

Why emptiness is liberating

“Awakening to the fact of there being nothing frees us from the endless quest for something. Our problem is the seeming ‘thing-ness’ of the thing, our sense that we exist as some-thing in a world of many different things. The reification which imputes a real and enduring substance to phenomena is a deluding mental process. When this process is not relied on as a means of generating meaning, the actuality of phenomena is seen to be unfolding revelation. This revelation is the flow of experience, concrete and precise, each moment with its own unique specificity yet with no-thingness to grasp on to. Thus the anxious self can cease attempting to take refuge in illusory things and relax into the space of unfolding.”

Public talk by James Low

Shang Shung Institute, London

25 February 2016

Transcribed by Lea Pabst, February 2022

Revised by James Low April 2022

Audio:

<https://simplybeing.co.uk/audio-records/year/audio2016/why-emptiness-is-liberating/>

Video on Vimeo:

<https://vimeo.com/158008149>

Video on YouTube:

<https://youtu.be/axpwYOiHFXg>

Contents

We use narratives to create something-ness	2
Words can never put a handle on actual phenomena	4
Emptiness: absence of inherent self-nature	5
Interdependence	6
Samsara	7
Empty yet full of rich potential	9
Non-duality of the mirror	10
Dealing with life’s uncertainties	11
Choosing habitual formations over the infinity of space	12
Everything is the imagination	13
Every appearance is the unborn display of the vitality of the mind	14
Participation	14
Being responsive with minimal intervention	15

The topic for this evening is emptiness as the basis for liberation. Emptiness is an insight which we find in all the levels and dimensions of Buddhism, in all the different schools. It gets packaged slightly differently, but the basic principle is the same. The term 'emptiness' points to the insight which eliminates the habitual delusion of grasping at the world and finding things to hold on to.

This delusion has two aspects: a tendency to grasp, and the fantasy that there is something that you can grasp hold of. This is the basic structure of dualism or duality. What is it that is grasped? The erroneous assumption of inherent existence. Who is the one who does the grasping? The erroneous belief in a self-entity. Both are empty of substantial reality.

These two deluded beliefs are part and parcel of everyday experience. They are so familiar that we take them for granted yet they are actually constructs arising from our fusing of concepts with appearances. The applied concept seems to fix the transient appearance and impart to it a sense of inherent existence. But when we see that all the aspects involved are transient and insubstantial, then their intrinsic emptiness becomes clear. Insight into emptiness is like a screwdriver; it unscrews the hinge points which keep the edifice of samsara in place. It is also like a lubricant because it allows the fricative movements of subject and object to be less conflicted, less generating of unnecessary energy and so life moves more smoothly.

We use narratives to create something-ness

The Buddha's early teachings repeatedly draw our attention to the fact that all phenomena are impermanent. Impermanent means they are changing. You can read this in two ways: that there are things which change, or that there is ceaseless change in the endless patterning of experience which our mind conceptualises as the appearance of things. When we take the first reading you get an increased sense of motility and possibility, but there is still the basic assumption that there are entities which exist. What are these entities? They are often referred to as '*dharmas*', things, phenomena, individual existents.

The Buddha also pointed out that all compounded things are impermanent. Usually we see phenomena as existing as something in themselves. For example, beside me there is a table. On the table there is a cup and a watch and it would appear that they are just there, simply being what they inherently are. We look around the room and see people. When you see somebody's face it seems self-evident that somebody is there. We are able to function in the world on the basis of our confidence that we look out on a world which is pre-formed. We believe that it is there before we encounter it. We feel that we exist apart from the world although we are always in contact with it. The world exists apart from me and I encounter aspects of it as I engage with it. Moreover, I am confident that I can accurately describe my experience of it.

In fact this world, my world, the world of my experience, is inseparable from my narrative about it. The concepts of self and other are the fundamental building blocks of our constructed world. I am defined in and by the stories that I and others tell about me. Through our definitions we call into 'existence' our experience of self and other, and then we elaborate their qualities through commenting on them.

