

## **The Evolution of Consciousness – Part 1**

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Did everyone arrive? It seemed like we were still arriving last night.

Over the next couple of days I thought we could talk about what I'm reluctant to call stages of consciousness or levels of consciousness. It's a natural progression. It's similar to growing up: there's childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and then just a few steps beyond that. It's a natural process. It's a personal evolution during one's own lifetime. It's the normal course of things if we allow it to go that far.

Let me point out several things. First of all, it's not religious. I may use the word "spirituality," but I don't mean that in a religious way. It can be expressed in that way, but the difficulty with that is that there's often a lot of cultural and dogmatic belief systems and practices, and sometimes costumes, that go along with that. And so, if we have an aversion to some of those cultural attributes, it can be difficult for us to really access what's being talked about. It's not actually religious.

When I was young, my search was: "What does life mean? What is it about? What about this Life would make it feel fulfilling and satisfying? And what would make it feel like I've really grasped the juice of it?" I was surprised to find out when I was 30 that what I'd been looking for had been expressed by others in religious terminology. It totally surprised me, because I'd never thought of it in those terms. It can be expressed in religious terms and I may use that terminology occasionally when it's useful, but it's not about finding the right set of beliefs.

Often, we look for the right set of beliefs. We think that if we just had the right concept about life then everything would be fine. We could relax about it. But, ultimately, no set of beliefs is going to be sufficient for many of us. When we recognize that mere beliefs are not going to be sufficient, that's actually when seeking in earnest can happen because we realize that we can no longer depend on somebody, or something out there, to tell us how it is. We have to do the heavy lifting ourselves. It can be a little scary when we realize that it's not simply a question of adopting the right set of beliefs, or having a moment of bliss and thinking everything is now clear. It's when we realize that it's actually up to us to walk down that road and find out what's there for ourselves in our own experience, in our own authority. It can be a little scary because suddenly we can feel alone on that journey.

If our search is authentic then we realize that this is something that nobody else can do for us: no guru can sprinkle their magic dust on us and we actually have to walk that walk ourselves. Did we really believe it would be otherwise?

At a very early age we adopted beliefs about what we are and how the world should be. Since we were very young children, we have all been conditioned to believe in the thought that we are separate, individual people - body-minds - walking around in a great big world. And anybody who questions this premise of being a separate individual, depending on who it is they express their doubts in front of, could be medicated or even put away. We've been led to believe that what we are is this body, this mind, these thoughts.

Descartes in the 1700s famously stated, "I think, therefore I am." That was time when our being became bifurcated. Before that, there was more of a connection with nature. Even some Christian mystics had a deep connection with nature, as a manifestation of the Divine. And then that connection got lost, separated. Our Western culture did a conceptual split there. There was a point when people started to be interested in the body and dissecting it to see what was actually inside. They were cautious about doing that because of what the Church might think. This is when the Church had inquisitions and such, so you had to be careful about what you were doing. However, the Catholic Church responded by saying basically, "You can do that, as long as it's considered to be just the physical body and we (the Church) will take care of the Spirit." So, the church made a division between body and Spirit.

And that's essentially how science has operated since then, with maybe a few exceptions lately. Science has said, "We have our system of proofs, and they're the correct ones, of course. It is what we can see, what we can measure, what we confirm with our senses and prove with logic." That's the package. There's always this distinction between science and religion, but science in that sense is just another religion. They have a set of dogmas: "This is what's true. If you can prove it, see it, feel it, touch it, replicate it, then it's true. If it falls outside of that category, it's just 'woo-woo'." That's the dogma.

Whether we're scientists or not, we've grown up in a culture where we've accepted that we are limited to this body-mind and this thought and emotional structure. It's a package; it's a physical, mental package. We believe we're separate individuals; we walk around in this big world and we get bumped around. Sometimes good things happen; sometimes tough things happen. And we have to be on the look-out. We're always trying to manage our own experience. We're looking for things that are pleasurable for this body, this mental structure; and we try to avoid things that are unpleasant. We go through life trying to manage that, trying to find our way, trying to limit the bad stuff and maximize the good stuff. We spend a lot of effort doing that, right?

