

The natural freedom of the mind

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This evening we are going to look at the nature of the mind in the dzogchen tradition. Generally speaking, it is said that the mind is like space. We have outer space, and inner space. Space gives us a perspective that allows things to take on their proper shape.

Perspective allows us to see that it is our own positioning that makes some things big and some things small. Certain aspects of the world appeal to us strongly and so we spend our time and give ourselves to them. They appear 'big' to us thereby allowing these objects or people to show more of themselves. It also gives us the opportunity to project more onto these 'big' people and objects.

The question for us this evening is how to see without fabricating. The basic question, can be phrased as, "Yes, we are here, but what are we here as?" That is to say, what sort of identity do we imagine we have? We're all used to making statements about ourselves, to defining ourselves across different registers. We have a legal identity, established by an identity card or a passport. This guarantees that we are a citizen of a particular country and it affords a certain protection. For most people, identity is generated by the accident of birth. We did not work to get it; merely by having been born in a particular place we got that particular identity. We also have the identity of gender, further influenced by how other people interpret our embodiment of our gender. We have identity through education, through our economic circumstances, through our social class and so on.

We also have the more personal profile of our identity, the things that we like, the things that we don't like, our history, our favourite places to go on holiday and so on. This is influenced by our memory. When we are talking with others, perhaps about places we've been, things we have enjoyed doing, then by the very process of talking about experiences, memories come to mind, and our sense of self feels rounded out. We may also become revealed to ourselves through the very act of saying something. So many different kinds of experiences and so many different enthusiasms and interests, all more or less available.

Thinking about this helps us appreciate that identity is not something fixed. In fact, most of the time it is situationally evoked, since how we reveal ourselves to the other is not just a matter of our personal confidence, but is also the feeling tone that we have of the other person's availability to us. For example, depending on who we are speaking to—older people, contemporaries, children—our voice will change in terms of its tone and volume; our vocabulary and grammar is likely to change as well. In linguistics this can be referred to as 'accommodation'. In Buddhism this is referred to as dependent co-origination, or interdependence: how we emerge into the world with others arises as a co-creation of becoming.

Buddhism says that we need wisdom in order to develop compassion. What is meant by wisdom? Wisdom is seeing the illusory nature of the restrictive habit-formations with which we frequently identify. Wisdom allows us to see that the building-blocks out of which we create both our areas of competence and our areas of incompetence, have no true substance to them.

One of the blessings of living in a city is that it's full of people who are not like us. We may think, "I couldn't be like that. I couldn't do that." but for them it seems very easy. That establishes two things: that some people are at ease doing what I can't do, and that what stops me doing what they do is my own self-limitation. So it is important to have some sense of the construction "I am like this". If "I am like this"-ness, if the seeming given-ness of our "I am like this", is just a fact, then it's difficult to examine. From the point of view of meditation, a strong belief that we are what we take ourselves to be is a delusion created by not understanding the nature of thought.

Everything that we encounter, whether it appears to be outside of us or inside of us, is experience. If I lift up this cup it looks as if I am holding something in my hand. You can agree that this is the case because you can see the cup that is in my hand. So there is my hand and there is a cup. The cup is self-existing; it is what it is. I put the cup down on the table and it's still the cup. Wherever we put the cup, the cup is the cup. If, however, we let go the cup then we don't have a cup. We now have water on the floor and lots of sharp pieces of broken pottery! So it looks as if the cup has cup-ness, or that it's full of cup. But of course this is all part of a conversation with the world. The cup is not something added onto the world from outside. The cup is *in* the world; it's made out of the earth, prepared in a factory, produced by some design department, sent out to the shops and so on. The cup has always been in relationship—in relation with mind: the factory owner's idea to make a new kind of best-selling cup, the shopkeeper scanning the pottery brochure to see what will sell well... From the beginning to the end the cup is a mental phenomenon. Without the mind the cup wouldn't exist. Without the mind the cup wouldn't have come here. Without our careful attention in washing the cup, it would have got broken.

The point I am trying to make is that the world is not constituted out of separate things, each with their own internal essence or substance. We live within many intermeshing webs of communication. We have the web of visual display of colours and shapes; we have the semantic web, the juxtaposition of words and thoughts supporting them whereby we generate new meanings moment by moment; we have webs of feeling which are linked to memories from the past, hopes of the future. They all show that the field of our experience is very rich. Many different factors are operating at once.

