It should evolve, and it should be open to questioning. Is our notion of awakening truly open to questioning? Is the very question or the journey we have with the notion of awakening and what that might be genuinely open-ended?

So right there, it's quite a perhaps different point of view—one that you might not have encountered before or be used to. I don't want to be communicating a final "this is how it is" dogma. But of course, much of what I say will inevitably be influenced by my history with this question, my experience with practice, and my current way of relating to it in approach and thinking.

But let's start with this business of how we approach the very notion. People say awakening, enlightenment, liberation, and as I mentioned, for some people these words just don't register—they simply ignore them. For others, they're really quite alive or charged words, quite emotive for us.

One of the things I'm really interested in—I'd like to start there—is how are we approaching this question of awakening, this notion of awakening? How are we looking at it? How are we relating to it? How do we conceive of it? What intentions are we bringing to this concept of awakening, this idea of awakening, this goal, if you like, of awakening? And what of those intentions are conscious and what is perhaps unconscious in the intention? What are the assumptions—and what are perhaps the unconscious

assumptions—that we bring to this word, this idea? What movements of the being, of the psyche, do we bring there?

This to me is where I'd like to start and one of the really indispensable questions to try to open up this whole field. How am I approaching it? How are we approaching it? How are we conceiving? What are the intentions, assumptions, drives involved for us? What goes on for us with respect to the idea and the notion of awakening? What goes into that relationship? What goes into that conception and that notion? What are we bringing into it?

I think it's really helpful in this area, really important, and in fact, potentially liberating. In asking what is liberation, and in asking what is awakening, what is enlightenment, it's helpful, important, and potentially liberating to draw attention to and contemplate—or at least consider the possibility—that we, many of us, let's say, will tend to approach the question and the teaching of awakening, enlightenment, liberation with motivations that are, to some extent, informed or impressed or driven by two kinds of motivation that I would highlight right now.

The question is: how much is our approach informed by or motivated by or shaped or directed or limited by these two motivations? How much is our perspective, and then the whole field, shaped, directed, limited, informed by these motivations?

One is the wish to measure where we ourselves are on some kind of scale towards awakening. So the question is: how much of the motivation involved in the way we approach the question of awakening and the goal of awakening is actually a kind of ego measuring wish, if you like—an ego wish to measure up, which is actually quite a normal movement and inclination of ego, to measure itself.

Ego, or actually self, self-sense, is conditioned by, is fabricated based on any kind of measurement. This goes extremely subtle, extremely deep. I can't remember the name of a talk I gave—something like "Beyond the Measuring Mind" or something. But really, in the subtleties of—not just in the gross way when it's really ego and inner critic, which is really important to look at—but also in the very, very subtle movements where the very fabrication of perception of object and subject is based on measurement. I'm not going to go into that right now because I've talked about it a lot before. I think that talk was called "Maya and Nirvana" or "Beyond the Measuring Mind"—something like that—but if you're interested.

Right now I want to talk about the grosser level, which is this kind of ego measurement, the sort of normal movement or inclination of ego. So how much is that a kind of motivation when we relate to and approach the notion of awakening?

And secondly, how much is there a kind of wish or inclination to frame our questioning about awakening within the frameworks given to us by the tradition or traditions we are currently viewing as authoritative?

So it's not really common, as an observation I'd like to make, it's not really common to radically question

the views and definitions of awakening, enlightenment, liberation—whatever you want to call it—that are handed to us by the traditions that we are currently viewing as authoritative. In other words, wrapped up with this whole question of what is awakening and how we approach it is this relationship with authority and tradition, and how free we are to really bring a kind of radical questioning there.

So two questions for us. How much is our approach to awakening, and our approach to even the idea of awakening—what it might be, what it can be—how much is it motivated, informed, shaped, directed, limited by the tendency of the self or ego to want to measure itself, to measure up? And secondly, by a kind of unquestioned authority of tradition, or a non-questioning of the authority of tradition?

Sometimes those two factors combine, of course: the measuring self and the lack of questioning of the authority of a tradition in all kinds of ways. And sometimes it's not one tradition—it's like a tradition such as Pali Canon Buddhism, or even just insight meditation tradition. As I said, you'll get different interpretations from different teachers within that tradition, which I think is actually quite healthy. But then the question is—and this is not an easy question to answer—why do I adopt this teacher's interpretation as an authority and not that teacher? What makes sense to me? Is it just that? What's going on for us psychologically in the ways that we relate to authority, and in this case specifically the authority of certain teachers, and then the authority in relationship around the notion of awakening?

