



Ajahn Abhinando

# **AWARENESS & DESIRE**

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Interviewed by  
Dr Matei Georgescu  
and George Petre  
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**MG.:** Thank you, Ajahn Abhinando, for agreeing to take part in Universitatea Spiru Haret's Spirituality and Education programme, and thank you, George Petre and Asociatia Alethea, for making this event possible.

In a way, the interview situation invokes a need to accommodate a 'third'; whether through a microphone or a camera, it brings an 'other' into the exchange. This seems to complicate the one-to-one relationship. We feel that we are also addressing this 'third' as we speak, and this could be a challenge, as it re-configures or fragments the space of 'presence'.

**AA.:** The notion of 'the third' doesn't have to imply an intruder. If there is presence, what we consider to be 'the third' is simply part of the present situation. Every situation is complex. In contrast, presence is quite simple, but also very subtle. Aspects of presence might escape us, or we may grasp at the notion of presence in ways that oversimplify it.

If the notion of the observer comes up, that may cause a feeling of fragmentation. On the one hand I may feel like the 'doer'; on the other I may feel like an 'observer' who is judging the particular action of the 'doer'. And there may even be another 'observer' who is aware of this 'judging', so the situation can become quite fragmented if we reify the various elements. This fragmentation can be projected onto external experience; for example, the inner judge may be projected onto the microphone. This may be no more than the projected fear of being judged.

Now, presence, or awareness, is the great unifier – it unifies experience because it is present for the actuality of my experience, with the willingness to receive all of its aspects. For example, 'the third' is a part of my experience. I can see the notion of a 'third' as something that I am creating. So from the point of view of awareness, experience is unified. Part of that experience might be intention. The present is moving towards a future. There is a context that brought us here, and our simple exchange in the present will have future implications, so the present doesn't exist in isolation, even though from the point of view of direct observation it seems to be the only thing that exists. For us, the past is a memory we are having now in the present; the future is the thought that something will come next, an anticipation, which again can only be experienced in the present. But if our direct observation of the present reveals past and future as non-existent, what, without past and future, is the present? What is time?

**M.G.:** Yes, we isolate concepts, words, mental images, and we separate them from this unified field.

**A.A.:** Yes, and of course even this 'unified experience' is a concept. Any kind of conceptualization tries to pin down something that cannot really be pinned down; it always implies at least a slight distortion of our lived experience. When we think of the past, that is just a memory of our past. But we also experience everything we experience right now through all of our past intentions. Without past intentions, this present experience wouldn't have come to be – it's as simple as that. And the way we are now, which is the filter through which we experience what is happening now, is the accumulation of our past experiences that have conditioned us into how we are. Thus to a large extent, our past defines what is happening for us now.

**M.G.:** So it's a natural tendency in the psyche to produce isolation in the form of concepts or memories, even traumatic memories. Why this movement? Could we live in a space with no isolation? Why, as humankind has evolved, does the psyche produce these kinds of inner fragmentation?

**A.A.:** I wouldn't consider myself an expert on that topic, but rather than isolation, I would say definitions, which create artificial boundaries. We need these definitions to organize our experience, for orientation and communication. To a certain degree it is very useful to fix things in our perception, but there is a tendency to over-emphasize the distinctions between phenomena and thus to turn aspects into fragments. Language further cements our perception of a world of distinct objects operating on other objects, with one of those objects being me, separated from all the rest. That is shorthand for actual experience; an abstraction, which can become very limiting if we take it to be the whole or an accurate picture of what is happening.

**M.G.:** Because in fact, from early childhood, even in the first months of our lives, we are not living in isolation, in fragmentation. As I understand from psychoanalysis, the child first perceives the world as unified, and only later begins to separate it into parts: this is a chair, this is me. OK, but now we are here in order to explore how we can re-enter that unified space. So in a way the origin and the end are the same. Why all this trouble? We are in the middle of the stage of fragmentation, isolation.

