

Intrinsic awareness and the constructed self

James Low

Public Talk, Freiburg, 23rd June 2011

Transcribed by Sarah Allen

Revised by James Low

We are going to look a little at the nature of conditioning, at the way in which we have developed a construct of ourselves, what the ground of that construct is, and how to get a bit more space to move both inside ourselves and in the world with others.

Our lives are clearly composed of interactions. The body is interacting with the environment all the time. The doors of the senses are always receiving information and scanning the environment to find particular kinds of information. Our existence is co-created with the environment we inhabit, and year by year the environment we inhabit becomes more and more complicated – more kinds of information are presented to us. In order to function in the world we have to develop maps about how the world is constructed. These maps are not the actual concrete situation itself, and yet they seem to illuminate what is going on because they provide us with a narrative whereby we can make sense of our experience.

However, these constructions or story lines can come to operate in a kind of middle territory, as a haze or a veil. At one polarity we have the actuality of what is there. For example, if we look around this room we can see many things. We see walls, mirrors, windows and so on. But always there has to be the question: do we really see windows? We see shapes and colours which we interpret as being walls, mirrors, people and so on. The interpretation comes from us onto the perceptual field. The interpretation is not just a simple cognitive identification of there being a window, but it very quickly carries with it some emotional response: we like that kind of window or we find it ugly or whatever. The moments in our life where we simply see what is there are probably rather rare. Sometimes when people take drugs they have a little bit of that experience, and many kinds of meditation can open us to that kind of experience. Extreme exhaustion can also open that kind of experience, as can fear and shock. Most of the time, however, we are inhabiting this interpretive realm of believing that how we are making sense of the world is a true account of what is there. And then, because we believe that our description of

what is there is a true account of the actuality of the phenomena, it becomes difficult to recognise that in fact it is our own personal interpretation. Often we construct our social life in a way that we get to hang out with people who have similar patterns of interpretation. Finding people who agree with our interpretation gives us a sense that they also see the world as it is.

At the other polarity, we have our inner experience of being the one 'who has experience'. Who is the one who is here now? Each of us is sitting here. What is the ground or the root nature of that being present? Clearly we have many of what you might call internal experiences. We have proprioception in our body, internal kinaesthetic experience which is not immediately available to other people. We have our own thoughts and feelings, and these thoughts and feelings have a double function. They give us information to use in preparing our response to what is going on. Yet in their arising they also confirm to us that we are indeed the ones who are having this experience. That is to say, having a thought confirms that 'I am a thinker'. Indeed a great deal of our personal identity is created out of thoughts, memories and feelings. The stories that we tell other people about ourselves, and also the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves are constructed out of the raw ingredients available to us. Out of our reliance on language and our use of language we capture fleeting moments, give them a particular kind of substance and then build on that to create an edifice of our notion of who we are and our place in the world. We are constructing our sense of who we are while simultaneously taking it to be a given.

This points to two aspects of experience. Experience is both an ungraspable immediacy arising immediately in this moment that will never be repeated. That experience, though naked and free in itself, quickly becomes captured through our habit of wrapping phenomena in abstract concepts. [Bells start chiming outside] Now we have the experience of sound ... something quite strange ... and then we think, "*Oh! It is the bells.*" Since I know what that is this precise knowledge confirms that I am quite an intelligent person who knows how the world functions. So now the bells become an ally, confirming to myself that indeed I am not so bad. In this way experience becomes incorporated as a support for maintaining the sense of a continuous sense of self. Although, actually, when we observe that seeming continuity of self we see that it is built up of a stream of experience.

The one who is having the experience can be explained or introduced in terms of stories: we can all say a lot about our lives, about who we are, where we come from, and the sort of things we do and so forth. However, these stories are one step removed from the immediacy of being the one who is having the experience. That is to say the experiencer of the experience is not someone who can be experienced: our basic quality of being, our presence, is beyond appropriation. 'Something' is here, we are here, we are alive. That basic aliveness is not a thing, it cannot be defined and yet it is always here. What can be expressed are stories about, and the about-ness of our discourse is built on abstraction, concepts which are extrapolated from the immediacy of the context and thereby seemingly given a more universal or continuing valency or significance.

