

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Shift into Freedom: An Interview with Loch Kelly

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome to The Seekers Forum Guest Interview series. Today, Mark speaks with Loch Kelly, M.Div., LCSW. Loch is the author of “Shift into Freedom: The Science and Practice of Open-Hearted Awareness.” He is an educator, consultant, and recognized leader in the field of nondual meditation and psychotherapy who was asked to teach Sutra Mahamudra by Mingyur Rinpoche and nondual realization by Adyashanti. The founder of the Open-Hearted Awareness Institute, he is an emerging voice in modernizing meditation, social engagement, and collaborating with neuroscientists at Yale, UPenn and NYU to study how awareness training can enhance compassion and wellbeing.

MM: Welcome Loch, it’s really good to talk to you as always. I want to start by asking you a big question that sounds more simple than it is. How would you define awakening?

LK: I would define awakening as a normal human potential, not something that’s esoteric – as a shifting from a certain constellation of consciousness, a kind of way of perceiving and a way of identifying who we are to a more open, awake, less contracted, less anxious, depressed, fearful center. So moving from kind of an ego identified center to an open, and yet embodied and connected stage and way of being, which is kind of the long definition but I think we can go through the different parts – but the most important thing is I think it’s a next natural stage of human development.

MM: And do you see it as an ongoing process? Obviously, it’s not like is one is awake and then you’ve drawn the line in the sand and you’re in another realm, it’s a process. Is that correct?

LK: That’s right. I think it’s an awakening and that’s why I don’t use the word “enlightenment” as if it’s a goal and then you’re done, because the definition of “awakening” includes waking up and growing up, so that there’s a continual maturing and kind of deepening, and almost like layers of “a-ha’s” that happen one after the other, that just like you think, *Oh wow, you’ve landed*, but then another layer of detoxing begins, which feels like, *Uh oh, I’m going backwards*.

But actually you’re going – in a way you’re letting go or unfreezing, and then another kind of bottom drops out, and you feel like you are even more open-hearted, and where you felt free of a limited sense of self, you start to feel embodied and actually able to be sensitive, vulnerable and emotional with support.

MM: And sometimes there are larger leaps and sometimes it’s a more gradual process. I’m thinking about how it happened for you, when you describe coming out of this terrible year and having this momentous realization on that sort of cold, starry night. Could you talk a little bit about what happened for you that night?

LK: Sure, and in some ways that was kind of a small awakening that I think many people, maybe not as traumatically, but many as dramatically, have had glimpses like that, and the important thing was that I somehow decided that whatever this was, and I had no idea what it was, that I was curious enough and at a place in my life that I had the ability to follow out in a kind of – both – you know, my heart’s desire, and my curious sense of “what’s going on” in my consciousness. But what happened is I had a series of losses in a very short time in my sophomore year at college, and I had lost first my father who went through a year of brain

surgery. He had brain cancer, a tumor the size of a lemon in the left lobe of his brain. He had a successful operation and went back to about a kindergarten level and then came up, so he was almost ready to go back to work; then he had an aneurysm and deteriorated, and he died right before I was going into my sophomore year.

And then, my grandmother who had been living with us and was in her late nineties, she passed away six months later, and two months after that my best friend from the hockey team died in a car accident, driving nearby at school and yeah – I felt just completely overwhelmed and tried to talk to people, but very few of my peers had gone through anything like this at that time and I felt weighted down as I left the library that one night – just felt like – it’s hard to say what it was – but like I was talking to myself or I felt or said – one part of myself said to me, “I don’t think you can take this any longer.”

And my response was to kind of look to *where is that coming from? Or who is that?* and literally what I realized later was I kind of looked with my awareness back until I looked through and up and out, and what happened was something just kind of opened and popped, or dropped, and I felt I was released from a kind of a contracted, heavy, both mental and emotional way of being and seeing, and I felt open to this beautiful night sky and to a sense of spacious support – some kind of opening to another dimension of consciousness that – you know, I both laughed and cried and felt like who I was in that moment had changed so dramatically – and yet I felt it was me and I felt like *Oh, I can deal with this – I have enough space to feel my feelings.* And it became kind of an immediate, unintentional shift – or a small kind of glimpse or an awakening.

