

The Evolution of Consciousness – Part 2

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The mind is a wonderful servant and a terrible master. If we put that into today's language, we could say that the mind is a wonderful employee and a terrible boss. If you think of it in a workplace situation: Do you want a boss that's always nagging at you, consistently telling you everyday how you could do things better? "You didn't quite do it good enough." Reminding you what you did 30 years ago and punishing you over and over again for that. And yet, that's the role we've allowed the mind to assume.

In spirituality you hear that thinking is bad, and that you must get rid of thinking to be more spiritual. But it's not that. There's a lot of thinking that's useful. It's what we get paid to do at work. It balances the checkbooks; it learns how to map the GPS to come to a retreat. All that is useful thinking.

What was the original sin according to the Bible? Eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Clearly, it's not the type of knowledge you gain from reading a book. That's not problematic. Neither is learning a skill, nor is the knowledge you might use in your profession. None of that is problematic, but there's something about knowledge that is. After Adam and Eve ate the fruit from the tree of knowledge, they suddenly had self-consciousness: "Oh my gosh, I'm naked; I'm different from you." Suddenly, there was this self-reflection, which seems to be what distinguishes us as humans from everything else.

We appear to be different in this regard from animals. Animals aren't self-reflecting unless you have a dog who's been around neurotic humans for too long and some of its rubbed off! If you watch the deer outside, they're not thinking: "Why does he have bigger antlers than I do?" They're just being themselves. And it's not that animals don't have wisdom. I've watched the birds on the bird feeder. If a dove flies in, which is about 14 times bigger than a chickadee, chickadees are fine with that; but if a hawk flies by, they're gone. They just scatter instantly. There's wisdom there. And a cow knows which plant to eat when it needs a certain nutrient. We humans have lost that knowledge. So, animals have wisdom but lack the capacity of self-reflection.

What gets us in trouble is this sense of looking back at ourselves all the time: "How am I doing? Am I getting it right? Am I OK? Do they like me? Do my parents approve of what I am doing? Do my kids love me?" It's all this constant self-reflection back to ourselves. And, in the meantime, life just goes on. This tendency to think about ourselves all the time isn't something that we were born with, but it's something that develops at a very young age. We live entrapped by this sense of self-consciousness: "What do I have to do to get people to like me, to have friends, lovers etc."

Most of us can probably remember our teenage years, where we were just trying to get through the day, just trying to make it work; figure out which group to belong to; know which hair style would advance our interests, and what clothes to wear. We are seeking: “What’s my identity going to be? Who am I?” “Well, I’m the pretty one; the athlete; the smart one; the rebellious one; I’m the one who doesn’t care about school.” The role itself doesn’t matter as long as I can grasp onto an identity “I want to be different. I want to be independent. I want to be seen, appreciated, recognized, valued, or maybe I just want to fit it.” It all seems like a natural part of our maturation process.

There are many useful skills in life to learn, but we retain this self-judgment, self-reflection. In some sense, self-reflection is useful. It’s a way we learn. “Ok, that didn’t work, so I’ll do something different.” But we don’t let it go at that. We add a couple of layers on top of that. One of the layers is: “I shouldn’t have done that.” Other layers can be: “I’m the person who always embarrasses myself in public; I’m the shy person; the person who doesn’t do well in school.” Whatever the self-judgment is, it is imposed on top of the actual experience. We think that’s somehow useful, that it’s being honest with ourselves, that if we weren’t self-judgmental in that way then we would just fall apart completely.

In that sense, self-judgment is not helpful. But being observant about what works and what doesn’t is useful. If we have an interaction with someone and walk away knowing that, “I feel good, and the other person feels good,” then it’s a skillful interaction. But we can also walk away from an interaction knowing that, “I’ve made the person mad, for no apparent reason. I don’t feel good and there’s a sense that I’ve created some degree of separation.” Then we know that there was something about that interaction that was unskillful.

I really like the words “skillful and “unskillful.” It’s not about being good and bad, or right and wrong, saint or sinner. It’s more like, “Was the interaction kind, was it loving, was it generous?” Just simple things.

What we were pointing to last night was something beyond the normal, mental management that we were taught to engage in. Something exists beyond that. It’s not something that’s absent in any way in anybody; but it’s something that we tend to ignore, partly because it’s always present. We’re present to whatever happens to us. We may not remember that we’re present. We may not say, “Oh, I’m present to this circumstance.”

