

FINDING FREEDOM IN THE MIDST OF COMPLEXITY

A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO STAYING RELAXED AND OPEN IN MODERN LIFE

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Extracts

...Each of us is waiting to be recognised as the universal emperor, "If I were in charge things would be very different." But we are not in charge and so we are feel oppressed by someone doing something we don't like. Their very presence is an attack on 'my' sense of how I want to be. That is to say, my fantasy about myself and how the world should be is under attack. This is useful to examine for in fact I am not actually being attacked. They are not hitting me, merely speaking in a way that I don't like: 'Because they are making their proposition, my plan will not be fulfilled, and this plan of mine is very important because I believe in it.' ...

...If you are on automatic pilot then you are asleep in your assumptions, living in your imaginings. It can be very comforting to be asleep in dreams of 'oh this is my life', 'I'm home again I'll make a nice cup of tea'. This is not fresh but it is comforting. Moreover living within assumptions gives a sense of continuity. However winter is ending now and the days are getting longer, spring is coming. This is new. Is it significant? This is an essential question. "I, as the lord of the world, decree what is or is not significant." This is how we live, as stupid rulers. Rather than receiving the world and being called into ceaseless presence—vitality, aliveness with the ever-freshness of the world—we edit, we disregard. We stay inside our tunnel vision because it gives us a sense of personal continuity...

...When there is snow and ice on the ground it is slippery and so we walk in a different way from when it is a dry surface. That is to say, the ice calls our body to be more careful. Observing ourselves allows us to see that the gestures and expressions we make are not an expression of some inner 'myself' but are an expression of our participation; we are collaborating in non-duality. The more you relax and trust non-dual co-emergence the more you will find that life becomes easier. Trying harder is actually unhelpful if you want to find the ever-open door to freedom. So whenever you tense up, simply return to being present in the moment and do not block the flow of participation...

...Naked appearance is not 'experienced' by awareness. Awareness is not an experiencer. The experiencer is always and only the ego-self. Awareness is calm, open, unchanging, bright, illuminating and intrinsically pure—it is never involved in, or mixed with, any occurrence although neither is it standing apart from that occurrence. Words do not take you to this unimaginable presence...

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We have some time this evening to look at the dzogchen approach to living with complexity. The lives that we have nowadays have many unsettling factors operating through them. The rate of change in our culture, the economic situation and so on seems to be accelerating and there is a lot of uncertainty. We usually try to deal with uncertainty by acquiring particular kinds of knowledge, and, with the use of computers it is very easy to access a huge amount of information. Yet again and again we are faced with the fact that our situation is not really predictable. For example, within the world economy there are so many factors in operation that nobody can really know which way the trends will go. This affects peoples' predictions about the amount of pension they will need when they get old, the kind of medical care they might need and so on. All of us want to be safe and happy but there are so many factors which can impinge on our lives leaving us not quite sure how to establish the security we are looking for.

To try to secure a territory in the world involves a great deal of attention to the constant flow of new detailed information and a constant revision of the plans that are made. Nowadays in Europe we all have a reasonable degree of education and are used to devising and revising plans so, in principle, this challenge shouldn't be too difficult. However we tend to identify with our maps, our patterns, our plans. They become invested with our sense of who we are. Although we may know on a rational basis that changing how we live is a good idea I think it is fair to say that we often find ourselves returning to habitual patterns due to the comforting quality of their familiarity. We see that something is not very wise and yet we are drawn back into it again and again. We may well feel that unless we can find some new mode of operation to invest our energy into we are going to experience a slipping back into the known.

As we meet here, next-door to us in this building there is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Those attending have invested a lot of time, energy and money in the consumption of alcohol. Now they have to invest a lot of time and energy in the struggle to change their identity and establish a new framework for understanding who they are. They move from being 'an alcoholic' to being 'a recovering alcoholic' and this new identity has to be re-established again and again as they struggle with temptation. Many recovering alcoholics go to several meetings a week in order to affirm to other people and to themselves, *'I am a recovering alcoholic. I am recovering from alcohol addiction but the temptation is always there, it is so easy to slip.'* This pattern manifests in many different ways for human beings. As we know, you can have an unhappy love story and be certain that there is no real future in being together and yet somehow leaving can be quite difficult.

OUR SENSE OF SELF IS UNSECURABLE

Buddhist meditation view and practice offers a very clear understanding as to why this is the case. Our sense of self, our basic identity, is unsecurable; it can never be established as something existing in truth. The basis of our personal identity is contingent; it arises from the juxtaposition and interaction of many factors. Some of these factors we take to be 'ourselves'. Thus we might have a sense that my habits are due to 'my DNA', but what does it mean to say 'my DNA'? In what sense is it mine? We could say that the reason we are like we are is due to our parents' behaviour, which has led us to adopt these patterns that seem to define us. However, this is again saying that who I am is not really something that belongs to me—it is co-created as an intercourse, as an interrelating with the environment. That is to say, 'I, me myself' is co-emergent with my environment.