To me these are really important questions, considerations to open up, to bring to our awareness.

Regarding the first one, this tendency of the ego—the tendency of any self-sense to be built on measurement, the discrimination of measurement, better or worse or whatever—and the tendency of the grosser levels of self-manifestation, ego and certainly inner critic and all that, to be based on self-measurement. Sometimes a student who's been practicing a long while will ask me, "What do you think? What's your take on stream entry or the first stage of awakening that the Buddha outlined in the Pali Canon?"

Sometimes I find myself actually wanting, rather than just say what I think, to ask what seems like a more important question in response: Why are you asking? And sometimes I wonder—and sometimes I think it has turned out to be the case, not in every case at all, I don't want to insist on that—but sometimes I wonder, is it that you want to feel you've achieved this thing called stream entry or this stage? As if, "I want to be one of those. I want to be a stream enterer. I want to be in that club. I hear people talking. There are these web forums and people say this. Or I was at a meeting and people were talking about stream enterers, and I want to be in that club."

Or—obviously a very related question but subtly different—is it that you don't want to think and feel that you're not in that club, that you're not one of those? Why? Can we dare to really explore this question? It takes a lot of courage to explore that question. It's quite radical to turn the questioning around that way. Can we explore it vigorously? Sometimes I've brought this up and a person kind of shrugs it off. And sometimes it's been my sense that there's a lot more to investigate here.

I don't mean by this to jump to the other extreme which sometimes is communicated in certain teachings: just drop all notions of awakening, forget about it, it's just an ego trip. Don't harm yourself by even asking the question of what it might be and might it be possible and how. Just drop it, just forget about it. Don't go near it because by going near that question, you're poking the dragon of the inner critic. The dragon will be awakened and torment you.

But by asking this question—"Why are you asking? And can you really vigorously explore that?"—I'm asking it out of kindness. When I ask it, I ask it out of kindness. Part of the reason for asking it is kindness. Can you get that? If I'm actually chasing something just for the sake of satisfying the unsatisfiable inner critic—getting my stripes, measuring up, finally being good enough—that's really unkind, to live a life that way, to pursue practice that way, for one's practice to be shot through with that kind of drive.

So the question is coming, if one poses it to oneself, or with a friend where it feels safe to ask that question together, of each other, out of kindness.

But there's also a lot of boldness and radicality in the questioning. It's kind, but there's boldness and radicality there. Why am I even asking this question about awakening? What is my relationship with this?

There are aspects—this is one aspect—and there's a whole other kind of level of what we might call meta-freedom, M-E-T-A, a whole other level of freedom that can open up when we open up our relationship with the very notion of freedom, of liberation, of awakening, enlightenment. That's partly what I hope to open up a little bit. It's like a whole other level of awakening, a whole other level of freedom.

But even asking this question—why am I asking? And asking: what am I bringing to this question? What are my notions? What's my relationship? What are my intentions? These are not easy questions. I think they take courage, they take honesty, they take integrity, and they take boldness.

Personally, I am very interested in awakening, enlightenment, liberation—what that might mean, what it can be. I'm very interested in the possibilities for a human being, possibilities for consciousness, the possibilities for living, for life, for the sense of existence, the possibilities for perception. The breadth, the range, the depth, the possibilities for soul, the possibilities of what liberation of my action in the world means. And the possibility in relation to all this for society. We talk about awakening, liberation. What might that mean socially? What might it mean for the wider sphere of being and beings? I'm also very interested in the ideas about it, notions, and our relationship with it, and our relationship with our ideas about it, as I've just said.

But when someone talks to me in an interview, and sometimes the student might bring it up—they're feeling this pressure or this measurement or this way that things have just gotten really tight and constricted and painful in relation to a question of some kind of achievement on the path, meditative achievement, whether it's awakening or jhana or emptiness stages of emptiness realization or whatever it

is—when someone's talking to me, one of us, either it's them or me, is wondering about how much of the intention is coming from this measuring, wanting to measure up, and how much pressure there is coming from that. Then often I feel that at that point, the most necessary and most interesting piece to explore in the conversation is exactly that. It's the relationship with.