Most of the time, nearly all the time, until we catch onto it, we’re caught in the experience, whether internal or external, feelings, thoughts, or story – whatever it is. We’re locked onto it and it becomes the entirety of our experience. That feels imprisoning because we’re dependent on the satisfactory resolution of that situation or somehow pacifying our thoughts and feelings: “Somehow I just want to get to a sense of peacefulness.” Relief can happen momentarily on that level, the external situation can get resolved, but there’ll always be another situation that comes up; another problem to solve; another drama to engage in.

There might be some good times, and peace and tranquility in between, but there's always tension lurking. "Yea, it feels good now, but..." Doesn't it feel like that? There's an underlying tension there. "Right now, I've got things so they suit me reasonably well, but it's on shaky ground." That's where the sense of impermanence comes in.

Impermanence seems threatening to our stability. But we can just as easily look at it another way, where impermanence is what makes life interesting: the scenery's always changing. If it were Groundhog Day every day, would that be interesting? If we got better and better at managing what happens during the day, would that give us joy?

Byron Katie says: "Life isn't something that's done *to* you; it's something that's done *for* you." That gives things a different flavor altogether: it's much more welcoming. It's like saying, "Ok, life's giving me this challenge now. How am I going to respond to it? What is the most big-hearted way that I can respond to this situation?" "How can I respond to this situation in a way that is of most benefit to everyone involved and not just for me?"

It's just a slight shift in perspective, but it changes how the situation looks. We're not in every situation, every moment, thinking, "How can I get the most out of this to make me the happiest, and avoid the most unhappiness?" If we're always looking at it from that perspective, we're still in survival mode, basically. It might be psychological survival, but it's still survival mode. And when we're in survival mode, it's hard to be generous, open-hearted, and all those high-sounding spiritual things.

What we're talking about is the territory beyond the normal, everyday mind; even what we think of as our "higher mind," where our "higher mind" is judging our "lower mind." It's still all mind: it's just one thought believing itself as better than some other thought. It's still all mind and it's still all thought. And again, the problem isn't knowledge. Knowledge about things where we don't have an emotional investment is not a problem. Of course, if we get emotionally hooked by our beliefs, well, then, there's some fruitful territory to look at. But what I am talking about is this constant self-reflecting tendency that humans indulge in, where we're constantly use our thought process to step outside ourselves and then trying to look back at ourselves. It's a psychological U-turn that we do using our thought process.

There are times when all of us have stepped out of this otherwise incessant thought process. It might just be for a split second. It might be that you walk around a corner and a deer jumps out in front of you. In that moment, your mind stops. You don't even say, "Deer!", because you're so taken by surprise. And then, a split second later you'll say, "Oh, it's a deer." So, our mind comes in, but in that split second beforehand, our mind stops. That's a useful thing to see, because whatever it is that we are, if that still exists when our thought process stops, then what we are is something that's not dependent [or defined] by our thought process. That's just simple logic.

Whatever it is that we are isn't going to come in and out of existence. Subatomic particles may do that! But we don't. Whatever we are is what we are. If the thought process stops momentarily, we don't disappear into a puff of smoke. What we are continues to exist

when thoughts stop. That offers us a huge clue. If what we are exists when thought stops, then what we are isn't dependent on thought. Any thought. It's not dependent on any thought, any dogma, any concept, or any theory. All of those things are composed of words: words being little packages of concepts, which, at best, relate to things that exist in the real world.

If what we are continues to exist when the thought process stops, if even just for a split second, then what we are is beyond thought.

Another example of existing beyond thought that's used in some esoteric spiritual practices is making love – sexuality. Using sexuality as a means to be present in a space that is, hopefully, beyond thought - in a space of conscious enjoyment. When it's not really in its natural form, then it becomes about lust, power, "getting something for me" – it becomes distorted. But, in its pure state, it's enjoyment, it's life, it's aliveness, it's loving, and it's non-conceptual. But, if we're thinking about it, it separates us from the experience; thinking gets in the way. When it's just as it is, it's like walking out in nature. If it is as it is, there's no problem. It's just enjoyment; it's just how life's happening. That's the power of that kind of practice. Most religions don't like it and they do their best to suppress it, because it's a powerful energy that's hard to contain. So, they put people in monasteries and keep the men apart from the woman. "Don't look at women if you walk around." That's the solution, right? Keep it suppressed enough and that takes care of that energy. And what happens? It still arises.

