

## Questioning Awakening

November Solitary

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*This talk is the first part of a talk in three parts. (Part 2 is "Buddhism Beyond Modernism"; Part 3 is "In Praise of Restlessness".)*

Okay, good morning, everyone. Over the next three weeks, I think what I'd like to do is really give one long talk, one very long talk, split (I *hope*) just into three. I hope. I really hope. But just to start by putting that in context a little bit. For me, and I would guess for most of the teachers in this tradition, most of the talks that I give or a teacher gives include quite a lot of advice, if you like, or practice possibilities, tips, techniques, etc., regarding all kinds of life challenges, difficulties, situations, *dukkha*, emotional, psychological, spiritual, to do with communication and speech, relationship, relating, sexuality, work, body, etc. Also, quite a lot of guidance, and very detailed often, about the lovely side of things, and how meditation can deepen into very lovely spaces, and navigating all that. So all of that is in most talks, or some of that is in most talks. And/or, most talks try and sort of explain the Dharma, if you like; try and actually explain what that teacher's take on the Dharma is.

All that's in the library. [laughter] And also on Dharma Seed. Of course, when you come to interviews, I really hope that you feel met and that you feel engaged with what you need, practically speaking: something that helps, a shift of something, a tool, something or other. I really hope that's the case. Sometimes what a person needs is just to be listened to.

These talks, or this talk, is not so much any of that. Something different. A different purpose, if you like. What I really want to explore is the assumptions underneath how we think of and conceive the Dharma, practice, the path, etc. The way we think and conceive of the Dharma, and the assumptions *underneath* how we're thinking of and conceiving of practice, path, Dharma, are not often at the forefront of our minds. They're sort of somewhere at the back, and the assumptions are often *really* buried. They're not often what we investigate. They're not often investigated. So I would like, if possible, to shine a little light on that whole level of things, and question. Question. Really, this is about questioning.

So three talks over three weeks is a long trajectory, and I'm very aware that when there's a long structure like that, it's actually hard for a listener to hold it together and see how things are fitting together. I'm very aware of that – even when there's a linear structure. I've done that in here before in different, other retreats. The structure of these talks is even not so linear. We'll be touching on something, mentioning it, coming back, returning, etc. What I really want to do is open out, open out a whole area, open out what may have become quite entrenched and unexamined ideas that actually have a lot of power in our lives and in relation to our practice. So I hope each talk stands alone, but really it's the three together. I'll basically do the best that I can with what I think is a really enormous and enormously important area.

Okay. Having said all that, you are free to leave now. [laughter] Seriously, I mean it. If you feel, "I'm not up for that," that's cool. [laughter] It's not a joke! I'm serious! [laughter] You really all want to

stay? I don't take it personally. Okay.

All right, so I mentioned this in the talk that we gave on the first morning about *samādhi*. Just looking around us, even just at Gaia House or the Insight Meditation tradition, what a *huge* range of views exists, or is on offer to us, of what the path is, what the goal is, actually what the Dharma is. It's really, really wide, and quite divergent. There's a range of views that all of us are going to encounter. We *do* encounter it. Even regarding something like awakening or enlightenment. I was speaking on the phone with a teacher in another country just the other day, and he's been in the Dharma scene internationally for, I think, more than forty years. He's really quite long-standing. He was asking me, "Has there been a shift? I'm not sure if I'm seeing this right. Has there been some kind of shift over the years, and over the decades, in relationship to awakening and the question of awakening?" We were talking a little bit, and I think I would agree with him, that he is picking up a shift. If you listen back to talks from the seventies, eighties, nineties, etc., there is a shift. There has been and is a shift. Looking at that whole area of the concept of awakening, what sometimes we see over those decades in this tradition is a disappearing, a disappearing of any reference to that word or that idea, 'awakening,' 'enlightenment.' It's not referred to much, or referred to much less. It's not used very much. It's disappeared off the scene a little bit, or quite a lot in some instances. So that's one trend.

A second trend is that the *meaning* of 'awakening' or 'enlightenment' has, if you like, been lowered, really. It's become much less of a big deal, so that sometimes, very popularly now, if it means anything at all, it kind of means being in this world without 'selfing.' What does that mean? It means dragging in the past and projecting the future, dragging in the past resentments and obscurations of *papañca*, etc. Being in this world without that, freshly, so that the process of the psychophysical organism is just unfolding to reveal fresh, direct perception of this world. That's what awakening has come to mean for some people, very popularly. That's a second trend.

A third trend is actually a kind of ossification. The whole idea of what awakening is has become almost like unquestioningly, rigidly set: "It's this." That happens in a lot of different traditions – in some of the Insight Meditation traditions, but also some traditions outside, for instance the Advaita tradition. If you listen to someone who claims awakening, it's always the same story. What's going on? It's the same, "*Da-da-da-da*, and then I stopped trying, and now I have no self, and I never have any self." Of course, you could see that same ossification in other traditions.

So, if either disappearance, or lowered meaning, or ossification (this rigidity of ideation of what we're talking about), if any of those are occurring, *why*? Why has that happened? What's gone on? What's underneath those trends? If you're listening, and you think in relation to the fact that it may be getting much less frequent, may kind of have disappeared, or it might have lowered its meaning, and you think, "So what?", you're very free to think that. But I would, again, ask, "Why do you think that?" What's going on in your response of "so what?" What's underneath the "so what"?