It doesn't mean we won't get to the rest of it and the ideas and the possibilities of what it might mean and how one might move towards that or open that up, whatever metaphor we might use. But this piece about relationship with and what comes in in terms of intention and motivation is a really necessary piece. Oftentimes it's like we need to do that before we can go any further. And it's actually quite an interesting piece, I think.

So sometimes, or at different points, let's say, for a person, the dominant intention or push regarding either the whole of practice or some particular strand of practice, like jhana practice or emptiness practice or whatever, is to prove oneself. What's going on? I have to prove oneself. Is it to myself that I have to prove myself? Is it to others, and who? Is it to a certain teacher or teachers, to measure up somehow?

Like I said, if this is the case, or even if one of us in the conversation suspects that it is the case, then in my role as teacher, I actually become more interested in that at that point, or as a necessity to understand and unpack it and find freedom from that particularly narrow and painful drive. That becomes, at that point, more interesting and more necessary than attaining jhana, attaining this stage of realization or whatever.

If we just dwell a little bit with jhana practice—the same kind of psychological, painful psychological mechanics regarding motivation can go on there as they can in relation to awakening. With long-term practice, I mean really doing a lot of jhana practice, doing it very thoroughly, one sees—I think it's almost unavoidable to see, I hope it seems pretty obvious that one would see—that the attainment of any jhana is not really dependent on myself. It's dependent on the conditions in the moment. When the conditions are there, when the past and particularly the present conditions are there, then the jhana, this particular jhana, will arise or will stabilize or whatever it is, or will deepen. And it's not really to do with self.

It becomes really, really clear when you do a lot of jhana practice, dipping in and out over a long time in all sorts of conditions, and bringing a kind of intelligent attention or scrutiny or curiosity, willingness to understand: how is this even working? Why is it that some days it seems to go really well, other days not so well, and everything in between? Or sittings well, or not so well, etc. If there's an interest in that, it's kind of unavoidable that one realizes, you know, it's not really that the self is so fantastic and the architect of all this. It's the conditions.

So this realization dissolves any attempt to use the jhanas to measure up or prove oneself. It's not about oneself. That's not what it depends on.

When, though, there's just been a little practice of the jhanas and a little success or attainment—you know, first four jhanas, just a little bit—and then we go, "Oh, that's it. Yeah, I got it. First jhana, got that. Got the

second, got the third, got the fourth." There's this quick sort of ticking off and getting of one's stripes. Oftentimes that realization of their dependence on conditions has not become clear yet. It's not mature yet. It's all too quick. I haven't seen, I haven't paid enough attention. I haven't had enough experience there.

So one possibility is that you get this strange effect where the practice—just a little bit—has unfortunately reinforced the whole ego-measuring, ego-proving orientation and focus and motivation. In a way it actually feels good to the ego, but it's actually reinforced that whole problematic stance.

Again, it's really important to bring a kind of curiosity and intelligence both to the motivation and to actually asking: does this even justify being pumped up about achieving this or that?

I actually think, if we just stay with jhanas for a little bit, a much healthier desire for jhanas and for emptiness experiences is a love of and a curiosity about the depths—those kinds of depths of consciousness, of opening, of perception, the beauty there, the nourishment of mystical experiences of various sorts. I think a kind of greed, if you like—if I even dare to use that word—a desire and a love for those depths and even an attachment to those depths and the beauty and that nourishment and the love of those mystical depths, that's a much healthier motivation.

Sometimes what happens is a person becomes afraid of becoming attached to pleasure regarding the jhanas. But I don't think attachment to pleasure, in itself, is rarely a problem in my experience teaching the jhanas. It's rarely a problem. What can look like attachment to pleasure arises predominantly when one or the other of two conditions serves as a basis.

In other words, it looks like there's attachment to pleasure when actually what's going on—the root of that seeming attachment to pleasure—is actually a chronic avoidance of some kind of psychological or emotional or relational pain, and one is just hiding. Or part of one's motivation, let's put it that way, part of one's motivation is this chronic avoidance of certain psychological, emotional, or relational pains or difficulties or challenges. It's actually not attachment to pleasure.

