
The Radiance of Emptiness

The mystery of nonduality

or,

*how everything comes out of nothing
and yet there is always more than nothing available.*

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Excerpts

“We are not who we think we are and, in fact, the thoughts that we have about ourselves are one of the greatest barriers that we have to experiencing ourselves directly”.

“I am empty of the me-ness of me”. That is to say, I don’t have an inherent existence. My life is not a possession that I own. My life is the modality of my participation in the river of life.

“Each of us has this natural light, the light of awareness, which is present in our hearts but unfortunately we’ve developed this shell, this covering of solidified thoughts”.

“All you have to do is receive. Everything is given to you free”.

The problem is not the thought. The problem is the grasping, the glue, the dualistic identification which both binds me into the thought and separates me from everything else.”.

“Am I the only sane person left on earth?” 😊

Our fantasies of power and knowledge are an illusion. We are neither the master nor the slave; we are having to collaborate and it is a bumpy ride.

“You are a ‘how ‘and not a ‘what’ ”.

“If I want to meet you and see you I have to let the light of you come to me”.

“Emptiness — because it is pointing to the absence of inherent self-nature — is actually the beginning of freedom”.

“When I stop grasping I get my hands back”.

“No one can steal our freedom. That is the deep meaning of emptiness”.

This evening we have an impossible task. Why is the task impossible? Because we are going to look at emptiness and emptiness is beyond language.

Millions and millions of words have been written about emptiness. They often simply create a conceptual wall in front of us. Some of you are students of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche. Do you remember that he was never enthusiastic about people taking notes when he was teaching? This was because we usually want to get something, otherwise why we would be bother about going to a teaching? We want something. As he pointed out many times, basically the way we understand is through our mood. When we open ourselves to the flow of ideas it is the flow, as much as the individual ideas, that are important. It creates an ambiance in which hopefully we can relax and trust, which allows us to put ourselves into question.

Suffering is a symptom rather than a problem

When Buddha was first teaching the four noble truths, the first truth was the truth of suffering. Getting free of suffering is a very big concern in Buddhism. There are a lot of books concerning happiness in Buddhism. However suffering is not the real problem. Suffering is a symptom. It is a symptom of ignorance and grasping. What are we ignorant about? About ourselves. When we try to find out who we are, we engage in internal discourse and thoughts, feelings, memories and so on. We speak on the basis of the ingredients we use to construct our current sense of who we are. As the situations around us change, as the patterns of our emotions, our physical health and our memories change, our inner world changes and we find that the constituents we have available to us for constructing ourselves are shifting moment by moment.

When we don't have some access to direct awareness of the ground of our being, we find ourselves living in a world of stuff and that we are one thing amongst many things. We then try to work out what kind of thing am I. We compare and contrast ourselves with other people. We see that they have some qualities or skills that we don't have. That could make us admire them and want to copy them, or it could make us more envious and bitter regarding the good fortune they have: they are like that, I am like this, this is me.

When we look to see who I am and who the other person is we see an image, a topology with a particular kind of shaping to it. This is because we are ignorant of the ground of our being. When you don't see how things actually are in themselves, there are a lot of things that are not clear and so we try to make sense of them. We do this by developing our concepts. Society and culture encourage us to do this. Our parents encouraged us to do this, our school encouraged us to do and of course we do have to do it in order to hold down a job and earn money.

This capacity to bring together patterns of ideas generates new possibilities. Our mind is like a kaleidoscope which we tilt and tilt for new patterns. But it doesn't matter how many patterns we see, if we see them in a rarefied mode, in a solidified mode, it will never give us access to the open ground. So, we have this paradox that in order to make myself

feel a bit safe and competent and at ease in the world, I have to gather knowledge, skills and information to develop myself into a shape that finds some niche in the world around me.

The factors that generate a sense of competence and belonging for me and give me some capacity to function in the world with others, are simultaneously the opacity whereby I don't manage to find out who I am! So, this is a terrible situation. What I thought was the remedy it is actually the poison. As we become more and more competent at producing poison, we become so addicted to the toxicity that we have less and less capacity to open to how things are.

We look around the world and we see how dismal and stupid our great political leaders are. Britain and America are both very good examples at the moment: leaders who are fundamentally blind imagine that they see very clearly, yet because they have power, they are able to insist that their blind vision is true vision. It is not generally that these people are wanting to cause trouble, but they are deluded. They think that a false understanding is a true understanding.