To think, “What is it? What should I do?” is a very dislocating question separating me from my embodied world, from me being part of existence. I am then living in a little island of myself: I look out at this world full of people and things and wonder, “Oh, who are you, what are you up to? Do I like you, do I not like you?” One question leads to more and more questions: “Who are all these people. What would I do with them?”

This is the basic position which in Buddhism is referred to as samsara. It starts with the sense of oneself as isolated, as an individual. An individual is one who is separated from others but also is a unit. It may seem very strange thing to refer to oneself as ‘a unit’ since most of us are highly fragmented, not indivisible at all! ‘Unit’ seems to imply being autonomous but we are not in the least autonomous; we’re highly dependent. We depend on air coming in and out of our nostrils; we depend on food which we didn’t grow for ourselves; we wear clothes made by other people yet we still consider ourselves to be autonomous individuals. This is a kind of autohypnosis whereby we each fabricate a notion that ‘I am an island onto myself’.

From the Buddhist point of view this notion of a self-referential ego as the basis of ourselves, of our life, is a terrible misapprehension. It’s a mistake that generates more and more difficulties for us in the course of our lives. Buddhism describes our root difficulty as ignorance leading to attachment. It basically means that we are ignoring what is actually here and instead become attached to our ideas and interpretations of how it seems to us. Having once created our private world of interpretations, which has taken us a lot of time and effort to do, this then has to be maintained constantly.

Think back to when you were a child building a sandcastle at the seaside. If the sand was very fine and wet then any wall you try to build just gets washed down again. This is how it is for us as people: we come into a particular shape but something happens and our mood shifts. We don’t feel the same any more. Maybe we wake up one morning and we don’t feel very well. We went to bed feeling fine and now in the morning we are sick. We didn’t plan to be sick. We didn’t ask to be sick. We’re just sick! Something happened to me and now I am sick. This is not the mark of an autonomous individual. This is the mark of being a puppet, a poor lost puppet who doesn’t even know who is pulling its strings. So, then we start to think, “Oh there must be something wrong with my diet.” And we go to our computer and search for a good diet. We find hundreds of excellent diets but which diet will I choose? How will I know? We will never know. Thirty years ago people in Britain started telling us that butter was very dangerous and that we should eat margarine. Now we are told that margarine is not good and we should eat butter. It is the same with salt. People used to say that too much salt was bad and now people say that we are not taking enough salt.

The problem in being an individual is that our own shoulders have to carry the whole burden of responsibility: “It’s my life. Nobody is going to tell me what to do. So what should I do? I don’t know. But it’s my life...” This is such a paradox, such a punishment, being condemned to freedom. European existential writers such as Camus, Sartre, Kafka, Rilke, Hesse and more recently Kerouac addresses this paradox, the fear and horror of freedom.

If everything is up to us to choose and the world is increasingly experienced as a range of commodities then as a free consumer in a capitalist economy I have this infinite

richness of options in front of me. But what will I choose? What will be my criteria for choice? Questions and uncertainties and insecurities can mushroom and spread out from this very quickly. The root of this is an assumption "I am me" "I exist". But who are you? "I told you, I am me." 'I am me' is sufficient, completely meaningful. On the basis of this we can say, "This is a table, this is a cup, and I am me". Since you are a human being and I am a human being let's agree that these are non-negotiable statements. We all know this is a cup and if I say "I am me", you know what I mean. So when you say "I am me", I accept that too. And you, with equal-politeness, will agree that when I say "I am me".

We agree to allow each other to be stupid, because we are not inquiring into what does it mean to say, "I am me". It becomes a statement with a big full stop at the end which seals us into a cul-de-sac. There is something quite reassuring about these dead ends because we can all agree there is nowhere further to go. I am what I am and indeed within the semiotic web, there are final statements. We say, "This is a cup", "I am me", and these become axioms, subject-verb-object. Each can be moved around in different combinations in different linguistic families however accepting a meaningful balancing of the sentence generates the feeling that whatever is stated is quite acceptable.