As the weather changes our mood changes, our clothing changes, and probably the food we eat changes as well. When we are very young we are just 'having our life' but as the years go by and we have more years to look back on we start to see that we are part of a cohort in which we share many features with other people who were born in the same culture at the same time. For example, the kind of music that we have an emotional response to is very often linked to what we heard as a teenager and were dancing to at parties. We have a resonance with particular features of the environment and we usually feel that that resonance is due to the unique qualities of these features. But why doesn't everyone respond positively to them? If they were truly special in themselves then everybody would respond well to them. They ring true for us due to our shared historical patterning, the co-arising and interdependence of our developing self and these environmental factors. The particular aspects of our culture that ring true for us, the kind of art we like to look at, or the movies we like to look at and so on are usually determined by repeated exposure to these patterns at a sensitive age. Generally we might say, 'But I am just me, this is who I am and this is what I like.' It feels to be inherent, intrinsic, but actually it has arisen through relatedness.

It has two aspects

There are two aspects to this. One is that we are truly influenced by what we encounter for there is no autonomous internally defining essence inside us. We exist as a repertoire of possibilities which are called into being by certain features of our world. If you are at work talking with your boss and then after work you go and have a coffee with a friend it is likely that these are two very different kinds of conversation, not just in terms of their semantic content but in terms of your mood, your freedom to express yourself, and the kind of vocabulary and gestures you make. Due to the nature of your boss, their personality, their degree of authority over you, your anxiety about keeping your job or not, you feel called into being in a particular way in the work setting. When you are in the café chatting with your friend a whole new range of aspects of yourself are evoked by the quality of their presence. That is to say, we exist as a potential which is evoked by the qualities of the environment, and also by our capacity to know the extent of our potential and our freedom to bring that potential into the closest possible linking with what is around us. Thus this potential is called forth by a range of factors which present externally and by a range of internal factors. These could be whether we feel tired, whether we feel lonely, or embodied factors like the menstrual cycle, and so on. There are many, many things occurring which in a sense 'are us' but are actually happening to us. Thus the personal narrative of my identity often acts as an appropriative tool making claims for a sense of agency and ownership over factors which are in fact contingent. We are participants, not masters or victims. The factors which emerge for us and as us are not created by us.

Clearly the potential for the patterning of such interactions is infinite due to the number of variables involved. They are beyond our control and if we get fixated on the idea of control this may well generate anxiety and depression. If we believe, *"Well it's my life and I should be in charge of it and I want to fulfil my vision. I am entitled to have the life that I want"* on a good day this can feel like freedom, *"It is my life. It is all up to me. I can make it happen."* But on a bad day it can feel like, *"Ah! It's all up to me! I have got to make it happen!"* Then it doesn't feel so good. *"How will I make it happen? I will have to collaborate with other people but other people don't behave the way I want."* We may have noticed that other people, in being other, do things their way. Somehow, strangely, this comes as an endless source of shock and surprise. We are reasonable, we are kind, we are rational, and yet other people are non-compliant and indeed delinquent. With this conflict we directly experience the limit of

our agency, that 'I, me, myself' is always coming into being through interaction with others. It is not all up to me.

None of us knows how we are going to feel tomorrow morning. We have been alive quite a number of years and we know many things. Some of us been to universities and have all kinds of certificates, but we can't say, "*Oh tomorrow is Saturday morning, and on Saturday mornings I always feel like this.*" Actually, we know very little about ourselves for we are fundamentally unknowable. Our cognitions working in harmony with our memories create storylines, narratives, which give us some rough sense of how things are likely to be for us. But actually if we attend to the lived phenomenology of our experience it is not like that. The Buddha pointed out that everything is impermanent. Friends become enemies and enemies become friends. How can this be possible? This is my friend, my friend is my friend, and yet now we are not friendly anymore. If you had an apple on your bedside table when you went to sleep at night and in the morning you woke up to find a banana there instead you might think there was a poltergeist in the house. An apple is an apple; it can't just become something else. A friend, however, is not like an apple since friends change due to many unpredictable factors. Even apples will eventually rot so definitive knowledge between living creatures is unachievable since new forces, new winds, new stimuli, emerge without our permission.

A DUALISTIC VISION

Usually the way we operate towards ourselves and other people is on the basis of a dualistic vision where we see self and other as fundamentally separate. We are dual, two not one. Thus, I can feel that I have a body, a voice, and a mind, and, due to the kindness of my mother over many years when I was small, I have just about learned to control my body, my voice and my mind. Children generally don't control their bodies. They zoom about all over the place caught up in waves of inspiration. Gradually they learn to sit still in the classroom and then after a while they've learned to sit still for three hours in an exam writing and writing. That is to say, we learn to manage and control how we manifest. To say, 'I am controlling myself' sounds normal and reasonable yet what is this 'self' that I am controlling. Do I know what shape my self is, what colour it is, where it is located? I am assuming that my 'self' is an item similar to my shoes.

An illusion is something which manifests, which we can see and which appears to exist, but which actually has no true self-existence. Under certain weather conditions we can see a rainbow in the sky. There is definitely something to be seen but it is not something you can catch; there is an appearance which is devoid of an intrinsic essence.

The rainbow manifests out of conditions that are extrinsic to the rainbow—it doesn't have an internal source but a contingent, contextual source. In the same way, when you were a baby you came into your individual existence through interactions with the environment. The particularity of your family situation, a big family or a small family, a happy family or a difficult family, became part and parcel of how you developed. That is to say the you-ness of you—what appears to be you yourself, your personality, your ways of doing things, your likes and dislikes—has come into being through the influence of the environment. You would not be how you are now without this particular patterning of social events in your school, your home and wherever, of your early relationships, of whether you were sick or healthy, of what languages were spoken and so on. In that sense, you are an illusion. Illusion doesn't mean that you are nothing at all. It means that there is no individual particular personal essence inside you that is making you, moment-by-moment.