**A.A.:** Maybe the baby has a more unified experience at the beginning of life, but it has no competence, no understanding about how to relate to any of its experience. So it starts to explore. Recognition of repetitive patterns sets in, and they are remembered and increasingly defined as objects. These objects are not then entirely viewed as such in a world 'out there', but we abstract them from our experience. I think the benefit of this is obvious: recognition of patterns and object formation allow us to learn from our experience, to develop strategies for relating to a world of objects that can enhance our well-being.

That is a long and arduous learning process, and nobody ever seems to get it completely right. Some of the strategies we learn will be more skilful than others. We each end up with a mixed bag of them, with some bags containing more fortunate mixes than others.

The spiritual process does not involve just dismantling all that again, to come back to an innocent childhood. A baby might be innocent, but it is not wise. You might say that the way it operates is perfectly adequate for its current state, but that's it: it is adequate for a baby. You don't want to end up crawling around like a baby, being innocent, experiencing everything for the first time. As we grow up we learn to distinguish, to recognize the continuity of certain traits of our experience, which we start to identify as objects; we learn to distinguish between what is and is not our body; we start to develop a sense of agency, a sense of ourselves as more or less independent operators within an environment. We learn to orient ourselves in our world and to look after ourselves. All that is functional, in effect: essential. The more differentiated from your environment you become, the more responsibility you need to develop if you want to remain functional. To begin with there was no responsibility, no conscious relationship, because there was no separation, but then you must develop the capacity to consciously negotiate a skilful relationship to the objects of your world. That's where things can go wrong, but hopefully we realize at some point that this skill we have developed has severe limitations. It serves us to a certain extent, but no matter how much we improve our strategies, they can never guarantee us lasting well-being.

We might hear that spiritual teachers like the Buddha have pointed out that our potential is much greater than we might think, that we can grow beyond the limited identifications and strategies we have developed. In terms of the Buddha's analysis, it is important to realize that we are the creators of these strategies and identities. They don't constitute an ultimate reality. The way that we perceive ourselves as within or opposed to a world of objects is something that is created. It has its uses, but it is not an ultimate reality and therefore not an ultimate refuge; it is not something that will always work for us. In fact it is a miracle that we have developed a more or less functional personality, and this miraculous creation needs to be maintained, which costs effort and energy. But in spite of all our efforts, at some point it is going to fall apart, so if it's all I know and all I rely on for my sense of well-being, I am playing a losing game. Even for the most well-adjusted, capable human being, it is not going to last. So there inevitably has to be some underlying anxiety in our life. Even if everything is going well for me, I will tend to worry about how long I will be able to protect what

I have achieved, or even just ask myself, 'So, what next? I've got to this level, I've got everything I thought I needed... and now?'

**M.G.:** We are living a losing game of impermanence. So, what to do?

**A.A.:** The Buddha maintained that it is possible to realize a kind of well-being which is self-sustaining, which is independent of the quality or content of our experience, which doesn't depend on anything that we can experience through our senses.

**M.G.:** So, no causal conditioning; it's beyond causation, this something that we can rely on.

**A.A.:** Yes, I think that is correct. It is something we can realize, but which is not caused. The Buddha also referred to it as something that is uncreated, unborn, undying, something prior to cause and effect.

**M.G.:** A negative definition.

**A.A.:** Right, he wouldn't give a positive definition. He would sometimes speak about it in a metaphorical way, calling it for example the island or the other shore, but obviously those are poetic, inspirational descriptions to explain that it is really worthwhile to make the effort to find it. He even calls it ultimate happiness at some point. So he was talking about something that we can discover, something that is already there, not something we would create; which perhaps makes it sound rather mysterious.

**G.P.:** But at the same time it is something you can train for? That is an interesting point, because even though it is uncreated, even though it is unborn, even though it is unconditioned, it seems you can train toward that idea.

**A.A.:** Training according to the Buddha means to purify the mind to a point where it becomes ready to realize this possibility.