Examined in this way we can see that there is an external ungraspability, an internal ungraspability and, moving between these two polarities, endless stories of construction, creation, interpretation and so on. We come to be so used to these stories, so addicted and reliant on them, that it is as if they are both the guarantors of existence and the definers of the nature of our existence. As long as we can tell a story about what is happening, as long as we can make sense of it, our existence seems to have clarity and continuity.

There is a kind of clarity in 'knowing about', in being able to refer to something, to place it in a context, to compare and contrast, and so on. In this way the events of the world condition us and we in turn condition the events of the world. There is a constant movement of interaction of what appears to be object and what appears to be subject. Sometimes the feeling tone is positive and we feel fulfilled, relaxed and happy, and sometimes the feeling tone is difficult

where we maybe feel lost, depressed or unhappy. But there is always a sense of something going on. This creates the sense that, *'If only I were more powerful, or more skilful, I would be able to make the events of my life happen in the ways that would generate for me the continuity of happiness and fulfilment. If only I could control circumstances better, happiness would arrive.'*

Based on that, we have techniques for controlling outer circumstances and techniques for controlling inner circumstances. We learn how to find a way to make some money. If we have some money we can pay the rent and afford to sit in a cafe and chat with our friends and so on. Internally we can learn some breathing techniques, some yoga or tai chi and so on, and through that we can maintain some sense of knowing how to adjust these more subtle aspects of ourselves.

The environment we live in, however, both internal and external, tends to be somewhat chaotic and out of our control. If we don't believe that it is beyond control, then when we cannot control it we think we lack control. The reason life is not being controlled is because 'I' lack the particular skills to control it. Therefore 'I' must try harder with a better method. In that way one comes into the micro-adjustment of the flow of experience. But, of course, our position with regard to our own life is not one of being a neutral expert. We are implicated in our lives, we are connected with it, it is us. In the very attempt to control external circumstance we control and direct ourselves, and in the attempt to control the more subtle aspects of ourselves we are also influencing the environment around us. Thus the patterning of what we might call conditioning continues.

On the level of interaction with the environment we can't avoid being conditioned because the world is not something apart from us, truly separate and outside of ourselves. Things get to us because there is no wall between us and the world. The interactive nature of the field of experience knows no boundaries or border guards therefore as long as we are alive we are going to be touched and moved by circumstances. Many events happen that we don't like, that don't please us, that we feel wary of or uncertain about. We participate in a world of occurrences which run across whatever plans we make. In trying to develop a map, a plan, a way of proceeding, we are trying to impose order on the shifting sands of the field in which we participate. From the point of view of dzogchen, if we start to recognise our tilt towards control, we can start to see that we have got pulled into a way of relating to the world and to ourselves which lacks fundamental clarity.

The absence of that kind of clarity is often described as ignorance. It doesn't mean that we are lacking information about things in the world, but rather that we just don't quite get what is going on. It is as if you have switched on the TV and it is half way through a movie and you spend the next hour trying to work out what is going on. You are sure it is meaningful but you can't quite get what the meaning is. So from the point of view of the practice, the meditation is designed to open up these two interactive nodes of the same field: the precise point of the one who is present, the one who is aware, and the other point of the immediacy of what is occurring.

Thinking and feeling and having memories and knowing how to function in the world is not wrong. Rather, that is an aspect of our existence which, in the forgetfulness of the other aspects of existence, has come to be over-privileged, over-used. It involves a kind of busyness, the sense that *'it's up to me to stay in charge'*, 'I have to manage my life otherwise things would fall apart and then where would I be?' If our individual sense of self has become woven into these story lines and constructions which we use in communication with others and with ourselves, then we have nowhere to go except to keep the show on the road – for we are this very busyness.