If somebody tells you a happy story, you become happy; if somebody tells you a sad story, you become sad. That is what happens and it's not very complicated to understand. You don't hold a little conference inside your head and weigh up whether you should be happy or sad. Somebody tells you a joke and you laugh. You don't have to decide whether you'll laugh—you just laugh. Their words and your patterning have come into a communication and are merged in that moment of intercourse.

The fantasy that we have of our individual self as being somehow our own possession, of something that we are in charge of, is shown to be false by the very ordinary interactions of daily life. If

you are walking down the street and you suddenly hear the sound of a car crashing it's likely that you will turn your head. Although it is not your car that has crashed nevertheless something has happened in the world that you participate in through your senses, and so you respond. This is an aspect of non-duality.

There is no fixed hard wall between our embodied existence as individuals and the environment around us. What I take myself to be, and the world in which I am, are co-emergent. I influence the world, and the world influences me. They are not two separate things banging into each other. Rather, what I call 'myself' and what I call 'my environment' are separated only by my conventional use of the separating terms, 'I, me, myself,' and what is around me. In that way, we are the environment. It doesn't mean that we are other people and that we are suddenly going to jump into their bodies, rather that how we are, is inseparable from how other people are. This is a phenomenological fact. You may feel that you know this already, but is it a living knowledge which illuminates your life?

I need to take care of myself and yet when I start to examine how I am, I see that all these aspects of myself that I feel I need to protect have come from somewhere else! When I am speaking, when I am expressing what I think, I am using words from English. My words don't belong to me. When I am speaking I am like a child making a sandcastle on the beach. I get my little shovel. I have my little pot. I dig up the sand and I put it in my pot. So now it is my sand and I make my sandcastle, but then the wave comes from the sea and washes it back. The sand is just sand. It is just the same when we are speaking. We are taking these words from the whole matrix of language and shaping these temporary forms, which do some kind of work. They confirm that I have some kind of performative efficacy as the doer of the deed. And then they dissolve back into silence.

It is the same with every part of ourselves. If we don't eat food, which is something from outside, we lose our strength. Nowadays, people like to be healthy so they go to the gym. In order to give myself well-toned muscles I push a machine and the machine pushes me! My muscles are made by the machine. People say, '*Hey! You look good! You look fit!*' You say, '*Yeah...thank you.*' You don't say, '*It's due to my friend the machine*'.

From the buddhist point of view it is very important to keep looking again and again into how this division of self and environment, self and other, is constructed as something real and enduring. Once we do this we can start to see how everything which appears to be stable, static, reliable, predictable, and enduring through time, is in fact not so. Actually our existence is grounded in experience, rather than based on things. Experience is neither only subjective, nor only objective. Experience arises as the feeling tone of the interaction of the various field factors that we encounter, and this includes what we call 'other' and what we call 'self'. Experience is ever-changing; it has no essence in it, but like the rainbow it has function and it has an impact.

But still we have the question: 'Who is the one who is the experiencer of the experience?' If we take this up from the point of view of the self-narrative the answer seems obvious: '*My experience is happening to me and I am the experiencer*'. But who is that 'me'? Because 'me' and 'I' are propositional; they are terms which assert. They invite us to take for granted that they are truly referring to something. However, the 'owner' of experience is in fact the ego-self. This ego-orientated consciousness functions as the experiencer, yet it has no true existence and is co-emergent with experience. This is very different from our awareness which reveals what occurs without involvement in it.

IGNORANCE FUNCTIONS AS THE WISH TO BE SEDUCED AND TAKEN IN BY OUR OWN NARRATIVE

Why do children want to go to Disneyland? Because that's where Mickey Mouse lives. You can make a lot of money by giving a seemingly substantial form to an illusory construct. '*Of course, Mickey Mouse exists. Of course, I exist. Why? Because I am telling you, and you should believe me. Why wouldn't you believe it?*'

From the buddhist point of view this is exactly the point of ignorance: ignorance functions as the wish and the willingness to be seduced. When you go to the cinema to see a film, you want to be taken in. It is the very act of falling into the film that allows the film to show itself as it was designed to be seen. The film can only give itself to you if you give yourself to the film.

This is what happens in the construction of our narrative sense of self. The clarity of our mind, our noetic capacity—our capacity to know—gives itself to a story and then believes the story and acts in accordance with the storyline. The function of meditation is to put that fusion of awareness and storyline into question.

If you look back over your life and think of how many different stories you have been involved in, clearly you have an enormous capacity to believe yourself to be many different people. The things that were very important to you when you were a small child are not so important nowadays. At that time you inhabited a particular world of interpretation and belief that seemed completely true. If you went to school one day and your best friend didn't want to play with you, then that would make you very sad. *'My best friend doesn't like me anymore.'* The child had inhabited a fantasy that they were going to have this person as their best friend forever. It was so real, so strong, so true, and then due to the movement of causes and circumstances it's gone. When we look back over the course of our lives we've had all sorts of connections with people. We've been in situations that have seemed to be exactly definitive of who we were, but they have vanished. How could that be?

