

Peter Fenner - Awakening Unconditional Awareness

Iain: Hello and welcome to Conscious TV, my name is Iain McNay, and today's guest is Peter Fenner, hi Peter.

Peter: Hi Iain.

Iain: And you are a teacher of non-duality in the Buddhist tradition, and you've also written a book recently, you've had books out previously, called 'Radiant Mind' and you have a CD as well. And so today we're obviously going to talk about you yourself, your journey to an extent and also the contents of the book. And the subtitle of the book is 'Awakening Unconditioned Awareness.' So what is unconditioned awareness?

Peter: Unconditioned awareness is awareness. In a way we don't have to say that awareness itself is unconditioned because it's already unconditioned. Awareness itself is different from the contents of awareness; what we're thinking, what we're feeling, what we're perceiving. These are conditioned and they change but awareness itself, that capacity to receive everything is unconditioned, it's not something that changes. It's ever-present, it can't be found, in a way its sole capacity or function is to receive things as they are.

Iain: So it's what we call the never changing?

Peter: Yes.

Iain: Is it personal?

Peter: It is and it isn't because we can be here 'presencing' unconditioned awareness so it's personal in that way. We can both be in the same state channelling it in a certain way through our body-mind but it has nothing to do with us. So, it's impersonal. If you're presencing pure awareness and I'm presencing it, it's the same state that's being 'presenced.' It's the same experience, the same state that's being 'presenced' by hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of masters throughout history.

Iain: So you were saying it's always there, so it's a question of in a way, our availability?

Peter: Yes, but there's nothing we have to do to be available to this because it's not a thing, it's not functioning in a subject-object relationship, so when we say 'it's here,' or 'it's everywhere,' we're not really saying a lot because it's not here in a location. The great thing is we don't have to do anything to be here in this pure way—in a way that takes us beyond suffering—because when we're in this moment, in this way, it's not possible for us to suffer. We go beyond suffering, and the very possibility of suffering. This is the place that's at the end of the search, at the end of the spiritual path. This is the end of the path

because when we're here there's nowhere further to go: there's nothing more to achieve. A question I sometimes ask is; 'Can we enhance this space in some way, can we make this better?' We can't because this is not a thing, it's not a material, it's not a medium, it's not even a state of consciousness so we can't tweak it and make it better. 'Can we degrade this, can we move away from this?' No we can't because it's not a thing.

Iain: It's always easy for me to talk about these things on a more personal point of view of how I experience things and one of the things that I do notice more and more is that my reference point changes, and if I'm really caught up in a drama in life and I'm not very aware of the bigger picture let's say, I'm running on my personal programmes, and they change over time and they get less dramatic but they're still... they're still in operation. And there's other times where it's almost tangible, palpable, I can feel it, the reference point draws back [pulling left hand towards body] and I, the personality, the individual, is further away and it's like something in the background becomes stronger, and that's bigger, that's... in fact it's vast in a way and that becomes a new reference point which isn't personal but it's more aware where I am, based. Now is that what you're talking about with unconditioned awareness?

Peter: We're talking about the same thing; we're talking about finding ourselves as a what I sometimes call a "clearing" or a space, in which there is no 'I' inside of myself as a centre point of my experience. There's no point I'm looking out from or that I'm experiencing things from. It's more like becoming space through which life is moving, through which this experience is arising in this moment. If I try to find the 'experiencer' of this, I can't find myself experiencing it, but it's all happening nonetheless, so there's no negation of anything.

Iain: So it's a movement that includes us, and we're not really separate from the movement, and we're also not, not the movement?

Peter: Yes.

Iain: Yeah, no I know this space and I can feel this space now to an extent. And I'd also like to ask you... this is really shifting, but I'd like to ask you how you got to this place? And I know it's a long story and often on Conscious TV we do look at people's lives to see what were the important markers and the big decisions they took and I know that when you were younger you did have, when you were a teenager you did have some strong spiritual experiences didn't you?

Peter: Yes.

Iain: Can you describe those to us?