So there's this range. There's a huge range, and wrapped up in the range of the kinds of Dharma there are is the sense of where we're going, what we want, what the goal is, if you like. To compare a few sort of different packages, if you like, of Dharma and goal: for some people, for many people, what the Dharma *is* is really the attempt or aspiration to live a life of presence, to be present to life, to live a life of mindfulness. And that's pretty much it. Maybe kindness as well. Living a life of presence and kindness. I'm going to run through a whole list here. Connected with that, people say, "I want to live

life to the full.” That’s the sense of goal: I want to be *alive*. Another package – these are not separate; they’re more like currents that exist, so they can overlap and get mixed, etc. But to artificially separate them a little: for some, it’s more a kind of – no one really uses this phrase, I don’t think, but it’s a kind of what we could call ‘existentialist Dharma.’ The awakening there, if you like, is realizing the existential limits of our existence. We’re impermanent, fragile beings, cast into a world we don’t really understand that appears meaningless to us, and we have to accept that, bear up to it, open to it, be brave enough to see that, deal with it. The suffering that comes in is kind of neurotic, in Freud’s sense of refusing to suffer. That’s his definition of ‘neurosis.’ It’s like refusing to accept that this is our lot. Once one accepts that and the limitations of that, that’s the kind of awakening.

Again, there’s another model or package where the human being is really seen – people don’t often say this explicitly – really seen as a kind of biological machine, a very sophisticated biological machine, evolved, of course, over millennia. Practice and meditation and mindfulness and all this is really optimizing the functioning of the nervous system of that machine so that it runs more smoothly, so that it doesn’t create problems that may have been there from the hardware – reprogramming the software, within all this, and that’s the reality it takes place in.

Very different, a further kind of model or package is: where we’re going, what we want to see, is that you are awareness. You’re not any of this mind and body. You are awareness. A different version is that everything is awareness. It’s all one. Or it’s all love. These are different insights required as sort of goal insights.

Or we want to know something that is transcendent to this whole realm of appearances and experience. Transcendent, even, to awareness. Or we want to understand that all this is empty, all of it: mind, body, biology, matter, awareness, space, time. There’s a whole range. It’s like, “What do I need to understand is empty?” That would be one model or one thrust as well. There are many others, but maybe there’s even something beyond *that*.

So these are currents, as I said, not completely separate. To say again what I think I said last time: we are, in principle, free. In principle, you are free to believe and think whatever you want. In principle you are free to hold any view. But what I want to ask is, “Are we *really* free?” Are we really free to inquire into the views that we hold? Or are we blinkered and blinded by assumptions that we don’t even realize that we have? In principle, we’re free. You can think anything you want, have any view you want about the Dharma. But are we really free to inquire? Now, as I talk today, you will probably quite quickly realize that I have my biases in that range of examples I just gave. Of course I do. Everyone does. So please don’t be biased by *my* biases. If you don’t agree with my bias, that’s completely fine. What I really want to get to is the importance of questioning, not that I want to convince you of a certain bias I have within that range. The questioning is the important thing, okay?

Now, if you see yourself as a Buddhist – and maybe some of you do; maybe a lot of you do – we have, as Buddhists, a common language, usually: the Four Noble Truths. It can seem, because we keep referring to things like the Four Noble Truths, and things like awareness, and this kind of common language, it can seem that we’re all really talking about the same thing. It can *seem* that way, but it might be an illusion of the language. If one looks into the Pali Canon, the original set of teachings of the Buddha, it’s hard – it’s actually impossible – to *not* realize that the goal he was talking about, the Third Noble Truth, involved, ultimately, not being reborn again into this world of *samsāra*. It was an

ending of rebirth that was equated with a final awakening. We can try and erase that because we don't like it, or it's not the way we think nowadays, etc., but that's there. It's a transcendent teaching. There's a thrust of transcendence that runs through Pali Canon teachings. We don't often talk about it these days, but it's there. Nowadays, even in this room, how many people even believe in rebirth? Like, really believe in rebirth? Some, probably. My guess is less than half of the people in here, but who knows? Most people don't. So if I take away 'ending rebirth' as equating that with the goal, the final goal of the path, the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, the whole structure starts to lose its substance.

The Four Noble Truths become more like a skeleton. They need fleshing out, and they'll be fleshed out very individually. I use the word 'skeleton' very particularly. What does awakening mean to you nowadays? Where is this path going, the direction of it, the Third Noble Truth? There's a huge range there. If the Third Noble Truth, the end of *dukkha*, is different, then of course the First Noble Truth is different. What are we even talking about when we say *dukkha*? With those two being open, liberation is open to be defined in different ways. *Dukkha*, even, is open to be defined in different ways. Of course, then the Second Noble Truth, the cause of *dukkha*, what leads to *dukkha*, and the Fourth Noble Truth, the way, will also be opened. They are available to a multiplicity of interpretations and directions. And those interpretations will affect the whole package, the whole thrust, the whole tenor, flavour, feel, mythos and ethos of what we call 'the Dharma,' or what the Dharma is to us. Massively, massively. In all kinds of ways, big ways and little ways.

Even just the meaning of 'insight,' the place of insight, what it means and what place it has. Or mindfulness. Or, coming from that and going even smaller, more particularly, the place and meaning of, say, *samādhi*. We talked about that in the first talk. So just briefly: for instance, in the Mahāsi tradition, one of the Burmese schools, insight for them is being able to dissect reality, to dissect the world into atomic units of cessation and matter and moments of time and consciousness and perception, etc. That's insight. That's what you need for deep insight. That definition or thrust of insight automatically implies something about what *samādhi* is and what its place is. It needs to be small. It needs to be very focused, and very narrowly focused.

