
Finding your self where you are

James Low

Amorebieta, Spain, 1st July 2011

This text was transcribed by Sylvester Lohninger

from a video prepared by Maria Vidarte

<https://vimeo.com/32972781>

<https://vimeo.com/38771914>



Here we are; we are all alive and maybe one of the most important things is to think a little bit about our experience of being alive. Of course in the middle of our life events are happening all the time; thoughts are coming, feelings and sensations. We all have many plans, and of course we have memories as well—a whole construction out of which we try to make sense of what's going on. Sometimes our hopes are fulfilled sometimes they are not fulfilled.

Well, let's try to see a little bit more how to have some space and a freer sense of movement within this process, because our life is already in process. Things are going on; moment-to-moment some stimuli are coming from outside or from inside and in the midst of this process a kind of pressure can build up inside us.

It might be a sense of, *'I should be achieving more; I should be getting more. I see what other people get, I see all the things that I've tried and that haven't worked out.'* Our life is

both an immediacy of what' is going on, and also a storyline that runs inside ourselves. These stories are sometimes harsh, rather persecutory. In any case, we can only do our best.

Let's look at the basis. Here we are, alive. What does it mean to be alive? Essentially something is happening. We have our body, which has eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and the wonderful texture of our skin. Moment by moment sensation and experience, the raw data of life, is occurring for us. It's occurring because we are alive. If we have ever been with a corpse, we see that their senses have closed, nothing more is happening for them. What then is the difference between life and death? When we are alive, something is happening and it is happening to someone. It happens to me, it happens to you. What is this aliveness? It's a presence: I know I am alive. How do I know I am alive? Because things happen to me.

That seems obvious, but who is the one to whom things happen? Who is this one that I call myself? I can tell you about myself, I can tell you where I am from, the kind of things I like to eat, the kind of work I do, but this is essentially to share a story. We all have many stories that we can tell about ourselves. If we try to look underneath the story or see through the story, moment by moment there is a felt sense—almost intangible, ungraspable—of being alive. I exist, but what do I exist as? Sometimes I am happy, sometimes I'm sad, sometimes I'm thirsty, and sometimes I'm hungry. Each of these experiences in the moment of experiencing seems completely real, completely true. It's the whole of my universe, and then it's gone. What seemed to be 'me' was arising for me due to causes and circumstances. If it's a hot day like today I start to get thirsty. Why am I thirsty? Thirst is an experience I am having. Oh, because of the sunshine. When it's hot, I get thirsty more quickly than when it's cold. That is to say, my personal experience, which appears to be something in me, defining how I am— 'I am thirsty'—is dependent on events outside and inside. When it's hot, the body starts to sweat, it's draining the moisture from the body, and so thirst arises. What seems to be 'me' as something internally definitive of who I am, is actually an interplay of many relational forces.

Events arise and they pass. Experiences arise and they pass. And yet there is a continuity of being. I am still 'me' through all of these different experiences, so what is this "me-ness" of me? If the content of my mind, the content of my experience, the feelings in my body, the hopes and fears that arise, the thoughts, the analysis of, 'Am I doing okay? Am I doing not okay?', even if we see all of these as a movement, as a sequence, as a chain of events in time, still there seems to be a continuity of I, me, myself, which continues. What is this made of? It's difficult to see.

Why should it be difficult to see who I am, if I am 'me'? I can hold up my hand, I can look at my hand, that's not so difficult to understand; it's not so difficult to make sense of. Something is there: I can see my feet, I can see my clothes, I can see the houses, I can see people. Do I see 'myself' in the same way? I construct an idea: 'I am like this, I am like that.'

However if we just pause for a moment and observe the function as it arises and passes, the feeling tone of being happy, the feeling tone of being sad, these temporary events are always passing, and yet I am here.

The function of meditation is simply to give us more time to experience the movement of experience, the movement of events, and the stillness of the one who is present. Our own root nature or basic presence, our basic capacity of existence, is not

something we can grasp or define or determine. It does not mean that it does not exist: it simply means it does not exist as a thing. Everything we say about ourselves is both true and untrue. If I say I am thirsty, well, I am not always thirsty. If I say, I am from Scotland, that may be true, but I do not now live in Scotland. Every kind of reference, every kind of construction relates to a set of events which is already changing, which is not fixed.

Our age is changing, our health is changing, even how we look is changing. What is there in ourselves that we can grasp on to? From the point of view of Buddhism, there is nothing to grasp, and moreover there is no need to grasp. When you grasp something, you only grasp what is left, a bit like trying to grasp a snake and finding that it has left its skin behind. The snake has gone off and we are left with the leftover, with something which simply remains. In the same way, what happened when I woke up this morning is gone. Having breakfast is gone. Now there is this moment, and even as it is arising, it is also passing. There is nothing to grasp—and that's okay. If there is nothing to grasp then a lot of the work that I habitually do in trying to construct my life and build up a safe sense of identity is perhaps unnecessary.