It's also the case that what looks like attachment to pleasure can only really take root when there isn't a sense of soul-making, of mystery and beauty in the discovery of the jhanas. You understand? The jhanas have become kind of flat because one hasn't opened up that dimension of soul. They're just pleasant experiences of different degrees, and one hasn't really—for whatever complex reasons—opened up to the sense of mystery and beauty that they can reveal. There's not really a sense of soulfulness, of deepening and soul-making going on there. It's just become about pleasure. And sometimes that's when the attachment to the jhana, the attachment to the pleasure, can be a motivating force—because there's nothing else. It's just pleasure. Or it's mostly avoidance masquerading as attachment to pleasure.

The pleasure of jhana—just even taking the first four jhanas—the pleasure of those jhanas and the kind of nourishment and fulfillment far exceeds the pleasure that's available to human beings in the flatly sensed

senses. Not, you know, without sensing the soul—just the pleasure of a meal, or the pleasure of the sensations of taste, or the pleasure of the sensations of sex or whatever, when it's flatly conceived. The pleasure of jhana dwarfs those. You're talking about a totally different realm.

But the pleasure of soul-making, and that kind of dimensionality opening up—the delight of that and the nourishment of that far exceeds the pleasure of the jhana when the jhana is conceived flatly and felt flatly, when it's just a realm of pleasure. "That's convenient, that's a lot of pleasure, I'll hang out there in the third jhana or wherever it is."

So wrapped up in all of this is this question of motivation. What do I want? What am I wanting? Whether it's from jhanic experiences, whether it's from emptiness, whether it's from the whole path, and whether it's from awakening and that whole idea or goal.

If my motivation is this kind of proving myself or measuring up somehow—the ego measuring up—I would say that's not a deep motivation. It's not really what I would call an authentic desire. It's not a soul desire. Let's just say it's not even authentic. It's not a deep desire. It's a superficial psychological mechanism where the pain can feel like it goes very deep, but it's not what I call authentic. It's not really your own. It's somehow put on one socially. This desire to measure up is a kind of social desire.

What do you want? What's your authentic desire for practice, for the path? What kind of awakening do you want? What is the awakening that you seek? What possibilities do you hope for, long for, yearn for?

When we ask this question "What is awakening?" we could approach it by studying various conceptions and statements and differentiations of the notion of awakening. We're going to do a little bit of that in the Buddhist tradition as well as other traditions and teachings. We could also describe the apparent characteristics and lifestyles and personalities of those popularly considered as enlightened.

But as well as all that, or even instead of all that, we could ask this question: What do you want?

But do you see that the answer to what you want may be—and may be to a large extent—informed, conditioned, and even closed in by the study of various conceptions and statements about awakening, by the Buddhist tradition, by stories and images describing the apparent characteristics and lifestyles of those popularly considered enlightened? Do you see how what we receive from an authority or from a subculture actually might shape, inform, direct and limit the very answers we give ourselves when we ask what we want? It may shape, limit, inform and direct what we actually want or what we feel we want.

Of course, if we ask "What do I want in life?" this question is not just about what I want in my existence, in this movement of time that I have between birth and death. What do I want from that? What do I hope for? What do I long for?

I don't need to tell you how much we are assailed, barraged by advertising and images in the culture, pushing, prodding, dragging, harassing us to develop this desire or that one, shaping us. Sometimes we'd

like to feel "I'm not—I see through all that," but it's so prevalent and so powerful. Sometimes some of that is really obvious and we can just let go of it easily—we're not pulled in, whereas we might see others pulled in by our society and culture. But this also exists in much subtler ways and in other areas of our lives.

I was reading about an indigenous native tribe in the Amazon. An oil company came—or was it a damming project, people putting up a hydroelectric plant—and they tried to bribe the tribal people. They said, "Let us give you these satellite TVs and alcohol and things." The tribe wasn't interested in them at all, but they were given them anyway. Because they had the satellite TVs and all this stuff, they saw others with all kinds of things, living very different lifestyles—affluent Western lifestyles, of course, which is what you see on TV. They were exposed to corporate advertising directing and magnifying their desires, and over not very long time, this began to shape what they wanted. They wanted all that stuff. That had devastating effects on that region of the Amazon, on the social cohesion and well-being of that tribe.