That energy isn't easily suppressed so it often arises in ways that are not in a loving space. It becomes about power differentials, abuse of different kinds, obsessions, and used for personal gain. So, that energy is still alive, it just gets shunted off in a direction that's more about power and gain, and not about love and enjoyment, tenderness and companionship. But, it's the same life energy. The difference is in how it's being expressed. Making love is an area where there's an opportunity to experience the absence of thought. When it happens fully, the experience is beyond thought.

There's lots of other examples, too. When we're engaged in something that we really enjoy, something that we know how to do and don't have to think about when doing it. Maybe it's just as simple as weeding the garden: thought isn't required there. We can just enjoy the connections with our hands in the dirt or pulling out weeds and admiring the plants. Thought isn't really necessary. And so, we enjoy these types of activities. We're in that space. One of the benefits of being there is that it gets us out of our self-reflecting mind. If we're thinking about ourselves, then we're not really weeding the garden. Our primary focus is somewhere else.

In terms of meditative practices, sitting down in a room and being quiet is great, when we have the chance to do it and when we're disciplined enough to do it. That's great. But there's many other opportunities in life to practice being beyond thought. When I first met Sal, I found out that he had represented Northern Ireland in the World Pool Championships. We had a whole conversation about that because I had spent a good

deal of my college years playing billiards (but not before or after). In billiards, or pool, it's really apparent when you're in your head and thinking about the shot versus being in that space and just doing it. When you're outside the normal thought process, things happen, things flow. It's almost like everything just happens. And then you have a thought, "I'm really playing well," and it all just collapses! But that's self-reflection, right? It's no longer that Life is simply flowing through me. I've spent years developing these skills and it's all just become a natural part of me at this point. I see the shot and it happens." It's similar to the Zen archer and those kinds of practices. But it can literally be anything: it can be washing dishes or walking down the street. It's whatever we can do without a thought process involved.

It's useful to spend forty minutes sitting and meditating, sure, but it's probably as useful, or maybe even more useful, to come back to that sense of spacious awareness over and over again during the day. Even if it's just for 5 seconds, like: "Oh, there's that alive awareness. It's still here. It hasn't gone anywhere." It might have been paying attention to the cereal aisle in the grocery store for the last 5 minutes, but that awareness is still there. So, it's just coming back to that simple recognition frequently.

Yesterday, I said that we'd talk about some territory beyond the mental structure. This glimpse of awareness is the first step beyond that. It can feel like, "Maybe what I am is not limited to this body, these thoughts and feelings; maybe there's something more." We can't get to this glimpse through mind; we can't reason ourselves there. It may be marginally beneficial to attempt to understand using logic that the mind is limited and at least opening to the possibility that something exists beyond thought. That is a decent first step. But it is not the real thing. It is a facsimile and a poor one at that. The undeniable recognition of what exists beyond the realm of thought and mind is not something we can get to thought. This only makes sense, right? But we can get ourselves in the right neighborhood. That's our job: to get ourselves in the neighborhood where we're receptive to that moment where our mind, if even for an instant, lets down its guard.

We think of Grace as something fickle: We imagine God doling out Grace to the worthy: "I'll give a little Grace to you, but not to you..." That's how we tend to think of Grace. It's something that you can't count on: "It's maybe out there but it's probably not for me. It's Probably destined for someone who is especially good and deserving." That's how we typically think of Grace. The way I see it is that Grace is always present. It is we who are absent. Grace is patiently waiting for us let down our guard momentarily.

Letting go. We've all heard the term. However, letting go isn't something that we can do. It's an oxymoron: "I'm trying to let go." But, we can loosen our grip on the reigns a little. It's more useful to try and see how we're holding on to something, than trying to let go. Does that make sense? Because it's the holding on that's getting in the way. It's our insistence that, "This is how I am; this is how life is; this is how it should be; this is what shouldn't be happening." That's the grip. We don't need to let go so much as to see clearly how we're holding on: holding on to our thoughts, beliefs, judgments, opinions, our gripes, etc..

