

Consciousness (5 of 5) Conscious of Consciousness

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We come to the last talk of this five-part series on consciousness. I've emphasized that I don't really know what consciousness is. But I have a premise, an assumption, that it's not a thing. It's not an entity. It's not its own stand-alone thing that can exist independently of anything else. It's a little bit more like a hologram, maybe.

A hologram can seem very real and fascinating. It can be a hologram of a real object, but the hologram image doesn't exist except as a hologram. Consciousness is a little bit like a hologram. It's the combination of all the different forms of our faculties of attention. They combine and work together, or are gathered together by the mind's capacity to construct, have an image, a sense, or an idea of the whole.

This is part of what the mind does. It's a constructing apparatus. It's reconstructing – constructing – our ideas of the world, ourselves, and all kinds of things. That is a necessary part of being in this complicated world we live in. Sometimes we will reconstruct things inaccurately. We can see something and, at first glance, we think it's a snake. At next glance, we see it's actually a stick on the ground.

So, the mind reconstructs things. It's kind of like a hologram – all these pieces. But consciousness is a beautiful thing, and it's very valuable. It's wonderful to abide in it and have clarity. When awareness or consciousness feels very clear and relaxed and is not entangled or caught up with all our concerns and the objects of our attention, then consciousness can have a sense of clarity, openness, spaciousness, peacefulness – qualities of freedom and happiness. It can be a rich world that, in and of itself, seems to be independent of what is known.

In meditation, when the mind gets very calm and quiet, when we're not engaged in our thoughts or with the things of the world, sometimes there is a very clear sense that there's awareness, but no object of awareness. It's almost as if awareness stands out by itself. Consciousness is conscious, but not conscious of anything in particular. The hologram can be that clear and pristine.

In my meditation practice on retreats, when I experienced such clarity and pristineness, I went to my teacher and said, "I don't know if I'm supposed to be a Buddhist because Buddhism teaches that everything is inconstant, changing, and impermanent. And I see that for everything, except for this thing "consciousness" which seems to be everlasting and permanent." Rather than debating with me or explaining that it was different, my teacher just said, "Keep practicing. Keep looking. Look."

So, I kept practicing with a lot of confidence and faith in the practice, until I came to the point of seeing that consciousness is also inconstant. It can disappear. It can vanish. And its vanishing didn't mean that I had died. Rather, there was a marvelous, unprecedented experience of freedom.

It can seem very unusual and frightening to have consciousness disappear and to experience the freedom of that. But I think it's one of the reasons why, in Buddhism, we don't reify consciousness as a thing – at least in early Buddhism, the basis of what I teach. Consciousness is not seen as a thing. It's not reified or seen as permanent, transcendent, or as something that lasts after we die. Whatever consciousness is, it itself is part of the inconstant, changing nature of the world we live in.

The freedom we're looking for is not the freedom for an experience of anything – including consciousness – but something that is almost a non-experience; something that is in between all experiences, which is: freedom, the absence of clinging. That is the most marvelous thing there is. At least for me, it is more marvelous than the radical purity of awareness and consciousness.

As the Buddha teaches mindfulness practice, he teaches all of the different forms of attention we can engage in. He teaches recognition – clear knowing, clear recognition of what’s happening. That is so important and not to be overlooked or bypassed. He teaches sensing, the embodied feeling of experience, the sensing of experience. He teaches sensitivity to the pleasantness and unpleasantness of experience. He teaches observation as watching, seeing, abiding, resting in the seeing of things.

When all these become stronger and stronger, more developed, more highlighted, less agitated, and we become less preoccupied with our concerns, then, at some point, awareness begins to stand out in highlight – so much so that we know that we’re aware.

If I’m driving on the freeway and things are difficult – I’m late, I’m trying to deal with traffic, trying to get ahead of all the other people because I’m late – I’m not really aware that I’m aware. I’m aware of the cars around me. And, in that sense, my awareness is impoverished. But to be aware of awareness, that is wealth. That is fantastic.

Finally, when I get off the freeway and decide, because I’m all frazzled, to meditate for ten minutes before going to my meeting, maybe then everything quiets down enough so that, at some point, I know that I know. I know I’m present. I know that I’m feeling. I know that I’m seeing.

There is a higher order of understanding – a knowledge, a perception. We perceive that we are perceiving. We know that we are perceiving. At some point, there is a sense of awareness, a simple, spacious sense that receives all perceptions, all phenomena – the medium through which perceptions go, having no resistance to anything, like a hologram does not resist anything. Everything comes to us through that door of the hologram. The sense of awareness can become strong – so strong that it becomes a more interesting focus of attention. It, itself, is the focus of attention, instead of all the things of the world.

It’s a paradigm shift for some people because their mind – their whole life – has been concerned with things, objects of attention, objects of thought. They are always navigating the world of objects, things, and “aboutness” – what they’re thinking about. The paradigm shift is to take a break – a vacation for the mind – from focusing on some *thing* to resting in itself. Awareness, resting in awareness. Awareness knowing awareness.

In early Buddhism, we are not reifying – celebrating – awareness as being the ultimate, the final answer to everything. Rather, there is so much letting go, ease, and trust in awareness that, sometimes, we’ll find that it is massaging or it is working – even unconsciously. It is massaging the places of clinging and holding deep in our psychology and our mind. It is providing the trust to prepare us for a time when the mind and heart are ready to let go of our deepest attachments, the deepest clinging we live by.

The experience of awareness – clear awareness – the Buddha focused on, is there as a platform to help a deep letting go. The word the Buddha used for “clear awareness” (I like to translate it as “lucid awareness”) is *paṭissati*. *Paṭissati* is an awareness that is so clear and present that we know we’re aware. We sense a clarity around it.

The Buddha taught many forms of attention leading to deeper and deeper concentration and to the simplicity of mind and attention. It is a beautiful process to do this. There are other factors that influence an experience of more and more simple awareness or consciousness, and other faculties of the mind affecting the faculties of attention. Maybe we can call those attitudes – the attitudes by which we’re aware. I thought that we could continue this series, and, next week, look at attitudes. We will look at how attitudes might play a role in how we know the world and how we know ourselves.

I hope you have a nice weekend. Maybe this weekend you can take time to be curious about the nature of awareness itself, the nature of consciousness. Not to figure out what it is, but to see what is it about awareness, about consciousness, that makes it possible to rest in, to abide in. Maybe you can sit in a park or some other place looking at the sky or the clouds – someplace safe and reassuring. Explore what is this. What would it be like to rest in awareness? Thank you all.