If we say, "Green cows fly slowly" then this is quite an acceptable sentence as Chomsky pointed out. Surrealists also generated many strange expressions: meaningless yet apparently meaningful because the basic structure was correct. "Terrorists should die" is one such popular sentence these days. You can choose whatever enemy you want, just insert it into the sentence. Language allows us to create new expressions and what I create appears to be a real thing. It appears to be truly existing out there and I am just observing and reporting how it is.

A child might say that cabbages disgusting and the parent responds pointing out that many other people like cabbage, so it can't be disgusting. You may not like cabbage, which is fine, but you are not entitled to say cabbage is horrible since "I eat cabbage and for me it's not horrible." Families you often have this kind of discussion and they're very helpful because they let us see how the subjective feeling-tone flips itself into an objective statement. Our mind constructs and then believes that the construction is true in itself.

This is the dynamic nature of ignorance in Buddhist teaching. A child may come to a conclusion about ourselves such as "I hate math, I'm not going to do it anymore." Perhaps it is because they I don't like their teacher then that's a relationship and it can be altered. But when we say, "I don't like math" and then we say, "Math is horrible", the door to understanding mathematics is getting narrower and narrower and narrower. Probably each of us can remember times in our past when we made our world small, by developing some idea about something. For me, I remember playing tennis as a child. I played with somebody who was better at it than me, so I solved that problem by saying that I didn't like tennis. This was a very effective method. The world gets smaller and smaller and we are following a narrow track through the labyrinth. "I don't like tennis" is a thought. It probably expressed a mood one afternoon when I kept losing. I could have responded in various ways but it was caught in a conclusion "I don't like this" and led to a whole series of decisions of avoidance and a particular shaping in the topology of my existence appeared.

But what was the true status, what was the true value of the statement, “I don’t like tennis”? It was a mood in a specific situation. The feeling was transient. When we look at our mind in meditation we see that sensations and thoughts and feelings are always transitory. They have no solid substance of their own and we, the subject experiencing the thought, also have no capacity to hold on to the thought. Perhaps you read something in a book, a very interesting idea, and you start to think about it but probably not for more than a minute. If you keep thinking, your own thoughts will open into thinking about new areas. The thought that you had been focusing on dissolved into something else. Nevertheless we continue to come to fixed conclusions that seem to give a definite reality to the constructions that we ourselves build.

This is like a kind of dark miracle, a miracle in that, on the basis of transitory ungraspable phenomena we build seemingly solid enduring edifices. On the basis of these transitory and ungraspable phenomena – the thoughts and so on – we create the seemingly solid reliable enduring factors of our existence. How do we do that? By denial of the actual nature of phenomena.

In Buddhism this is described as grasping at the illusory self-substance of the object. We see an object as having inherent self-nature. For example there is a table here beside me. Because I’m using it as a table. We could also sit on it, or stand on it. There are thousands of things we could do with this wooden box but once we have decided that it’s a table we don’t need to imagine anything else. The creation of ‘the table’ is the death of the imagination. If our imagination stays alive we may deconstruct the tableness of the table in order to allow the potential embedded in whatever might be there.

We have done the same to ourselves. We have incredible potential. We show many different moods and ways of walking and talking and we become used to being ‘ourselves’. This ‘ourselves’ is an artificial construct, a construct which is maintained by forgetting our potential. Potentials are a bit scary because how would I know who I was if I could just be whatever was going to happen? I need to be in charge of ‘me’. I can’t trust the spontaneity of co-emergence. I want to know in advance what is going to happen yet the fact is that nobody knows in advance what is going to happen.

But ‘I am who I am’. That is to say, my individual identity is based on lying and cheating to myself. A consequence of this is that I lie and cheat you as well. But that’s okay because you’re lying and cheating to yourself as well!

In buddhism the first thing we look at is impermanence. The content of the mind and the content of our visual and auditory sensory experience is ever-changing. How can you make something stable out of that which is always moving? You can’t. Only by telling lies. So I am lying. I’m pretending to myself that the world has stability. We are very accustomed to this. Politicians tell us that there are just a few problems but if we vote for them then they will solve them. No need to worry. However there is no way to solve the problems of the world by imagining that you understand them. If we all try hard enough can we bring an end to suffering? So there is no end to thinking and there is no end to fabricating solutions which are impossible to implement.