When a child is small, adults often say, *'Behave yourself!'* If a big powerful person says it, the small child often freezes. They were being themselves, just running around making a noise and then they hear, *'Behave yourself!'* *'What do I do?'* It means to do what you think the big person wants. This means to be the self they want you to have not the self you feel yourself to be. Then once they have gone away you can be yourself again. Gradually children learn to do this 'behave yourself' internally. That is to say, our sense of self is dialogic, emerging in the ongoing form of conversations where we are deformed and reformed according to the play of interpersonal power. We can talk to ourselves as subject to subject, as subject to object, or as object to subject; we have many different kinds of internal dialogues. Sometimes we are quite sweet and reassuring to ourselves: *'Come on it will be okay, never mind.'* Sometimes we are quite harsh and criticising: *'This is ridiculous, I always mess up, I cannot bear it!'*

'I' and 'myself' are not the same. There is an object formation of myself and a subject formation of I. The 'subject' I has to get the 'object' me to behave because if I don't behave then I, the subject, get blamed. Therefore in order to avoid being blamed by others I blame myself in an ongoing internal dialogue that can turn into a deadening diatribe. The internal split of the ego self into subject and object parallels all the splitting that generates samsara and ensures that the ego is rarely calm and clear. Self to self-accusation reifies experience and solidifies agency into a personal property or characteristic that can be evaluated. Hence, "You have done this wrong." "Oh, I am very sorry." Who has done it wrong? If there is a deed there has to be a doer of the deed. Who is doing my life? And who do you think is doing my life? Are they the same? The other person says, "You have done it wrong." "But I have to tell you that I have never felt like a 'you'. I always feel like a 'me'. You is you out there." So if somebody speaks to me and says, 'you' I have to transform 'you' into 'me'. Are you speaking to me? Because actually you are calling me you!

This is the theatre of language. Our interior experience can seem like a pinball machine you find in an arcade where the ball goes up, ricochets around and sets the lights flashing on and off. You can be walking along the street when suddenly all sort of thoughts and feelings start running wild inside you. The eruptive thoughts and memories can have you travelling to events that occurred in different countries or going back into some event that happened earlier in the day. We are ceaselessly constructing worlds, worlds we inhabit as we identify with them and with what occurs in them as if they were real. Yet, as phenomena, they are arising and passing with no inherent existence. What makes them seem real is our belief in them.

ATTACHMENT: THE ONGOING PROCESS OF REIFICATION

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In dharma this is what is referred to as attachment or grasping, which the Buddha has said is the source of all our suffering. Due to the ongoing process of reification we experience ourselves as an entity having a unique defining essence inhabiting a world composed of other seeming entities each with a unique defining essence. This seemingly defining essence, the thingness of a thing, appears to be intrinsic to it. But what is it?

For example, here in my hand I have a glass that I have been drinking from. It is obviously a glass for we all know what a glass is. When we look at it we take it for granted that it just is what it is; it seems to be self-existing as 'a glass'. It would be quite strange for an adult to be looking at this glass and wondering what it is. An artist might do that if they were trying to make a visual representation of it or somebody who has taken LSD might be having an unusual experience of it but generally speaking, a glass is a glass. We take the glass-ness of the glass to be its own quality. What has happened, of course, is that we have cut this object off from its historical root. The glass has arrived here from somewhere else, perhaps from a small shop. It arrived at the small shop from a large storage warehouse. It got there from a factory. It was made in the factory by a machine. Then it gets more complicated for you have the history of the machines that make the glass, you have all the instruction for all the ingredients which go into making the glass, you have the design of the glass, and you have the marketing department which is considering whether there are consumers in the world who still want to purchase this particular style of glass. Thus there are many constitutional factors which are in this glass. If they had not occurred, this glass would not be here. Yet we live in a forgetfulness of the cause and effect chain which gives rise to the glass and thus it seems as if the glass is existing just by itself. The glass then seems to be enduring in time. Moreover, how the glass appears depends also on us being able to see it with the current light in the present room. At the moment we have fluorescent lights which gives a particular kind of illumination. If we put these lights off and just have the candle that is burning on the table the glass will appear to be different. Tomorrow when there is some natural light coming through the window, depending on how much cloud there is in the sky and on the time of day, due to the rising and passing of the sun the glass will again offer a display of its myriad possible appearances.

Now we are at an interesting crossroads. We can say "Ah, the glass is a glass, it just looks different when the environmental factors change." Or we can actually see how it is if we do not smother it in interpretations. It is our concept that confines the glass to its prison of being just one 'thing'. The glass as phenomena, as appearance is, as we have looked, co-emergent with the current state of the looker: where they are in the room, how they slept, whether they are bored with what I am saying and so on. What we refer to as 'the glass' is stable and enduring only as a concept. It is a presence, a showing in this room of showings– it is a site of unfolding display, an energetic emergence that is patterning moment by moment in an interplay with circumstances. Our ego self has, with full cultural approval, abstracted an image of the glass and used this in its habitual delusional activity of creating 'entities' it pretends are 'just there' each with their own inherent existence. Looking at the glass what we actually see is a chain of phenomena and not just one fixed thing. Thus the continuity of the glass lies in the concept of the glass.

We continue to apply the title 'glass' to an 'object' which is imagined to be the same yet is actually freshly emergent at each moment. If I ask you to pick up the glass that task is not so difficult to do unless you have arthritis. If I were to pour boiling water into the glass and ask you to lift it you would find it very hot. The glass can show many different forms due to causes and circumstances. The point of this exploration is to see that what is in my hand is a potential, one which reveals itself in different ways with different circumstances. It is a potential which has no internal definition but manifests in interaction with whatever is around it. It is the same with ourselves. Our world, moment by moment, is revealing itself anew and if we are present with the world through our senses we can collaborate with the ceaseless flow of possibility. But if we try to secure ourselves within the fragile castle of our concepts then we estrange ourselves from the revelation of open empty appearance. In our allegiance to concepts we alienate ourselves from the ground of our own presence.