If we look back on our life, we can say that every decision that we made along the way was made in what we thought was our best interest at that time. Maybe the decision was to have one more drink late at night. But at the time it was like, "This is what's going to give me pleasure." Or go into this relationship, or take this job, or move to this new house. All of those decisions were made in an effort to promote our pleasure and minimize our pain. It didn't always turn out that way, but that's what happened. That's actually how we learn what works and what doesn't. But all of those things are being made from the point of, "What's beneficial for *me*?"

There's a survival mechanism at work there. It's from way, way back, long ago, when we needed to look out for ourselves. We needed to know what food to eat, what animals to stay away from, what plants were good for us and what plants were poisonous. But we can carry that to the extreme where everything that happens is perceived through the lens of: "If I do this will it benefit *me* or be harmful to *me*."

Have you ever been to a cocktail party and there's an insurance salesman there? With everybody that salesman talks to, it's like, "OK, is this a perspective buyer of insurance?" Every interaction is filtered through: "Is there something in it for *me*?"

This is where we start from. This is the organism that's trying to find it's way in the world, and as we age hopefully we get a little more sophisticated about what we look for. Hopefully, as we get a little older, the things that we believed would give us pleasure as teenagers become a little more refined. Maybe it's no longer about being the star athlete so girls will like me. It's more sophisticated than that. And eventually, we go out into the world and say, "How can I perform in the world? How can I do something useful? Let's see about having a family." It gets more refined. And then if we're lucky, at some point in our life we arrive at, "Well, all that is wonderful and rewarding, and yet there's something that feels like it's not quite enough." There's a sense of incompleteness.

In Buddhism they have a term that's often translated as "suffering," but that seems like too strong a word because life isn't just suffering. There are some very pleasurable things about life. But there's also this underlying sense of discontentment. It's like, "Life is good, but if I had a little bit more of this or that – a bigger house, a better job, more security, less stress – then I'd be happy. Then, everything would be great." We can spend an extraordinary amount of effort trying to arrange things in the outside world to make it feel comfortable enough for us to feel OK – an extraordinary amount of effort. And it's never permanent. That's the issue.

Sometimes everything might line up. You might have the right relationship, the right job, the right house, good health, a good 401(k), everything's in place. Then, some crack can appear and it all unravels. That's the fear, right? We can put all this effort to arrange the outside to be exactly what we want, but it's vulnerable. That's what is meant in Buddhism when they use the term "impermanence." Impermanence is considered a profound insight, but does anybody not notice impermanence? Does anybody not notice that things are always changing, that things aren't permanent?

However, the consequence of recognizing impermanence is pretty astounding because we can no longer place our bets on anything external. When good things are available, that's wonderful. We can enjoy them. And then something more difficult may show up. How are we with that? Are we OK with that also?

When I look back on my life, I can remember some very difficult times. But those are the things that have probably caused more beneficial transformation than all of the times when everything was going just right, and things were comfortable. The odd thing about that is that we spend a great deal of effort trying to avoid those difficult times. We make

every effort to avoid the things that are most transformative. It's pretty funny. And it's the same mechanism. We're seeking something that's pleasurable and trying to avoid something that's not. That's being caught in our preferences.

We all have preferences. If you go into the ice cream store, you're going to buy cherry, vanilla, pistachio, whatever. You can have preferences. That's inconsequential. The real preference is the insistence that life look like this and not like that. The problem with that is that we are then at the mercy of whatever life throws our way. If our happiness is dependent on what life gives us then we'll have fun sometimes, and be in misery at other times. We're like a twig in the wind.

We don't have to go out of our way to seek difficult situations. Does anybody notice that those seem to happen by themselves? We don't have to seek them out. It can actually be looked at as life offering us something. It's like Life says, "OK, I've just given you a vacation and now here's a little challenge. Let's see how you're going to work with that." We don't have to go seeking for it, we don't have to conjure up suffering. Remember the old religious sects that used to punish themselves? We don't have to do that. It's not about suffering; it's about having the willingness to face, and be willing to pass through, whatever life has to give us.