The function of the practice is to open up the possibility of seeing that there is a different kind of ground to our existence. The ground of movement is not a subtle movement, not an

essence of movement, but is something different: a mode of stillness. Stillness means that awareness itself doesn't move. If we look around, just letting our head turn, many different colours and shapes arise. We can give an account of that: *'Now I am conscious of a tree in a pot, now I am conscious of the mirror on the wall'*, and so forth. This is all interpretation. It seems to be an illuminatory power as thought chases thought, as thought talks about thought however this illumination is a very dull kind of clarity. It is the clarity of endlessly striking matches on a dark night. Just as the match illuminates the space for a few seconds, so a thought arises – *"Oh, now I get it"* – but then the thought has gone, like the match being blown out.

However, even when we seem to have no light at all, when we feel depressed, perhaps hopeless, lost, full of confusion, when we can't make any sense of our lives, this experience of being totally trapped and confused is being experienced. Who is the experiencer of hopelessness? Who is the experiencer of the worthlessness of my existence? Some presence is here. Does it have a shape? Does it have a form? In the arising of conscious experience there are many subtle hooks around which we can construct an image of ourselves as 'the one who feels like this'. We can always tell ourselves about ourselves, and this about-ness appears to be the proof that there is some truly existing person being referred to. However this whole flow of signifiers, all these thoughts, emotions, and sensations, which seem to gesture towards meaning, are themselves being experienced. So again, who is the experiencer?

This is the fundamental point – the doorway, the key that opens up a different aspect of how we are. If we look to find this presence as if we were looking to find where a bar of soap is or where we have left our car keys, we will never find it because it does not exist as some-thing. And yet it can't be not there at all because we are here and since we came into this room we have had many different kinds of experience: sensations in the body, perceptions through our eyes and ears as well as many thoughts and feelings. These all have been come and gone. Not one of them has stayed, and yet we have the sense that 'we are here'.

That brings us to a crossroads. If you take one path you go into the world of explanation and identification and we can say, *"Well the reason I have had all these experiences since I have been here is because 'I am me'. They are my experiences, they are not yours."* On that path there is always something to talk about, something to think about, something to worry about. Or ... we can go down the other road and take a little holiday from telling ourselves about what our experience is and who we are. We can simply be with how we are and what is happening. If we do this we become aware of the ceaseless flow of experience, the movement of the arising and passing of events whether they appear to be external or internal. We see that the continuity of objects is maintained through the repeated naming of these objects by the one who does the naming. That is to say the illusion of the stability of object-forms is generated by our way of thinking and talking about them.

As we sit in this room the sky gets a little darker and the way we see the walls is changing. What we have directly available to us is the immediacy of our experience of the wall. That experience alters as the light changes – that is immediate, direct and reliable. We don't have to invent any story about it. However, we may introduce a story that says, *"Ah, but the wall is the same, it just looks different because the light is changing."* In that way we assert that there is a true self-existing wall. In that moment we have privileged a concept, an abstraction, over the direct experience. The advantage of concepts and abstractions is that they are predictable: the wall is the wall in the morning and it is also the wall in the afternoon. Although it looks different in the course of the day, by calling it 'the wall of the room' we are clear that something is truly there that has an endlessly reliable existence and essence.

From the point of view of meditation the essence lies in the concept; it doesn't lie anywhere else. We ourselves project the essence into the wall and say that the wall is truly existing. We might then say, *"Oh, but if I go and bang my head on the wall then I will experience pain and that proves that the wall is real."* All that this proves is that the interplay of the subject

and object generates many kinds of experience. This is a central point of why we meditate – so as not to be seduced by this fantasy web of conceptual elaboration.

If you go to the theatre you see people standing on the stage interacting with each other. They act as if they were the characters in the play. By believing that the actors embody the truth of the play we open ourselves to a particular experience. We offer ourselves into the movement of emotions that are generated by the words and actions on the stage. Deep feelings can be aroused and interesting thoughts can be stimulated. But it is a play, a fiction, and there is no essential truth in what these people are saying or doing. They are creating an illusion, and by participating in the illusion we experience its impact on ourselves. This affects the tension in our skin our breathing, our posture, our emotions. We are living in a theatre in which we take on, or find ourselves in, different kinds of roles and then believe in the things that we say and do. This creates a particular structure of interpretation and action, and then the play changes and we are susceptible to yet another range of impacts. In the course of a day we participate in many kinds of dramatic enactments yet so familiar are we with fiction as fact that we hardly notice the strange artificiality of all that we engage with. Constructions arise, there is movement, experiences. We are happy, sad, expansive, contracting, and so on, yet somehow nothing is truly established since everything is interdependent and conditional. It is always, 'On the basis of this, that arises'. There is nothing to hang onto because the moment of experience is always already passing. All we can hang onto our abstractions, our story lines, building up representations about that which has already gone. It is difficult to find contentment in these castles in the air.