This is why buddhism says that there is no end to samsara, because as long as you believe that your thoughts tell the truth about the world and if you could only just develop a better thought, you would find a universal solution. This delusion is a show that can run forever. However once we see that our thoughts are coming and going, our feelings are coming and going, the sensations in my body are coming and going, then once we begin to see that, that the world is dynamic, then we have a paradigm shift: I am moving in a moving world. To try and stabilize a moving world doesn't make sense. I need to become better at movement; I need to move with circumstances. I don't know what is going to happen so I give up the fantasy of control. That doesn't mean that I go to the other extreme, to feeling out of control. I am in the middle, present with what is occurring and moving with that, sometimes coming forward, sometimes giving space, always being in connection.

Then we start to see that we are not an autonomous individual, that we are a participant, part of what is already here. I can relax and live through my senses, through my embodied being with the world as it shows itself. I can allow myself to be as I manifest. I can feel sad, hopeless, hopeful, whatever arises. I can notice what this does to my body and how it positions me closer to other people or further away. The more I allow this display of expression, the less I identify with a definition of 'me', the more aware I am that this is all just potential manifesting.

Where does this potential come from? It is the mind displaying itself. What is the mind? Then we start to explore. Is the mind a thing? Is the mind inside my body? Is it outside my body? Is it big, is it small? Through relaxing into the meditation and making these explorations again and again, we start to get a feel of the unspeakable mystery of existence. Now there is no point to solving a mystery, unless it's in a crime book; mystery is something to be entered into.

The more we allow ourselves to be with ourselves, the more we find that we are not someone in particular. The ground of being is always open and the forms that we manifest are relational. This frees us from the sense that we have a particular shape which we have to protect under all circumstances. That's a great relief. All this busy work of holding myself in place! We can relax and be with our feelings. If this seems to be difficult for other people that is just because of their limitations. We cannot rescue other people from themselves. If we feel sad the other person will feel something. They might not want to feel your sadness, but that's another issue. The idea that we have to present ourselves as a nice person to be socially acceptable is a terrible curse, because that is instructing us to be artificial. But when you're artificial with others you're artificial with yourself, so how then will you ever know what you feel? It is unlikely that meditation is a cause of mass murder. Meditation makes people more spacious. The things you might show are curiosity, irritation. If you are connected with the world there are many things to irritate you. It's not toxic to show and share your irritation. But what will others think? Well, that is their freedom. The beginning of your freedom is to give them the freedom to have their experience. When we are trying to develop ourselves in a way that will manipulate other people into thinking that we are nicer than we are, this may be socially acceptable but it is also completely corrupt: deception as the royal road to happiness. What is so toxic about the rawness of experience? The function of meditation is to allow us to experience our life as it is.

In dzogchen practice, there are two main instructions for meditation. Try not to hang on to what you like and try not to get rid of what you don't like. Offer hospitality to whatever occurs as it occurs.

I may think that I don't like how I am and so I pretend not to be like that and then I am able to like myself again but the self that I like is not the self that I really am. That is tragic since what it means is that I create or continue the inner duality between the anxious self-formation which is judging how I am and the flow of experience. How can I ever be integrated, how can I relax and be at home in myself if I think there is something wrong with me? Perhaps I tell myself that I could be more kind, more generous, must try harder.

Who is the one who is trying harder? This is a thought. Thought is the gardener who is going to improve the thought-garden. "As the gardener, I know the difference between flowers and weeds but I find it very annoying when you confuse them. Your garden is full of weeds. Since we are neighbours your weeds start to grow in my nice garden of flowers." This is the problem with the judge: the judge is not a universal judge. We all have a rulebook in our head but it's not a shared rulebook and so we fight and we squabble about the rules and we start to distrust other people.

The problem here is not the actual content of the mind but the status which is ascribed to the content of the mind. The thoughts in our mind are not serious. They are not the truth. They are just playing in the playground. It's impossible to speak the truth. We may speak truth-ly because we can know whether we are cheating ourselves or not. Does that give us the confidence that we are speaking *the* truth? The objective truth would have to refer to things that are objectively out there? Not everybody likes Picasso. Not everybody likes Cabernet Sauvignon wine. Some people love *foie gras*; others see it as the torture of animals. It is difficult to find anything that everybody could agree on as the truth.