When the Buddha was first teaching he spent a lot of time pointing out the nature of impermanence. That the outer world changes with the seasons, politically, economically, and sociologically. Our body changes over the years and it also changes in the course of a day. We are hungry and thirsty and then we eat and drink and we are no longer hungry and thirsty. Sensations which arise in the body are not stable, neither are our feelings nor our thoughts.

When we just start to do meditation and we sit we observe wow! There's a lot going on. The mind is always moving and yet we are stuck. How is that? We are stuck in movement. We are stuck in the movement because we are trying to stabilize the movement—to create from the flow of experience something which is reliable and secure: my sense of self. I can express a sentence like, *"I know I am getting older but I am still me"* which may sound quite meaningful but it is completely meaningless. I am getting older but I am still me?

What does it mean, me being me?

So what is the me-ness of me? It is not my energy since as I get older I get tired more tired. My activity has changed over the years. My body is definitively changing; my skin is thinner and less resilient; the hair falls out of my head and my teeth are not sure how longer they want to accompany me in this journey of life. Yes, I may say this is my body but it doesn't do what I say. So to say, *"I am still me"* is stupid. It is a believable stupidity. And when we believe stupid formations of course they return the favour by making us stupid too. When we say, *"I am still me"* and it seems such a simple phrase; it seems to be self-evidently meaningful. It is like these pieces of plastic strip that the police put around the scene of an accident or a crime. They say, *"do not enter"*; take it at face value. And if you keep saying it, it seems to be true. For us as individuals this is the site (or crime scene) of our mental affliction.

So let's try to get some sense of what it means to be me.

The five aggregates

In his earliest teachings the Buddha taught about the five aggregates or skandhas, which he described as constituting the pudgala, the individual. So, when we look around the room we see people, some are male some are female, different ages and hair styles and clothing and so on but they are all people. There seems to be something irreducible about people-ness. If you know that this is a person and not a banana then you can rest your mind on that thought. You know that even if you happen to be questioned by a psychiatrist you will be safe. I can tell my name, I know what day of the week it is, I am not a banana. People are people and I am a person.

However, the Buddha said "*Ho, Ho. Maybe, maybe not*". He said that this notion of the person is built up from five factors: form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. All of this is well known and so I could also say, "Oh! I have these five factors".

Ah ha! Now it is these five factors that create the illusion that you exist. If you say, "*I have these five aggregates*" then you become like a wrapper which embraces these five and brings them together into one. Just like the butcher takes the bits of meat and puts them into a skin and then lets them dry or cook them, then you have a sausage. In fact, we do in some ways look like sausages, we have the skin on the outside. We look like sausages yes. So when you see the sausage it appears to be something. Inside there is all the cheap crap the butcher can't sell and pretend it to be steak, but to put it in skin and sell it as sausage is OK. Skin and the name together make the confusion that we know what this is. If you really knew what was in a cheap sausage you may not want to eat it. But what we get is the skin and the name-sausage I am James-sausage, what you see is the skin. You never quite know what is inside.

This is very important because the surface of things, towards which we impute some kind of essence or defining quintessential content together with the name, gives us a sense that we know what is there. We are imputing or projecting and in fact inventing essences as being inside things.

Generally speaking if you say to someone "*You are full of shit*" is not a complement. But in fact, it is a fact. Unless you are a very holy person on a long fast you have quite a lot of shit inside you. There are many things about ourselves that we don't really talk about in a social setting because we maintain a fantasy or an idea about who and what we are. We are little tubes of blood going around blub blub blub blub blub blub. If somebody said "*I will help you to see who you really are*" and they took a knife and started to cut you up you wouldn't be happy. I am only me if what is inside me stays hidden. It is a cover up. Because how can I be James if I am actually full of kidneys and liver and heart and all these things. So we have the medical-body and every now and then if we go to the doctor we take the medical-body out and we say, "*Hey, you know about this sort of thing, have a look*". But most of the time we just have a me-body which is just full of meat, nothing else.

Once you examine you start to feel a bit strange. That is the purpose of looking using these five aggregates. It starts to deconstruct or even dissolve the reassuring simplicity of the assumptions that we have about our own identity. We are not who we think we are and in fact the thoughts that we have about ourselves are one of the great barriers we have to experiencing ourselves directly.