That doesn't feel natural, does it? It feels like, "Yea, but I don't want to do that. I don't want to suffer. I don't want to feel bad." That's not the point. The point is not to feel bad. What if life gave us exactly the situation that we needed at exactly the right moment to grow? What if we allowed life that wisdom, to give us the situation that we needed to grow? I don't know if that's absolutely true, but it's a useful construct. It's a useful way to approach life.

The question is what does that get us? Where's the pay-off in that? It's why most of us get into any type of spiritual or deep work at all. It's to relieve this sense of anxiousness about what life is about, what death is about. "What does this all mean? Who am I?" Those kinds of questions. We don't know where those questions will actually lead us. We read books, we hear ideas about where that can go, but normally the first steps we take out of this personal sense of me is into some form of meditation. We may have heard that meditation is good for us. And, there are many scientific studies that show that it is. It's good physiologically; it's good for the blood pressure; it's good for brain waves and heart. It's generally good for the body, and it's scientifically proven to be good for stress reduction.

The question is, however, are we going to use meditation as a medication or are we going to really see if there's anything beyond just temporary relief? Is it more than just aspirin? Do we only meditate when we're feeling bad so maybe we'll feel better? Is there something beyond that? The first step is actually sitting down and being willing to be alone with our self for a short while. For a lot of people, that's just scary. "I couldn't possibly go on a silent retreat. The idea of being alone with my own thoughts..."

Thoughts have no real power, by the way. The only power they have is the power that we give them by believing that they're true and by believing that they're really *our* thoughts. We believe that our thoughts make us who we are. "I am the sum total of what I believe. Whatever runs through my head, that's what I am. That's the most fundamental aspect of my existence." That's what we've been taught. That was the conclusion of Descartes when he said, "I think, therefore I am." It's what most of us believe today.

"I think this. I have this belief about myself; that's who I am. I have this belief about how the world works. I have this belief about what's best for the world, what my neighbor should do, what my partner should be like." We adopt them, mostly unconsciously, and then we're imprisoned by them. And when we really look closely, we can see that they may not even be *our* beliefs.

Imagine that you were born in some other country, into another religion, economic or educational status. Would you have the same thoughts that you have today? No! All of that is the result of circumstances. But we think, "These are my thoughts. I've objectively adopted these thoughts and that's what I'm willing to live [and be limited] by – these beliefs." But they're just the result of circumstances. What if that wasn't our fundamental nature?

When we really look at thoughts, if we're honest with ourselves, we can recognize that we don't control the thought process. Thoughts arise from somewhere, they stick around for a while, and eventually subside. Maybe not as fast as we'd like them to, but they'll eventually come and go. It's like a sound, like the bell ringing: it has a beginning, middle, and end. Thoughts are the same: they come, stick around for a while, and then go. So, where do they come from? We can think, "Well I control my thoughts. I'm going to think right now that for lunch I'm going to have..." That is a thought, but where did the thought to think that thought come from? There's no end to that line of argument.

We can admit that whatever happens to come through our mind arises from somewhere and disappears somewhere. But we have this belief that we control it, that it defines what we are, and then we suffer for it. Isn't that why we suffer? I'm not talking about physical pain; I'm talking about suffering. Suffering is what we tell ourselves about what's going on, and the only way we tell ourselves is through thought. "This shouldn't be happening to me. They shouldn't have done that." Those kinds of thoughts cause suffering because it's us versus the world. It's what I think should or shouldn't happen versus what's actually happening.

To realize that we don't control our thoughts may sound immobilizing, like suddenly we're powerless. It can be interpreted that way but that's not what I mean. What I mean is that if we acknowledge what's actually happening, it allows us to take appropriate action. If we don't get to Point A, which is acknowledging what's actually happening, then there's no possibility of getting to Point B, which is taking action that would be appropriate for that circumstance.

For example, let's take being in an abusive relationship. To make an appropriate decision about what to do about that, the first thing that we have to acknowledge is that, "I'm in an abusive relationship and I'm not willing to continue as it is." And the action may come out of that, whatever that happens to be. It's the same with the 12-step program. The first step is: "Yes, I have a problem." It doesn't immobilize any future action; it's actually the first truthful thing you can say. And then you can go from there. So, it's not disabling at all. It's really acknowledging what's actually true, which allows us to change. And it's not judgmental; it's just acknowledging what's true.