Peter: What I was thinking as you were describing your own experience, took me back further than my teenage years. Something quite like what you're describing happened to me at a young age. I guess from the time I was 4 or 5 I had a feeling of there being two of me. I often had the feeling of being aware of myself, at a distance from where I was physically. I couldn't really say three feet or one metre behind me, but there was a feeling of observing myself and I thought; 'I don't think other people are experiencing this.' At that time it felt as though most of the time people were just doing what they were doing. They were fully immersed and embodied in their activities. There seemed to be a sense of comfort or naturalness in their way of being, whereas I thought I was often accompanied by a witness: by the sense of that witnessing my body-mind. I couldn't say more about it at that time, I didn't have labels for it, but something was there. Occasionally I'd meet people, adults and we would share a particular glance and I'd think; 'They know what's happening for me,' but these glances never evolved into conversations.

Iain: Right, and how was that for you? Was that unsettling, or what kind of reaction did that have from you?

Peter: I thought 'ok, that's part of what's happening for me,' I thought it doesn't seem to be happening for many other people. I didn't have a language for talking about it so I accepted it as part of my existence.

Iain: Yeah. But I think you gave me some notes from your writing, a quite biographical book, some notes beforehand and I think you said 'you felt a little displaced by it.'

Peter: I felt different from other people and I became accustomed to that.

Iain: And I think that lead you on to do some investigations in... I think you looked at Christian mysticism at a fairly early age?

Peter: Well when I was about twelve or thirteen, for several months I had an experience at night when I was lying in bed of dissolving. This would happen in two different ways. In one my body would dissolve. This was more than just losing my sense of being embodied. I thought I was losing the connection with my body.

Iain: Like you were disappearing?

Peter: Like I was disappearing and I felt that I needed to keep myself awake to be here otherwise I might disappear and not come back. It would either happen through a feeling that my body was disappearing, going into a point, so rather than it being however big it was, it was all contracting into all one point, into nothing. Or it would just get vast. My body would just spread out infinitely, again losing its differentiation. I became homogeneous like the universe. I tried to understand what was happening. I'd never heard anyone describe anything like this so I kept it to myself. In the library at school I found the section on

Christian mysticism section and while the theistic language of the mystics didn't touch me, I was comforted by the fact that they were describing different types of states of dissolution, and that these types of experience *did* happen, even if they weren't so normal.

Iain: Right, so it gave some light on what could have been happening for you and it triggered a wider exploration didn't it, a wider venture?

Peter: Yes, I thought; 'Ok, this does happen, these types of experiences are known by other people. There is an interior process.' The main thing I gained from the Christian mystics was the knowledge that there's a process of 'interiorisation' in which our experience of who we are and our relationship with the self and the ground of being can be fundamentally different from how it is in everyday life.

Iain: Right. And then you started to look at meditation, explore meditation?

Peter: Yes.

Iain: So how did that first start? What was the first type of meditation you came across?

Peter: My first contact with meditation came through reading a book by Karlfried Gras von Durkheim, the German psychologist who spend time in Japan practicing Zen and then brought this back to Europe. I read his book, "The Japanese Art of Tranquility" and this opened me to meditation. When I first started to meditate I didn't know that many people, in Australia and worldwide, were already meditating. I followed the instructions. The first time I sat it was wonderful but also lonely. I thought; 'This is great, but are other people doing this?'

Iain: So you were doing this on your own?

Peter: Yes, I began on my own, then, as things happen, I quickly discovered that there was a Theravada community in Melbourne so I started going to their weekly meditations and weekend retreats. Twenty or thirty people would gather at these events. This gave me a great sense of community and belonging.

Iain: How is the experience of meditation different from experiences with drugs? Because, in a way, both are searching for bliss.

Peter: A big difference is that with mediation "everything" you do is viewed in the context of the "totality" of your life. We are looking to create a foundation within which we can constructively evolve our consciousness, over the long term. This includes taking care of how we live our life, and behave and communicate with others. Through meditation we can see that our capacity for sustained tranquillity is connected with everything we do in life.

Iain: I'm interested that you were smoking I think sixty cigarettes a day, at one point, which is a very heavy addiction, and in one retreat you were able to give it up, which is remarkable really.