You can see this happening large-scale in the world. So the question is: to what degree is what I want the product of conditioning? How much of my answer to what I want is the product of conditioning, of ideas, of images, fantasy?

Just another thing I read recently in the Guardian—up to 1990, they did some study in Fiji. Eating disorders were unheard of there in 1990 and before that, when they did anthropological social studies. In 1995, TV was introduced in Fiji. Most of it was American TV, and it was teeming with food ads—hamburgers and sweets and this and that. Within three years, twelve percent of teenage girls in Fiji had developed bulimia.

This kind of thing is really painfully shocking, but you're obviously aware of that kind of conditioning. But the point I want to make is that we can also be subject to spiritual conditioning, a spiritual influencing of what we want spiritually by those we come into contact with—by teachers, by authorities, by a sangha, by what's popular in books, by all of that.

For some of you who've been around a while—I mean really a while—and perhaps come across or been in and out of different sanghas, different spiritual communities and teachers and fellow practitioners...

I don't know if you have wondered this as well, but sometimes in some of the communities I've moved through over these thirty-plus years—whether settled sanghas or more mobile communities of practitioners—I've noticed something curious. Sometimes I wonder whether certain figures in a sangha, perhaps senior students or teachers, seem to inhabit or project a particular persona in a way that feels almost unconscious, yet somehow calculated to influence others.

It depends on the sangha, of course. Some are monastic, others decidedly non-monastic, but there can emerge a certain archetypal image—perhaps of someone jovial and warm, yet somehow distant or aloof. There's an affable amusement at the world and at those who scurry about, busy and attached, but with

genuine goodwill underlying it all. There's something about this persona that I find myself wondering about—as if someone might be unconsciously or semi-consciously inhabiting it, even selling it a little through their smile, through the way they walk or stand in the lunch queue, through the casual way their shawl falls over their shoulder.

Certainly it can be beneficial to model a certain possibility of disinterest, of non-entanglement. It's good to embody an archetype of equanimity, even one that appears somewhat aloof. But when does this become a fixated image that goes unquestioned and rigid? When does it begin operating in a way we're not quite conscious of—this pull toward conforming to what awakening should look like, this unconscious stamping or rigidifying of a model? It remains a certain style, but it becomes a fixated image rather than an imaginal one, even though it may be operating relatively unconsciously.

And again, there's this question: what do you want? What do you really want?

I was recently having several conversations around awakening, with different people presenting similar issues around this very question. When I asked them what they really wanted, very often the answer came back easily: "I want the end of suffering." But it didn't sound authentic to me.

"What's suffering?" I would ask.

A person might respond—and this has happened several times—"Well, I'm kind of addicted to food." This is actually a relatively common response. When I inquire what's involved in their relationship with food, we're not talking about anything like anorexia or bulimia, just a pattern of overindulgence.

I find myself wondering: how much suffering is there really around this pattern? How much is it actually a problem? They say they're interested in awakening, that they want the end of suffering. But is there really that much suffering involved? Many people have robust digestive systems—they can indulge in all kinds of foods and sweets and overeating and feel perhaps a little sluggish, maybe some minor indigestion. But it's not really a significant problem.

So I probe: is that really what you want—relief from that particular suffering around food? Is that really what's most important to you?

Sometimes, when we go deeper into this question, a person will think more and say, quoting the Buddha, "I don't want to be an untrained, ordinary, run-of-the-mill person." This is stock phrasing that the Buddha used to describe someone unenlightened, someone who hasn't engaged in practice or progressed on the path.

But this answer reveals something different. When I probe a little deeper, it becomes clear: is it really about the end of suffering? Are you really that concerned about the suffering you experience in your life? Actually, there isn't that much suffering present. There's this relationship with food, but it's not causing significant difficulty.

This deeper answer suggests to me the very issue we've been exploring around ego identification and ego measurement: "I don't want to be that kind of person."

I don't want to be in that camp—what the Buddha calls "untrained, ordinary, run-of-the-mill person."

So is it, again, the motivation coming out of ego and measurement? Or is that motivation—let's say that aspect of the emotional, that strand of the motivation—is it larger than the attraction to actually lessening suffering? In other words, what's the relative dominance of the different motivations?

Or is there an attraction to beauty? We haven't even said anything about that yet. Actually, we did when we talked about the jhanas. So what's the relative weighting of these different motivations?