The view and the practice in dzogchen can help us to see movement as uncatchable movement, as illusory forms like shadows on a wall. This can release us from the prison of taking life too seriously. However, as in a theatre you have to take what is happening seriously enough for the play to be meaningful. As an actor you have to believe in your own performance and allow others also to believe in it. You have to do this whilst knowing that it is a play otherwise the intensity may drive the actor mad. All day long we are enrolling and de-rolling. This pulsation is part of our participation in the field of compassion: we interact with beings of various kinds and find ourselves being in different ways with different people according to how they are. The more we open ourselves to experiencing the other as they are, the more we can allow them to show us how to be in order to be with them. This has two great advantages. Firstly, it allows us to develop a wide repertoire of moves, and in moving through these various postures and gestures and ways of expressing ourselves, we come to see that there is no fixed definable, graspable essence to ourselves. Secondly, there is then no particular territory to protect for if all these ways of manifestation are 'me', what then is this special me-ness of 'me' to be ring-fenced and kept safe from other people?

With this we awaken to the wisdom of the emptiness of the self. Rather than having and being a core internal existence, we are present as a potential which reveals itself in different ways according to circumstances. This is not a sign that we are lost and confused and don't know who we are, since who we are is not a thing that can be known. And, at the same time, in having this openness to other people as they are, especially an openness to the people whom we know, we see the people we know rather than know the people that we know. We have more chance of being with them in the many non-definitional ways that they can be.

Of course one of the habitual activities that we engage in is to build up knowledge about other people and thereby construct an image of them as what we take them to be. Then our contact with the other person is mediated through this map or image that we carry inside ourselves. This is an attack on the fundamental freedom of other people to be other than what we take them to be. If I have a good map of who you are then any variation that you may introduce to my map of you is undermining my sense that I know who you are. So I request you, *"Please continue to be the person I know you to be and that will help me to continue to be the person I know as 'me'."* This is one of the social contracts that progressively reduces our freedom to express ourselves since we carry the burden of maintaining these interwoven commitments:

'I will reassure as long as you reassure me'. However our existence is nothing but change. It is not entirely chaotic because clearly there are patterns which can be identified, but patterns are patterns of repetition; they are not structures of constancy. Nothing is constant, but through regular repetition we come to have a sense of 'this is how it is'.

Compassion is the development of infinite tolerance for people being how they are. That doesn't mean that you have to let other people do whatever they like. Rather you have to actually see how they think they are. Our sense of what they are or who they are is a way of not actually seeing how they are. Moreover when we agree to confirm their sense of who they are, although this may be reassuring for the person, we're actually supporting their blindness, their commitment to belief over simple seeing. The how-ness of our existence is something which is changing all the time, and so by attending to the 'how' we start to experience the world as movement. All that I can say about myself, all that I can say about other people and the world is a description of movements in space and time. This movement establishes nothing, but by being present in the moment with it as it unfolds there is an aliveness, an aesthetic vibrancy as we receive the fullness of the potential of each moment as it reveals itself.

But who is the one who is open to others? This still presence itself. The movement and the stillness are not two separate domains. As we come to explore the immediate phenomenology of the stillness, we find that in fact it is not a phenomenon at all, yet it is the ground of the appearance of phenomena. In that way the continuity of our being is not something continuing through space and time but something which is the very ground of space and time which is always present here and now. In the flow of linear time and interactions in space, subject and object will continue to condition themselves and each other. Things happen to us and we act on the world – when I look out of my eyes I see people sitting in the room and I also have a sense of myself. Of course I experience things happening in my body and I don't experience *your* body in the same way. The sensations of the body seem to create a particularly intense and privileged realm of self-identity. This is my body and I can know about it in a way that I can never know about your body, and you cannot know about my body in this way.