Within the buddhist dzogchen tradition we engage in meditation in order to be aware of ourselves as presence. We open to how we actually are. Instead of telling ourselves who we are,

wrapping ourselves in narrative, we just relax and open to our presence as we manifest. Our habit of encapsulation in the web of conceptualisation continues to insist and so at first we have to make effort to be present in the self-arising self-liberating here and now. Instead of engaging in the activity of identifying as the subject and identifying everything else as the object we should let go of our habitual activity of identification. Identification is both a naming of things and an evaluative positioning of the relation between this 'subject' at this moment and this 'object' at this moment.

AWARENESS AND EXPERIENCE

Awareness, our bright open presence, does not enter into judgement. It shows how appearance appears and yet is free of the deluded activity of constructing entities by imagining them. With this openness we are aware of shapes, colours, sounds and so on. These are naked appearance, the first fresh showing of the energy of the ground. This is the field of awareness, this is what awareness is aware of, self-arising and self-liberating appearance inseparable from emptiness. Awareness is not involved; it has nothing to gain or lose by involvement in anything that occurs. It is aware. This open awareness is also aware of the arising of light in its opaque modes when, suffused with concepts, it appears thick and dense. These appearances also arise and pass yet claim a false continuity, the continuity of substance. Awareness shows them and their false substantiation whereas dualistic consciousness is unable to do this and so is taken in by the delusion. For consciousness there is the experience of a succession of thoughts and little story lines that snatch and grab at each other and try to make a continuous sense of the story of our ourselves, the conscious ego, confirming ourselves as we know ourselves to be. However it is vital to relax our intoxication with concepts so that there is space to see the freshness of appearance.

Concepts are not bad in themselves but they are mesmerising. Computer games are not intrinsically bad but some children can vanish into them for hour after hour until they inhabit this separate world. Their parents may say, *"Hey, why don't you go and have a bicycle ride; go outside and have a look around or go and see some of your friends?"* But the children say, *"No, no, I have everything I need in this little box."* We also can get lost by being immersed in storylines and interpretations, stories we tell the world about what it is or about who we are. When we are committed to our own story there is very little space to see all the other possibilities.

Therefore in meditation we relax our identification with, and immersion in, thought and remain present with presence which is itself free of involvement in what comes and goes. As we sit here our mind reveals its potential, its energy, its creativity. We hear something as people come into the room and so we might say, 'Oh something is happening to me'. We also have thoughts and sensations inside what we call our body and we can also say, 'This is happening to me'. This points to something interesting since it indicates that what I call 'me' and what I call 'the world' are both experiences. It is not that 'I' as an individual, isolated ego am in relation with the world as it is and so can say 'I know what is happening to me' as an objective fact. Rather what I experience is myself revealed to me.

This may seem to be a strange claim: that I do not see the world as it is, the world I am familiar with, but in fact what I experience is 'myself'! The world I see is the world I experience. My experience of 'what is there' is mediated through the lens and filter of 'what I am'. I experience my personal take on the world. And this take, or selective construction is not identical with anyone else's. This is because what we each take to be our accurate perception is in large part selection, interpretation and imagination. What I experience is the activity of my mind yet I falsely take it to be an accurate perception of what is there. The ego cannot see what is actually there in itself since the ego-self only has access to its own productions. Only unborn awareness can reveal naked appearance. Naked appearance is not 'experienced' by awareness. Awareness is not an experiencer. The experiencer is always and only the ego-self. Awareness is calm, open, unchanging, bright, illuminating and intrinsically pure—it is never involved in or mixed with any occurrence although it is not standing apart from that occurrence. Words do not take you to this unimaginable presence.

However in terms of experience, you might start to feel that your back is a little stiff or that the www.simplybeing.co.uk © James Low 2020

chair is not very comfortable and so you move. I don't think any of you decided to have a sore back. Rather you found that your back was getting sore. The pain of your back was experienced by you with the conceptualisation, "Oh, this is happening to me." The thought 'this is happening to me' happens for you because we don't have to think, "*Ah what is that? Mmm what will I call it? Mmm I will call it 'this is a pain that is in my back.'*" The pain arises and "Oh, my sore back!" Thus the sensation and the concepts identifying the sensation seem to arise as one—leaving no gap in which awareness could reveal the simple ungraspable sensation as a mode of emptiness. Our notion of individual agency, of the mastery of our existence is an illusion for the narrative account of 'who I am' is always a bit behind what is actually occurring. We are trying to catch up with ourselves by talking about ourselves and our experience. Meditation can reveal directly that you don't have to catch up with yourself and neither do you have to make sense of what is going on. These are merely activities rearranging concepts. There is a natural ordering of occurrences which is revealed to us if we are effortlessly present. However if we are not present, even on an ordinary level, we are vulnerable to events.

For example, you might go to a party where there is music that you like being played and you start to dance. However you have just had a quarrel with your boyfriend and your mind is full of irritation, "Every time I go to a party with my boyfriend he keeps looking at other women so what is the point?" With a thought like that it is quite difficult to dance because now you have a disturbing triangulation: there is you, the music, and this negative thought. If that negative thought vanishes then there is just you and the music, so you open yourself to the music, the music welcomes you and you have a seamless participation.