MM: And that awakening stuck? Is that right?

LK: Well, that was the first one, and it stayed for a while, and it certainly was like background music. I always knew it was there but there was definitely more – you know – less support and I couldn’t intentionally access it, so it was there in the background, or it was a little covered over, or it was more foreground, but not primary. You know, so that I started to be curious about how can I intentionally access what came intentionally, or is that possible – and that’s what I ended up being curious about and going to study with great teachers and going to graduate school in both physiology and spirituality, and going on a fellowship to India and Sri Lanka and Nepal, and trying to find those people who were reporting that this was our natural state.

MM: In the book you mention that we don’t always know how to recognize awareness. What do you mean by that?

LK: Well, that what I came to feel was the ground or the primary dimension of consciousness that was the ground of this spacious, awake, free and yet intelligent dimension of consciousness is what I call awake awareness, so it’s not intention in the sense of I can maintain my attention on my breath – it’s actually the background awareness that is awake and free, and is a potential for the foundation of our mind – and kind of a source of our mind before thought and within thought, and beyond thought. So, this awareness is the sense of knowing it; it can’t be known by thought; it can’t be known by effort; we can’t know it though our five senses.

And through all the ways that we know so many other wonderful things – and this is why I believe people have missed it because we’ve been trying to find it through effort, will and knowing through our mind or even through attention, and even attention can’t know awareness, so awareness has to know itself but we don’t even have that awareness on our map of Western psychology or even philosophy or religion except in some contemplative mystics.

MM: And what are the doorways? You mentioned five doorways, I believe it’s five doorways, to direct recognition. Can you talk about those briefly?

LK: Yeah, I mean I talk about... like... there’s many different doorways. I think I was talking in one chapter about the five, using the sense of doorways as a kind of stepping off point because in Buddhism, thinking is considered the sixth sense, so it is one of our five senses. It’s an organizing sense but it’s as a sense, and all the six senses report to awareness. Concept or thought-based knowing is one kind of knowing but it’s not the essential knowing, the awareness-based knowing is the foundation. So what I do in this book and these practices – “*Shift into Freedom*” – is to have awareness which is identified or attached or enmeshed with thought and thinking, unhook or detach or let go or surrender, whatever word or feeling – but actually literally feel like it leaves thought and then can come to one of the other sense doors, like hearing or felt sense in your body or seeing, and then as a transition, kind of coming back to your senses but then you actually feel like if awareness, for instance, if anybody listening could just feel without even knowing how they would do it, just let awareness unhook from thought and kind of step back and then awareness being the center of intelligence can feel your jaw directly from within and then awareness can know your throat from directly within your throat, and then awareness can drop below your neck to know your upper torso, your body, the sensations, space and awareness directly from within your body without looking up to thought and without stretching attention down from thought, but feel like you’ve actually come back home to your senses in your body or your heart space, and then from there that kind of a door that allows us to even go subtler and to open then to the space – either space within or the space outside of our body so that we actually unhook from our mind at first, and then from our senses so we begin to have awareness, know space and then know spacious awareness as the knowing dimension as both subject and object, so that there begins to be a feeling of freedom and a new kind of knowing or clarity that is spacious. But then soon after that, I don’t stop there as some systems stop with pure awareness but the pure – once you realize pure awareness, even for a few seconds, immediately come back and recognize that form is emptiness but then emptiness is also form – so that the basis of awareness is also inherent within you but now the primacy of this awareness feels like there is a heart knowing – or heart mind – rather than a mental orientation for who you are.

MM: Hmm. Beautiful. You say that location matters and where you’re viewing from matters. How does that relate to what you were just saying about awareness?

LK: Yeah. So in some ways that was a little bit of a tour there or one glimpse series that I was just – whether people were just listening or whether they were actually following me, could have been either one – but the feeling of literally being located in a looping pattern of thought that feel like we are located in a point of view behind our eyes, between our ears, looking out of our eyes.