I'll go back to Byron Katie, again. Are most people familiar with her? As part of her teaching, she asks 4 questions: 1. Is it true? 2. Is it really true? ["Hell yea, it's true!"] 3. How do you feel when you believe that thought? 4. How does life look when you believe that thought? Or, how would your life be different if you didn't believe that thought? The answer to that question is the price you pay for that belief. And you're entitled to it. The useful question is: "Am I still willing to play that price?" Maybe I've paid that price for four or five decades (more years than your mortgage), and the question remains: "Am I still willing to pay that price for that belief, knowing what it costs me?"

That's how we hold on. Looking at the ways we're holding on is more useful than trying to let go, and thinking, "Oh, I've just got to let go." That not only is another thought, it's another demand on our self: "Ok, I've got all these things to do and now I've got to let go, too." It's not going to happen that way.

But we can get into the right neighborhood, into the right arena, where a shift in consciousness can happen, by seeing through the thought patterns and conditioning that cause us to suffer. That's what we *can* do.

"Oh, my goodness, that's what I am. I've always been that. All be darned." That next step, that little leap, comes from the other side. It's something we can't make ourselves do. We can conceptualize about it, which may be helpful, except if we believe our concepts are the real thing. But we can get into the right territory: that's what we can do.

"Leap" isn't quite the right word because it's not something that you're not already. It's something that already exists and is what we already are. That's the humor off it; that's the cosmic humor of it. It's the thing that was doing the looking all along. "It's my true identity, but I didn't know it. I thought all these ideas about myself, my storyline, my opinions were who I am, but what I am is already free from all that, beyond all that ." It's a simple sense of our own beingness.

There may be a glimpse. It may last a moment, a couple of hours, a few days, or maybe even a couple of months. Often, that first glimpse isn't abiding. Eventually, it can feel like it fades away. I would say that's true in most cases. It was true in my case. It felt like, "There's no way I could possibly lose or forget what I now see. It's so obvious." And yet, a few hours later it was gone! We can mistake the experiential elements – the bliss, joy, relief, etc. – for the essence of what it revealed. So, we think when the bliss fades, when the high state fades, then we've lost our awakening. This is partly because we've been taught that awakening is an experience, that it's an experience at a point in time and then it will remain as a high state forever. Doesn't that sound like every druggie's dream? That they'll take the right pill and you'll be high for ever.

The experience associated with awakening may have transformative benefits, insights. But the experience itself will pass, because the awakening isn't an experience. A spiritual experience is like every other experience in the sense that it has a beginning, a middle and an end. It will come, it will be there for a while (maybe not for as long as we'd like),

and then it'll go. It's not an experience; it's our natural state. It's already fully functional. We just tend to dismiss it.

We can have this glimpse, like, "Oh my goodness, aha! Finally, the burden's been lifted. Everything's complete; everything is as it should be." That's sense of it. But it tends not to be stabilized at first glimpse. You hear people say, "Yea, I had this awakening experience in 1987, and I've been waiting for it to come back since then and it just hasn't happened." The mistake there is that that particular experience, that particular movie, won't be rerun. That particular experience of bliss, joy, relief etc., there's no need for it to replay. All those byproducts will fade. The recognition of who we really are is not an experience. It is what notices the experience, whatever the experience happens to be – even spiritual experiences

Everything else is a byproduct. The byproducts will inevitably come and go.

When that recognition becomes abiding, it doesn't mean it's in the forefront of our mind at all times. It's not like a mantra in our heads saying, "I'm awake, I'm awake, I'm awake." It's not that. We can still live our lives and go out and do things. But there's this knowing that, "What I am is this spacious awareness." Not as a concept, but as a lived reality. And that's not a blissed-out, ecstatic, high state. There can be moments of that, but it's more like contentment; being comfortable in our own skin, being at ease in the world, living without fear. This may not sound as exciting as much fun as ecstatic bliss, but I assure you, it is very, very nice. Like I said, it's not a high state, it is our natural state.

A momentary glimpse can be explosive or very quiet, gradual or sudden – or anything in between. It doesn't really matter, and you don't get to choose. There's all kinds of arguments about which one's the right one! Whatever happens to you is the right one. It can be as simple as, "Wow, I had no idea that what I am is what was looking for God [or Truth, or whatever]. It's what I've been all along." It can be that simple, or it can be as explosive as any drug – and anything in between. And it's not up to us. We like the enlightenment stories we can tell to fascinated listeners, right? "That's what I want. I want that variety." Don't get greedy. Be grateful for what is given in whatever package it is given. Notice the gift; appreciate the package - don't get hooked by it.