When we first go into meditation, we can have many thoughts and feelings start to arise. One of the ways that people respond to that is by being judgmental about themselves. "I didn't have any idea how many problems I had until I started to meditate; and I thought I was going to be more peaceful!" It's not about being judgmental. Our conditioning is not our voluntary doing; it's something that we adopted as a self-protective thing, generally as little kids. And there may come a point where it's just not that functional anymore.

When a thought or feeling arises in meditation, what often happens is we come in right after it and make a judgment about ourselves as a result of seeing something that we didn't like. That judgement causes suffering. Just seeing something clear and simply is not a problem: "I've been selfish for a good part of my life. Oh, that's interesting." How does that feel? That's just being curious about what's discovered. It's like an archeologist digging a little bit and then saying, "Oh my goodness, look at that."

This thing that comes in and judges, feels like a superior me: the me that's able to judge my own behavior, past, and decisions. But it's really just more thought, the thought of what I should be like. Who says what you should or shouldn't be like? The only thing that really counts is what's actually happening. If we can be curious, open and nonjudgmental about it, with no shame, blame or guilt, just really allowing ourselves to see in the clear light of day, that power of observation which is transformative. Just seeing it clearly is what is needed.

The amazing thing is that we think we have to try to change. But trying to change is a form of struggling. It's like trying to pick up this glass of water. I can pick it up or I can try to pick it up. Trying isn't transformative. It's really about being willing to see clearly, being curious and honest enough with ourselves. That clarity has transformative power. When we're trying, it means that we're struggling against something else that we believe is real. We give it power, and then we struggle against it, as if it's something heroic. It's not. It's just a false concept – a false contest. We created the contest and now we're struggling with it.

So, this is our starting: a thoroughly conditioned package. Meditation and mindfulness are practices. They're not necessarily meant to be practices for the rest of your life, as if that is the be all and end all of this work. They're tools. They're a means to see something, a means to focus our mind. Meditations which are more concentration orientated – like counting backwards from a hundred or staring at a candle – are meant to bring our mind,

which may be all over the place, into focus and be able to look at one thing. Mind doesn't want to do that, so it takes effort to be willing to settle for the simplicity of one thing. That's can be a helpful initial practice. But it's not our destiny to look at a candle our whole life.

Mindfulness practices are also good. This is taking a step back and focusing on one thing. "I'm going to watch myself eating oatmeal really slowly; or, I'm going to walk and remember each step that I take." These are mindfulness practices: this is becoming aware of what our body's doing, so that what the body does is not done quite so unconsciously. Again, this is a useful practice; it's watching what happens without going into a concept about it.

If we sense into our senses, like what we did last night in the meditation where we sensed into hearing, into feeling our body move, feeling air in our noses, sensing into our hands, it is being aware without making a concept out of it. "I'm just going to be aware of certain things that are coming into my senses without turning them into concepts." So, that's a useful practice too, because it gives us a little separation from what's happening.

In mindful meditation we can be aware of eating the oatmeal, which is a little bit on the outside; or, we can be aware of the next thought going through our head, which feels like it is a little more on the inside. But, it's the same noticing of some thing. We're "standing back," metaphorically, a little bit more and watching what's happening, without having a judgment about it, or creating a concept about it. The fact that the thought is going through our head is no more problematic than the oatmeal going into our mouth. It's just the next thing that's happening within our field of consciousness.

We have certain senses: there's the five senses that everybody talks about (smell, touch, sight, hearing, taste); but we can also look at thinking as another sense. It's something that is flowing into our organism, something that's appearing in our organism. We talk about feelings; we talk about sensing energy in the body, which are two other sensations that we can be aware of. All of these senses are showing up in the body. They're showing up in a non-conceptual way. When we were very young, infants, and we opened our eyes and looked at a room, there were no concepts. It was just the experience of light, darkness, shapes, sounds – all without conceptual thought. We didn't say, "It's a pretty room." "They should have changed the wallpaper." There was none of that.