We make commentaries *about* the world. We generate meaning *in* the world through the kind of narrative that we can generate *about* the world. This narrative becomes a kind of thread. We take the entities of the world as if they were loose beads and we string them onto the thread of our narrative and make the necklaces of meaning with which we adorn ourselves. With this we also disguise the fact that we 'exist' as characters within our own narratives.

For example when you see a picture of the Hindu goddess *Kāli* she wears a necklace with fifty skulls. These fifty skulls represent the *āli-kāli*, the vowels and consonants of the Sanskrit alphabet. When these basic building blocks are put together as words you can start to manifest your narrative. You can start to make a story. The sounds of the vowels and consonants have little meaning in themselves but when they are combined in patterns it is as if their combinations carry inherent meaning. They become signs pointing to referents that seem to have inherent existence. Generally, we think that there are trees and because they exist the word 'tree' can be applied to them. In fact, it is the word and concept of 'tree' that gives separate identity to the shape to which we apply the term 'tree'. The something-ness of the tree is not in the object 'out there'; rather it is an experience generated by the concept.

What we think of as reality is based on ideas. Moreover as long as the mind commences its operation on the basis of the seeming given-ness of stuff, what we have is the elaboration of *interpretations* of stuff. Our commentaries both arise from and reinforce our belief that we live in a world of existents, of inherently existing entities about which we have our own opinions. Because we are very good at beguiling ourselves with our own creativity refracted through reification there is always more to say. We ourselves and our worlds are the interplay of the identifications and evaluations arising in the infinite conversation of *samsara*. Subject and object provoke and inspire each other into endless mutation. This is the flow of signifiers and signifieds dancing and creating the patterns we believe in and by which we live our lives. This points to the second meaning of the Buddha's statement that I referred to earlier, "*All phenomena are impermanent.*" There is only change. The seeming stability of phenomena is an illusion generated by our conceptual interpretation

You can go to therapy for five years, ten years, fifteen years, twenty years but you will never get to the bottom of yourself, because the self is an unfolding process which is fed by the very action of talking about it. We our world is also fed by and elaborated through the ways in which we think and talk about it. Once there is something, there is something about which something can be said.

With dharma we have learned that everything is impermanent and compounded. We also have our own sense that we were once small children; we went to school, we went through lots of changes and have developed all sorts of personality characteristics, memories, tendencies and so on. Yet although we know all of this about ourselves, there still seems to be a core sense that we exist as an unchanging self-entity, 'I am myself.'

This belief is strong and powerful. All the evidence of change, the fact that we have moods, we have feelings, we have hopes and fears which arise in interaction with the world, indicates clearly that there is there is no isolating sealant around us. We may feel that we are an individual, that we are a separate monad entire unto ourselves, and yet our physical presence is in ceaseless communication with our environment. We look out and light comes into our eyes; we hear, we speak, we drink, we piss – this interaction is ongoing. The interplay of our hopes and fears and all the feelings that we have, arise in relationship, and yet, here I am as me. You are you. The 'someone-ness' that I experience in you and in myself is not foundational. It is not real or enduring as a fixed entity. All the components of myself are in flux, fluctuating in the forcefield of dependant origination. The 'I', the personal self that I have taken to be my root, my core, is in fact a flow of becoming whose actual root cannot be found. It is empty of substantial existence and yet here we are – undeniably present, but not as we think we are.

Ignoring the actual openness of our ground we cling to identities formed through a variety of narratives. Narratives link concepts together in patterns which are wrongly taken to indicate the existence of entities. Some narratives are given to us in our childhood, through our parents and through going to school. We learned how to elaborate particular kinds of interpretation. We learn not only to make commentaries on direct experience, but that we can make commentaries on indirect

experience, and then further commentaries on indirect experience of indirect experience of indirect experience. At school you might have had to write an essay on a classic play like *King Lear*. To do that you read some commentaries on *King Lear*. Then you looked up a critique of these commentaries on *King Lear*. Building castles in the air. And yet the teacher reads it and tells you, “*Oh, that’s good! I think you are really starting to understand what’s going on here.*” The more ideas you have, the more others think that you are able to make sense of what is going on.