Contrary to that, in some Sōtō Zen schools, the everyday and the ordinary is what's important. There's this elevation of the ordinary. So *samādhi*, as a kind of non-ordinary range of states, becomes irrelevant. It has no place, because it's not ordinary. In many of the Advaita traditions, what's axiomatic and cardinal is there's nothing to do. "Don't do," actually, is the instruction. So *samādhi* automatically is a non-option, because it must involve doing. In the kind of packages that are about being with life, being with experience as the path, *samādhi* seems like it's not being with life – something else happens; life seems to disappear and just become a radiant ball of nice energy. I'm not, then, being with life. Or in the existentialist schools, they assume "this is what I need to be with, this existential situation." Again, it becomes irrelevant. Or if the view of the Dharma is really what we're doing is releasing, purifying old wounds, old hurts, old karmic knots, healing childhood trauma, then actually *samādhi* – those kinds of states – are regarded as escapes, 'spiritual bypassing,' as the phrase goes. That phrase has become so entrenched as to become almost unquestioned as a concept. In that package, the more miserable you are, the better, because that's the real purification. Then you're really with the real stuff.

All this is there, in big ways and small ways. Couple with that the relationship with goals itself, and

the relationship with doing. Some of this we touched on in the *samādhī* talk as well. I was talking with someone recently. We did a bike ride for DANCE, the Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement, from Exeter – or the bit *I* did was from Exeter to Gaia House. It's about 20 miles, 30 miles? Something. More? It was a lot. [laughter] It took all day. I was talking with someone about the whole relationship with goals on the path. And what's the difference between goals on the path and doing a bike ride like that? It took work. You pedal. There's beautiful scenery, lovely company, Saṅgha. Some hills, some freewheeling. Some hills you had to stop, wait for the others to catch up, take a breather. Lovely!

Why is that different than the notion of goals and doing on the path? What's the difference? How does it *become* different? All this is involved. Predisposition to certain styles. I was talking with someone who said, "I want simplicity." This is absolutely pervasive in the Dharma world, not just the Insight Meditation tradition. Simplicity becomes so important for us. Why? What's going on there? So there's predisposition, but there are also assumptions and ideologies about simplicity: "An awakened person is a simple person. The path must be simple. Practice must be simple. Simplicity is where we're going." Why? Where do we get that from? It's predispositions, but ideas, ideologies, underneath, propped up by assumptions that are not usually investigated fully. So the whole dichotomy between 'being' and 'doing' would be another one.

Most Buddhists, or most people that come to this kind of scene, come because – not everyone, but most people come because they want to reduce suffering. That's what the offering is. That's the advert for Buddhadharma. It's reducing suffering. Let me ask you: after the sort of stress, or patterns of stress, or patterns of anxiety, the patterns of neurosis, the inner critic and all that, after that's gone – and it *can* go; it's a matter of practising in the correct ways – after that's all gone, then what? Then what? Even after one's so-called awakening, then what? Then what? Why are we practising? What is this path for? What is *your* path for? Why are we here? What are we doing?

It's interesting, in relation to freedom, in the modern Western world, where there's a lot of comfort and safety, generally speaking, in the modern West, deeper levels of freedom (if we're talking about freedom) are hardly ever tested. They're hardly ever visible. Maybe there are only subtle differences evident between, for example, someone who is really just practising mindfulness in an ongoing way, just ongoing application of mindfulness. Compare that with someone whose meditation has opened to a vastness of awareness, and they feel everything is awareness, and they're practising with that. They've seen that, and they're opening to that. Compare that second one with someone who has seen that all awareness – vast or small, personal or impersonal – is empty. How visible will the freedom, the difference in the level of freedom be from the outside? Even sometimes from the inside, the little stresses that come with overwork, the pressures, the demands, the pace of modern life. Why are we practising? What are you wanting?

Of course we want to reduce suffering. Everyone is interested in that. But is that *all* it is? I would say, for most people who love this, who are really into Dharma, whether it's insight or something else, it's actually not just the reduction of suffering that we're here for. That's actually not all it is. Is there not, in the way that you feel and relate to practice, a whole kind of mythos, a whole kind of ethos, a whole particular kind of beauty that you relate to, that speaks to you, that touches your soul? Wrapped up in that, a whole way of seeing existence? And is that not a big part of what we're attracted to, and

why we are practising, and why we are here? Each teacher who sits in this spot over a year, or whatever it is, or at other retreat centres, if you listen to them, it's not just a reduction in suffering that they're teaching, that they're communicating. They're communicating a whole ethos, a whole mythos, particular to them, a whole particular kind of beauty, and a whole particular kind of way of seeing existence. And with that, particular emotions and particular values get either elevated or less so.

So it's interesting. As practitioners, some are really happy with efforting and striving and a sense of goal. It gives them a sense of nobility. There's a nobility in that striving. There's a mythos in the striving. For others, the striving, the effort – one can only find an ego-measurement relationship with it, and it's painful, and it's tight, and it's not authentic. Some practitioners love, absolutely *love* to the core of their being the sense of meditative depth that can open up. They love it. They love the subtlety, the refinement of consciousness. They love the mystical openings of perception that can occur. They love the exploration of different levels and states of consciousness and perception. For others, they are completely not interested in any of that – just utterly not interested, and there is more this elevating of the ordinary. Ordinary, everyday – the mythos of the ordinary. Or the elevating of our existential situation as 'true,' undeniably 'true,' as common sense. "It's common sense, our existential situation," *hiding the fact* that there is a mythos wrapped up in that. It's a claim of truth, undeniable fact. Wrapped up in it is a mythos, a myth, a fantasy.

If we just stay with this question of freedom, awakening, liberation. Are we free, am I free, are you free, to inquire into freedom, into liberation? Are you free to inquire into what liberation is or might be, or what you assume it is, or any of that? Or is the notion of 'freedom' boxed in somehow? Is it merely received, unquestioned? People say, "It's this, not that," or "It's that, not this," or "It's not possible any more," or "It is possible." Or when a senior teacher gets into some kind of scandal, they say, "Ah, you see. We're all scoundrels. It's all a load of rubbish." There's a tightening of the whole view. Are there *different* freedoms? Are there different kinds of freedom?