If I say "I don't want to be an untrained, ordinary, run-of-the-mill person," it seems to be voicing, it seems to be indicating that these questions of identification, ego identification and measurement are actually dominating.

And sometimes even then, the psychology is much more complex. So a person is saying, "I don't want to be untrained, I don't want to be..." But some part of them is really rebelling angrily against the prospect or the demand of training. The Buddha talks about training a thoroughbred horse as a metaphor for the development of meditation and practice—sila, samadhi, panna.

So at the same time, one part of me is wanting this—I want to measure up and not be counted as one of those the Buddha calls untrained. And another part of me is rebelling angrily at this demand or even prospect of training. To me, that's interesting. What is going on there? Can I open this up? Can I actually look at it with honesty, with integrity, with courage?

In the absence of a cosmological belief—basically, a cosmological context of awakening meaning the ending of rebirth—that's a kind of cosmological idea that the Buddha adopted and taught. In final awakening is the ending of rebirth, the stage of awakening, the movement to the ending of rebirth in arahantship. So you get non-returner—that means you're not born again in this material existence. Once-returner—you have one more rebirth in this material existence. Sotapanna has a maximum of seven.

So the whole thing is this trajectory to end rebirth. It's a cosmological view. And wrapped up in that view is there's basically an infinity of suffering awaiting us in endless rebirth. Endless rebirth is equivalent to an infinity of suffering, albeit in a kind of seemingly random roller coaster—up and down, highs and lows, fortune and misfortune, pain and pleasure. But inevitably, the suffering there outweighs the pleasure, and a lot of it will be absolutely brutal.

So there's a kind of cosmological view. Awakening is situated in that cosmological view—ending rebirth. In the absence of such a cosmological view, which I think is the case for a lot of people these days—it's not really gripping to them, that whole cosmological view of ending rebirth. It's like, what I'm really trying to

do is end rebirth and not be reborn into the human realm. It's quite the opposite, actually. If people believe in rebirth, it's actually quite an attractive notion these days.

But anyway, in the absence of such a cosmological belief structuring the larger view of what awakening is, the question comes again: what is awakening as you conceive it? And why do you want it?

A very easy answer in a Buddhist context is to conceive of awakening as the end of suffering. Again, sometimes—in fact, a lot of the time—is that what you really most want? The end of suffering. Is that really what you most want?

Sometimes when we have a lot of pain and we just feel trapped in a lot of pain, whether it's psychological or physical, that can be the dominant thing. "I just want the end of suffering." But when that goes, or when we've seen through that kind of psychological pain, or whatever it is, for our whole lives, for our whole existence—is that really what you want, what you most want, the end of suffering, the end of dukkha? Is that your greatest desire? Is that really what you're after in practice?

Often, someone is saying that, and it's palpably clear, actually, to both of us, that they don't live like that. They're not living and choosing the end of suffering every day. Far from it. There's lots of suffering in their lives, and they actually don't mind too much. It's not such a big deal—a little bit of indigestion, a little bit of sloth and torpor, a little bit of whatever it is. They're cutting deals with suffering. "I'll have this much pleasure and I accept this much suffering that goes with it when I crave that or I indulge in this."

When a person is living their life that way, they're saying "I want the end of suffering," but it's not really what's going on. So "end of suffering" is one way that one might frame it.

And it might be a valid answer. My question is simply: is it? And if it is, then great—that's your orientation. But is it?

The person might say, "Happiness—I want happiness. Awakening is happiness," somehow tying the notion of awakening with happiness. I'll just mention this observation—I'm not quite sure what conclusion to make with this, but it made me smile. Maybe you can draw your own conclusions.

From the Guardian in December 2016, there was a nationwide poll in the UK. They asked if people would regard themselves as happy. Ninety-two percent of UK residents said they were happy. Which I found very interesting.

Then they were asked another question: to estimate how many in the UK would say they were happy. In other words, what was their estimate of how many people would answer that question "Are you happy?" with a yes? The average estimate was forty-seven percent.

So ninety-two percent said they're happy, and the average estimate of what people think about how many other people are happy was forty-seven percent. I think that's interesting. I'm not quite sure what to conclude from that.

There's also the statistic—I don't know if it's just US or UK—that one in five people are on antidepressants. So I don't know quite how that squares with ninety-two percent of people saying they're happy.