Words can never put a handle on actual phenomena

Buddhism, however, goes in the other direction indicating that the less you elaborate ideas and the less you rely on them the more you are likely to directly see what is going on. The function of meditation is to release our addiction to ideas as being the vehicle of truth. Conceptual elaboration is a very powerful force. It’s the way in which one thing leads to another in an endless chain of signifiers confirming the real existence of what is occurring. Because of the very nature of language there is always more to say. Each word has little meaning in itself. Meanings unfold within the semiotic web of interaction and linking. There is no single perfect word that can voice the truth and end all commentary.

Yet in our yearning for simplicity we believe that the signifier and the signified exist in a very simple correlation. If there is a cup, the cup is something which is signified through the use of the idea of ‘cup’. I say “*It’s a cup*”, and when you look at it you say, “*Yes, James knows what a cup is.*” On the basis of your own belief in the true existence of the cup you believe that I am able to accurately identify what I am holding in his hand. This is not a frog or a dog, it’s a cup. That makes sense. This is how we tend to proceed.

But, of course, someone else might say, “*Well, it’s not actually a cup; it’s a mug.*” So now we can get into some fine distinctions for it is not just a mug but it is a particular kind of mug. Moreover, should you so wish, you could use it as a weapon. You could bang someone very hard on the head with it. You could break the edge of it and gouge out their eyes. You could use it to bail water out of a boat. There are many, many functions which are potential in the object yet are hidden from us by our desire to know precisely and definitively what it is. So, in order to give myself a sense that I know what is what, I have to exclude many aspects of the potential of the object. I make the object something for me and so the actual object, which is not something as such, slips away unnoticed,

We tend to believe that we know who other people are yet everybody is multiple, eluding all fixed entities. We have many aspects to our personality, we have many moods, we have diverse potential. These aspects are not controlled by us for they are co-emergent with circumstances. We are participating in a vast shimmering of participation. We only have access to certain aspects of other people and yet we feel we know who they are. It is self-confirming to be able to say, “*Oh, I know what they are like.*” This desire to apprehend appearances as objects which we take to be existing in and of themselves - as a ‘mug’, as a person, as a man, a woman, whatever – maintains our ego sense of competence and confidence. We have worked hard to enable ourselves to move through the world applying the right identificatory categories so that we gain some purchase on what is going on. Just as this mug in my hand has a handle that lets me hold it easily, so all the objects in the world seem to have a handle. We grasp them with a conceptual handle that we ourselves have fixed on to them.

Dzogchen texts refer to the nakedness of the mind. Naked means no clothing, no handles. The mind is compared to a round ball. A ball has no edges or corners, no top, no bottom. There is nothing to grasp and hold onto, and yet in our everyday existence our ease of being in the world with others is entirely facilitated by our capacity to find the handle and then use it correctly.

This is a mental activity, one which is self-deceiving because it only works if you imagine that the handle that you grasp belongs to the object. This means that my power as an ego-self requires me to live in a dead world of fixed objects. It is the fixed reliable knowability of the object that allows me to feel safe in my dependence on it. This sometimes comforting delusion is inherently unstable since, as the Buddha pointed out, all things are impermanent, dynamic and ungraspable.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus is famous for saying, *"You can never step in the same river twice"*. A very simple thing to say, but it is profound. If you regularly go to the River Thames for a swim, you might say, *"Every day I swim in the River Thames."* However every day when you plunge into the Thames, you are swimming in different water. Different water, but the same name. The phenomenal actuality of what you are encountering is fresh and new, but you reassure yourself about what you are doing by adhering to the name, 'I am swimming in the river Thames'. The stability is not in the water. The stability lies in your capacity to convince yourself that your concepts are giving you an accurate account of something being there. The river, the ceaseless flow of water, is wrongly taken to be a stable entity. This is delusion.