So what is this identification? [James pats his hands on his body] *"This is 'me'!"* This seems absolutely undeniable to us – the body comes first. But how does the body reveal itself? We could have photographs of ourselves taken. We could put them on the ceiling, on the wall, on the floor, we could have carpets printed with our own images, so that we always know that 'I am me'. Or we could put mirrors everywhere so we could see our reflection. But the reflection or the representation is not 'this' [James pats his hands on his body]. So what is this? It is what is here. So what is here at the moment? Each of us has a nose. Probably your nose is not particularly telling you anything at the moment. You might have a little bit of a cold, you might feel some little dribbles of water coming down the inside of your nose, but apart from that, actually you don't have a nose. Your nose is something you know that you have, but it is not something you actually have. It only occurs for you when you are there with it. That is to say, there are certain circumstances under which your nose presents itself as 'yourself'. But at other times, perhaps when you are reading a book, the nose has nothing to do with you. Its only function is to be a prop to keep your glasses on! This is enormously important, because again, from the point of view of experience, the body is discontinuous. The medical body, the body of anatomy, in which you can memorise all the bones and muscles and sinews and so on, can be seen as having some actual manifest existence which is predictable, which is the same on Monday as on Friday, but again that is a body of knowledge, a body of knowing how to put a reifying interpretation onto something which is manifesting.

In terms of the flow of experience the body is not a thing. For example, I am sitting this way at the moment. I am leaning slightly over to the right; my head is a little twisted and I become aware of the muscles running on the right side of my spine. Before I found myself in this particular posture these muscles didn't announce themselves. Or you could say they didn't suddenly arrive in an ambulance and the doctor suddenly grafted them onto my back – they

were always there, but where? Not where I was. Where I was these muscles weren't. But when I sat like this, they suddenly arrived. That is to say, the different aspects of our body are pulsations which manifest or recede according to causes and circumstances, some of which appear internal and some of which appear external.

This is something to really investigate for yourself to see that the body that you always have is a mental body. The body that you actually have is not a body that you always have, just as this room is coming and going. One minute your gaze might be attracted by someone sitting in the room, suddenly they are there, and then you see someone else, and they are very there. The first person has vanished and the next person is there. This is very important to see. Each of us is the key nodal point of existence; each of us is the centre of the world. It is not some kind of hierarchy with some big important person at the top and us all like frightened mice running around in the bottom. The fact that 'I am the centre of the world' doesn't prevent you being the centre of the world. It is not like being a child going to the play park and having to wait your turn to have a go on the swings: *"Come on you have had your turn, I want to be the centre of the world!"* Moreover, moment-by-moment each of us is that point of awareness, inseparable from ungraspable emptiness which reveals the world from that particular position.

In the language of tantra, each person is the central deity of the mandala. We are not in competition with each other because we cannot have what each other has. For essentially all we have is experience, and if we become concerned with what kind of experience other people have and think, *"Oh, if only I was like them, then my life would be better."* then we get into the whole domain of abstraction and interpretation. If we want to be at the centre all we have to do is to see 'who is the one having this experience?'

The experiencer of the experience is not determined by the quality of the experience. We can often think, *"Oh, if only my body was different I would be happy. If only I could sing in a better way I would be happy. If only I had these qualities that other people have I would be happy."* But there are plenty of rich, beautiful people who are healthy and who feel like shit. In London there are many, many nightclubs where rich children of very wealthy people go in their beautiful clothes. They go into the toilet and stick a lot of white powder up their nose, and at 4 am in the morning they stagger out of the club with their clothes almost falling off, and the paparazzi are taking photographs. There is no quality outside in the world or owned by other people that you can definitely say will guarantee us happiness. When we imagine that there is, off we go endlessly chasing illusive phenomena, like running after a rainbow or after the horizon. Rather than worrying about the quality of the experience, whether it is intense or weak, full of happiness or sadness, return again and again to the simple point: *"Who is the one experiencing this?"*

The experiencer is always at the centreless centre. The experience never moves. Experience is always moving. But whether it goes up or down, whether it seems to be expanding and opening new possibilities, or closing down and becoming a very tedious boring life, the essential point is to not to try to chase after a better experience. Just stay present as the experiencer released from the covering of individual personal subjectivity. If you settle on that ungraspable point, which is always immediately here and now, there is satisfaction because you are where you actually are, rather than where you imagine yourself to be.