Peter: [Nodding and smiling]

Iain: Ok, [laughing] you're taking that as a statement of fact. I just wondered... I was interested really in how that was? Was it just, it went like that the smoking or was it actually something in you that was still wanting the cigarettes, and you were with your mind just not going to that place?

Peter: In Buddhism, there's a process called 'taking refuge.' It happens at a particular moment in time. There's a ceremony surrounding taking refuge. When someone take refuge it means that they commit to rely on the Buddha mind—their own wisdom mind—and that they rely on the spiritual processes discovered by masters and in a community of practitioners. I received refuge from my root teacher, Lama Thubten Yeshe. The precise moment of taking refuge, which happened when Lama Yeshe clicked his fingers, was like an electric shock. In retrospect it produced a fundamentally severing of something from the past, particularly my conditioning and habits and so on, and so it was extremely easy to stop smoking. I didn't have to do anything. I was given a tremendous gift through his transmission. In some ways it produced revolution in my mind.

Iain: It seems like you also had a very clear understanding of the process of the time too of what was happening? And I think that's one of the things that's important. I know again from my experience when I started meditation, there was a lot going on and there wasn't necessarily the support system or the explanations for me to put into context so I could understand it and relax the mind. but it seems you had; you got pretty much straight away or very quickly what was going on with you and what needed to happen.

Peter: [Nodding and smiling]

Iain: Ok, [laughing] I'm looking to you for a further answer and you feel that parts complete. Ok, so an then you did something that is for me very you know, a huge step; you were married and you decided to become a monk and you went to the... do you want to tell the story you tell in your notes when you went to see the... ? It's a very interesting story that.

Peter: Yes. I took refuge as I described to you and then over the next year something evolved in me and I thought; 'I really have to do this properly. I'm now on a particular path, I have a connection with an extremely wise and compassionate teacher. I want to do this thoroughly as I can.' The model that was being offered through Lama Yeshe's organisation strongly emphasised the monastic lifestyle. His senior Western students were monks and

nuns. I couldn't resist the idea of wanting to be a monk. This idea grew in me until it felt like an imperative. But, as you said, I was married, I had a daughter. I was creating something that was impossible in my mind but I didn't have any control over it. I felt a need to become a monk yet on paper this was impossible. I found myself in a huge dilemma. One year later Lama Yeshe returned to Australia and I presented my situation to him. I was quite frightened. I thought he might just laugh at me. Effectively I was saying; 'Lama here I am, I'm married with a child and I want to become a monk.' I thought he might just think; 'Wow, Peter, how did you get there from where you were one year ago when you took refuge?' But without even needing to think about it Lama Yeshe said "Yes, we can do that, you'll become a monk living the precepts.'

Iain: Because your wife... your wife was at the meeting with you wasn't she?

Peter: Yes. Lama Yeshe checked this would work for my wife, and then he instructed me to become ordained, live the precepts of a monk and taking care of my family at the same time.

Iain: Yes. And you were a monk for nine years I think?

Peter: Yes.

Iain: So how was that process for you? That's a long time to make that commitment.

Peter: For the first five years it was really creative. I was trying bring together two mutually excluding lifestyles; lifestyles that are normally thought to be incompatible. So it was really creative, and very expanding. My challenge was to bring forth and stabilise the mental and physical discipline required to be a monk, and so this in worldly circumstances. At this time I was studying Buddhism at the university so this made it easier. It allowed me to pursue right lifestyle and created the bridge between monasticism and taking care of my family.

Iain: So for those years you must have felt a big difference inside in so far as your perception of reality, your relationship with the world? There must have been a lot of changes going on making that kind of level of commitment I imagine?

Peter: Yes, but I think when things are moving very fast in terms of lifestyle changes we often don't have time or process them, or even think about them. It's just a matter of keeping up with the change that's happening. So I never thought about this period as being difficult. It was challenging but I figured life is challenging. It was also exciting.

Iain: Were you aware of your perception of the world changing? Was there particular realisations or times when you felt big shifts happening?

Peter: Yes, but again in Buddhism specific experiences are not so significant. I had some insights as I studied the traditions and meditated on emptiness but these types of experiences happen within the larger project of working to becoming fully awake, and more than that, of that becoming awake for the benefit of all. To this extent we are just players in the cosmic or universal project of the full evolution of everyone.

