

OUR MIND IS NOT WHAT WE THINK IT IS

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Excerpt

“Trying to catch hold of life and describe and depict it is like trying to catch a lizard. When you think you have caught it the lizard drops its tail off and runs away to freedom. Life is always way ahead of our concepts. So the question would be: can we come to live in the moment? “

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Hello. We have a little bit of time together and I'm going to set out some of the traditional understanding of the nature of the mind according to Tibetan buddhism. This is a view which is rather different from the Judeo-Christian tradition and also the modern scientific tradition.

TRYING TO DEAL WITH THE COMPLEXITY OF THE WORLD THROUGH CONCEPTS

I think it would be undeniable to say each of us present here has a mind. Having a mind gives us a sense that something is happening. Things seem to arise outside our mind and inside our mind. We look around the room and we see people, we think: *'They are not me. I live inside my own private skin bag. I'm looking out of my eyes and see all these many different skin bags all around me.'* So we have a sense of being separate from other people. With that we have the irreducible complexity of trying to make sense of who other people are and how they are.

For the self the other is a problem. It's usually quite difficult to know what we ourselves think and feel, but to try to imagine what someone else thinks and feels, that's truly difficult. Therefore, it's much easier if we imagine that other people are very similar to us. That is to say, we simplify the world by inhabiting a series of assumptions about it. Assumptions make life quick and easy; they function as simplifications. But actually, life is quite complicated.

When you look around the room there's a lot of detail. This detail is immediately available for us when we receive it all at once. But when we try to describe everything that's here, if you were to try to make a written account of all that you could perceive, it would take thousands of pages. Because as soon as you start to describe how the room is, the room changes. People move about, their posture and gesture changes, the expression on their face changes. This is not just a secondary order phenomenon, but it's the truth of the actuality of how we present ourselves moment by moment.

To be alive is to be interactive, and yet the concepts we use to make sense of our world tend to move in a rather static direction. And we believe that our concepts indicate something meaningful. I can say: *"I, James, am a man and the translator is a woman."* But man and woman are rather empty signifiers. That is to say, they can only function because they are so under-determined in relation to the lived actuality. There are many ways to be a woman, obviously, and many ways to be a man. And each woman is just herself. She's not some kind of numbered production from the woman factory. And how she manifests is going to be influenced by all sorts of factors: internal feelings, hormones, external impacts like a boss at work, the season of the year and so on.

So we start to see that the main concepts that we use in describing our identity function because of their hospitality, we can fill each concept as we need to in the moment. Similarly, this is a room, a room which can be used for many different functions. While we are in the room together it looks like the room is like this. Some other events occur, different people arise, there's different seating arrangements... it will be the same room, but as a phenomenal presence it will be rather different. I'm highlighting here the difference between the concept that we use to apprehend what is going on and the irreducible complexity of what is actually presenting itself.

From the point of view of Buddhism one can approach this incongruity between concept and actual manifestation not just through concepts but through meditation. As you progress through school you learn to think and then you learn to think about thinking – for example when are asked to give an account of your sense of a book that you were told to read. Later, if

you go to university, you learn to think about thinking about thinking about thinking. Because there is no end to concepts. Endless possibilities of elaboration, of moving into further detail, unfolding contradictions and so on.

That is to say, we can develop the range of the events that we take to be our experience. We can develop the kinds of concept that you know through intellectual study. You can develop the kind of range of sensations and proprioception you encounter through engaging in yoga and dance. You can extend the range of your emotional responsivity through psychotherapy, through drama and so on. This is very obvious. We are used to the notion of developing ourselves, accessing more of ourselves, unfolding more of our potential. It is as if our self is a kind of dynamic totalisation, so that we could give a full account of our life. We could write our autobiography.

But would that be the same as our life as we live it? Perhaps in its lived moment our life is quite ungraspable. Trying to catch hold of life and describe and depict it is like trying to catch a lizard. When you think you have caught it the lizard drops its tail off and runs away to freedom. Life is always way ahead of our concepts. So the question would be: can we come to live in the moment? A moment not achieved by interpretation or presented through comparing and contrasting with other accounts. Each moment is fully itself when we are open to the arising of the unified field of experience.