All of the ideas that we've developed about life, and all our conceptualizations, are not ultimately true. They're just our ideas. It's the filter that we've adopted to try to manage life. It's been taught to us. We've bought that filter. It's like putting on rose-colored glasses, or dark-colored glasses, or whatever glasses your viewing life through: "Life is wonderful," or "Life is scary," etc.

Mindfulness practice gives us a little distance from what's happening. We can do it more easily on the outside: "Ok, I can look at the door over there and see that I'm here and the door's over there and I'm OK with the door being over there." But, when it gets to thoughts, it feels closer to home, it's a little more challenging to do initially. It's like, "Oh, that feels more like me now. I know the door's not me, but this thought, hmm, I'm not so sure. It

may actually be who I am: “I’m a shy person.” Is that true or is that just our conclusion? What does that thought even mean?

Although mindfulness gives us a little distance, there’s still a sense of “I.” “I am eating the oatmeal.” “I am watching my thoughts.” “I am having a good meditation.” It’s still very much about me. It can be liberating as long as it’s all going well. We can have our thirty minutes of peace in meditation because we’ve managed to keep our challenging thoughts at bay, or if they’re not at bay at least we can have a little distance from them, and so it feels good. And then we go home, or go out into the world. We leave our “spiritual life” and go into our “regular life,” and then all the other stuff comes flooding back in and it’s challenging. We get mad at traffic, we get mad at our work mate. We go about our life hoping that this happens, and afraid if that happens. Then maybe the next day we’ll sit down to meditate again and get another little break.

This is mindfulness. It’s useful, but, again, it’s not the end of the road. But it’s in the right direction. “At least I have some perspective for some limited time during the day, and it has a good physiological benefit to the body and I feel good for the rest of the day. But if I don’t do my mindfulness practice for a couple of days, I can feel myself slipping.” I’m not saying that it’s not a useful practice or that you won’t enjoy meditating for the rest of your life. I’m just saying that it’s not the end of the road.

It all depends on what you want. If your idea is to use a mindfulness practice to feel good for a short time and then go back to your life – great. If that’s what you want, that’s great. But to really take it more fully in the direction that it’s going, there are worlds of depth beyond that. The first leap beyond that can feel like a discontinuous leap. It’s not really, but it can feel like that. It’s a glimpse of something beyond the body-mind. It’s a leap beyond the sense of, “I am a separate self.” And the leap is actually into what we could call consciousness or awareness.

It may just be a glimpse at first; it may just be for a moment, or for a couple of hours. But even that glimpse is transformative. It’s what a lot of people call awakening, satori – a momentary glimpse. It’s like, “everything that I thought I was is just an appearance, and what I am is not limited to this body-mind.” When it appears in that way, it appears with a forcefulness that’s undeniable. It’s not like it’s an idea. It’s not a concept: “Oh, that sounds cool. I think I’ll believe that.” It’s not that; it’s a full body recognition of what we are already. It’s also not an attainment. It’s not something that we’re not already. The recognition is: “That’s what I am.”

How I see it is that that awareness or consciousness is the very thing that has been doing the seeking the whole time. That is the push. That is the discontent. Suffering is the way our body tells us that something’s not quite right, that we’re not quite looking from the right perspective. The body’s trying to get our attention. It’s like, “Wake up!” But we think suffering’s bad, that it needs to be medicated, and somehow ignored.

One of the highest paid people in our society are ones that get us out of our sense of self. Musicians, movie stars, sports heroes. “At least for a couple of hours, I can forget about



myself and be totally engrossed in some movie for \$12.99.” We’re willing to pay that just to have the privilege of forgetting about our self for two hours. That’s the degree of our discontent. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with watching sports or going to the movies, but the fascination with it, at least for a moment, is to be engrossed in something other than our self. I think that’s why some people become workaholics – at least it gets us out of our concern for our self.

When I talk about recognizing this consciousness, it’s not the result of self-improvement. It’s not rounding off enough edges, so you gradually roll off the cliff. That’s not how it happens. You can do that, but you can spend your whole life doing it too, trying to gradually improve yourself. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s great. Your neighbors will like it, your spouse will like it. Unless you take it too seriously!