Why am I so busy trying to stabilize a sense of self, a sense of purpose, to give myself a sense that I am a reasonable human being and that what I do is acceptable to other people, when every building block that it is made of is actually like a wave in the sea? The wave is there, undeniable, you see it, and then it's gone. The wave arises from the ocean and goes back into the ocean; the moments of our experience arise out of this open field and then vanish back into it. Then another wave comes; the waves never stop. But what is the depth or the spaciousness of the ocean itself? Our mind—when we relax and look at it—is not a thing. That is to say, each of us is not a thing, we are an openness, a presence, an awareness, that is not resting on anything material, is not generated by the brain.

Our knowledge of the brain is a set of experiences that arise and move through the limpid clarity of the mind itself. We don't have a mind, it's not a possession, but the mind is rather the basis or the sphere within which all our experiences occur. Our mind is not something inside us, it's not a private possession, it's not a thing that can be determined, and so it's invulnerable.

Of course our bodies are quite vulnerable, our personalities are vulnerable, that is to say the patterns of identification that we create about ourselves, how we imagine ourselves to be, are vulnerable to events. If friends seem to go off us, then we feel hurt, or we may have difficulties at work. We thought we would have a clear sense of how our lives would unfold, and it's gone. Or suddenly we become sick, and we think, 'How can this be me? I am not this kind of person. This shouldn't be happening to me. I can't be me if this is happening so how is this possible? That shows us the way in which when we construct ourselves out of events, we are actually making a house of cards, a house of sand, with no solid essence to our sense of self. It's an illusory show that is true for the moment of its occurrence, and then is gone.

So the main function of practice—which is essentially profound relaxation and trust—as you give up the active work of constructing your experience that everything is there already. Things are as they are. Instead of making excess effort, which in fact merely obscures the possibility of the opening of the door to see what is always there, once we stop doing that then there is a freshness. Something is numinous, just there on the edge of our consciousness. However I want to understand, I want to find out what is going on, but this is impossible!!! You can't find it, because you never lost it.

The biggest transformation we can make in our life is to stop objectification. Stop treating ourselves as fixed objects and stop treating other people as fixed objects. All moments of life are movements in an ungraspable field. We know people, some we call our friends, others we may even call our enemies, but either way we have a concrete defined sense of who they are. In fact what we have are only moments of shared experience. What I call 'myself' never stands alone; it's always in a context. The experience of being something in particular arises for us because we experience a world of many particular things in relation to who we are, in relation to our sense of purpose and meaning in life. The more we trust that the dynamic flow of existence is something to participate and find out way in, the more this way will not be determined by our hopes and fears.

Whatever plans we make will always have to be adjusted. Although we sometimes may feel that they have gone wrong this is only because the fantasy of control and power creates an internal world of hopes and plans where we make a beautiful map that we then try to force onto circumstances. Life, however, cannot be contained and placed in a frame. It's like the children you see playing on the beach. They have a little plastic bucket and they put the sand in the bucket and then turn it upside down and start to make structures. Sand is like earth; it can take a shape. But if you add too much water in the bucket and then turn it upside down, it just moves away. The same with our life—it's always moving away, moving away yet simultaneously arriving.

So instead of trying to look at it from the inside out, relax and you'll find that what we call the object, or the outside or other people, and what we call ourselves are not two separate things; the field of experience is non-dual, it has no separation at all. This is revealed, as it is, just by relaxing and being present. Our own creativity is the very thing that generates worries, confusions, problems, sleepless nights and so on. By allowing the energy of the mind to relax we give it a break from our expecting it to provide the meaning of life, as if one can think one's way through to some defined conclusion, arrive at the safe place where one knows what everything means. We have been doing this for many years, and where has it got us? Life slips through our fingers, therefore keeping our hands open is a good idea. Trying to grasp that which slips away is ridiculous.

The basic function of practice is to help us to be alive by recognizing what life is. Life is the immediacy of participation in the arising of experience—without planning, without controlling, trusting the dynamism, the free movement of the open ground of the mind and the open field of all that is around us. Allowing this dynamism to move and pass, lifting us up and lifting us down, always with the unchanging stability of mere presence, just here we are. We can't say what it is, but it's always there. It's not so complicated, but we make it complicated by looking for something else.

That's why the basic instruction is always, 'Just take a rest.'