Of course there's social freedom, political freedom, economic freedom – that's a whole other thing. There are even different freedoms in relation to what I was talking about before, different packages. But even then, are there different freedoms? Are there kinds of different freedom? Or is the very notion of liberation – can it sometimes be boxed in by the very teachings themselves? By the very structure and starting point of the teachings, the notion of liberation itself gets boxed in. Is it possible that liberation, freedom, is actually ever-expanding? Could it be something ever-expanding? It realizes it's in a box, breaks the walls of that box, finds itself in another box, breaks those walls. Keeps opening up a freedom to think, to question, *any* box; to question, to think, in directions and in areas I hadn't even occurred to open up, freedoms that hadn't even occurred to one before. Freedoms that may not usually even be part of the awareness or the discourse of Insight Meditation or Zen or Advaita or Rishwan or whatever other traditions – didn't even *think* in that way about freedom.

So what do we want? What do *you* want? I ran through a whole list before very briefly, but let's pick out some of those and unpack them a little bit. This life of mindfulness, or presence, or wanting to live life to the full – it's a very popular notion, and not just in Dharma circles. People want to go parachuting before they die, or whatever it is. If you know you're going to die, you go on an exotic holiday. Packing experience – maybe just maximizing pleasurable experience; maybe just wanting intense experience. Somehow wanting to live life to the full. What does it mean? In these kind of

circles, it gets more refined than that. So it's just about the presence, the fullness of presence: "I don't need to go bungee jumping, but I want to live life to the full." How many people think that way and say that way? Do I dare to ask, "Why?" Why do I want to live life to the full? Why? Why do I want to savour the moment, savour the experience, the taste, the breeze on the cheek? Why? It seems like the most obvious thing. Do I dare to ask why, and what's underneath wanting that?

Is it because that's what the Buddha taught, that's what he said? He taught about savouring the moment? Is it because otherwise I feel I'll miss all there is (because what else is there but life)? Or is it because I think, "Well, that's what's real"? It's not in the Pali Canon. That's not a thrust of the teaching that's in the Pali Canon at all. You never find – maybe there's a subclause that could possibly be interpreted in that way here or there, but generally the Buddha is not saying, "Savour the moment, live life to the full." That's not what he's teaching. It's not there. You can't find it there. The very lovely little placard by the wash-up area by Thích Nhất Hạnh (paraphrasing), "Be mindful when you're washing the dishes, because we want to be present. If you can't be present to that, you won't even be present to enjoy your cup of tea. You'll miss life." That's not in the Pali Canon. That's not what the Buddha was teaching. We may or may not care what the Buddha said, and that's something I'll come back to. That's actually important.

In a non-modern, non-Western culture – say, medieval Europe or an Asian culture – that is nowhere, nowhere seen as the goal or the purpose of practice, to live life to the full. They wouldn't even know what we meant by that, if you were talking to a medieval European or Asian. "I want to live life!" They'd just look at you utterly baffled and perplexed. They're not interested in living life to the full. It's not only because they believe in heaven and hell, and that's more important than this life, or they believe in rebirth. 'Life,' that word, was, in medieval Europe, experienced utterly differently. And in Asian cultures it's actually talking about a different thing.

When we say 'life,' what do we think we mean, or what do we mean? It trips off the tongue so easily: life this, life that. What do we actually mean by it? And what on earth do we mean by living life to the full? Being with life – what we usually mean is being with life *as we experience it*, and we take that as being 'reality.' There's something about reality assumptions wrapped up here. Something about reality assumptions wrapped up in that whole rhetoric. Is it reality? What we call 'life,' and assume so readily – "I can be with it," etc. – is it really reality? Or is it empty, as the Buddha's teachings would say? They're empty. It's not 'reality' in the sense that we think it is. Just in terms of cultural differences, we modernists, if you like – scientific materialists, secular humanists – we assume, don't we, that we have already or that we *can* strip off our beliefs, strip off any beliefs and any projections, and approach life and experience 'life' (in inverted commas) as it is. We assume that, way too readily. Is that really the case? We may perhaps assume that if those medieval Europeans weren't forced to believe some church dogma, they would actually see and experience 'life' (in inverted commas) straightly and directly, as we do – purely, without the projection.

Wrapped up here are very popular notions nowadays. Hidden in to the usual way we talk about mindfulness, the usual way we communicate mindfulness teachings, are a whole bunch of assumptions, a whole bunch of unexplored assumptions about reality. Mindfulness and all that, and presence, and being with life, has found its way into the culture too. It's informed the culture, the *Weltanschauung*, the world-view. Probably more importantly, the current world-view, the current modernist world-view,

has found its way into the Dharma. It has impregnated the Dharma with its assumptions and its views. You see it all over the place, all over the place in the movies, in Hollywood, etc. I don't know if any of you saw this twee little movie, *About Time*. Did anyone see that? It was quite cute, and a little bit funny. I can't quite remember – it's about a guy. The males in the family can travel in time. They can, I think, go back and do something again. So this guy realizes it, and he does that, and he goes back to when he's made an idiot of himself or he hasn't impressed the girl that he wants to impress. He goes back, and then gets to impress her and stuff like that. He's talking with his dad, who has had this ability for a while. It runs on, and it's funny and cute. But at the end, or towards the end, there's a sort of moral that is given, partly explicitly, and implicitly. The dad kind of says to the son, "Look, it's all great, this ability to do this. But now, actually, I don't do it. The most important thing now is *being with* experience, *being with* actuality as it is, without changing it. Living to the full, living each day as if it's your last. Being in the now, savouring." I can't remember the exact words, but that was in the sort of little moral of it.