But that’s not it. It’s really the recognition that all of that is the conditioned package, and yet there’s something else already happening. And that something else is present in everyone of us to equal extent, right now. Like, right now. It’s just a simple awareness, simple everyday consciousness. It’s the consciousness that we confessed we were all participating in last night. “Yea, I’m conscious. It’s not possible to deny my own consciousness. I can’t say, ‘No, I’m not conscious.’”

It’s not spiritualized consciousness, it’s not Christ consciousness versus Buddha Nature; it’s just consciousness. But it’s of a fundamentally different dimension than these bodies, these thoughts, this physical world. It’s of a fundamentally different dimension. Eventually we realize that it’s not and there’s only one thing happening, but initially, it is important to distinguish between the impermanent world and formless consciousness. But, to be gin with – at a very early age - consciousness has been fused with our thoughts: “I am what I think. I am the sum total of my conditioning, my heritage, my situation, my thoughts.” So, this is just an attempt to un-fuse them, to see the conditioning that’s there. We all have it. Maybe you like some of it, maybe you don’t like other parts of it. It’s true for everyone. And, at the same time there’s this awareness that’s happening.

It’s the awareness of being dissatisfied with your conditioning; it’s the awareness of having a pleasurable moment; it’s the awareness of being unhappy; it’s the awareness of being depressed, confused. Whatever’s happening, awareness is present for the whole show. It always has been. So that awareness is of a fundamentally different dimension. You can’t say much about it, you can’t stand back and look at it, you can’t quite say where it’s located, where it originates from. At most, you can say there’s a certain aliveness about it when we sense into it, but there’s not too much more you can say about it other than it exists. If it didn’t exist, everything else might still be there: the door, the room, the other people. But if awareness didn’t exist, as far as you were concerned, nothing would exist. Awareness may seem flimsy, but without it the world goes disappears. No awareness, no world.

We have this belief in Western science that this awareness, consciousness, is somehow a byproduct of brain cells. That’s the standard medical, scientific belief. They haven’t quite

figured out where it originates from in those brain cells, but the assumption is that it's in there somewhere, somehow. And most of us have the belief that it's centered in our head, that it originates from there and that it's looking out from our eyes. But when we really sense into it, where is it? It's an odd question: "Where am I?"

We can see our thoughts and feelings, our feet and hands, our memories etc. So, it seems like almost a silly question to ask: "Where am I in all that?" And the assumption is that there's a "me" in there somewhere. "I refer to it a million times a day, it's got to be there somewhere. When I have time, I'll go looking for it." The odd thing, though, is that when we actually go looking for it, it is amazingly difficult to find. We can see all the debris of that sense of "I": all the memories, all the ideas about our future, our situation, our personality, all of that is there, but where's the point of origin?

I'm not saying to believe this, but I'd suggest a worthy direction of investigation to consider. That is, could this simple everyday awareness be who I am? Just simple awareness. It's easy to dismiss. We've all dismissed it a million times. We've actually all noticed it a million times, too. But we've just passed over it: "Of course, I'm aware. What's the big deal? Everybody is aware."

Last night, one of the questions I asked was: "What do you know with absolute certainty?" When we really start looking into that question, the list gets really short. About the only thing we can say with absolute certainty is: "I exist." We may not be quite sure what that is, but there's an undeniable sense that "I exist." And by "I", I mean everybody.

So, "I am" – beingness. The only questionable part of the statement "I am" is the "I" part. The "am"-ness part, that's undeniable. None of us can deny that. "I may not know what this life is about; I may not know what's in the future. I may not know who I am. I don't know how all my organs work; I don't how the universe works. All I know is that somehow, I exist. There's a beingness here; there's an aliveness here. That I can say." Then there's a curiosity: if that's all we can say, what is That? What's the nature of That?

With mindfulness, we gain a little bit of distance from what we're looking at – thoughts, objects, whatever. Then, after we gain a little bit of distance, we can say there's at least a point of awareness that's outside of the objects, including thought. What is the nature of That?