We have all had that kind of experience and we know the difference between feeling alienated and feeling light, free, alive, and unburdened. Of course you could say that dancing is not all that complicated and to bring that quality of openness into a meeting at work is another matter. But what is it that gets in the way when you are at work? It is hopes and fears, and a base-line antipathy that you have built up over time towards a colleague: they start to talk and you think, "Oh, here they go again." When that happens we are not very available. We are closing down to protect ourselves, "I cannot bear this person anymore." With this reaction you are trapped in your certainty that you know the true negative value of your colleague. Both she and you are imprisoned by your intransigent belief that filters events in order to gather ever more information to support your fixed belief in the awfulness of your colleague!

In such situations the shape of myself feels under attack when it is brought into juxtaposition with the shape of this other person who I experience as unpleasant or hostile. But who are they actually attacking? They are attacking my sense of how things should be. Each of us is waiting to be recognised as the universal emperor, "If I were in charge things would be very different." But we are not in charge and so we are feel oppressed by someone doing something we don't like. Their very presence is an attack on 'my' sense of how I want to be. That is to say, my fantasy about myself and how the world should be is under attack. This is useful to examine for in fact I am not actually being attacked. They are not hitting me, merely speaking in a way that I don't like: 'Because they are making their proposition, my plan will not be fulfilled, and this plan of mine is very important because I believe in it.' This is not very wise for having put ourselves into 'our plan' and having made it very important we are now a hostage to fortune. We have created something sclerotic. We have brought a rigidity into the moving field of interaction through our investment in 'our plan' and the consequent antipathy that we feel towards the other person. "It is not good if they win, they don't understand! It's ridiculous that other people seem to want to agree with them." These kinds of thoughts can arise very easily and we can feel trapped and oppressed yet, in the end something else happens and our self-punishing echo chamber goes quiet for a while.

This has been happening for a very long time and is at the heart of the history of the world. What actually keeps us alive as a sentient being in samsara is our need to be in the game, being able to strive to win. It is a lot of work regulating our position, trying to get the best possible deal in a situation. How sad that we are so obtuse!

NON-DUALITY

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The dzogchen view illuminates the actuality of non-duality. Non-duality simply means that the structural opposition between categories such as good/bad, right/wrong, Germany/France and so on are merely categories which are empty of internal definition but are held in place by their structural binary opposition. The root binary is between infinite open and finite closure. This is clearly ridiculous since the infinite open includes everything and so there is no opposition. It is the stubborn intransigence of the initial separatist position (*bDag-Nyid gChig-Pu*) which installs the delusion of *gChig*, duality. The initial 'separation' is a moment, a freezing, a reification, a solidification. Yet these are all mere movements of energy, activity which never reaches its goal of establishing something real. They are patterns presented as entities. If one looks clearly one sees that they are manifestly without inherent existence. But if one believes in them (*bDag-'Dzin*) then it is as if they are real and enduring.

From this initial deluded belief, this self-vanishing idea, there arises the illusory division of self and other: 'I am me because I am not you.' If you ask me who I am, I am not quite sure but there is one thing I am very sure of, and that is that I am not you! Thus the seeming integrity of myself as an entity is established by saying 'I am not you'. The definition of self rests on the law of the excluded other. 'Me' is all that is left over when it is separated off from all that is 'not me'. All that is good is by definition 'not bad' since things that are bad are 'not good'. This structure informs all our nuanced actions in the course of each day.

But what is the essence of me, the actual individual? Surely I am not just a leftover after everything else has been rejected as 'not me'? When I say 'you' it doesn't give me any privileged knowledge of who you are, but it does assert that I am not you. You are me by not being me. Your being not me installs me as me. The rejection of 'you' is the acceptance or adoption of 'me'. If we brought in some skilled interviewers to enquire into each of you as to who you are, would one hour be enough, or a day, a week, a year? I'm sure we would always have more things to say about ourselves. This is because we are not essence based; we are performative. We come into being by showing images of ourselves and so there is no end to the storying of ourselves.

The self is dynamic; it shows itself in interaction within the field of experience. Moreover this field of experience is not actually composed of separate forms. There is no real separation between self and other since they are both movements of energy in the field of experience which is itself a field of energy. There is not one fixed definable entity to be found here as all phenomena are already vanishing in the moment of their arising. In fact, in their emptiness, nothing arises or passes away for these are mere shadows on the wall. Moreover, all that we see, hear, taste, touch, smell are moments of arising experience whose foundation cannot be discovered. Do not believe this but look again and again until you see that it is true. The foundation is empty of any essence or entity which could be discovered and yet this great emptiness is always revealing new appearances. Thus emptiness and its potentiality are non-dual in the ceaseless display of illusory forms. And we are all just such illusory forms.

Examples

Since we were born we have been so many different people, each with many different kinds of enthusiasms. How is this possible? Here is a glass and we can fill it with water or with We can apply this way of thinking to ourselves, or with orange juice or with many other different things. Then we take the content out of the glass and fill it with something different, for example, "*Oh, when I was five I really liked to go out on my roller-skates and they were really great. Then I inherited a bicycle from my older brother and after that I was always on my bike.*" 'I' was filled with the roller-skates and then with the bicycle. We often tell our story in this way so that there seems to be a continuing 'me' that has been filled with and then emptied of many shapes, flavours and interests. Each of these forms felt like me for the period of identification. But what is this continuing sense of self?