So when we look we see that our form — which is shape and colour — shifts over time. Summer comes, we are outside more and the colour of our skin shifts. In different seasons we eat different food; many people put on a bit more weight in winter, lose some weight in the summer. Colour and shape are changing, our feelings change a lot too. Feeling here means positive, negative and neutral. On a cold day in the winter you may want to have some thick stew to eat, but you wouldn't want it on a hot summer day. To eat salads in the middle of the winter may not feel satisfying. So the value attributed to food will shift according to the seasons. That is to say, the feeling tone response that I have to these items in the environment is not fixed.

Our perception is changing all the time. The Tibetan word for perception, *du shes*, indicates gathering information into a composited apprehendable form. So when you glance around the room you see colours. Colours have a shape, and you interpret people. There aren't people out there: people are invented by us, but because we all suffer from the same delusion we carry on in what is referred to as karmic vision in the tradition. That is to say, we humans have the same habitual tendencies operating inside us and therefore that allows us to see this as a man, this as a woman, this person as young and this other person as old. All this seems obvious to us but it is not obvious for a mosquito or a fly or a mouse. If a mouse comes into the room he is not thinking man and woman. He is thinking cheese. If you have no cheese he is not interested and runs away very quickly. Like us, the mouse is under the power of desire and fear. Runs towards the cheese, looks around, runs away, looks back at the cheese. Hope and fear. But he doesn't see people. Flies don't see people. Why is that? Maybe they are stupid, they haven't evolved enough? They haven't had Charles Darwin as a guru to help them find their way forward. We humans have marched ahead of them. That is not the Buddhist point of view.

[We all have the potential for awakening](#)

The Buddhist point of view is that we all have the potential for awakening, sometimes referred to as Buddha nature. When we haven't awakened to what that is, and we are under the power of ignorance and grasping due to the formation of our tendencies, we grasp on to particular potential homes or identities.

So after we leave this life and we enter into the bardo, which for most people passes very quickly, then we can be born from an egg, from a womb, from heat and moisture or have the miraculous birth from a lotus. If you are going to be born as a bird you find yourself inside an egg; if you are to be born as a human you find yourself inside a womb. The unfolding trajectory of that particular species identification continues until we die. The bird is not truly or essentially a bird just as we are not truly or essentially human beings. Due to causes and conditions our energy potential manifests with this patterning on this occasion.

As human beings we have now a brief opportunity to learn many things and we have the capacity to sit still and focus on the nature of whatever is arising. As far as we know butterflies can't do this, hummingbirds can't do it, whales can't do it. We have the capacity to use a lot of concepts. Concepts can bind us further and further into delusion and fantasy, but on the relative level well-chosen concepts such as an understanding of karma, can illuminate a lot of the patternings within which we find ourselves moving. More particularly, we have the capacity to allow the movement of the concept to be revelatory.

Sometimes we are just fused in our thoughts, fused in our feelings. We are angry or a bit obsessional; we can't get something out of our heads. Sometimes maybe you are going for a walk and you go off in a little riff of some sort. Suddenly (finger snap) you pop out of it...What was that all about? Where did that come from? Wow. Then you go off on another thought. But in that moment there is a sense that you de-fused — you uncoupled yourself from the thought. The thought goes but I am here. Who am I? Either we can have some thoughts about this or just stay with the simple fact of being present. We are still in the realm of thought but now it is not so enclosed.

Maybe the language of the five aggregates doesn't speak much to us in this culture, but we do know that thoughts about the future and memories of the past are not quite the same. Being happy and sad are not the same. My sense of self is unstable. I am not like a stone, I am moving. Moment by moment I am moving on the basis of internally manifesting stimulæ and externally manifesting stimulæ. So the content of who I take myself to be is always changing. It is undeniable that I exist, I feel it, I know it, I am here. But if I say who I am then I am hooking into a story.

Examine the 'how?', not the 'who?' or the 'what?'

From the Buddhist point of view, particularly in meditation, we want to avoid going down the road of 'who' and 'what' and start to pay attention to 'how'. How am I? I see a friend, I feel happy. I see someone I am less comfortable with, I don't feel so happy. The face of someone else can shift my mood. This is worse than being a puppet. If you want a puppet to move, you have to move a string whereas I only have to see your face and Pop!, something happens. How is that possible? You are out there, I am in here but I see your face and I shift. Where is the boundary? We look at this again and again, moment by moment as we go through the day.