Implicit in that, in a slightly confused way, because it was involved with time travel and all that, is this idea that this is reality: "This is reality, and therefore it needs to be respected." But if one realizes that this is *not* reality, *this* is not reality – that now, without saying it's something else, this is not reality. Without saying reality is something else, *this* and *now* are not. What if one realizes that, in whatever way? It's not reality. Then that whole rhetoric and elevation of *this* and *now* collapses. It loses its meaningfulness. It loses its primacy. Its power and its appeal are tied in with, and they come from, hidden metaphysical assumptions about reality.

This is an aside: I have to just mention, also in that film, and so often in Hollywood, what's elevated as well as really mattering the most, being the most significant, is human, a close circle of – probably family – human relationships: "This is what matters, especially in the light of death. This is what's most significant. At the end of the day, this is what matters, the small circle of close human relationships." That's part of the message, and not the wider totality of human beings, and not the relationship with nature. This is part of a message that's getting communicated. It also comes into the Dharma sometimes. But what happens in relation – why do we not care so much about the climate? It's because we're getting fed a certain message about what's important and what matters. That's an aside.

About this mindfulness and presence and living life to the full: could we separate mindfulness as a simple strategy, as one strategy among many possible strategies? One way. A strategy of dealing with and coping with and responding to perceptions, thoughts and feelings. And separate that from mindfulness as a kind of religion – an unconscious religion, a religion that poses as areligious, or assumes it's areligious. And I mean 'religion' in the worst sense of the word here, in terms of being full of unquestioned – in this case, modernist – assumptions, and maybe reductionist materialist, maybe others. Full of unquestioned assumptions about reality. If we don't separate those two, what's a simple strategy (one among many), from what's wrapped up with a whole ideology, it has a lot of consequences for the range and the power and the depth of my investigation, and for the range and power and depth of experiences that open up for me. In both of those (my investigation and my experiences), a lot of what could be very beneficial and very insightful gets circumscribed, gets limited. The range is limited.

Let's explore this a little bit: mindfulness as a kind of coping strategy for the sake of reducing



suffering. Okay? Here's a question. Is that enough, being mindful in order to reduce suffering? Is it enough in the sense of will it reduce enough of the suffering, enough of the *dukkha*? Does it go deep enough as a strategy? But even more than that (and I just mention this because I talked about it in other talks; I won't get into it today), is the whole thrust of wanting to reduce suffering, the whole tenor and thrust of that, is that enough for us as human beings? Is that enough for the soul and the psyche? What happens to eros, what happens to passion, what happens to soulfulness when that's the totality of the direction? Is it interesting enough, wide enough, rich enough, as a philosophy or as a psychology? I'm just going to throw that out. I've talked about it in other talks. I'm not going to talk about it today. It's the other piece that I want to dwell on today.

Often this mindfulness or 'being in the now' is seen as a coping strategy, as a way of being in our assumed real, existential predicament: "Things *are* impermanent. Things *are* uncertain. Life *is* uncertain. Death is coming – that's certain. We're living on shifting sands. The reality of things is just flow. Everything is moving. This is our existential predicament." It's *assumed* real. So mindfulness is the way of meeting that, coping with it. Rather than seeing meditation and mindfulness, then, as being part of a thrust of understanding reality, seeing a deeper level of reality, in this case reality is given with common sense. Listen to the words: common sense. Maybe we throw in, "And the self is a momentary arising process, which is not-so-obvious common sense." But that's about it. Reality is given with common sense, and we cope and deal with it and be with it.

So this opens up a really interesting thing. Some people, some practitioners, they have a meditation experience, and it therefore becomes a truth. I'll pick one example just because it's very simple and common: "In my meditation, the sense of awareness opened out, and was vast and enormous and beautiful and unchanging. Everything else was coming and going within that, and it seemed eternal. Then everything seemed like it *was* awareness." They'll say, "It's true." How do you know it's true? "Well, I saw it in meditation." Someone else goes, "So what if you saw it in meditation? It's just your brain doing weird stuff because meditation is a weird thing and it affects your neurons." One view, another view. Is there an alternative? Or what might be an alternative?

One possible alternative is actually seeing what happens, exploring the range of perceptual change, in and out of different states of meditation, and understanding how those perceptual shifts dependently arise and dependently cease. That would be *an* alternative. But what I really want to say here is: look, there's a question here, is there not? How are we going to know, and how are we going to decide, what is real?

This isn't abstract, because this affects the whole texture of your sense of existence. The whole sense of meaningfulness in your life, the whole vision and feel of what your life, existence, and practice is depends on what you believe is real and or not, and what's not real. How are we going to know? How are we going to decide? In philosophy, ontology is the study of what is real and what is not, and how real, etc. Ontology always comes into it. And epistemology in philosophy is the study of how we know things, how we know, for instance, what is real and what is not. Ontology and epistemology are part of what in philosophy is called metaphysics, along with cosmology, which means, "What is this universe that I'm in, and how is it ordered, and what's its structure?" It's impossible to get away from that. You can *think* you're away from it, you can *assume* you're away from it. It's impossible to get away from ontology, epistemology, cosmology – metaphysics. And always we have to assume

something. There is always an assumption that ends up being actually unprovable – always. Interesting predicament. Maybe that's more our existential predicament than what is usually regarded as our existential predicament.