We can entertain a sense of our self as being continuous and also a sense of being fully each of our specific identities which arise and pass. There is a familiarity, 'here we go again', as we give ourselves to an experience that we can use as a medium of me being me. However, the felt sense that something is familiar does not mean that it is truly the same. For example, I have been in Geneva before and now I am back here. It is not the same place, and yet it is the same place. Since I was last

here the airport has changed a lot—it has the same name yet it has changed. What is continuing is the name. But we have to say this name again and again for although the name is shown in big letters at the front of the airport the letters they need us to bring them to life by reading them. That is to say, the term 'Geneva' points to a vast potential of possible emergents while Geneva, as experience, is co-emergent with people experiencing what they take to be Geneva.

Each individual who lives in this city or who visits it will have many precise experiences unique to them. Some of you may have spent your whole life in this town and feel that you know it very well, yet each day you have a flow of unique unrepeatable experiences. Each time you put the key in the front door to go into your flat it is new. The difference is in the detail and you will only see the details if you are present. If you are on automatic pilot then you are asleep in your assumptions, living in your imaginings. It can be very comforting to be asleep in dreams of 'oh this is my life', 'I'm home again I'll make a nice cup of tea'. This is not fresh but it is comforting. Moreover living within assumptions gives a sense of continuity. However winter is ending now and the days are getting longer. The quality of light is changing, buds are starting to come out on the bushes and the snowdrops are starting to come out of the ground. This is new. Is it significant? This is an essential question. *"I, as the lord of the world, decree that it is or it is not significant."* This is how we live, as stupid rulers. Rather than receiving the world and being called into ceaseless presence—vitality, aliveness with the ever-freshness of the world—we edit, we disregard, we stay inside our tunnel vision because it gives us a sense of personal continuity.

Three interlocking modalities

With the view of dzogchen we come to see that our presence has three interlocking modalities or domains. The **first** aspect is our awareness, our presence, our mind itself. Awareness is empty of self-substance; it is not a thing. Not being an entity with shape and colour it cannot be apprehended or compared and contrasted. This open ungraspability is ever-present as the basis of all that occurs. You can't make it or find it, but you can find yourself non-dual with it if you desist from the activity of reification. This is not a dogma to be believed. Rather it is the primordial truth that you can open to since you have never actually been other than moments revealed in the mirror of awareness. The mind itself is the ungraspable ground of all occurrences. It unchanging and it has no inherent content of its own. Due to this emptiness it offers great hospitality for there is space for any kind of 'thing' to arise.

Inseparable from the unchanging purity of this open ground is the **second** aspect: ceaseless display, instant and fully formed. The field or domain of appearance is unconstructed. It is unborn illusion and truly ungraspable. All construction is the play of concepts, of signifiers—and they, being empty of essence and substance, are not actually able to construct anything except delusion.

The **third** aspect is apparitional participation in which the empty patterning of subject and object emerge like interweaving waves. If you throw a stone into a still pond you see little circles of waves spreading out and when you throw in another stone this also sets off ever-expanding circles of waves. As the waves interact they create more turbulence as they pass through each other. In the same way pulsations of what appear to be 'objects' seem to move towards us and we pulse as 'subjects' moving out into the world.

That is to say, sometimes we seem to be passive and the world seems active and sometimes we seem to be active and the world seems to be passive. However, nothing is established by this movement for it is not other than the play of emptiness. Every day many events occur and instantly vanish. Like a plane traversing the sky they move and do not remain. Planes sometimes leave vapour trails which gradually fade and sounds which thin like echoes. It is our own mental activity which converts echoes into orchestral sound. Our mental activity layers echo upon echo, memory onto memory, plans onto plans and these vapid formations in their rapid layering create an opacity like mist which we then misinterpret as a sign of real entities each with individual essence and substance. We grasp at illusion and the energy of our grasping thickens 'it' into delusion. We are the makers of the dulling haze by which our own bright awareness seems unavailable.

Thus when you are young and have an exam at school, if you get through the exam you say, “Oh I passed the exam”. This exists as something to celebrate for five minutes and then something else is happening. It seems so important at the time yet its moment fades. You get your certificate yet you are already forgetting the information for which you have received your certificate.

Our manifestation, the third domain, is completely fresh; there is no continuous glass or self around it. We are actually not manifesting as someone or something but as rays of awareness bringing ever-shifting patterns of light and heat. In our samsaric domain of duality we name and locate and adopt or reject our ideas of what is occurring it. This is a parallel universe to that of actual occurrence.

We can see this with the lives of recent famous lamas. In the West they are defined and described through accounts of their substantial achievements, their titles and their status. This kind of description is reifying and deterministic whereas the traditional Tibetan accounts, when well written, are hagiographies—accounts of their spiritual life—with the clear understanding that immediacy is beyond description. It is then up to the reader to practise non-reificatory reading which is a helpful aspect of the path. All phenomena are devoid of inherent existence and inexpressible. Words as compassion are not words as wisdom since wisdom itself is silent.

FINDING FREEDOM

Although we have to work with circumstances—including our enmeshment in language—if we can see that everything that seems to be a limitation is actually a mode of radiance, then we can find freedom even in the midst of restriction. The basis of this freedom is to open to being present where we are for then we are with the actual lived situation and not just our ideas about it. With this you have the broadest interface with your environment for you are present with it all. If you bring in plans, if you bring in agendas, hopes and fears, you narrow your own positioning and then it is less easy to find a moment-by-moment contouring with the topology of what is occurring.