If you ride a bike you have to deal with cars, with people walking onto the cycle path and so on. You are confident that you know how to ride your bicycle, but how you ride your bicycle is determined by the condition that is the environment you are moving through. That is to say, cycling is a relational activity. Again we can see that we can tell a self-referential story: *"I can ride a bicycle, this is what I do"*. Self-affirmation. But I have to ride the bicycle according to the other people with whom I am sharing the space. That sharing of the space is the actuality of riding a bicycle. The notion that I am riding the bicycle — that is a thought. Now, if I am angry, *"I am riding the bicycle, so get right out of my way!"* Some aggressive people are like that and they are rather dangerous because they are saying, *"I can live my life from the inside out."* Sooner or later that leads to a crisis when the fixed sense of self cannot

work with the changing factors of the environment. The reality is we don't live from the outside in unless we are, for example, enforced into some form of slavery. Nor do we live from the inside out, unless we are very wealthy and we have our own grounds and we can ride our bicycle all alone on our road.

We are as we are according to what is around us

We share the space with other people and how we are is linked with how they are. That is to say, although I may describe myself as an individual, that is a conceptual identification. The facticity of my existence is that I am co-emergent with what is around me. I am not separated or isolated. Of course, I can have some discernment and some room to manoeuvre but if I want life to go well I have to collaborate with the world I am in. That is to say, as an energetic formation I manifest into a world which is also emerging, also dynamic.

So where is this central defining essence of me? I am not manifesting from some me-factory inside myself. I'm emerging relationally. Yes, there is some degree of continuity: I like particular kinds of food, others not so much. I like swimming at certain beaches but not at others. I have tendencies, but the tendency is non-definitive since it depends on which beach I'm near. If I really want to swim I'll even swim on a beach where there are sharp stones. That would depend on my mood, but I can't tell you what my mood is going to tomorrow or even five minutes from now. The idea that we are in charge of our lives, are self-defining, are the formative agent of the trajectory of our existence, is probably false.

To describe this in a more Buddhist way would be, "*I am empty of the me-ness of me*". That is to say, I don't have an inherent existence. My life is not a possession that I own. My life is the modality of my participation in the river of life.

Our sense organs take us out into the world. You see your face in the mirror when you clean your teeth or put on some make up, but most of the day you see other people's faces much more than you see your own. Other people are your world. How they are strongly influences how we are. So we take this idea, I am co-emergent, I am not a separate phenomenon, I am not internally defined — and yet here I am. I am just me. I am just me with you. I am like this here tonight on this occasion. This is not what I do all the time. You might be glad to know, and I would be very glad to know, that this is a particular kind of talking. In other situations I talk in different ways. I am a situationally evoked or situationally responsive potential.

This potential, I could say is mine, but when I look to see which part of me has that potential... Can it be my ego self? What do I know about my potential? If I don't know what I am going to think in one minute from now, if I don't know what the next thing is going to come out of my mouth, then I am not really the owner of the potential. The potential is bringing me out. I am the fruit of my potential but language is so sneaky. Even to refer to 'my potential'. Yes, we can refer to 'my potential' but just as a kind of self-recognizing, without ownership.

The environment calls to us and we respond

So, we do things and we can know that we do them even if we don't do them consciously. Whilst I am talking my hands move about. I haven't been to some special hand choreography course, the Royal London Hand Ballet School! I just talk and the hands move. The moving arises in the connectivity. The bicycle gear changes according to the surface of the road. If you're in a hurry to catch your bus, you run. You sit down in different ways if you are sitting on a high chair or a hard chair or a soft sofa. The sofa is sitting you and you are sitting on the sofa.

The key thing in a basic Buddhist understanding is to shift back from this over-centralized notion of being the master. Then we can start to see that I am empty of me-essence. However, this very emptiness or absence of me-essence is the ground of the manifesting of me as expression. That is to say, I find myself talking, I find myself walking. We are already involved, taken in.

The welcome of the environment calls to us and we respond. Often we only know it slightly after the fact, because the one who is capable to know that I said or did that, didn't know I was going to do it and even hardly noticed I was doing it until I was halfway through doing it or at the end of doing it. Yes, I did it but I don't know why I did it. You hear this in law courts every day. The ego comes after the fact. But human social life would collapse if that was accepted. We have to take responsibility for our actions even though we are not quite in charge of them.