I'll say a bit more about what I mean by this. When I want to make sense of what's happening here in the room, I look for something to hold on to. Our consciousnesses operate through the five senses to provide information which our mental consciousness reflects on. These are all shaping functions. We approach the world not as neutral observers but with bias. We might not be aware of our bias because we think: *'I'm just me. This is how I am. I see what I see and good luck to you.'* However, if I were truly to pay attention to how you seem to be seeing things, it would relativise my position. Instead of having the confidence that I can see things as they are, When I accept that you have a rather different experience of what is going on I am compelled to see that what I have access to is the view only from here. The world I encounter is the world revealed to me through me. The patterning of the content of my experience – my feelings, sensations, memories, hopes and fears and so on – act as a kind of refracting prism which highlights certain features present in the environment and hides others.

When people start to meditate and become more aware of their actual experience, they realise that there are two possible interpretations at this point. The first is our rather familiar materialist view. The world is here, and it's full of things. These things exist in a way that allows us to describe them as nouns. For example, beside me there is a plant. The plant is here and I can have my opinion about the plant. But my opinion is separate from the plant and arrives after the fact of the independent autonomous existence of the plant. The world is full of things like this plant. In fact, when I look around, you guys all look pretty much like plants to me. You have particular shapes and colours and you seem to be just you. You were you before I met you. That's one view and we're very familiar with this view.

KNOWING ABOUT IS NOT KNOWING

The other view is more attentive to the actual nature of perception. If I look at you, do I have any access to the 'you' for you? Perhaps only you can access 'you' for you? Perhaps you are

presenting a 'you' for me? And when I'm making use of the 'you' for me, I am then developing my own sense of who you are.

The problem is that I shorten my account of you. Now I think: *'I know who you are.'* The more accurate sentence is: *'I know who you are for me.'* Who you are for your mother or your lover or your children, I don't know. That is to say, each of us is a situationally, contextually manifesting potential and none of us know what the next context is going to evoke from us. We don't know what sensations are going to arise in our body in the next five minutes. We don't know what thoughts are going to arise in our mind, or what feelings. We live swimming in this flow of experience. Moreover, although the experience is immediate and reveals itself easily, somehow we can't quite get a handle on it, or take hold of it, because the actuality of our life moment by moment is arising and passing. The moment itself vanishes on arising—it is too quick for thought to catch. What thought catches is thought about the moment. The narrative that I have about myself, others and the world is based on extraction of certain features from the field of experience which are then woven together into a reasonably coherent story. I assume that I am knowable and then I can assume that you too are also knowable.

When extreme governments come into power, they want to know a lot about their citizens which is why they create secret police and informers and keep dossiers. However, although they can accumulate a lot of knowledge about someone that person is alive. Being alive is not the same kind of experience as having knowledge about yourself. Because we are interactive, because we come into being through interaction with others, the carapace that can form around us from our concepts is constantly being disrupted. This disruption could be annoying or liberating depending on your attachment to your stories about yourself

So there is a difference and indeed a tension between ourselves as emergent phenomena and the stories of identity and predictability that we can weave. The more we attend to the interplay of subject and object the more we find something rather strange. I experience you as revealed to me through your movements, facial expressions and so on and I am also revealed to myself for I also am unfolding and don't know how I'm going to be.

Knowledge about me describes abstracted patterning. The nature of this abstraction is that it relies on taking ideas to be truth-telling phenomena. Yet, because of our interactive nature and the transience of thoughts, feelings and sensations, the very ingredients of the seemingly stable narrative we develop are actually dissolving as they arise. Moment by moment the ground on which we are basing these assumptions is dissolving. Because the things we say about ourselves, like we are tired or hungry or excited or interested, are situational descriptions which only last a very short period of time. While they are valid they seem to be a truth. When we are tired we want people to respect that. We are tired because we have been doing a lot of things. Due to causes and conditions I feel tired. The tiredness is generated by things which I might normally say are not me and yet the effect of being tired seems to be found in me.