**M.G.:** We have to train what? The dual consciousness ? The subject-object capacity of focusing?

**A.A.:** First of all, when we see that we participate in creating our reality, we try to become more skilled in doing that. I don't mean to say that our world is entirely our creation, but obviously the experiences that arise for us as we interact with our environment, and the ways in which we organize and interpret those experiences, have a very strong subjective quality; they depend on our biological, social and personal conditioning. We see the world differently from the way dogs see the world. If you grew up in an

urban environment you will probably interpret reality differently from if you'd grown up in a rain forest; if you grew up in Romania, you are likely to perceive some things differently from if you'd grown up in Germany. And then there is the personal conditioning depending on your childhood, your education, the ideas you picked up from your parents or your friends – ultimately, all the experiences you have had in the past. All of that will contribute to the way in which you are predisposed to register new information, or even to your choice of where to pay attention, often not even consciously. That is one of the reasons why in an argument about some political issue, it is extremely difficult to convince an opponent of your viewpoint. An opposing view on a particular issue is only the tip of an iceberg of all kinds of previous conditioning which have predisposed you to see things from a particular angle.

So this is a very complex process, and it has a lot to do with saving energy. If you had to process all the information arising from your interactions and always compute all your responses afresh, from scratch, so to speak, your brain couldn't possibly cope with the amount of work involved. Powerful as it is, it just doesn't have the computing power to do that. So, firstly, we already save a lot of energy by screening out most of the potential information we could receive, allowing only a small number of nerve signals to go into advanced processing and even fewer to become conscious. Secondly, when we decide to respond to or initiate an interaction with our environment, we have already stored away a large number of fixed action patterns, some learned, some innate and refined down by experience, which save us a lot of energy because we don't always have to figure out afresh how to do things. We accumulate habitual and automatic ways of doing things, from brushing our teeth to even having an argument. They are not wrong. Without them it would be difficult to function at all. But if we don't have any awareness around these conditioned responses, we become very rigid and limited.

So the first element of the training the Buddha advocated is to become more aware of how all of this functions. The second element is to become more skilful about how we work with it, to try to use our awareness to find ways to weaken and perhaps finally abandon those habits that we recognize as being harmful or not helpful, and to reinforce the skilful ones. As we become more adept at this the burden of our conditioning becomes lighter, and our ways of getting involved in creating our reality become more skilled and more flexible. Then we can increasingly use the inner space we have gained to question the whole process. How much of my

experience is constructed? How am I involved in constructing it? Do I have any authority over it? If so, which kinds of construction are useful, and when? Are there times when I can let go of constructing, and to what extent? What is a less constructed reality like? Is it possible? Is it possible to let go of constructing altogether? What would be left then? By letting go of the mental activities involved in construction, is it possible to get a glimpse of what the Buddha referred to as the unconstructed?

**G.P.:** So would you say that we're going to see how the object is created and constructed, and also learn to see how at the same time the subject is created and constructed, so that what remains in experience would eventually be something uncreated? We would maybe start from a dual type of attention that's being trained, and ultimately remain with an objectless attention? Is there movement in this from a subject-object towards a non-object type of...

**A.A.:** ... non-dual awareness?

**G.P.:** Yes, is there a movement there?

**A.A.:** Yes, and in my understanding this kind of attention is essential for the ending of all unnecessary suffering, stress, anxiety or dissatisfaction, which is the goal of the training the Buddha offered. In the Buddha's analysis this stress or dissatisfaction is created and sustained by our identification with a separate self, in an environment of objects and experiences that can please or threaten it. We need to understand that this sense of being a separate, independent self points not to a 'really existing thing', but rather to an activity. As long as we identify ourselves as being something, we are 'selfing', so to speak. We have invested a lot of energy in this activity for quite some time, so it will eventually have a strong habitual momentum. And by creating a sense of vulnerability and incompleteness, this separation itself causes more of the thirst and aversion which originally fuelled the separation. So we have a vicious circle in which thirst or greed, aversion and ignorance – the lack of insight into the process – sustain each other to keep our suffering going. That is why almost everyone needs a long process of training to break the vicious cycle and replace it with a virtuous one, in which our increased understanding lessens greed and aversion, allowing for more ease. This might then facilitate further insights if we maintain our practice of skilful attention.