So the feeling that many people have is that the location or the center of who they are is literally feels like it's – they're a thought – they have to go to thought in their head to realize, “What's going on? Who am I? What am I thinking? Who am I thinking? Who's thinking? I'm thinking? Where am I? Where do you feel like you are? I'm right here. Where?”

Well, if you really look, you could feel like you're in your whole body but most people feel like they're in their head, behind their eyes and that location literally – it creates contracted perception and a dualistic way of identifying with a function of our thinking mind, which is supposed to be dualistic and create a subject/object separation and create a good/bad, right/wrong, green/red, discriminating view. And if we're identified with that, we start to have this judgmental discriminating view toward everyone and everything we meet in a way that we are identified with that – and so that feeling –when we step out of that feeling, unhook awareness, either drop down into our body, open into space out of this location, there's a sense – and I speak about it in the book and give some of the neuroscience about the parietal lobes which actually begin to register that we feel like we're less contracted and less worried about feeling separate – a separate sense of self – that feels like we're in a danger mode... that we actually feel on the level of identity, a sense of boundless, spacious, interconnected location, and that shows up in our brain.

MM: Right. And that dissolves the self, the us/them divide, the dualistic divide?

LK: That's right. That dissolves that because that's not – whereas a lot of practices and relative practices or preliminary practices were doing it with attitude and effort – try not to be so selfish, try to be less judgmental, try to be accepting, you know, accept everything now – and you're doing it with the part of you that is not accepting. You're doing it with the part that accepts and then not accepts. You're doing it from this identity which makes everything “either/or,” and what I'm saying is – and in many of these traditions of contemplative practice, that the first move is actually to – not to calm the existing mind but to step out into the spacious awareness which is always already free, awake and calm.

MM: Beautiful. Speaking of effort, before we started the interview, you were talking about the fact that some people are listening to the audio meditations that come from the book and saying “Oh, this is meditation, this is so easy.” Could you say something about our misunderstandings about meditation as a great mountain to climb?

LK: Yes. So there certainly are different aspects of meditation – there certainly [are] aspects of our development of attitudes and ethics and emotional learning and delayed gratification and things like that that take effort. There's nothing wrong – effort in general is not the problem and is very important to learn how to use that but in some ways meditation starts with its intention to get to effortlessness, and so the assumption is there's already an effortless awareness that once discovered as primary, can then allow you to relax on a level of being free of suffering that almost no other way of efforting can help – no psychological means, no mental understanding – intellectual understanding, that there's already a free non-suffering dimension that is spontaneously, effortlessly free.

And so some little effort at some point is needed to let go or discover or uncover that, but as you were mentioning, a lot of time is spent on what are considered in – you know, most Eastern traditions in yoga and in all forms of Buddhism, the preliminary practices, which are one-pointed focus and observing of contents of consciousness, which is called mindfulness or, what's called in my book – I talk about what's called “deliberate mindfulness” and then “effortless mindfulness.” So deliberate mindfulness is intentionally trying to maintain focus on one point and stay with that present experience. Whereas instead, what I have learned is that if you shift your awareness into the effortless field of awareness, and then kind of get on board as that awareness, that's now including everything, that you can actually effortlessly focus on a task more easily.

It becomes like what's called a flow-state in psychology where people actually are able with their eyes open to function at their highest optimal level without effort because they know the basics of what they're doing. And so my sense is that we actually do know the basics – we've spent 10,000 hours walking, talking, typing and that if we can just let go, and discover this effortless awareness, you lose that separate sense of self on the mistaken identity level but you still feel – you know – you're a separate person.

You know there's some extreme views that focus just on the emptiness and feel that *I'm nobody and there's nobody here and you're nobody* and that can lead to a kind of ethical relativism. But this emptiness is the foundation, but it's showing up as particular human beings and so there's a sense of empty clarity and then also compassion and relatedness and creativity.