So that whole list before, let's pick out another one: this biological machine. It's rare that you'll get a teacher or someone actually staring you in the face and saying, "You are a biological machine. You are basically evolved over millennia – a very sophisticated, breathtakingly sophisticated neurological machine and biological machine." But sometimes that is underpinning. That view, if you poke at it enough, it's underpinning someone's presentation of what meditation or mindfulness is, etc. "You can learn to reprogram the software of this astonishing computer." Sometimes they'll show you slides of the brain, and how people with mindfulness, who do a lot of mindfulness practice, a certain membrane in the brain grows a little bit thicker, or this – I don't know the words – sort of gets a little bit bigger or smaller or this or that. So sometimes even the hardware of your machine can be affected just a little bit. But what we want, or what's possible, is that machine, that biological machine that you are, can be made more efficient. Its neurological functioning can be made more efficient, a more smooth process can ensue, and any unnecessary suffering that comes with the hardware before the updated version or whatever can be minimized. View. Ideas. A certain kind of very thin mythos there.

There was a retreatant here a while ago. I asked his permission to share this, and he was fine with it. He was struggling in meditation, mind drifting. He came up with a way of doing it for himself. He had a little bit of paper, and he was doing the noting technique, where you note "rising, falling," for the in/out breath, or "hearing" or "thinking" or whatever it is. So he was doing that, and he decided actually to write down what happened very quickly. The words were too big, so he had little sort of symbols for in-breath, out-breath, thinking, etc. He showed me this little grid chart of a meditation session. It looks like a kind of machine code thing that you would put in. After a little while he said actually this really helps him. I said, "Okay. I've never come across anything like this, but go for it." And then he said, "I found out a way I can do it on my iPhone," and he was explaining to me the technicals. I didn't understand. So he was sitting there in meditation, and he would punch out his noting in this code, and it would look like literally some kind of esoteric computer code. That was his meditation session. But he said, "The mind is bright, and it's really less entangled."

How do you feel about that? Probably some people, "Great, fine. I think I'm going to try it." No phones! [laughter] No phones! And some people will feel somewhat horrified, yeah? Why? Why are you horrified? I don't like it, but that's, again, my bias. But I don't want to distort with my bias. The question is, why are you horrified, or turned off, if you're turned off? Is there not a cosmology, a sense of what the human being is and what the setting is for our practice, that is woven into our very view of what practice is – the ethos, the feel of it? One of my teachers used to give walking instructions, and they were very vague. It's like, "A human being walking on the earth." And another teacher I was talking with years later, "He always used to say that. I was like, I don't get what the hell he's talking about." [laughter] And I wanted to ask this second teacher, because *I* really related to that, I wanted to ask this second teacher, "Okay, so if some machine could be invented that replicated the exact sensations of, say, walking with bare feet on damp Devon grass, exactly replicated but you're actually inside a machine, so the purpose was the same – sharp mindfulness of sensations – how would that be?" It's fulfilling the same purpose, is it not? Or *is* it? Because the cosmology is different, the whole

feel for existence, and where we are, and what it means, and what is beautiful, and what is deep – it's different. So all this is wrapped in.

So this biological machine is very popular now. It goes back to the Scientific Revolution and the so-called Western Enlightenment in the seventeenth century, the idea of the universe as machine. Little billiard balls of stuff set in motion somehow, and then mechanically just interacting with each other, ricocheting independent of human observation, and certainly independent of God and all that. Then, in time, you are a machine within this machine. Now you are a computer within a big computer or whatever it is. And it becomes a truth. It becomes a truth. We forget it's a model. It's a way of looking. It's a very helpful model. You see medicine, technology, a lot comes out of that model. But is it a truth? Reductionist materialism. About 100 years ago, physics – which set the whole thing in motion – started to question, very, very powerfully, pull the rug out from that whole model as a truth. Relativity questioning the objective, independent existence of both space and time, and in quantum mechanics, of the idea of reality being made of little billiard balls, which are independent of the observer, exist at a certain place, in a certain way. And also in Western philosophy, starting around the same time, interestingly, Husserl and people with phenomenology. So this idea that that is a *truth* – it works, but is it a truth? The idea that it's a truth is actually outdated by at least 100 years. Any Dharma that's based on that as truth is actually outdated philosophically and intellectually.

Then there's this existentialist one I mentioned, where we're sort of cast, thrown into (to borrow a phrase from Heidegger, I think), cast into a meaningless world, usually of matter, of this kind of independent, soulless matter. A strange existence, perhaps alien. Somehow I'm conscious, and the rest of it is not. Strange, alien. I'm in an alien existence. Death will come, and death will be an annihilation. And either that's just bleak, or it's terrifying, or it's what came to be called in the Romantic movement 'sublime' – a mixture of terrifying and awesomely beautiful, to be faced with the abyss of all that, the meaninglessness, and the death, and the annihilation. We're at sea in this, in the fragility, etc. And this is taken as *fact*, as *truth*. And there's only one appropriate and honest response or feeling in relationship to that. Anything else is denial or dishonest. This is the view.

So Blaise Pascal, I can't remember when he lived, but [he was] a mathematician. He also invented the barometer, was a philosopher. "I am terrified," he said. "I am terrified by the eternal silence of the infinite interstellar spaces. I'm terrified by that." But that and the whole feeling in relationship to the existential situation – can you not see, can we not see, they're from the view of self? It's the self, the belief in a self looking out at this as reality that feels that way. It's completely dependent on self-view and reality-view. Some people – and I'm one of them – absolutely love the interstellar spaces. I love it. It does something in my heart, my soul. It does not bring up terrifying feelings for me. People go deep in meditation, and there's a sense of opening up to that infinity. They actually grow to love that.

Some people say, "This is as good as it gets: impermanent, fragile, *dukkha*." How do you *know*? How do you know it's as good as it gets? Have you really investigated? Have you really checked it out? Some people say there's nothing beyond this. Axiomatic: there's nothing beyond this. What do you mean by *this*? What do you mean? Poke, question. What do you mean by *this*? Do you mean matter? Or do you mean appearances? Big difference in what is meant. If you mean matter, what is it that you mean by matter? If you mean appearances, there's nothing beyond appearances, again, what exactly do you mean? And do you understand, through meditation, the dependent arising and the dependent fading

and cessation of all appearances, so that there can be a beyond this, a beyond appearances? This is available in meditation.