Additionally, as with any newly learned skill, we have to put the understanding gained into practice in different life situations, so that it can stay with us and gradually transform the way we relate to our experience. If

we don't act in accordance with our insights they will just become memories, notes we can compare on interesting facts we carry around in our heads. That is why the training involves all of our life: body, speech and mind. The Buddha called it the Eightfold Path, dividing it into Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Collectedness.

It is particularly fruitful to explore the relationship between the sense of being a separate self, someone or something separate from the surroundings, and the energies of attraction and aversion – how they depend on each other. By identifying ourselves as something – anything – we are trapped into this sense of being someone or something having experiences from which we are separate. Then our relationship to experience is always precarious: for things to be right, there always seems to be either something lacking or something extra we think we need to get rid. This keeps us busy trying to manipulate our experience, to adjust our environment or the image we have of ourselves, staying on the run like the hamster on its wheel. The Buddha called that the wheel of *samsara*. If we identify with the body or the mind, we must necessarily suffer some underlying anxiety, because we know that we cannot completely control either of them. Our body will fall sick, it is getting older all the time and eventually it will die. The mind is even more unreliable; we don't even know what we will be thinking or feeling in two minutes' time. And eventually the mind as we know it will also disintegrate. Our experiences, even those we wish to have, are not under our control either; they are changing, unreliable. So if we think these are the only possibilities we have, we are engaged in a constant effort to keep things under control to at least the extent that we feel is good enough. And if everything we do not identify as ourselves is the world out there, we are constantly having to negotiate a precarious relationship to it. We are never quite one with it or truly separate from it, so we can never merge with and keep the 'good stuff' or feel safe from the 'bad stuff'. But we keep on trying. There is no peace in doing so, and yet this seems to be the basic underlying structure that informs the way we create or interpret our realities.

So when the Buddha talked about spiritual practice, he was talking about investigating these mechanisms and finding out how to participate more skilfully in the creation of our realities; he was talking about investigating this sense of 'me', of what I think or feel I am. What identifications do I take refuge in? What kind of objects or experiences do I think I need or need to get rid of? How true are the stories I tell myself about all of this? Does any

of it ever lead to contentment or perfect satisfaction? The irony, as the Buddha pointed out, is that we discover self-sustained and independent well-being precisely when we give up our attempts, motivated by greed or aversion, to manipulate our experience. The more we are able to relax from the kind of movement which is always aiming to change our experience so that it becomes more agreeable (thereby implying that whatever is is never good enough), the more contentment and happiness we will experience.

It is important to see how our lack of ease is always connected to some sense of ourselves as being separate from what we consider to be the world, and this sensed self can never feel complete because it singles out aspects of our experience as being 'us' or 'ours' and opposes them to everything that is not, thereby fragmenting our experience. That self is a construction: neither the sense of what we are nor our world are givens, they are merely abstractions from our immediate sense experience. And of course, even what we become aware of as our immediate sense experience is already partly determined by our past experience, which conditions our interests and what we pay attention to, and how. Then there is our biological conditioning: to a dog or a parrot the world looks different. But whatever experiences our senses provide us with, we are constantly engaged in interpreting and elaborating on them.

The Buddha was very interested in looking very directly into what is happening right now, as my world is being created. And how is the way I am involved in creating my world right now contributing to my unhappiness or to my well-being? When the Buddha talks about going beyond all creation, he advises paying close attention to this point. If we can stop making anything up out of anything, we might get a taste of something uncreated. If I don't create an idea about myself and the world in the first place, where's the problem? There's no problem. A problem arises from adopting a position. This doesn't mean that the solution is to always stay in some sort of undifferentiated consciousness, where the perceptual process is so far diminished that we don't recognize anything as anything. That wouldn't be functional. To relate to people and our environment we have to use sophisticated levels of perception. But if we really know from our experience how far this reality is actually created, we can use these perceptions in skilful ways. We can use a glass and call it a glass, but without being attached to either the object or our perception of it; we won't get upset if someone takes it away from us or argues about our understanding of it.