Emptiness: absence of inherent self-nature

The names we use to define appearances do not reach the actual appearances. They do reach our concepts, our imaginings, and this co-mingling of name and imagining generates an opacity, an impenetrability which we take to be the substance of the thing. In fact the actual appearance has no thing-ness. It is pure or mere appearance, an appearance whose ground and essence and manifesting is empty of existence. All appearances are, in themselves, unborn. This is intrinsic, simply how it is. Yet it is hidden from us by our own relentless determination to trust our concepts and our narratives as the vehicle for truth.

If we simply stay open and present before what we take to be a flower and desist from adorning it with our concepts we will find that all our projected words and identifications slip away. There is an immediate actuality, but what is it? It is here, it is this. It is so clear. Yet we cannot see what it is. It is not a what, not a thing. It is luminous appearance empty of self-substance. As such, in not being anything in particular, we find ourselves present with an ever-revealing potential. This emptiness or absence of defining substance is the ungraspable gift of all appearances. It is due to this that any object or any person can sustain multiple usages, multiple definitions, multiple identities, without ever being reduced to any one of them as its defining truth. The essence of all appearance is emptiness and with the absence of definitive individual essences there is the space of possibility within which the creative potential of the mind moves in its now playful vehicle of language.

When we take ourselves to be 'real' and existent, we also take the world to be 'real' and existent. The duality of self and other is the basic polarity that supports the delusion of individual identity. When we see that this delusion is merely an illusion that has been thickened by belief, we start to awaken to the emptiness of the categories of 'self' and 'other'. They have no true referent and are merely conventional terms sucked into the limiting project of maintaining our erroneous perception of real entities.

Despite ceaselessly creating the many aspects of the world which we encounter we do not recognise what we are up to. It is only when we release ourselves from the dualistic confusion of unawareness that we can start to be aware of our own open empty ground and start to taste our own intrinsic freedom.

As long as this is not awakened to we tend to deny our part in the moment by moment emergence of our world. With this we place ourselves at the margin as small people who are at the mercy of the many factors of the big world. *'There is always stuff out there and I don't quite know what*

it is. And I don't quite know who I am. However there are some big people somewhere who know what's what and so I should rely on them...'

This is the fear of the ego, a fear that the ego gives to itself by frightening itself through imagining that the world exists as something knowable and that we lack the knowledge we need to function well. We imagine that the wise are able to avail themselves of knowledge produced through conceptualisation. We seek to copy them in this through relying on our dualistic consciousness, our capacity to know things by apprehending their true shapes through our reliance on concepts about them. Consciousness knows about shapes; it deals with knowledge of apprehendables. It consolidates knowledge that can be apprehended through the five sense consciousnesses. Mental consciousness formulates data in a way that gives you a handle on them. What you are grasping at is your own projected fantasy. There is actually nothing substantial there but this nothing is very rich. It is the glimmering, shimmering radiance of the mind which is never exhausted. It has infinite potential yet this is not seen directly. Instead we grasp at our own projected shadows and take them to be substantial and real. When you are committed to the duality of subject and object as being the truth of experience, the unreal unborn unestablished openness of radiant presence is not opened to as it is but is experienced as overwhelming and destabilising.

Concepts themselves are not inherently harmful or limiting. It is our sense of ourselves as a self, as an ego different from all other egos, that distorts concepts. Instead of being used as tools for thinking, tools that support conventional clarity, concepts are recruited to support the delusion that we exist as individuals independent of our environment. For the ego-self, freedom from reliance on concepts would generate uncertainty and anxiety. Our adult concepts support us in attending to the many tasks that are required in order to maintain our habitual sense of identity. Aligning with what we take to be necessary can easily keep us from taking responsibility for how we live our lives. Necessity becomes the organising principle which hides from us our basic openness, the uncompromised sphere of our creative potential.