When people are learning to drive they are anxious and careful. That often makes them not very good drivers. When they become more experienced they relax a bit and find that the activity of checking the mirror and being aware of the surface of the road flows through them. What makes an experienced driver a bad driver is distraction, but if they have an intuitive connectivity to the road and the car, and are present with that, they probably are going to be a good driver. Does that makes sense? Have you had that experience?

Kadag and lhundrub

Connectivity itself is clarity. Buddhist texts use the word clarity a lot. In Dzogchen we have the term *lhundrub*, meaning 'instant presence' or 'effortlessly arising'. There are many translation for it. It is essentially the immediacy of the presentation of the whole field, the undivided field of experience — a field which is emergent and shimmering and always unfolding and arises from emptiness. In the Dzogchen tradition it is referred to as primordial purity or *kadag*. The purity means it's pure from the contamination of any reified essences. Uncontrived. Unartificial. That is to say, the thought doesn't come first.

If you are having to studying mathematics at school you have to think your way in to the way calculus works. If you see the logic of it, see how it function, then it may start to make sense. Until you become very competent or you are very lucky, it is a concept-led activity. That is what a lot of our school education is like. In Buddhism, however, we say we have pre-conceptual clarity and this clarity is revealed when we remove the covering of conceptual edifices. A traditional example for that is a butter lamp inside a clay pot. The

lamp is burning, it is giving a lot of light but the light doesn't penetrate the clay pot so it doesn't illuminate anything and we do not see it.

This is our situation. Each of us has this natural light, the light of awareness which is present in our hearts but unfortunately we've developed this shell, this covering of solidified thoughts. Actually when we look at how it is, moment by moment our life is fresh. We have taste, smells, colours. In the season of spring the whole world is singing, you go down the road, you turn the corner and there is a big tree in blossom. It's amazing. For a moment you can't think, you are engulfed by beauty, there is nothing to think. What would your thought do with this? All you have to do is receive. Everything is given to you free. So, this is the possibility of living in the inseparability of primordial purity and instant presence. If you try to describe the blossom you lose the blossom.

Someone told me about their recent cruise to Antarctica, about sailing around in a luxury cruise ship looking at all the icebergs. The deck was full of people with expensive cameras taking photographs and then in the evening they sat in the bar reviewing their photographs, comparing and contrasting with other people's photographs. Now this sounds a little bit silly but it is what we do all the time. We have the immediacy of being present and we have our conceptual appropriation which is like an inner camera. We can take more and more and more photos but the mind's capacity to grasp at images is greater than any digital camera. While you are computing what's going on, while you are interpreting what's going on, running your narrative about what's going on, you have actually created a veil which stops the immediate fresh presence of whatever is occurring.

It's not that thoughts are the enemy — if you go to Antarctica why not take a few photographs? — but they are not the main thing. It's the same with thinking; thoughts are very useful when you have plans to make and work projects to complete, and so on. That is intentional thought in the service of a meaningful task. But often we are just caught by the thought, carried away, daydreaming, fantasizing, regrets, remorse and then we are nowhere. We are not here, we are not present; our life is going by, we are going to die, but we are not alive in our life because we are *thinking* about life.

Thoughts about thoughts

That is why meditation is important. Meditation lets us move away from thoughts "about" to direct experiences "of" and "as". I say thoughts "of" and "as" because even if you have subtle thoughts when you are thinking about something, there still a separation. I am still taking it of as if were a position inside myself: 'this is me here and I am thinking about something.' I close my eyes, go into some kind of internal space — I am thinking about something.

So we have the subject, the object and the connective activity. I am worrying about my children, will they be okay? I worry about them. There is an object and therefore my conscious self generates a mood which informs my engagement regarding that object. We are all familiar with the sense that that feels like me doing something. I am worrying about my kids. But if we just catch the 'how' of that, that's a thought. And it's gone, nothing,

nowhere. I am worried about my kids; I can wrap myself into that, I can merge into it. It's the truth about me. Alternatively, without changing the thought in any way, you see *"Oh! Arising and passing. Was there and now gone."*