**M.G.:** Beautiful example. I was wondering if you can describe a peak experiences from your practice. During my own explorations I sometimes

arrive at a state where I have no thoughts, but I perceive, I have visual perception and I feel a kind of spacious being with no other taste, no emotion; it is neutral, neutral spaciousness. This is my peak experience and my mind asks: what next?

**A.A.:** That sounds like an interesting experience. It shows you that our ordinary way of perceiving, which we use to orient ourselves in daily life, isn't necessarily the one true way the world is. Sometimes in meditation – actually, it can happen at any time in our life, whether we are meditating or not – parts of our perceived reality just fall away, because it is constructed and can therefore also be de-constructed. Sometimes that can happen in pathological terms. If your brain is injured and parts of it no longer function, you might experience our shared world in a totally different way.

But let's stay with non-pathological cases. In meditation, for example, you might stop thinking and then realize for the first time that thinking is not obligatory: you can be without thought for a while at least. Or you might observe certain things and then stop recognizing what they are; you don't join the dots up anymore. This can also happen when we wake up in an unfamiliar place and, for a while, don't know where we are. Sometimes the disorientation can be so strong that for some moments we don't even remember who or what we are, or even what anything is. We open our eyes and see something, but don't know what it is. Then perception gradually sets in again. We start to recognize, first: 'Okay, it's black', but we still don't know what it is; then we suddenly realize: 'Oh, it's a piece of clothing', and gradually our reality comes together again until finally we think: 'Ah, yes, I'm in my mother's place and that's actually my t-shirt hanging over the chair'. We have been disconnected from the continuity of our conscious experience during sleep, and we are not used to having this perception when we wake up in the morning, so it disorients us and for some time disrupts the smooth flow of the perceptual creation of our environment.

Those experiences can be informative, showing the constructed nature of our reality, but of course they are largely dysfunctional states; you cannot function normally if you stay in them. If you have no idea who and where you are, or what anything is, it is very difficult to relate to anything in a meaningful way. These are altered states of consciousness, which can indicate the constructed nature of our ordinary consciousness. Hopefully, after we have had such an experience and return to a more ordinary way of perceiving, we won't believe our habitual perceptions in the same way, we won't profess a naïve realism about the world anymore. We will be able to use our perceptions, but we won't see them as real in the same way as

before. And this may also change the way in which we seek satisfaction and peace of mind. That is really more to the point of the Buddha's concerns, what he had to say about attachment to greed and aversion.

Whether I recognize a television screen as a television screen, or come from a culture that doesn't know what a television is and thinks it is a god, is not the most important point. The most important point is the sense of neediness that underlies our relationship to the objects we create, our belief that we need things to be in a certain way. Some altered states of consciousness can undermine this neediness because they change our sense of reality as a whole, but what the Buddha suggested is that we should thoroughly investigate how much we depend and need to depend for our comfort on the perceived circumstances of our life being in a certain way.

Mindfulness enables this investigation. Practising mindfulness means trying to be more present either to the particular aspects of our experience that we have chosen as themes for mindfulness practice, or to whatever is happening right now, if we choose to be unspecific with our focus. In the example you gave of having the mind quieten down so that you experience emotional neutrality, to be mindful would be to really notice this, to stay with it, so you can realize that you are experiencing yourself in a very different way from usual. If you remain aware when thinking resumes, what happens next? If awareness is really clear, we can see what is actually happening. When we can observe how the movement of the mind we call thinking works, how its energy feels, we can recognize how the energy behind the thinking creates suffering, although a moment before everything was all right, was just how it was. It doesn't really matter then if you see what you see as a glass of tea or an accumulation of pixels. Whether suffering arises has to do more with our grasping at an experience, fearing it or craving it, or wondering what will come next. You can have an altered state of consciousness, see something in a different but still constructed way, and then delight arises and you wonder whether this is enlightenment – whether 'this is the way it *really* is.'