The world is actually open. Each moment is fresh. When we release ourselves from our preoccupations, we find that rather than being a thinker solving problems we are in fact an open presence. We are open because we have no fixed content. We are not a construct. We are not reliant on or produced by the transient content of our mind. Our mind itself is a simple unreified awareness. It is this openness which illuminates the open freshness of the world. Everything that occurs is experience.

In his earliest teachings the Buddha pointed out that there is an absence of inherent existence in people. People are composites of the five heaps or skandhas: form, feeling, sensation, composition and consciousness. He is pointing to the self as a fabrication, as an illusion generated by the functioning together of these five factors. Our mistaken belief that this composite is in fact a single entity with inherent existence is a veil of delusion which comforts and confirms the illusory self whilst hiding the door to liberating awareness. In his *mahayana* analysis of these factors, Buddha Sakyamuni points out that all constituent factors and all phenomena also have an absence of inherent existence. The more you look into any entity and try to find what is its core essence, the more you find that there is nothing underlying appearance. Everything rests on nothing, inseparable from nothing, and is without the least separate defining unique individual essence.

Interdependence

All seemingly separate entities arise in dependent co-origination, in interdependence. Each form is inseparable from the dynamic relationships from which it emerges, and which sustain it and which will bring about its vanishing. For example, who we are has been influenced by our parents, by the mood and culture of the times of our early youth, by our gender, our state of health and so on. We

emerge moment by moment as the patterning of myriad constitutive factors, some seemingly outside us and some seemingly inside us. The movement of the trajectory of patterning of our transient becoming is propelled by the alternating pulsation of proactive and reactive mobilisations.

Our sense that we are simply 'ourselves' is naive yet useful since it allows us to avoid the dynamic complexity within which we appear as momentary expressions of the ever-shifting patterning of that complexity. We are an inalienable part of the field of emergence. Our sense of apartness, of singularity as this specific isolate, is a delusion arising from unawareness of the indestructible integrity of the whole.

This whole is not a bland homogenisation. It is rich in diversity. Each and every appearance is an appearance of the whole and shares the empty essence of the whole. Due to this there are no truly separate phenomenon each with their own self-guaranteeing essence. Each appearance is within the field of appearance as an aspect of it. Each 'thing' that we are accustomed to seeing as an existent, as an entity, is in fact inseparable from the seeming otherness which surrounds it.

For example, this mug in my hands appears to be self-existing as something which is here just by itself. Yet even the mug is interactive. It appears to be self-existing if you ignore the fact that I am holding it. If I remove my hands from it, we will have a mess on the floor. So, what will I do with the mug? I better put it somewhere. Every something is somewhere. You can't take the somewhere out of something. Each 'this' is co-emergent with 'that' which is all around it. When we start perceiving self-existing entities, the essence that we perceive in the entity is an essence projected by our mind. It is our mind which attempts to stabilise that which is inherently unstable.

Samsara

The endless attempt to stabilise the unstable fuels the continuity of the illusion of *samsara*. The effort to freeze the world, to turn the unpredictable interactive flow of experience into something fixed and reliable, is wasted effort. The only glue we have with which to effect the stabilising is our own deluding belief that the world is composed of inherently existing entities. Dissatisfaction is part of our experience because although we are good at deluding ourselves as to the reliable existence of phenomena, their actual instability keeps challenging our assumptions. Our commentary, which serves to construct the world as we take it to be, binds us to the endless task of creating the uncreated. We enter into judgement; we imagine the world to be other than it is and so frustration arises as we try to make events conform to our ideas. If you decide that that form is better than this form and work to get from this form to that form, you are likely to find that there is something wrong with that form too. Life goes on in this way until you come to your death. This is what *samsara* is, the endless, endless adjustments of forms.