Iain: That's a big realisation in itself.

Peter: Yes.

Iain: No I understand. And then you decided that you wanted to leave the monastic tradition and do something I think psychotherapy and healing I think you were ... is that right you studied after that?

Peter: Being a monk served me really well for about six years. But then I feel I got caught up in the discipline. I overdid it. Also I was feeling a lot of creative energy; energy to explore and produce something that wasn't simply more of the tradition in which I was involved. The changes happening within me loosened monasticism to the point where I handed back my robes. This is when I began to explore and integrate western psychotherapeutic modalities.

Iain: And I think that's one of the things that really interests you these days isn't it? The way that eastern traditions, eastern teachers if you like have been... they haven't really been adapted but somehow they more now, they're more available for western people to understand and integrate into their lives.

Peter: For sure. If you look at where we were 35 years ago, when Tibetan Buddhism first came to Australia and the situation now, it's hugely different. It was difficult in those days to access high quality teachings. The people who made the initial connections were often pretty marginal and on the periphery or mainstream culture. Now it's just so easy. A lot of adaptation has occurred, Buddhism has been integrated and normalised into our culture. Now it's much easier to gain access to high quality teachings, non-dual teachings inside Buddhism and outside of Buddhism.

Iain: And the west is really benefitting from that to a large degree isn't it?

Peter: Yes.

Iain: So, your actual... the courses that you do 'Radiant Mind,' just talk us through how that work in terms of the different stages. Obviously in your book you go into a lot of detail on this, but just keeping it fairly simple, what are the stages that you teach?

Peter: Radiant Mind is a nine month course, so it's a different from a satsang for example. I was running workshops and retreats and people said, 'Ok that's great, but how can we

stay involved with this over a longer period of time when we're involved in our daily activities, taking care of families, work and so on?' So I thought 'ok we'll do something over nine months.' Radiant Mind is a programme that creates a lot of opportunities for people to connect with me and each other in workshops, teleconferences and phone work. People work with written and audio material. There are lots of ways in which people to come together for presence pure awareness. People create a type of vibrational field, a meeting of minds, that moves people beyond what's happening at an egocentric level and then share in the space of pure awareness.

Iain: And you feel that through going through this process, and there's obviously different stages to it, that people can reach a stage... a state of comparative stability and unconditioned mind?

Peter: Little bit by little bit. In my work I distinguish between the "purity," "depth" and duration" with which we can presence unconditioned awareness. Generally the process is one of deepening the state and then slowly extending it. The more time we spend here, in the place where there's no where further to go, the more familiar we become we this space and the easier it becomes to access it. In a sense we create grooves in consciousness so then when we're in a reactive state, struggling with what's happening, with some adjustment in the conditions, we find ourselves back here. It can be as simple as asking, "What is that I think I have lost?" It's like being in an elevator. We're in the basement and it's dark, it's not what we want it to be. But if we've made the journey into nondual awareness once, ten times, a hundred times or more, our mind knows that journey, and it starts to make it automatically. It's like being able to drive to our own home without needing to be aware of any sense of direction or control. And this process is really enhanced by being in a community that like adds that vibrational fuel that assists us in making this journey to include this moment in this pure way.

Iain: So Peter, when you talk about 'a place there's nowhere further to go,' is that really true, that there's nowhere further to go?

Peter: In this moment I feel there's nowhere further to go. I cannot imagine what that could be, because I don't know where we are at the moment! This is a state of not knowing. Because I can't say where "I" am at the moment, or what "this" is, there's no idea of doing *more* of this, or going forwards or going backwards. This is what's meant by nondual awareness; it's the awareness within which no comparison is possible.

Iain: But isn't there also infinite depth within the moment?

Peter: In a way. But in this moment it doesn't feel to me as though we can deepen this state because nothing's more to integrate into this.

Iain: You see I can say 'I am here now,' and I am here now, but I know there's... I feel and I know there's infinite possibilities in being here now; it's another moment, and another moment, and it's always different and there's more and there isn't more, both are true at the same time.

Peter: Yes.