What notices thoughts or objects is awareness. It's that aliveness, that beingness. We can't stand back and look at it like we'd look at an object, because it's actually what's doing the looking. It's sort of like our eyeballs: they can't see themselves. An eyeball can't turn around and look at itself. It's the same with awareness. Awareness can't stand back from itself because it's not an object. For those who remember 8<sup>th</sup> grade grammar, it's the ultimate subject.

The recognition of that awareness or consciousness is very significant, and it's something that we were pointing to last night. We went in through the body, in through our physical sensations. Then, we took a little step back and said that we can notice that there may

be thoughts happening, that there may be the sensation of breathing happening, the sensation of sitting in a chair. If we're not focusing on any one of those things, or making a concept about them, we can take a step back and notice that all of those things can be happening at the same time. But the only way you can do that is to remain free of concepts.

It's just the direct hearing of the fan noise. It's not, "Oh, that's a mechanical fan. It's making the room too hot; I'm not comfortable." It's not that; it's just directly hearing, as it is. No judgment, not good or bad, not "It's disturbing my meditation." It's just the sensation. Then we can step back from it and notice what's observing. It is not a separate witness; there's not a little mini-me in there pulling the levers. It's actually just awareness. Just that sense of spaciousness in there. It's not far away. It's there all the time. It's just that we're more interested in the content, than what's doing the looking. It can seem like a dry exercise, going on and on about this awareness thing. But, that's actually the doorway.

Awareness isn't recognized conceptually; it's recognized in a visceral, undeniable way. It can happen just in a flash where it's like, "Oh my goodness, that's what I am." When recognition happens in that way, it's often called awakening. It may just be the first glimpse, but that doesn't mean that it's not seeing what we actually are. And, if it happens in that way, it happens in a way that's undeniable. It's not like, "Did I really see that? Well, I'm not so sure." It's seen, and it's undeniable.

Like I say, it can feel like a dry pursuit, like pursuing an idea: "Well, I'm going to really set out to see if what I fundamentally am is this awareness." It sounds a little dry, but it's actually what liberates everything because it frees us from our identity being confined in this conditioned body-mind. It can change our conditioning and habits, maybe quickly or maybe slowly. It doesn't really matter at that point. We can see that that's not of fundamental importance, because what's seen is: "What I am, I have always been. And it's free. Free from who I thought I was"

When Buddhists talk about pure consciousness it sounds like, "Woah, pure consciousness, I must have to be really, really pure to get there." It's not that. Pure consciousness just means: consciousness prior to content. It's just pure consciousness. It's not an elevated consciousness; it's just consciousness. And when we've seen that consciousness, the recognition is that that's what we are. That consciousness has been untouched by life. It's been there for the whole show, but it's been untouched. It's as pure as the day we were born. It doesn't mean lots of bad things haven't happened; it doesn't mean we haven't made a lot of stupid decisions. That consciousness is as it always has been.

That's the freedom. The freedom of recognizing that that's who we really are. It's the freedom to actually live life, without fear. Because there's basically two things we're afraid of: one is dying and the other's living. So, this recognition of consciousness as who we fundamentally are, frees us from both of those fears. That's the liberation. And again, it's not a concept, it's not something to be believed. It's a direction that's suggested to look.

We can waste a lot of time looking in unfruitful directions. Security, relationships, prestige, respect, all of that. All of those are subject to the Law of Impermanence.

Consciousness may appear to be flimsy, but Reality doesn't need to prove anything. It's the only thing that exists so it doesn't have to try and convince you of anything. So, it can sit there quietly, just waiting, and maybe at some point we might be willing to let our guard down and notice that it's always been there. It's infinitely patient, non-insistent.

This morning we've talked about life as it is, how we can get into mediation and learn to focus; and learn mindfulness, where we can step back a little bit from our thoughts, feelings and objects. And then we can just take this next step into awareness. Just spacious awareness. Just this sense of, "I am" – a sense of beingness. And being curious about it, just like little kids: "I wonder what that looks like. What does it feel like?" It may just be a glimpse, but that's the invitation. And we can talk a little more about what's beyond that later.

Let's take a break.