

Consciousness (4 of 5) Unentangled Seeing

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We come to the fourth talk of the series labeled “Consciousness.” The premise here is that we don’t know for sure what consciousness is. What I call consciousness is the synchronized working together of all the different active capacities and faculties we have for attention, for perception. They can come together with our attitudes, motivations, and many of the cognitive functions of the mind as well. The mind creates an image or a sense of the whole that is greater than the parts. This whole is like a painting. The mind paints what this thing is – the whole, the unified whole, the thing that consciousness can seem to be.

There is a wonderful coincidence that, in Pali, the word for “mind,” which might easily be translated as “consciousness” at times, is a homonym (same pronunciation) of the word “painting.” Maybe consciousness is this construct, the painting the mind makes of itself, that somehow brings together all the different parts into an image or a sense of something.

These different capacities we have for perception, for attention, are key component parts of this painting that is created, the sense that is created. The one we are talking about today is the ability to see – to see clearly what is happening. The Buddha uses this language of seeing as a metaphor for the inner way of perceiving, the inner way of sensing – the knowing that is somehow in the mind rather than in the sensations. The knowing quality of the mind that knows I’m sensing warmth, coolness, sound, taste, smell, a tactile sensation of the body. It is not so much the cognitive sense of recognizing what it is. It is not the recognition factor of the mind.

It is more like the level of the mind that can just do the equivalent of hearing or seeing. That hearing and seeing are different from listening and looking in that hearing and seeing are receptive, not directive necessarily. They are not active, engaging those sense doors. Those sense doors are open, and sensations, sounds, or sight objects arrive and they are seen or heard, but they are not looked at or listened to in an active way.

Both of these metaphors of hearing and seeing, I think build on the idea that what is heard or seen is usually at some distance from the ears and eyes. The distance could be just a few centimeters away, but there is still a gap, a distance. The medium through which the information is going, the air and space, creates a bit of difference from feeling physical sensations in the body.

We feel pain or pleasure, and there is an intimacy with ourselves in a certain kind of way. This intimacy sometimes becomes a condition such that we are prone to get actively involved in, concerned with, or even identify with the pain or pleasure. But the things we see in the distance, such as a tree, we don’t usually identify as being me – “Who I am, the tree. It’s all about me the tree.”

If we hear traffic outdoors, we are not defining ourselves by the traffic. We might find it uncomfortable and have a reaction to it, but the hearing itself does not react. Reacting and making meaning, values, and preferences happens deeper in the mind. Before those layers of the mind get involved – which have to do with judgments, evaluation, reactivity, preferences, and emotions – there is initially this very simple, and I would suggest, relatively innocent act of just hearing sounds and seeing sights.

That is translated now for the Buddha, or adapted to the Buddha, to talk about an inner eye and an inner way of seeing. Here also the idea is to do it in this receptive, non-active way. The Buddha never tells us in his instructions to *do* seeing with a mind’s eye, the inner seeing, or *do* perceiving, but rather to abide in it.

He uses the word “abiding” a lot when he’s talking about deeper meditation. When we get settled in meditation and are able to kind of course in the present moment, then it is more like settling back and abiding – dwelling in a state, a way of being, a way of perceiving – than it is actively trying to do something and make something happen.

It is a remarkable shift when that can happen. Some people find that they can tap into that earlier in their practice. For some people, it takes a long time. Some people can do it early, and then they can't do it for a while. They are needing to do some real inner work – sort through layers and settle down – so they can settle back. For the Buddha, it is the latter. We do all the work of practice – purification practices, cultivation practices, settling practices, understanding practices. With enough practice, at some point, we can just settle back and observe what's happening.

Abide in the observing, abide in this inner seeing where everything is allowed to be itself. It is very respectful of everything. It can almost be reverential. Everything is allowed to be its own pristine thing – every sensation, every sound, every sight, every thing that is known. This seeing can be seen with reverence or care, with simplicity, radical simplicity, just allowing it to be itself.

That becomes the foundation for the kind of insights the Buddha emphasizes the most. The insights that are a part of the insight meditation path are insights that don't come from actively looking for them. They come when we settle back, observe, and see in the way that I'm talking about today.

As we see in this way, the seeing is free of what is seen, in the sense that in the seeing we are not entangled, caught up, or reacting. What is being seen is clearly left alone. Just like seeing with a physical eye or hearing with a physical ear. We are not actively involved with a tree or interfering with it as we're gazing upon it. We're not interfering with the sound of a car outside. It just does its thing independent of us.

All things are allowed to be this way – be seen in such a way that insights begin arising (that is maybe for another time). The sense I want to emphasize today is the way in which there is a freedom in the seeing, an independence. There is a spaciousness, an allowance of things as they are, in this kind of inner seeing.

Seeing is one of our attentional faculties. When seeing has this quality of freedom in it, the construction of consciousness then begins feeling like something that is a place of freedom, allowance, openness, and receptivity. In particular, there can be a feeling that in consciousness itself is a place where we can rest, in a kind of freedom. Consciousness almost can feel very broad. The inner mind constructs a spatial sense of awareness, a sense of space and location. When that spatial location gets relaxed and soft, that also starts having a broad, almost boundless, quality to it.

The construction of consciousness can now start feeling not only free, peaceful, broad, and untouched by the things of the world, but also it can feel like it is boundless, open, and expansive. Is consciousness actually boundless? Is it actually anything at all? It is hard to say. There are strong opinions about this. The view that I'm presenting here – yes, it is boundless in the sense that the construction, the image, the sense that the mind creates, has no boundaries.

It is a wonderful composite image, gestalt image or idea of all these wondrous faculties that we have, which come together and work in some kind of harmony together. And we try to understand it. We try to have an image of what is operating. The mind creates that image of it all. Then we can abide in it. We can rest in it. We can allow it. It can be very freeing and supportive to have a sense of consciousness like this.

I hope that this is useful for you and gives you something to reflect on and explore on your own. I would encourage you for these next 24 hours to use hearing and seeing – the physical ones and the mind's eye, the ability to see, hear and perceive – to experiment with gazing upon things or hearing things in a very receptive, open, allowing way. Feel the refreshment that can come – how the eyes and ears get refreshed, cooled, calm, and peaceful when they're able to just see rather than look, searching, straining or staring. The same thing can happen to hearing when we hear rather than strain to listen.

Thank you all very much, and I am looking forward to coming back tomorrow morning.