Iain: Do you understand?

Peter: Yes I understand. This is continually evolving, so there's the possibility for integrating everything, every moment, into this. But right in this moment the integration is done, it's complete. And as you're saying, now all we have is this moment. We don't have to work this out. That's the great thing. We're beyond the mind. We're just being here and there's nothing more that we need to understand, there's no object of knowledge here.

Iain: Yeah but you see at the same time I have got my programmes running, they are not necessarily directly interfering with now, but they're running, and I know from history that there's programmes... there's programmes running say a year or two years ago were stronger, so the moments then were different and I know every moment is different but there's still been a movement overall that affects the moment, that's what I'm interested in.

Peter: Right. [Smiling]

Iain: Do you understand what I'm saying?

Peter: No, not exactly.

Iain: Ok. So the moment for me is an experience.

Peter: Ok.

Iain: I have an experience. What I'm saying is that experience, the capability of that experience for me now in this moment wasn't necessarily there several years ago because I had... [whirring hand in circles around temples] I don't know if you would use the word 'baggage' but conditioning, we'll use the word 'conditioning' and so the moment, the capacity or the potential of the moment has to change when the baggage is lost or the conditioning is worked through or whatever, so that's what I say that the... for me it seems the potential is infinite and...

Peter: Yes I agree. There's absolutely no limitation in terms of what can be arising within awareness itself, because awareness can't put any limit on what's possible. Is that what you're saying?

Iain: I'm speaking personally. I'm just aware that the potential has just changed and it continues to change and I... and I don't know, maybe I have an inbuilt suspicion of anyone who says that it's possible to get to the end because I'm not too sure if there is an end.

Peter: I'm talking about in this moment right now, there's nowhere further to go. I'm not saying that in the future we will be here, that we will be complete, beyond suffering. Today, tomorrow, next week, I'll be in a different place than where I am now. Our identities reconfigure. I will become involved in my preferences, thinking, 'I like this, I don't like that.' And then I'll be back on the path thinking that something needs to happen to be "here." But right now we can see that there's nothing that needs to happen. Nothing needs to be done in order to be here. This is our natural state.

Iain: This is leading me on to something else that I wanted to ask you, and we've had quite a lot of different opinions on non-duality... [rolls eyes] not different opinions but... we've had a lot of interviews on non-duality and there's been different ways of looking at it, and there's certain people we've had on the programme who are real, been real spiritual seekers and they say that a significant shift happened and they realised something realised beyond the self and they feel that nothing they did in terms of practice or work on themselves contributed to that shift; it was quantum a grace of God, whatever you want to call it, it just happened and then life was different. And there's other people that I think like yourself that are saying there's a more gradual approach, you're in a process and the process isn't the same for everybody because we're all individuals, and then there's openings and then there's arriving at a state or place or whatever. What would be your opinion on that, these two seemingly opposite ways of looking at it?

Peter: Both are true. When we're here at the unconditioned level we can see that this is 'acausal.' Nothing needs to have happened in order to be here. This is not a produced experience. It's not a conditioned state. But there's a way in which if we hadn't done what we thought we had to do, we wouldn't be here.

Iain: So we don't really know what contributed and why it happened or it's...

Peter: Well, more than that. Nothing that we've done has contributed as a cause to being here. This is not an effect of anything; it's unconditioned. But if we hadn't done what we *thought* we needed to do, we wouldn't be in this place. It's paradoxical.

Iain: Yeah. And if I personalise that it brings another dimension into it in so far as yes, the shifts seem to happen on their own or the changes, perception seems to happen on their own but the work if you like, provides often a basis of understanding of what has happened or is happening and there's a tremendous help in that because it helps to diffuse the power of the mind. If something happens and it is you know, it is a very different way of looking at things, I get another way of seeing life, seeing how everything fits together, my mind can

get very concerned about that, but if it understands then that helps diffuse that which allows more of a falling in and accepting of that space.