Some people say, “There’s nothing transcendent.” But in meditation, it’s possible. It’s possible to transcend, to go beyond *this*, beyond appearances. If we go into matter and the physics of matter, and you go deep, deep, deep, what do you get? You get atoms, and then you get electrons, and protons, and neutrons. They’re not little billiard balls. They’re not little packets of energy. They’re not even waves. What you get if you push a physicist, “What *are* they?” “Well, you can see them in different ways.” “But what are they really?” “Well, I don’t know. We have an equation.” “What’s the equation?” “It’s a transcendent mathematical entity. It’s an abstract mathematical entity.” If you know Schrödinger’s wave equation – if you have three particles, three electrons, let’s say, what’s called the wave function, how it actually is, it’s an abstract mathematical entity that exists in nine dimensions (three times three). What does that even mean, nine dimensions? And when you square that in nine dimensions, you get the probability of where this thing, which isn’t really a thing, *is* – if you observe it. [laughter] If that’s not transcendent, I don’t know what is. It transcends what we usually mean at all by any ‘it’ or any ‘this’ or any ‘thing’ indeed.

Werner Heisenberg was at the forefront, about 100 years ago, of the quantum revolution in physics. A really radical thinker. He wrote a little book called *Physics and Philosophy*, which is very good.

What *is* an elementary particle? We say, for instance, simply “a neutron,” but we can give no well-defined picture of what we mean by the word. We can use several pictures and describe it once as a particle, once as a wave or as a wave packet. But we know that none of these descriptions is accurate.... If one wants to give an accurate description of the elementary particle ... the only thing which can be written down is a probability function [what I just talked about]. But then one sees that not even the quality of *being* [that it ‘is’ or ‘is not’], if it may be called a quality, belongs to what is described.<sup>1</sup>

You’re not even talking about something that ‘is’ or ‘is not.’

It is a [probability] for being or a tendency for being. The elementary particle of modern physics is far more abstract than the atom of the Greeks [or the little billiard ball idea].

This is a separate quote:

The ontology of materialism rested upon [a kind of] illusion that [things at *that* level exist in the way that we feel that things at *this* level exist].<sup>2</sup>

You can’t extrapolate, he said. Atoms, subatomic particles, are not *things*. They’re not things. They’re not energy. They’re not wave packets of energy, or waves, or little billiard balls. They are not things.

Someone at a conference recently said, “We need to be based in reality. We need a Dharma based in reality.” ... Look, guys, it’s been almost an hour. Are you okay if it’s a little longer? Yeah? Okay, thanks. “We need a Dharma based in reality.” What do you mean by ‘reality’? Material? We need a

Dharma based in what is material? Is that what you mean? Do you mean what's tangible, what's "kickable," to quote Samuel Johnson? What's measurable? What's publicly shared? What's socially agreed upon? Is that what you mean by 'reality'? What's secular? What's bound by logic? This is the common notion, that package is the common notion of what we mean by 'reality.' But matter certainly doesn't fulfil all of them, doesn't fulfil even very many of those factors. An electron is not bound by logic. 'A' is not non-'A,' or whatever the thing is. It's not that. It's somehow a superimposition of not being this or that and both. It doesn't fit that. What do we mean by 'reality'? How are we defining 'reality'? And in the existentialist kind of Dharma, I think it's fair to point out, or ask a person, "Are you attached to a certain view? Are you attached to a certain view of existence for some reason? And what reason?" Is there something you're getting from a fantasy of regarding as truth the self, in a certain way, in relation to an existence which is taken as real and claimed as truth? And then claiming that there's not a fantasy of self and reality involved. Is there not a mythos in what you're describing and taking and declaring as truth?

So living life to the full, mindfulness as a coping strategy, optimizing a biological machine, the existentialist – these are all, all quite popular, and mixtures of them. Why? Because they fit the modernist assumptions and views. Because they fit the cultural zeitgeist. Because they fit the *Weltanschauung*, the world-view of the culture of modernism. None of them are particularly, to quote the Buddha, "hard to understand, hard to see, deep."<sup>3</sup> Easy to explain for a teacher. For me, it's easy to explain. It's easy for you to understand, if we talk in that way. There's not a lot of subtlety. Not much is needed in terms of meditative depth or meditative skill, intellectual understanding, not much in terms of deepening levels. I can talk about software, hardware being set because of evolution when we were still in the jungles, and now you're stuck with the hardware, but we need to twiddle with the software a little bit because there's some stuff that causes suffering now. You all will not blink. It's easy. If we have something very different, not any of that, it's difficult. I have to start picking at things and questioning assumptions and building things. It's much more difficult. Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish philosopher of the twentieth century, said, "Philosophy and philosophers should lift up the skirts of the culture." That's a great image. [laughter] Do you understand what he means? What's hiding under the skirts? What's hiding under the skirts, don't even realize it's there? Philosophy, *philo-sophía*, 'love of wisdom,' in the broadest sense – beauty, depth, questioning, *philo-sophía*. Lifting up the skirts of the culture.