Through the practice we start to relax and trust that we can work with circumstances. We don't need to defend ourselves against the world because we are part of the world, we are co-emergent with it as rays of energy. We are not autonomous entities but patterns of performative participation. Seeing this we can open to being touched and moved, freshly emerging in the dance of the matrix. If we hold onto a fixed notion of how we are then we tend to feel battered by circumstances. However, if we recognise that as part of emergence, we can simply participate in the unfolding. Instead of struggling against events which seem hostile or making effort to try to grasp the aspects which seem most beneficial to us we can just be with how things are manifesting. In fact, our hopes and fears don't give us any power over the world and they are likely to alienate us from ourselves.

For example, I work in a mental health clinic and in the last years we have had many cuts to our service budget due to the economic crisis. Many changes are imposed which I don't like. What status should I give to the fact that I don't like them? Probably very little for although what I like and don't like is very important to me, over the years I have learned the painful lesson that they are not very important to anyone else. Thus, if I become fixated on what I think is wrong I am alienated from what is actually happening and I start to build up negative views about my colleagues and especially about management. I can feel they are being hostile to my 'ethical' plans and my concern for 'my' patients. But this is just how it is for me—the clinic management has other concerns and so all I do is make myself unhappy. Often, particularly if we have a political background, we feel that we have to stand up and protest, to confront some of the negative movements in the world. This may seem to be an ethical turn—to be about justice—but on a pragmatic level what it does seem to do is to tie us into conflict, reification and dualistic judgement.

Again and again in dzogchen texts it is stated that whatever comes, comes and whatever goes, goes. This is not a helpless, passive, quietism. Rather it is a call to presence with phenomena—this is what there is here and now—it is not an idea. In this moment if we are present with what is occurring we have the optimal possibility of moving with events and influencing them. As we know, influencing

means a kind of flowing, a flowing into a situation which is also flowing. If we become fluid then the solidity of reification and objectification that freezes the world into pseudo-entities can be relaxed. We then move as waves in ever-fascinating patterning with other waves. So rather than extrapolating oneself to an island of separation where one can be concerned with winning and losing we are participating in the space of the infinite welcome which is the ground nature of emptiness.

This is not a theory. It is a view one can taste directly and bring into daily life. Life is easier and richer when we shift from control to participation. With participation there is an increased capacity for appreciation and enjoyment. One can even come to enjoy everything, for each moment is just as it is with its own particular flavour.

Due to the development of the taste buds in their tongues children usually have a predilection for sweet things. Gradually as they get older they learn to eat things which are more challenging and can experience that something bitter is also interesting to taste. We probably wouldn't want it all the time but we can be open to the sensation of 'bitter'. In the same way we like to be happy which is a very sweet taste, but we don't get happiness all the time. We get loneliness, we get sadness, we get confusion, anger, jealousy and many, many different feelings. When experiences like these arise we can see them as an attack on our life, something which spoils our life and steals it from us, or we can relax and open and be with its emergence without merging or reacting. Awareness is always fresh and present yet unaffected by the current patterning of arisings.

It can even be interesting to be in the presence of loneliness. This is quite different from the merged experience of being lonely where we might think, *'Well I am just passing time until this awfulness goes and then my life will continue—how long do I have to put up with this? These other people out there, look at them, they are all happy! I alone suffer.'* Like all phenomena, suffering is impermanent. It is our own reaction to it that makes it seem so real, controlling and important. Our own attachment to experiences as reality binds us to suffering. Stay with the actual energy of the moment. This will pass by itself. There is no end to the ego's involvement in thoughts—and if you are involved that is a clear sign that you are fused in ego-identity and are blind to your own open awareness.

Confusion is discontinuous, loneliness is discontinuous; anger is discontinuous. When you attend to an arising experience with open awareness you are not the experiencer. However if you start labelling the experience and telling yourself about it, *'I hate being like this it is terrible'* or *'this shouldn't be happening'*, the very aversive movement of your hostility to your own experience binds you into it. You have become the limited and limiting experiencer.

Thus in meditation practice first of all we explore how to relax and open to this unborn nature of the mind which is not a thing. Then resting in that openness we focus on seeing how the field of subject/object interaction is inseparable from this open ground. We are now able to explore how, moment-by-moment, we are participative energy patterning. As such we are free from the limiting constraints of having and being an inherent existence.

When there is snow and ice on the ground it is slippery and so we walk in a different way from when it is just a wet surface. That is to say, the ice calls our body to be more careful. Observing ourselves allows us to see that the gestures and expressions we make are not an expression of some inner 'myself' but are an expression of our participation; we are collaborating in non-duality.

The more you relax and trust non-dual co-emergence the more you will find that life becomes easier. Trying harder is actually unhelpful if you want to find the ever-open door to freedom. So whenever you tense up simply return to being present in the moment and do not block the flow of participation. This is not something you can work out in your head. Rather it is similar to riding a mountain bike going very quickly down a hill. You are safest when you are relaxed and fully present. You cannot control what the bicycle is doing by accelerating your cognition for that will simply make you very anxious. Rather it is about trusting that by feeling the emergent situation of the bumps and of

where the rocks are, you experience the non-duality of your body as part of the environment. Simple equanimity enables us to move freely with whatever occurs.

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