The problem is not the thought. The problem is the grasping, the glue, the dualistic identification which both binds me into the thought and separates me from everything else. So, if someone says, *"James let's go for a walk"* and I respond, *"No I don't feel like it, I am busy thinking about the kids. I don't know what is going wrong with them."* I am caught by the thought. I am unavailable. Around, around and around in this labyrinth of thoughts. Each if these thoughts is evanescent. They are ungraspable, they vanish by themselves. In the language of dzogchen they are self-liberating. I don't have to get rid of the thought, it just goes by itself. Luckily I can keep thinking about it. Which is an activity. So I ruminate, I chew it up like a cow. What I am doing? I am making myself stupid by not seeing that if thoughts are vanishing that is because they have no real substance to them. A traditional Tibetan example given for this is that it is like writing on water. If you place your finger in a bowl of water and write your name, as soon as you finish writing the first letter is already gone. Nothing is established.

This is the same with thoughts, this is the actual truth of the thought:(finger snap) but we don't get it. We think, *"...but I need to still keep thinking about this, now is getting clearer, just Shhhhh! don't talk, just let me get into this..."* We build these palaces of conceptualization which are always vanishing. Let's say, I come to a conclusion; I have the great plan clear in my head now about how I will speak to my teenage son. Unfortunately my son in the house is not the same as the son in my head. He has decided to be independent, which I keep telling him it is a terrible decision! Then I think fuck! I don't actually have a clue what he is like. I've known him a long time and his mother too, so why on earth did she say these things to him? In fact, I've known her even longer than I've known him, bloody hell! Am I the only sane person left on earth?

Others people's minds, they are really strange. It is exactly like that. And of course I am as strange to them as they are to me and the reason we are strange is because apart from, let's say, science and car engineering, most of our world is not rational. We are led by our moods and feelings and always turning and changing. Therefore our fantasies of power and great clarity and knowledge are an illusion. We are neither the master nor the slave; we are having to collaborate and it is a bumpy ride. But of course that is easier if we are not so proud, if we don't feel that we know best, if we can dissolve our solidification — relieve the ego-self from its prison in the earth element and start to flow and move as water, fire and wind.

Other people are moving in space. None of the people we know truly exists or really exists, if by that we mean exists as something knowable, definable and predictable. We know them; we know we see them. Hello! It doesn't mean we know how they are now. The fact that we recognise someone needs to be part of our hospitality. How are you? This is a conventional greeting but is also very profound because you are a "how" and not a "what". What I took you to be last time we met is no indicator of how you would be now. I have to attend to you, to give you my attention. Your posture, your gestures, the quality of your complexion and so on. You are showing yourself to me but if I already know who you are,

what I feel I know about you is going to smear the window. Like taking some Vaseline and rubbing it on glass, it makes for a distorted soft focus. If I want to meet you and see you I have to let the light of you come to me.

So how can I receive you? Now, that will depend on the size of my pot and whether I have the lid on. If I have the lid on, we may talk but it is superficial since actually I am unavailable. Or I take the lid off, but the pot is pretty small so not much of you gets in. On the other hand the pot may already be full of my thoughts about you, so you are only welcome in my pot if you are the same as what is already in the pot. However, if the pot is big and empty then maybe there is enough space for you as you are. If you can trust that my welcome is unconditional then you can even have a holiday from trying to work out how you have to be in order to please me.

My emptiness of fixed internal content—which in the tradition is called Prajnaparamita, the transcendent wisdom that sees the truth of emptiness—this open receptivity, doesn't mean empty, empty. I am not brain-dead. Thoughts, maybe worries, about my work or whatever still arise in me but they can just go through. I don't need to grasp at them or fuse with them or privilege them as very important. With this openness there is more connectivity, which is kindness or compassion.

Wisdom and method means emptiness and compassion. Wisdom is the ground. The wisdom of awaking into emptiness of all phenomena is the ground of compassion, because it means that our compassion or our kindness can be equal for all. If I am carrying my own egoic content, my habit formations, my previous lives, my family upbringing and so on, they both preoccupy me and they pre-position me. Having an orientation towards or against a particular person influences my availability. Then I am kind to my friends and not so kind to my enemies or people I don't like. In that way we still re-echoing, reverberating out of our hopes and fears.

Emptiness is the beginning of freedom

Equanimity, being open and equal to everything which occurs, needs to be without prejudice, which means without pre-formation. That is to say, we are free to respond to how things manifest in this particular moment. So when we read in the text about the nature of awareness, also called the Dharmakaya, it is described as naked, fresh. Naked means it is not covered. There are no accretions over it. Is just open. It is fresh in the same way because it is not cut, not adding anything from the past.