What we call 'I', 'me', 'myself', our embodied manifestation, our ways of speaking, chatting with friends, planning, going shopping and so on, all that continues and has a turbulence. But the ground or the centre or basis of experience, whether it appears as object or subject, is always available. So from that point of view, by resting in the intrinsic, the varying conditions of our lives become less important. Good health is not guaranteed for us. Financial success is not guaranteed for us. Having friends and people close to us is also not guaranteed. Actually, not all that much is guaranteed for us. If we remain in our anxious place of control, as a consciousness trying to make the patterns of the world correspond to our desires, a lot of

anxiety arises. However, if we can rest in this central point, which is always present, then we are here with the truth of how we are. This reveals the simplicity and satisfaction of not having to know anything more. Then what happens in the movements of interaction have less power to totally determine experience. That is to say, when the actor is in a play and the play is terrible and the audience shouts 'Booo!' and wants their money back, the actor, as a professional, also knows that the play is terrible yet, *"I am a good actor. The next play will be better."*

But if you fall into the conditioning of the moment, if you say that this series of events once again shows me that I have failed, that I am useless and cannot do this, then the flow of our life energy starts to freeze. We become over-determined. We take on a particular kind of solidity because we know what we are, and what we are is not good.

This is a key point. Events do not determine or define who we are. Events by definition are transient; they are changing, so how could they possibly define our always already present presence? Moreover, if we spend time being present with and as ourselves we realise that there is no substantial essence which could be caught by any definition. This releases two kind of freedom: the freedom to relax and trust, and the freedom to participate. Knowing that 'mistakes' can always occur we are free to jump into life. Life is never going to work out well all the time but we are here as inseparable parts of the whole. Whether life goes well or badly it is energy; it is the flow of experience. Events do not define who we are. If you want to know who you are don't look at the stream of experiences that arise for you or the thoughts you have about yourself, or the thoughts that other people have about you, just look directly into the truth of the experienter whatever is happening.

The accounts of the Buddha's life tell that after he had gained enlightenment at Bodhgaya and he was travelling around in North India many bad things happened to him. Being relaxed and open and spacious doesn't guarantee that the form of one's life will be easy. Events and situations come and go. The vital point is not to be conditioned by any occurrence. Remain relaxed and open. Your manifest embodiment will act and react but this activity is not definitive of any personal essence. The Bible may say, *"By their deeds you shall know them"* however what you will know is what they do, not who they truly are. Being and doing are not the same. Being is not something generated out of doing. It is not an epiphenomena, some kind of construct or creation. Being itself is the ungraspable ground of our potential displaying as participation in the ever-changing field.

So whenever we find ourselves caught up in conditioning, either through what other people show they are thinking about us, or by thoughts which are arising in ourselves, it is vital to see that all of these messages, all of these consolidations are simply lines in the already vanishing script for this particular drama. There is no essential truth about us except that we are indefinable and ungraspable. Limitations have no power other than our belief in them as something pertaining to, and definitive of, our core essence. We have no fixed core essence. The ground of our being is open and empty. It displays the ceaselessly patterning arena of ourselves in our environment. Which gives rise to our momentary presence as this or that non-dual with events.

Our manifestation has function but no essence. It cannot be caught and therefore, instead of conditions becoming something which restrict and limit us, they become the pathways through which our energy is transiently expressed. Being less self-referential and dualistic our open awareness is able to include the state of others, freeing our energy to be available in the service of others. In this way the inseparability of wisdom and compassion is our way of working with whatever circumstances arise.