For example, look at what has happened in England to our education system in the last thirty years, or to our universities or to the National Health Service. There has been endless tinkering, endless changing. All this effort yet nothing definitive has been established. Each person has their own idea and is not comfortable when the arena they inhabit does not conform to their idea. *"My way is best; things have to change."* Well, the river is flowing. You don't actually have to push the river since it will change anyway. The reason people want change is because they have convinced themselves that there is stability and that they are stuck with something they do not like. But the stability exists only in their own mind. However, instead of looking at their own mind and thinking, *"I could just change my thoughts about this since the object is going to change anyway"*, they say, *"I'll change the object. Then my mind will feel some relief because I don't like how the object is at the moment."* Due to this, rest, peace and simple ease is displaced into the future and kept out of reach.

When we look at our own mind in meditation, we see thoughts, feelings, sensations and experiences. They arise and then vanish – this, then this, then this... They offer nothing to grasp hold of for they are appearance free of inherent existence. They are there for a moment; they each have an impact by which the current topology of our experience reshapes itself. To see this directly is to see that the constituents of our identity have no real existence. Nothing which occurs for you, whether in the world or in your mind has inherent existence. There is neither fixed reality nor nothing at all. Whatever occurs is occurrence inseparable from emptiness. It is not the occurrence of something but the occurrence of nothing. Each ‘it’ is how nothing appears without itself appearing. It is our own mistaken belief in the true existence of appearances that persecutes us, not the arisings themselves, for they are like appearances in a dream.

If bad thoughts come, you might get terrified and retreat from them and feel that you need to change them and push them away. Yet, they will go by themselves. You might have good thoughts, you might want to hang onto them and build on them and develop them, yet they vanish by themselves. All mental phenomena are impermanent. All outer phenomena are impermanent. The illusion of permanence is generated by the reliance on abstractions, on concepts which form a second order discourse, a kind of miasma. Immersed in this fog it appears that when we are thinking about something, we are actually in touch with the thing itself and thereby are gaining true knowledge of the world.

However thoughts grasp thoughts and that is all they grasp. Furthermore, thoughts are always dissolving. Although thoughts are innately, intrinsically, empty they generate the illusion of reliable existents. They arise as illusion and vanish as illusion and yet we are deluded by these illusions into imagining the real. This is similar to being in the cinema. You are taken into a narrative that seems to be true and to be going somewhere. It endures for a short period of time and then it’s gone. What was that all about? We believed in the movie, we got taken in by the characters and some meaning, some value, seemed to be there. Yet it was an illusion. You might tell someone, *“It was quite a good movie, you should go and see it.”* What would they get? Well, they get what you got: sand pouring through their fingers.

On a nice hot day sitting on a beach somewhere in the Mediterranean picking up soft warm sand and letting it dribble through your fingers would be quite pleasant. But if you realise that the whole of your life is dribbling through your fingers, that’s another matter. There is nothing to hold on to so what is it all about? What is it all for? It is the absence of inherent meaning that allows the creativity of meaning making. We are not fixed entities in a fixed world. Each moment unfolds with our participation. The potential of the world meets our potential and this gives rise to the patterning of this moment. Meaning is a construct. It is constructed by mental activity devoid of inherent existence. It is the play of emptiness.

But why on earth would I be interested in a buddhist view that says everything is devoid of the meaning that I think it has? What am I left with if all fixed meanings dissolve? Well, these fixed meanings have never actually existed. The absence of fixed inherent meanings feels like a loss to the ego-self which seeks to cling on to something, anything. Yet this ego-self is itself ceaselessly dissolving. Meaning is emergent. Moment by moment ‘self’ and ‘other’ emerge as specific interactive patterns which then dissolve giving space for the next moment of emerging. If the objects of the world were intrinsically meaningful, we would be merely the audience observing the drama. It is because the appearances of the world exist as potential that they can endlessly display new meanings. Co-emergent experience is the ceaseless display of the potential of our unborn mind.

Our mind is not a fixed thing. Thoughts, feeling and sensations are not things. The appearances of the world are not fixed things. Devoid of fixed existence, the interplay of myriad empty patterns is our ceaseless display. This is intrinsically satisfying and integral. Being complete, it requires no added-

on concepts to complete it. Its intrinsic meaning illuminates the meaninglessness of trying to make meaning.