Is happiness something that you relate to, or is it a goal for you? Or do you feel like you're sold that by some kind of spiritual teaching or psychological teaching? What does it even mean, anyway? I have problems with all these polls, but what does happiness mean? It's such a loose word. There's so much range to what that can mean—so many kinds of happiness, so many shades and discriminations we could make between kinds and degrees of happiness. One wonders what was the range and conception people had when they answered.

But what would it look like to say "I'm happy"? What does it look like if happiness is a goal? I don't know if that's something people commonly say. I rarely come across that as an answer, though perhaps it's part of a larger answer about what a person wants.

Then there are also considerations around—again, we're talking about notions of awakening and how we get locked into what we want, or whether it's really what we want, and how that's related to notions we have and what we've been exposed to. As I said, all these questions are interwoven together.

Why is it that we often—or it seems most common to—cling to a notion of awakening as some kind of finality? The Buddha did teach it that way, and most spiritual traditions teach it that way. They convey a sense of "this is a goal beyond which there is nothing"—no further development, this is it, the end of awakening, the final goal.

What's the relationship between a finality of goal—an awakening conceived as some kind of finality—and self-view, or the tendencies of self-view? As I alluded to at the beginning, and in a previous talk, self-view takes as a scaffold some kind of view of finality with regard to awakening. That very finality becomes a kind of basis, or support, or scaffolding on which self-view and ego-view can be constructed, fabricated, and oftentimes hardened.

Whether trained or untrained, ordinary or extraordinary—"I am X." That whole kind of black-and-white thinking, which is also quite characteristic of addiction and many other difficulties, can very much come into play in terms of both self-view and view of goal, view of what awakening is. And they go together. There's something important about that.

So we tend to think in terms of some kind of final reaching point of awakening. We might, just as we ask what does happiness look like, also ask what would the end of suffering look like? The cessation of dukkha—how would it manifest? What would it look like to live the end of greed, aversion and delusion? What does that actually look like?

Now, again, you encounter these classical Buddhist terms from the Pali Canon—suffering, nibbāna, the Four Noble Truths, the three kilesas—and each admits very wide interpretation of what they mean. But actually, with any interpretation, I would still ask: what does it look like? What would it look like to

actually live the end of greed, aversion and delusion—the complete end of those?

Where are you going to draw the line for what greed is? Some of you will know my tendency, my preference regarding what delusion is—to regard it as a spectrum, and also clinging as a spectrum. So when we talk about really subtle clinging or really deep, subtle delusion, they actually are implicated thoroughly into the very fabrication of any and all perception. So that to really be without delusion is also to be in that moment without perception. And to be completely without clinging is also to be without perception in that moment. One cannot live that.

So where on the spectrum of clinging and delusion am I going to draw the line and say this is delusion but that isn't? And if—as we'll get to—if actually one's motivation, when one looks inside and asks, "Is it the end of suffering? No, not really. I'm not sure. What is it that I really want? What is it?"—if through practice and honest inquiry, you discover other answers...

This is really your question, not for me or anyone to tell you what to want. But if the answer is that actually, why am I practicing? What am I practicing for? And it's really about the love of exploration—the love and longing for sacredness, for sacrednesses opening up, the love and longing for soulfulness, the love and desire for beauty and beauty opening up, the interest and beauty of what we're calling the creation and discovery of self-other-world and all of that—if it's actually those kinds of things motivating you, why would we not allow the notion of awakening to be open-ended?

What's the limit to my love of exploration? What's the limit to the sacrednesses that can open up, or the soulfulness, the soul-making, the beauty, beauties? What's the limit to the kind of poetic and skillful and soul-making fabrication of self, other, world and eros? Would that be okay—to have an open-ended notion of awakening?

I want to continue, but again, just to sum up: I really want to stress what I feel is important to unpack, to unearth, to look at and ask. What is around and in my relationship to this idea of awakening? In my relation to my practice toward awakening, what's involved in my approach, in my conception, in my relationship, in terms of intention, assumption, drive?

To me, as I said, that question is itself motivated by kindness, but it has a lot of boldness in it—or it can have. And in itself, it can actually open up a whole other level of what we might call awakening, liberation.

Let's stop there for now.

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