Peter: Yes, but I also think we need to be careful we don't "create" conditions by thinking that something needs to happen *before* we can be here. It's easy to do that, to think that before we can be here we need to do a certain practice, or have a certain understanding, or history of experience. But if we look right now, we don't need anything to be resting as awareness. We don't need any understanding to be here, we don't need to be meditating. This is not the fruition of meditation. In a way it is the fruition of meditation. Here the result of meditation is realized without doing anything. There's no action of meditation, no meditator. [Smiling]

Iain: I think the way that I also see it is that if we're not happy with our life, it's pretty stupid not to try and do something about it, and what we might do might actually take us in the wrong direction, but it's better to do that than just to sit there and complain and do nothing and be miserable and suffer. I think that's where I've got to these days.

Peter: Sure.

Iain: And like you I see the dilemma involved, yes. So what's your practice these days personally? Are you still a big meditator?

Peter: Yes, it's more that meditation happens. I don't sit down in a regimented way, but I do a lot of meditation. I do a lot of work by telephone, a lot of workshops, a lot of travelling, so I have a very rich practice. My practice comes through my teaching, and in living my life so I can fulfill any role I may have in supporting others.

Iain: And you talked earlier about sometimes... and these are not your words, these are more my words interpreting what you said but you were saying something like 'you lose the space and then you find the space again.' Why do you think you lose the space?

Peter: When something is happening in the conditioned sphere that falls outside the parameters of my preferences—say a pain in my body or missing a deadline—I identify with the experience. That's when I can think I've lost this. [Pointing on a place on arm on sofa] When we're here, [pointing on sofa further along an imagined line] we see that we can't lose this [pointing back to original spot] so again it's paradoxical. When we are here [pointing to original spot] we see we cannot lose this because there's nothing to lose, but this inexplicable event happens. We think we've lost this even though it's impossible. For me the path consists of reconnecting with this space, many, many times, as I've said ten, a hundred, thousands of times, so gradually this becomes a more central dimension of our existence.

Iain: Are you aware at the time of the reaction?

Peter: No. I don't think it's possible to be aware of the moment in which we lose this. If we were aware, it couldn't happen!

Iain: Well you see, I can only personalise it, but I know for myself increasingly, when I have a reaction, I know I'm having a reaction, but it's too strong. And I'm not using that as an excuse, these are the words that are coming out now, but there's such a strength in the reaction, it's stronger than something else here that is watching the reaction, that is aware of the reaction. I'm increasingly aware of this whole process and it's... and I have to be patient with myself really. It's no good as you know, judging yourself and saying 'I shouldn't be doing this,' and that's right, and then I find balance again, and then something else happens and I'm off again and it's just an ongoing thing that seems to get less dramatic shall we say, and hopefully moving more towards this... Well let me ask you about silence.

Peter: Yes.

Iain: A lot of the people we've had on here, I remember Gangaji was the last person I think, she talked about experiencing silence and how important that was somehow. Is that something in you that...? Tell me about silence...

Peter: [Laughing] Talk about silence, [laughing] isn't that great.

Iain: It's possible, it's possible, yeah.

Peter: Well one way to be present to the silence of the unconditioned is by seeing that there's nothing that we need to talk about, or even think about. We run out of subject matter. Then we're just here, in what? We don't need to know. We don't have to put a label on this. Silence happens because we're not trying to get anywhere. We're not looking for an end point. There is no end point. And if there's no end point, we're just being here without any agenda, with nothing we need to do. Thoughts can still be happening but we're not going anywhere with them. They're just moving through awareness and then we're just resting. I think the silence emerges of its own accord in the process of going beyond the mind.

Iain: Well I feel quite silent. I'm also aware, I'm peeking at the clock behind you, we have about two minutes left, and I just... anything you'd like to say in the last two minutes?

Peter: I really appreciate you, I appreciate being here, where we are right now, and I thank you very much for the opportunity of sharing this time with you.

Iain: Thank you Peter. I'm just going to mention again that you have out a book 'Radiant Mind' and I'll hold these up to the camera hopefully, and a CD set. And I've read the book and listened to the CD's and it's very interesting and I found it very helpful at times. I recommend these and of course you do your courses, nine month courses and you can find

that on Peter's website, so thanks for coming to see as at Conscious TV and chatting with me and good luck with your work. And thank you everybody for watching Conscious TV and I hope we see you again soon. Goodbye.