We have to understand what this means. It does not mean that you have no memory at all about life. It means that all our resources, all our knowledge, all our skill is there, not rejected; it is to hand as required. This is the key thing, *as required*. If I am doing it because this is me and I am trying to confirm the validity of my own self-shaping as I take it to be, then I am just making more of the same and so life gets a bit tedious and boring: you keep on taking this crumbling sand castle of yourself and you keep building it up and building it up. 'Fresh' is very different; you arrive naked and then you see.

According to the tradition when Padmasambhava arrived in Tibet, he arrived naked.. Imagine you arrived with your little rucksack of life-tools. *“Mmm, let me have a look. I haven’t used this one for a while. It’s my favourite spanner, I must find a place to use it. Maybe it is not required, but anyway I like it and I like using it, and you like me to use it. So, I’ll tell you what, let’s make a deal: you let me be me and I’ll let you be you.”* In this way we can stay stupid together in samsara for ever and ever.

That’s because I want to know what is going to happen, yet we don’t know. I used to work in a hospital... go in there day after day, same building, go up the same stairs, say hello to the same people, go into my room. The frame was always the same, the content was always different. The ‘how’ is always changing. Because the ‘how’ is always changing, should you import the factors that reassure you about the continuity of yourself, you will be despoiling the fresh potential of the moment.

So from that point of view, emptiness — in pointing to the absence of inherent self-nature or the absence of any internal personal defining essence in anything be it a person or a stone or a flower — emptiness, is actually the beginning of freedom. If there is no essence I can get hold of, then my habit of holding on to and grasping at things is silly. When I stop grasping I get back the use of my hands. When I am holding on my hand is formed around what I am holding on to. There is no need to abandon the object. I can simply relax my anxiety that I need you to confirm that I am who I think I am. What a perverse use of the other this is.

I spent so many years as a therapist seeing couples and it is the saddest thing to do. I love you, do you love me? What we really want to say is, *“Go to the bathroom and wash your mouth out with soap.”* Do you love me? Nobody knows what that means! Maybe I want to take your knickers off tonight? It could mean anything. These are all empty signifiers full of anxious hopes and fears. You can be with someone for twenty years and never know them at all if you have that quality of conversation. ‘I love you because you love me.’ Trading. ‘If you don’t love me anymore why would I be with you?’ That is a very very very small pot. This is the tragedy of the human situation. In the Tibetan tradition, as many of you know, love means *“May all beings be happy.”* May all beings be happy; that is big pot territory.

So we need to observe how we make use of other people. It doesn’t mean that you can’t have relationships and be close to people. Proximity to another person is an opportunity to explore new forms of opening or unfolding together, of co-emergence. It will not and cannot arrive anywhere safe. On the level of emerging phenomena, on the level of experience, life is not safe, we don’t know what is going to happen. But if I can only say, *“I like you if you make me happy and if you don’t make me happy I won’t like you”*, then we are in the realm of duality and reactivity.

This is why emptiness is so important. There is nobody there. What there is, is the unfolding of the display of the energy of the open ground potential. Something amazing and wonderful. When babies are born you look at these little amazing creatures, you don’t know who they are, and they show you all sort of things. Gradually you get to know them, you get to know things about them, you get to predict that they would forget to pack their bag for school... So you remind them that they might forget to pack their bag. Luckily they thank you

from their hearts. The more you know about the child the more you get annoyed with them. The problem is not the child, the problem is that we have lost our freshness and we are trying to get them to fit into the shapes of the world. *"You have to, you have to."* If we try to explore why you don't want to, *"Oh, my job is to find the way to make it possible for you to do that"*, then the stubbornness of the child is the mother of our creativity. 'Because' is my job. Blaming the other makes me rigid, brittle and hot.

No one can steal our freedom: that is the deep meaning of emptiness — that your mind is never trapped. Which is why you have eight forms of Padmasambhava. If one form is not working, try another. Who is the real Padmasambhava? One letter  HUM, that's all. Dissolves in the clear blue sky, comes back again, new particles... So that's the meaning of emptiness. Wonderful, beautiful and we can take it further and deeper into our practice.

And now that is our end. It is a pleasure being with you but now impermanence has come knocking on the door.