So, this sense of abiding is not a high, blissed-out, dysfunctional other-worldly state. It's a sense of being at ease, being comfortable with life; allowing life to be as it is – however it is. Because from spacious awareness we can see that we're free to live life, that life doesn't have the capacity to permanently damage us. We can experience the good stuff, the difficult stuff, and spacious awareness is taking it all in. Consciousness is present for the whole show. Reside there. Live Life from there.

Sometimes we think, "If I let go into what is beyond the conceptual thinking mind, I'll be rendered dysfunctional in this workaday world." Part of that thinking assumes that we're as functional as we can be. But much more is possible. From spacious awareness we discover that we're free to be in the world. We're free to function from openness, from a place of receptivity to life. We know that if someone says something that might hurt our

feelings, ultimately, there's not a problem. There's an openness to what happens out there, and there's also an openness to what happens inside us with our own thoughts. Even when some reactivity arises within us, it's like, "Yea, there's that conditioning again." It's not a problem. Spacious awareness isn't demanding that the conditioning go away. In fact by not opposing it, our troublesome conditioning may actually change for the better because we're not so obsessed with it, we're not in such conflict with it; we're not always energizing it. We can see it for what it is. It's not so personal. "It's just my own brand of conditioning, my own personality – that's what it is. Mine's different from everyone else's. So what?" Everyone is in the same boat. No big deal.

From this spaciousness we can allow our conditioning to be, and then we can look objectively and simply ask: "Is it serving me well? Is this working? Is it loving? Is this what I want to be?" Without judgment, we can see clearly, without the blame, shame and guilt, and all the other layers that we've piled on top of our conditioning. Maybe it was somebody's else's idea to impose on us, but it was us who adopted those beliefs about our inadequacies, guilts, etc. In all likelihood, we adopted them unknowingly, with innocence of a small child, but still, if we've adopted them, we can let them go. We don't have to demand that our beliefs disappear; we can just notice that they no longer serve. You don't have to fight to make them go. You don't have to oppose them or argue with them, you just have to notice them without judgment when they arise. That's the magic and power of awareness. It's transformative. It is capable of things that we as humans are not.

There's something about this awareness that's willing to be present for everything. Awareness isn't judgmental; it's just simple awareness. It's willing to be present for whatever arises in us. Whatever faults or limitations we think we might have, awareness is willing to look at it. We, as our little me, may not be, but awareness is. It's not a higher form of mind; it's just that presence, that willingness to be – to see whatever life brings to the table.

When we really see it, we see that spaciousness, awareness, has never been hurt. It's not that bad things haven't happened, or that we haven't experienced bad things. But this awareness has been present for all of it, and it's as pure as the day we were born. It's untouched. It's not a moral thing; it's just how it is. That simple awareness is available for all us all, already. It's not an attainment. It's something that we recognize, that we notice is already present and functioning. We don't have to improve it; we just have to recognize what it actually is, and then see the implications of that. That's the next stage.

Last night we talked about the ordinary, everyday mind, and we talked about this "higher mind" that tries to manage the "everyday mind" – it acts like a judgmental, higher-self, like a CEO. We talked about the possibility of having a glimpse of what's beyond that. It can feel like, "Wow, I wonder if I *am* that awareness." That recognition is really a shift in identity. It's like our identity has been housed in our conceptual mind, and then there's this glimpse into spacious awareness. Into the utter freedom of it. The odd thing is that, although we may be overwhelmed by this glimpse and completely humbled and in awe

of it, we can still believe the thought, “This is who I am [my mental sense of self], and I visit this space [awareness] when I meditate. I can go there when I need to.” Does that make sense to anybody?

But there comes a point when there’s a shift of identity, where we can no longer believe that our unique set of thoughts, beliefs and opinions is what we are. There’s a shift of identity where our identity becomes takes up residence, you could say, in awareness. Awareness still functions through this body-mind; it’s not in denial of any of this. Instead, it frees us to fully enjoy this life.

I could go on, but I think I’ll leave some for tomorrow. There’s beyond spacious awareness, too. To arrive here, is incredibly freeing, but it’s not the end of the road, It’s half-way round the circle. There’s still the journey home. More later.