Similarly, I might say: *"I'm breathing."* This is an amazing thing to be doing. But who is actually doing the breathing? Mostly we are not very conscious in our breathing. Most of the time breathing is occurring by itself. Yet I'm able to appropriate this breathing and say: *"I'm doing this!"*

"I'm standing." Who is standing? Well, I am standing due to the kindness of my knees, my feet, my muscles, my tendons. On the basis of the cooperation of many aspects of my embodied being I come to a conclusion: I'm standing.

Looking this way, we start to see the illusion of ego agency as we find ourselves becoming conscious of the process of life and how we habitually interpret this in terms of our own starring role. *"I am living my life. I am an autonomous subject. No one is going to tell me what to do."* However, if you walk up the stairs it's the stairs that tell you what to do. Stair number one says: *"Lift your right foot."* Stair number two says: *"Lift your left foot."* When you sit in a chair how you sit depends on the height of the seat. That is to say, mainly we are reactive-responsive. But we are intoxicated with the idea of mastery. *"I am in charge of myself. Now that the weather is getting colder, I have decided to change the clothes I wear."*

This insertion of an inflated sense of self into how we actually emerge in interaction with the ever-changing environment is a cause of great confusion. We have a sense of *'I have a mind and in my mind there are thoughts, feelings, memories and so on. I have a mind and I can do calculation and remember things with it.'* Say I start to think about what I did in the summer. Many things happened in the summer, so just a few particular features arise in my mind as memories. What is this mind it arises in? What is this thing I call 'my mind' that seems to be the receptacle within which the memory occurs? We can have lots of ideas about this. Some people are convinced that the mind is in the brain. A huge amount of money goes into research into the relation between the hard and soft aspects of mental activity. This can provide a lot of information about the brain as mind. So it's another method of producing concepts about concepts.

RECEIVING THE IMMEDIACY OF WHAT IS HERE

However, are we made out of concepts? Are we an idea, something that can be apprehended in a formed, shaped image? When you walk in the park and you see coloured shapes gently swirling in the air, is that a concept? Aesthetic sensibility, our capacity to offer receptive hospitality to what is emerging offers moments beyond concepts. The falling leaf catches your attention and something is evoked in you, perhaps poignancy, a mood of autumn. The falling leaf and the mood that rises in you is a direct conversation, un-mediated through concepts.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONSCIOUSNESS AND AWARENESS

Aesthetics is helpful in providing a sense of what buddhism means by awareness. In English we can distinguish between consciousness and awareness. Consciousness is equivalent with what Tibetans call *nam par she pa* which means a shaping knowing and points to the double move in which, in the very process of knowing something, I'm shaping what I'm knowing. Now, because our knowing things or our making sense of things, tends to be dependent on the information bank we have already built up, a lot of our perception is repetition compulsion. Our selective attention carries the additional task of confirming our ego identity and so we tend to focus on the aspects of the experiential field that confirm our sense of being ourselves.

Modern consumerist capitalism is based on the possibility of commodification relying on the ongoing power of reification. Any experience can be transformed into something tradable, something to be compared and contrasted. Our consciousness is what we call the aspect of our mental functioning that is able to perform this function. It is how we apprehend the world and its contents.

When I'm in the park and the evening is drawing in, the light is very soft and the leaf falls, there is a mood. We can be aware of the emergence of the mood without quite knowing what it is and indeed, without needing to know what it is. This is a particular quality of autumn and of twilight. In the twilight day slips into night. Between the clarity of sunlight and the darkness of night there's a hazy, transformative sphere. As the light diminishes the tree looks different. If you hold on to the concept, you say: *"The tree is the same, it just looks different as the light gets fainter."* We say this because we don't believe our eyes. If you trusted your senses you would see that this is a different tree.