Now if your mindfulness is strong, if awareness is not fixated on the object, you notice what is happening, your reaction becomes part of the content of your awareness and you think: 'Isn't that interesting? Who is it that is getting excited, potentially making a problem out of this?' Thus you can see how suffering arises when there is this sense of 'me' and 'What's in it for me?'

**M.G.:** So at the heart of the question 'What next?' is the movement of desire. From this spaciousness desire pops up, and the source of things is that desire.

So I was born and being born means having desire; then desire creates the world, desire creates the subject and object. Without desire there's no world. These are in fact Freud's words. But life continues, life equals having desire, because the desires come from our biology. It is impossible to be in this body and have no desire, because no desire equals being dead. So Freud considered experiencing a state of nirvana as an ontological impossibility, because there will always be movements, inner movements generated by the mind, and he considered that if we are alive we have to deal with desires, not eliminate them. The Buddha said something different.

**A.A.:** The Buddha suggested that we look at our experience as it is, to watch desire. As human beings we are aware of our experience and thus aware of desire; and if we can see the movement of desire, what about that which sees desire? The Buddha said: 'All dhammas, all things, converge on feelings.' That is very interesting, because in the Buddha's sense the word 'feelings' just refers to the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral quality of our experience. You can construct and deconstruct experience on different levels, but all these constructions converge on feelings. Their sticking point is the fact that they also have a feeling quality, because that's where desire focuses. But we can see that.

That is why mindfulness is a direct path. With mindfulness you're aware of your experience and can look at it. For example, right now. Is any desire present? Is aversion present? If desire is present you can detect it, you can notice how it arises; can you also see how it ceases? And what about awareness itself, is that part of the desire? The quality of awareness is just to be aware, so it is aware of a movement which we call desire. But that doesn't mean you have to believe what the desire tries to tell you; as long as you can stay with the awareness, you don't have to follow desire. You don't have to fight it either, you can just feel it.

**M.G.:** Awareness, a part of desire - something like that ...

**G.P.:** Is apart, separate from it?

**A.A.:** Separate from it. Not a part of desire, but separate from it.

**M.G.:** But a part of it, because Freud said we become self-reflective and conscious because we learn not to gratify our desires immediately, When we try to prolong the time between desire and satisfaction, this interval of time generates consciousness.

**A.A.:** If you're aware of your desire, you don't need to act it out immediately.

That's true for aversion too, and also for more complex emotions. Let's look at anger as an example. If something annoying happens to someone who has not developed much awareness around their emotions, they might just react impulsively, and possibly not even be aware that they are angry because they get rid of their anger straightaway. They would act on it and then think: 'No, I wasn't angry, I just hit them because I didn't like what they said.' Now, if you start to be a little more conscientious and aware, so that you see the impulse of getting angry as it arises, but feel that it would not be a good idea to act on it; you are holding the anger consciously, you become aware of the anger.

What Freud says is an interesting theory. Any theory is an approximation to reality, but we have to check it against our experience. The Buddha was pointing us toward trying to understand how our minds work in our own experience. He tried to get people to look. Theories can be a good start; they provide maps of reality, but you have to check your map of reality against what's on the ground. And what's on the ground, first of all, are your own body and mind. So we look to see what is happening right now; how are we actually experiencing desire? Sometimes desire becomes very obvious, but sometimes it might not appear to be there at all; it might just be so subtle that we can't perceive it. The Buddha was already talking 2,500 years ago about what he called latent tendencies, tendencies toward anger, attachment to desire or other emotional tendencies that would not always be manifest but lying dormant, ready to be triggered when the appropriate situation arose, like our proverbial buttons waiting to be pushed.