MM: You bring up an important point in the book about emotions, which are such a paradoxical force in our lives and so troubling in spiritual traditions, some of which tell us to simply suppress them because they don't matter – they're just illusion. When you talk about returning emotions to their natural state, Loch, what do you mean?

LK: To kind of cut to the punch line, one of the Zen quotes that I like is when a Zen master is asked about emotions, she says, “When I'm happy I laugh, when I'm sad I cry.” So the emotions themselves are not a problem. In fact, the goal of awakening, as I see it, is to live a fully embodied human life but you know, emotions and thoughts get tied in knots and they get – you know, the creation of um – you know, the disturbing emotions are mostly based on ignorance and this secondary suffering that's created by this mistaken identity, by this small sense of self that feels like it's being threatened, so it isn't so much even about – there's you know – it's being angry about being angry – it's being fearful about being fearful that starts looping our emotions around.

In fact, recent studies have shown by some neuroscientists that when emotion is felt fully without reacting or identifying or fighting or fleeing but just feeling it and letting it play through – some sadness, some fear – like stepping off a curb, you know, or stepping back after a car comes too close and you jump back and you're in fear – that the emotion lasts ninety seconds in the brain, so it arises, it's felt fully; and then if you don't go from fear which *reminds me of the last time I was afraid – which that person made me afraid and it's their fault – or it's my fault.* And then

that triggers an early childhood memory/trauma that then you get engaged in and then you're regressed back to that fear rather than what just happened.

MM: Right. Exactly. And that's how they get compounded in the stories – get all tangled up in stories.

LK: That's right.

MM: I just have one last question, and you've touched on some of this already, but you speak specifically about a next stage of human evolution and for a lot of folks, that's a radical idea. You know we like to think of ourselves as already evolved. What do you mean by the next stage of human evolution?

LK: I do use the word “development” because it's so big. Evolution to me is too big and I'm not qualified to really say whether the human race is evolving or not evolving but I do know human development, and I have studied it and watched my own development and my nephews' and nieces', and seen how radically they've developed and how they can get stunted in their growth and how they change year to year. And so I use the example of how human development often around the world develops pretty naturally and unfolds in the first five or seven years of life no matter where you go; there's learning of crawling to walking and other developmental stages until you get to school age development. And then if you go to school, you develop school age development or you if you learn to read and write you learn to read and write. If you don't learn to read and write, you don't learn to read and write. So – it's almost like that – that's the example I use that we have the potential to go beyond this small contracted ego identity as a stage of our development.

We have the potential, just like going to school, but it requires a kind of training that we can develop so we're not literally ego-centered. That ego functions are available and we have our own personalities – that's not what goes away – but there's a whole other operating system that can be developed if we learn how to do that, and that's kind of been my study. My interest is like “Ok, what is required? What's in common throughout different cultures and different spiritual traditions and different contemplative traditions? What are they all saying is important, and can we do it in the midst of our daily life, rather than having to go to a monastery or cave?”

And I believe that we can and that the principles are not that difficult. They're fairly simple but they're not easy, mainly because they're paradoxical. Maybe because we've learned so much dualistically and consciously and effortlessly and we've developed a good ego development of functioning but we've taken it to be our identity, so that we actually have to let go of it on the level of identity – all the progress we seem to have been made there – and unlearn how to hold on and control and let go into this sense of awake awareness, which then comes back and we operate from a flow-state without this old sense of being a contracted little mini-me inside of our heads looking out of our eyes.

MM: Beautiful. And this is possible for everyone?

LK: This is possible for everyone, just like school age is. Some people, you know, like school-age, will be a little quicker, a little better but generally the developmental stage of adulthood or

the developmental stage of awakening is about the same for everyone, meaning some people are a little more natural, some people – if they're willing to put in the time – can actually, in their interest, can do a lot better than people who just trust their natural ability and don't show up for their own growth. So it's available to everyone.

MM: Beautiful. Thank you, Loch, so much. "*Shift into Freedom*" is a fantastic book. I encourage everybody to get it right away and share it with your friends. It's just been wonderful talking to you today.

LK: Thank you so much, Mark.

MM: Thank you, Loch.