The world as revelation is always changing. Dynamic, interactive, ungraspable. But the world mediated through concepts becomes knowable, predictable and semi-reliable. One of the functions of meditation is to allow us to rest for a while in a state where our experience is less and less mediated through concepts. Why would we bother to do this? Because we might see that over-reliance on concepts is like a kind of opiate, it dulls our sensibilities. Knowledge is now preceding experience. We know what is going to happen and so this starts to be just another day like the day before. We find ourselves getting a bit sad, a bit depressed, a bit bored. Life is not very exciting. We want to move from boredom to excitement and in a consumerist economy there are many products which can help us to move between these two polarities. However, we could think, *'What might lie in the middle between excitement and boredom?'* Perhaps there's a possibility of a sustained availability in myself to receive the ever-changing richness of the unfolding world. Such availability is the quality of awareness. Awareness is our lucidity and clarity which illuminates the emergent moment prior to reliance on concepts.

If we simply relax in to the outbreath we find a bit more space in our mental museum. If we look around the room what we see is shape and colour. What does it mean? Nothing, it's just shape and colour. But that's not enough because I want to know what's happening and so I have to tell myself a story about what is happening. The immediacy is here, just as if you were walking along the beach and looking out, saw small waves are rippling and rippling and rippling... We don't need to count the waves; we don't need to do anything with the waves. We simply receive the waves, allowing the waves to fill us. When we give ourselves to the waves, we are filled. This is enough.

Yet when we think about the waves and remember what it was like this time last year we have a very different experience, because now we are the shaper and the comparer. For the ego sense of self this is wonderful news. It has just secured itself some further employment. Nowadays many jobs are on zero-hour contracts. Our ego consciousness is very much like that, it has to keep proving its value moment by moment. Which is why stories are so seductive for us. With modern electronic devices you can be excited all day. From the point of view of meditation that excitement should actually be called 'distraction'. What is here is always here. It is here. What is this? This is the field of my experience.

When we finish here for today we will go out of the room, into the corridor and out into the cool evening air. We can imagine that we are individuals walking according to our wish, or we can be aware of our body as it shows itself moment by moment. We may meet a friend and greet them; it feels as if we are doing this, but if we relax the process of formulation, we can find that our greeting our friend is a flow of experience occurring by itself.

For example, I'm standing up because I like to see your faces, and most of you are sitting down. So you have the sensation of your body on the seat where your buttocks are. You can also see what's in front of you. The experience you have of your body and the experience you have of the room are both arising. If you relax your habitual interpretation you can see they arise simultaneously. There's no contradiction or conflict between feeling sensation inside your body and seeing the back of the room. It arises altogether. But we think: *'I am in here, the room is out there.'* That interpretive thought arising further feeds the delusion of duality.

We know that sometimes when we are dancing the music just flows through us and dancing moves from being a conscious, intentional activity into something which is an undivided flow between the sound of the music and the movement of our body. Moments like that are usually considered to be rather beautiful. By self-forgetfulness we are returned to ourselves. We find ourselves dancing. We find ourselves on the beach and open to being with the waves. Perhaps you've had some experiences like that. Rather than thinking of these as rare or strange experiences, from the buddhist point of view, these are identified as moments where the non-duality or non-differentiation of self and other becomes apparent. There's nothing wrong with concepts. They are useful for organising and planning. But when they become the guarantors of meaning in our existence, true openness and receptivity become unavailable to us.

HOW DO WE GET INVOLVED IN THOUGHTS?

One of the functions of meditation is to allow us to become familiar with not reacting to arising thoughts. It may well be that many of the thoughts that arise have little actual value: worries, anxieties, brooding over things of the past, regrets and so on. Even if you decided not to think about that particular person or event, somehow when the thought arises you get meshed into it again. You might think: *'Well, they are my thoughts, why shouldn't I think them?'* But you are just the middleman. You didn't make the thoughts, they came in your mind, now you feel that you've got to do something with them — like inheriting an ugly old table from a dead aunt. I never really liked it but I better hang on to it because it was my aunt's. The thought comes into my head, it must be mine, I've got to do something with it.