If we are conscious, we are aware of our experience, so we can contemplate it, and that gives us a tool - not a theory, a tool - to deal with desire and aversion as they arise. The Buddha was interested in the nature of awareness: can it only exist with desire, or can it perhaps manifest without desire? What is your experience of desire right now, and what is your experience of awareness right now? How can you use your experience of awareness to deal skilfully with desire, aversion or whatever else might arise for you? I would always come back to the fact that first of all I can notice in myself if there is, say, the desire for another piece of chocolate. So if I haven't cultivated any ability to rest in awareness, and nobody stops me, I'm going to have another piece of chocolate, whether that's going to be good for me or not. But if I have cultivated awareness, the stronger and subtler my awareness has become, the more clearly I can see this impulse coming; and then I have the possibility to respond more consciously. I can ponder my options; I can choose to follow my desire or decide I've had

enough chocolate for the day. I can be happy to be with the desire, rather than believing its message. This is interesting, because you can extend that principle from a piece of chocolate to any desire.

But we also need to recognize that there are different kinds of desire. Some desires are more wholesome than others. Also, some desires might be very superficial and easy to resist; others might be much more powerful. We can notice the context in which desires come up. Some may depend on biological cycles, some come up depending on the things to which we're exposed, what we watch and listen to. Noticing these things will give us an idea of how to respond to a particular desire, how to work with it. The possibility of being free of desire does not mean having no desires at all, but being free not to follow them, and we can train ourselves to do that.

My freedom to choose depends on how capable I am of remaining with awareness without collapsing into the movement of the mind which wants this or has to get rid of that. The extent of my ability to do this has to do with cultivating awareness. That's what formal meditation is about. In the gym you train your muscles, in formal meditation you train your heart and mind – for example, your capacity to be mindful, to become and remain aware. But your capacity will also depend on how much energy is in your desires, how convoluted, how complex they are.

So first of all, through the practice of mindfulness, we strengthen awareness so that we can see desire and just stay with seeing it. Then we can also train our perception, our discernment; we can recognize that if Freud was correct in saying that we are 'desire beings', that doesn't mean we have to follow or express our desires in stereotyped ways. The Buddha suggested looking at our desires in terms of their more or less wholesome or unwholesome nature, or their wholesome and unwholesome aspects. Craving for chocolate cakes, unlimited sex or the fanciest car in the world is different from craving for liberation or peace of mind, but they are all desires. And desire is what motivates us. The Buddha suggested that we should begin by taking responsibility for the way we direct our desire. The fundamental tool that he offered for practice was to look at our experience from an ethical point of view - ethical in the broadest sense, what is skilful and what is unskilful. Skilful means what leads to long-term well-being, unskilful is what leads to suffering for oneself and others. Then comes the effort of training our mind according to what we can see and how we understand it, trying to develop and invest our energy, which is desire, in that which we recognize as wholesome and take it away from those activities that we understand to be unwholesome. With time and practice our attachments may start to wear off as we begin to feel a bit more

spacious around our reactive patterns, more flexible in our responses. There might be a lot of work to do with things we keep feeling we need, even once we have realized we don't actually need them at all, because past conditioning will keep telling us that we do need them. But if our awareness gets stronger we can learn to stay with this feeling of need and ask ourselves questions like: 'What's actually wrong? This is just a feeling of need.'

**M.G.:** If my awareness becomes strong it is not repressing or denying desire, but being much more aware. much more flexible. So the capacity of choosing what desire to express is dependent on inner flexibility, the inner ability to process conscious information.

**A.A.:** Yes, with of course an increased understanding of what is helpful and what is not. It's assumed that in the process you become wiser about that too.

**G.P.:** What this brings up for me is a completely different idea of a human being, really a more multidimensional being. On one level there's conditioned experience, and desire that is biological; we all know how desires arise naturally. But the multidimensionality was the Buddha's experience, and maybe that of other enlightened beings, of a consciousness that is not conditioned in any way by the biological nature, by the movement of the elements in the world. So in our being there are different levels which seem to communicate, but which are of very different natures. One is conditioned and one is unconditioned. And the training is also paradoxical, because we're training in a conditioned way to open up towards an unconditioned.