Views and ideas, especially at the level of background, underneath assumptions, are *crucial*. And crucial – again, that word, 'crucial,' is from the Latin *crux*, meaning 'cross.' So a crossroads. The views and ideas we have – if I have this one, I go down that road. It unfolds certain experience. If I have this view and idea, this assumption, it unfolds another one. I go different ways at the crossroads. Crucial. Being with life, being with experience, etc., then things like the whole realm of the imagination become irrelevant, a waste of time. You say, "Well, the Buddha in the Pali Canon doesn't recommend imagination." I'm not sure, but it's not because it's not real. It's because working with the imagination doesn't lead to the Unfabricated, to the transcending of appearances. And that's what the goal was in the Pali Canon. If, like Mahāyāna teachings, you say, "The goal is not this cessation in the Unfabricated; rather, I want to see that everything is empty," that opens up a place, for example, for imagination, and hence tantra, and the use of imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Someone was telling me they were having a difficulty. I can't remember what it was. They were struggling a little bit, and a friend said, "Love the five-year-old in you who felt this certain way. Love the five-year-old little girl in you who felt a certain way." And she had done a lot of that. And she just, in that moment, "I just, I've done it. Been there, done it. I can't do it any more. It's done for me. That whole way of thinking and relating is done and it won't work any more." She had had, over quite a lot of years, very rarely, but three or four experiences of a figure that came to her imagination – very, very powerful; at first, oppressive, connected with a depression. A figure with skin like a dark black snake, pitch black. She called him the 'black devil man.' It was tied in with her depression, very oppressive at first.

Over years, something changed, and actually culminated in a sort of explosively erotic encounter with him. That opened up all kinds of things for her, changed the whole psychological dynamics within her. So instead of going to the five-year-old within, she went and stared into the eyes of this black devil man. She said unbelievable strength and power just suffused her, and the suffering was gone. It took about two seconds. She was completely surprised by what happened. "Wow," she said. Wrapped up in that – again, let's poke at some assumptions, because we tend to assume, "Well, that black devil man had nothing, no source in her history, wasn't related to anything in her past, some story, some thing that happened – nothing at all." The five-year-old, we tend to think, is more real. There really is this five-year-old, or it relates to the real five-year-old that she was. Or do we consider it being more real? If we experience the five-year-old feeling this or that, are we assuming that it's a living relic, that she/he is a living relic of my past history and my family? Am I assuming that the way I remember is accurate and true? Do I dare to question this?

We tend to think that five-year-old is related to 'life,' again, and the black devil man is not, is fantastical. What do I mean by 'life'? What's wrapped up about reality assumptions there? People sometimes say to me, "When I was six months old, this happened, and I felt this way, and I've really felt these feelings. Because of that, I now have these problems." Is that not a theory? I might have experiences that I feel I remember. It *feels* like a memory of what happened at six years old, and I'm positing that as an interpretation, positing that as a cause for what happened now. Someone else was telling me recently, and I know this from my own experience, working intensely in certain kinds of psychotherapy, and all this stuff is coming up, stuff coming up, stuff coming up – very intense and difficult, and then wondering, "Is it really true stuff?" And the therapist saying, "You've got to hang in there. It's a dark night. You can't run away from it. It's the truth coming up." Or is it the fact that psychological ideas, certain psychological ideas, are stimulating certain experiences? That the experience, rather than being real or true, is actually *caused* by certain ideas?

So unquestioned ideas – not just, "I am like this. I'm a failure. I'm this kind of character," not just about my story, but about reality, what's real and what's not. About the cosmos, about the goal of practice, about even things like the role of childhood in the development of the self. Unquestioned ideas operate in us. They operate. Unquestioned ideas will keep delivering the same limited range of experiences, and the same *dukkha*, and the same sense of existence, unless they are questioned. They will operate, and they will keep delivering the same range of experiences. Carl Jung said, "Ideas are not made by persons, but persons by ideas." We don't see how powerful ideas are, because they shape the way we see ourselves and the world and existence, and then that's the existence that we feel ourselves

move in. They conjure our experience. People want to say, “I’m not into that. My practice is very non-conceptual. I go for non-conceptuality.” Or it’s like, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not an intellectual. I don’t do all that.” Or if they *are* a little bit intellectual, they’ll say, “I don’t do metaphysics. I don’t do this questioning of what’s real, or questioning of how we know anything, or deciding on what the cosmology is.” This is dangerous. Always these assumptions are operating. If I think I’m non-conceptual, I am conceptual. If I think I’m not intellectual, ideas are operating. If I think I’ve put aside metaphysics, it’s an illusion.

To conclude, for today at least, can we expose the ideas and assumptions that are operating for us? And how do we expose those ideas? How will we inquire into whether an idea or an assumption is true? How? And if I find out that it’s not true, is it that another one is true? What other ideas are there? What other views of existence, of practice, of path, of awakening? Is a wholly different relationship with fundamental ideas about reality, about cosmology, about knowing, all that – is a wholly different relationship with fundamental ideas possible? And can that bring very different ways of seeing and feeling existence? Ideas are powerful, and we don’t realize how powerful. They *will* influence, they do influence, everything. Big ideas can open up the whole sense of existence – the questioning, the perception, everything. That opening up won’t happen just by ‘being with,’ or just by being with my feelings, if I’m ‘being with’ with the same unquestioned ways of looking, unquestioned conceptual framework, etc., unquestioned metaphysics, really. We somehow need to question and to put in new ideas. Somehow.

Okay, end of part one. Let’s have a bit of quiet now.

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 145: “The ontology of materialism rested upon the illusion that the kind of existence, the direct ‘actuality’ of the world around us, can be extrapolated into the atomic range.”

<sup>3</sup> MN 72:18.

<sup>4</sup> Editor’s note: for practitioners interested in imaginal/soulmaking practices, the question of whether imaginal practice can lead to the Unfabricated, as well as the topic of insight into emptiness legitimizing use of the imagination, is addressed in the third question of “Soulmaking Rivers (Q & A)” (6 Feb. 2018), <https://dharmaseed.org/teacher/210/talk/50519/>, accessed 22 Nov. 2020.