What is this involvement? It may well be that in the course of your life you had an unhappy love story. Someone was once very special and when you meet them a couple of years later you wonder: what was that all about? You are unavailable. You were once available. The availability is the being up for involvement. You want to see them. *"I need you."* Then, later: *"I don't need you. I don't want to see you again."* This is fascinating. *"If only I had known what you were like in the beginning..."* Unfortunately, you will never know what that person is like, because all we ever get is the 'you for me' as it occurs under the present conditions. A person whom you find a total shit may still be lovable to their mother.

The power driving involvement is not simply in the object. If it were only in the object the lovable person would always be lovable. We invest the other with a particular importance and then we see the qualities we perceive to be inherent in the object. Years ago, I was up in Newcastle and while sitting in a bar, I noticed a woman wearing a t-shirt which said: *"Keep drinking 'til he's cute."* So the cuteness is not specific to any one young gentleman but rather that when we get a bit drunk, we can give ourselves to anything.

Involvement happens very easily to us because the ego needs involvement to survive. We are easily lost in fantasies about the object. If we sit within the domain of conscious ego and try

to make sense of whatever is going on that's a lot of work. You have to be mindful of all the details. But such focused attention gets tiring so you start cutting corners and assume that you know how it is. You don't see, you project from your repertoire of interests and concerns. Thinking wraps us in our interpretive web; it is not a path to freedom and so we are endlessly having thoughts about thoughts about thoughts. We may decide, "*I'm never going to do it again.*" but this doesn't work, because we need to get lost in order to maintain the continuity of who we habitually find ourselves being. This is the quality of clarity of the ego, that is to say not much clarity.

However, we also have the possibility of accessing awareness which receives before it responds. Having received the broadest possible impression of the situation we can open to the intrinsic clarity of that. If you are on the beach with the wind blowing, the seagulls swooping, a slight mist across the water... It's all there, you've got everything. This is receptivity. Everything is being given to you, you don't need to do anything, just open yourself to it. Having received it, there's nothing to do with it. An hour or two like that can be profoundly satisfying. We have a sense of peace.

Now, we can't always hope to find moments with the power to hold us and open us in that way. But we can hold the remembrance of them as an encouragement to explore why, when so much comes without effort, why am I so busy making effort which upsets me? Perhaps more is available if I let go rather than grasp?

DOING LESS, RECEIVING MORE

In meditation, our focus is releasing and relaxing. Being busy constructing our world and maintaining it, requires a lot of effort. No matter how hard we try, sorrow and difficulty come into our lives. In the world today there are wars in many countries resulting in many refugees and people whose countries have been trashed by hurricanes and flooding so on. We live in a big world with big forces moving through. It can be tempting to put on the blinkers and just try to keep one's life on track, but such narrow defensiveness is not the only approach or even the best approach.

When we are in touch with the spaciousness of our being and the richness of our potential they flow together with the openness of the world. This opens many new possibilities. Deep meditation is deconstructive rather than constructive. By observing the impermanence of mental phenomena, simply sitting quietly and seeing that thoughts come and go, feelings come and go, sensations come and go we are released from the burden of self we are released from the burden of self-construction.

The transient nature of mental events might convince us that over-reliance on them as an attempt to secure a stable existence is foolish. Meditation offers the possibility that we could live with more space, more relaxation and, paradoxically, with more connectivity. Meditation lets us see that all thoughts partake of impermanence. They lack inherent existence. They are not intrinsically apart and so are actually always already in connectivity. They are part of the ever-changing field of the display of the open empty ground. Seeing this, we can abide in the freshness of the moment. Perhaps the world is meaningful in its beauty rather than in the stories we tell ourselves about it. If we do less, we can receive more.

This doesn't mean that we have to renounce the world. If we don't make it complicated, if we don't get in there turning things around and worrying about them we find that each moment

will go free by itself. The glue that makes our world seem fixed and solid is in fact our own involvement and attachment.

Allowing our reactivity to dissolve gradually we experience less and less unnecessary arousal. There is more space to receive what arrives as it is and so we find that the world is already rich and complete.

This is the great deconstructive move of resigning your position as the boss of yourself, as the master of your life. You are a participant in life, which is always shared and co-emergent with others. Taking your place you find that you have always had a place and so the struggle fades.