Buddhism would say that what we have access to is experience. Each of us is a mind, the mind, our mind, that is to say a quality of awareness or an awareness which reveals the ever-changing unfolding of the patterns of the world. Which world? Our world. Our worlds have some kind of interface, like a Venn diagram; there may be some overlap that we agree on but we have no access to the contents of other people's minds. We infer, we imagine, we interpret. This is experience. The world is experience; it's not objective fact. You could only have objective fact if you extracted the mind but anyway for now what we have are opinions, interpretations and the lived quality of experience.

This is very radical. It means that in the world there is nothing to catch, yet there is experience. Look, I am catching the cup in my hand; I have got something in my hand now; I'm holding the cup with two hands. You can see that I am doing this. That is to say, you are experiencing something, and I am experiencing something too. We can give different descriptions of what we are experiencing but what we actually experience is light. You see light; you don't see a cup. A cup you invent in your head. Without the concept of a cup you wouldn't know what it was. A baby can look at me doing this. It doesn't know what I'm doing but it sees something; it has an experience. We have an experience into which we massage cognitive structures, conceptual elaborations, which

take the raw fresh field of the moment and cook it into a familiar dish. We add the flavours we know and like. This is how we customise the world.

It's a strange paradox. The raw form of the world is like Primark, a budget clothes-shop, but we have inside us a *maison de haute couture*. Inside us scissors are moving, stitching is going on; we customise the world to get the perfect fit. We choose the colour to suit our complexion. We live in our world, with selective attention. We elaborate the features that appeal to us and play down the features we don't like.

Meditation begins when we start to be curious about what it means to be alive, observing the flow of experience without correcting or controlling, observing face on the formation of the patterning of our experience. We open to the mind itself. Our mind is not a self, an ego-formation which continues through time; the mind is an awareness which is open and naked and fresh showing whatever is occurring. Mind is also the energy which is unfolding within it. In terms of awareness we are nothing at all, because we can't find this awareness *as something*. And yet awareness shows the field of experience, this room in Geneva with the people in it, and within that field, each of us is the unique specific particularity of our embodied being.

In dzogchen, the whole focus is to realise the inseparability of these three aspects. However we are is inseparable from the field of everything else that is occurring. This field is inseparable from its ground which is open awareness. It's not that we strongly exist as this individual ego autonomy since all constructs are dynamic and changing—the fact that something is ungraspable doesn't mean that it's not here. When we talk, when we walk, we influence other people, other people who are also energetic formations.

We are patterns of energy in a field of energy within the space of open awareness. We are not the master, we are not the slave. On the level of manifestation, we are part of the field and have to work with the circumstances that arise. But our awareness is always open and in its ungraspability, it is indestructible.

This is an amazing range of possibility. As an embodied self we could say, from the individual point of view, that we are very vulnerable: the world can get to us in all sorts of ways. But if we open to the fact that we are always already part of the world then we find ourselves responding to what happens. If I build myself as a castle, I don't want to be invaded. That's the function of building a castle: to stop people invading. But if I am a participant, then other people are not invaders of my space since I don't have a space; I am participating in the open space.

The issue then is how to find the resources to respond to a particular person. For example if you are a schoolteacher, classroom environments vary and children vary in their capacity and interest. The teacher needs to swim in the sea alongside the students, not too far away and not too close. The teacher needs to find a dynamic balance of authority and availability. You can only do that by giving yourself into the task of teaching.

Generally speaking being flexible is good. By very minor adjustments to our vision what we might see as obstacles and provocations we can now experience as invitations, as invitations to open ourselves up, to remind us that when we close down

into our neurotic formation we don't benefit ourselves and we certainly don't benefit other people. When people annoy us, take it as a reminder that we were getting lost. Be grateful for this reminder. Don't get involved in pointing out to them how they annoy you. Correcting other people is not going to help you not be lost.

One of the helpful functions of meditation is that it lets us slip out of concretise structures more quickly, and with more grace.

This is a very brief introduction to how rigidity and control formations arise and to the possibility of relaxing them thereby experiencing the natural freedom, openness and hospitality of awareness which is always already present.