**A.A.:** Yes, as we develop this capacity for awareness, we can use it to work with the content of our experience: perceived objects, experiences and our relationship to them based on desire, whether positive desire or negative desire, which would be aversion. We then become more skilful in our way of using the energy of desire. In the process we become more discerning about what we desire, and hence develop more helpful attachments. That is an essential part of what the Buddha called the gradual path, what he refers to as a gradual purification of the heart. This means that gradually we experience more wholesomeness, more harmony, less confusion, less conflict, less attachment to things.

**G.P.:** This is the conditioned aspect, yes.

**A.A.:** Yes, that is when we first start to see which attachments don't serve us anymore. Then after a while attachments become weaker. You feel a

more steady inner contentment that is less dependent on particular experiences. The sense of presence, of awareness, becomes stronger, and it becomes more and more interesting to look at that sense of awareness itself. Let's explore it in our own experience, so as to find out about the potential which awareness offers to gain freedom from our attachment to desire and aversion, and the suffering that comes with that attachment. For a start, it gives you the freedom to not just react but evaluate your options. But you may also experience awareness as something that is just present and receiving your experience as it is, giving you the freedom to say: 'Well, here is a desire, and so what?' Desire is just a natural condition which sometimes arises. It entails no obligation or need to follow it, fight it, judge it or worry about it, or judge myself for having it, or even interpret it in any kind of way. Awareness is just aware, and in principle we can let it stop there, letting it be.

Whatever you experience is just another experience, and awareness is just aware of it. That is the powerful potential of awareness. You don't have to make anything out of anything, including desire or aversion. You don't have to follow them, you don't have to repress them, you don't have to judge them; you just notice them. Maybe that is why the cultivation of mindfulness is called the direct path. To the extent that you can stay present and mindful of what is arising, you don't make a problem out of anything. So suffering can't arise, it has nothing it can stick to. According to the Buddha, suffering always has to do with our wanting things to be different from the way they are. But whether we like or dislike what we experience, if we look at it from the point of awareness, whatever is just is. Awareness doesn't have any argument with it.

**M.G.:** So this is a direct path to ending the game.

**A.A.:** Yes, but in order to be able to actually live that kind of experience, a lot of groundwork generally needs to be done. Sometimes we might get a glimpse of it; indeed, some teachers like Ajahn Buddhadasa even point out that much of the time we are in that kind of state, but we don't notice because usually we don't pay any attention to it, as nothing exciting is arising, only neutral feeling. The Buddha said that everything converges on feeling. If a feeling is neutral we don't have any problems with it and we usually don't pay any attention. We just get on with things until something suddenly catches our attention and we think: 'That's nice', and then: 'I really want to have it', or we notice something which goes against our preferences: 'What's that?' When experiences move from neutral to pleasant or unpleasant, all the psychological reactions arise, and with them

the sense of 'me': 'I really want to have this', or: 'I really can't stand this'. And the stronger the sense of 'me' and the desire or aversion, the stronger the suffering. But the problem is that even when things seem to be all right, the underlying tendencies, our propensity towards aversion and greed supported by ignorance, are lying in ambush, to be triggered when the appropriate stimulus appears.

The wise person will have developed awareness to the extent that when something does arise they can see it immediately, and won't blindly believe the messages of greed or aversion. They just notice something that might be unfortunate or pleasant, and they might even do something about it, but without the need to have things be or work out in a particular way in order to feel fine. They might see that something could be improved and act accordingly, but their inner well-being no longer depends on results. That gives them a tremendous amount of freedom with the world, because they are not dependent on it to be one way or another.

**M.G.:** Yes ... Thank you, it was a beautiful journey. Thank you again, Ajahn Abhinando, and thank you, George Petre.

**A.A.:** You are welcome.

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