Empty yet full of rich potential

The *dzogchen* tradition points out that all phenomena have the same ground, the open empty availability within which all possible forms arise. If you awaken to the empty ground then everything which arises is like a rainbow. We have all seen a rainbow in the sky and yet nobody has managed to catch a rainbow or touch it or put it in their pocket. We experience a rainbow; in fact we're often touched and moved by seeing a rainbow. This magical ungraspable appearance offers us a taste of the actuality of all appearance. The truth of our life is the fullness, the richness, of momentary experience which never becomes an appropriate-able entity. What we appropriate is the sloughed-off skin of the moment. Just as a snake sloughs off its dead skin, when we grasp something life itself has slithered away. Life is fresh and always changing. To devote the years of our lives to the accumulation of snake skins is a good way to become bored and sad and uncertain about ourselves.

In order to turn towards the ever-fresh we need to examine who is the one who appropriates. *"I am. In order for me to be me – to continue being the one whom I know I am – certain factors around me have to remain the same because if there is too much change I don't like it. I become anxious. I don't know what's going to happen."* This is the voice of the ego, of our belief that we have and are an enduring personal identity. It feels true yet it is an illusion which continues because it is believed in rather than examined.

Our ego arises from our unawareness of the fecund space we manifest in, from and as. Having lost integrity with our own ground we are off balance, and habituated to using what we take to be object formations to prop ourselves up. The objects we are attached to, our possessions, music, friends and so on, become like a series of flying buttresses that are holding up the shaky edifice of our notion of who we are. We don't want to fall apart.

But who would fall apart? When you observe yourself in the morning you have a sense of the content of your experience, certain sensations in the body, certain feeling tones, certain thoughts. This is the current inventory of yourself. By the time you get to the afternoon, and you take the inventory once again, the sensations are different, the feelings are different, the thoughts are different. Your morning self has vanished. Your afternoon self has arrived. Effectively, your morning self has fallen apart. And it wasn't so painful! In fact we are not a fixed entity nor even a ceaseless flow of fixed identities. Rather we manifest as part of the ceaseless unfolding of the basic space of presence. Dissolving and arising are inseparable as the display of the unborn.

Emptiness is not a hellish void, it's not oblivion, a chasm of despair and existential lostness. Emptiness is the plenum void, the full void which ceaselessly shows its rich potential. This potential shows itself as ungraspable appearance. It is neither something that really exists nor nothing at all. It is the middle way free of all extremes and polarities.

In the buddhist traditions of the higher *tantras* and *dzogchen*, this open potential when awakened to, is referred to as the *dharmakaya*, the aspect of the mind which is empty and full at the same time. It's empty because you will never find it as a substance or an entity. And yet it's always full of the unfolding of experience, which is its own shining clarity. That clarity, that bright luminosity, is called the *sambhogakaya* which means the aspect of enjoyment. Enjoyment points to the vitality of all the flavours of experience of the richness of the world, the immediacy of presence. Within this non-dual presence there is the apparitional movement called the *nirmanakaya*. Our apparitional forms arise with our environment. Our potential of posture, gesture and expression is unlimited and is called forth in our non-dual presence. Thus our body, voice and mind are not properties we have, rather they

are the illusory constituents of ungraspable participation in the ungraspable luminosity of the ground. This is the lightness of being, a being which is pure presence free of reification. When we relax out of our anxious habit of holding on to our egoic false identity, we find ourselves as part of the undivided whole.

Self and other are not mutually exclusive entities but co-participants in the patterning of the field of luminosity. When it is clear to us that every arising has the same source, the open empty ground, then the burden of reification and selectivity falls from our shoulders. No longer having to organise what we experience into hierarchies of value, we are available to receive the vibrant immediacy of each occurrence. Our connectivity is intrinsic and not based on selective correspondence. All is the radiance of the source – including the thoughts which deny this. We are grounded in the ground and so have no need to set one thought against another. All are welcomed with all pervading kindness.

The stage on which our life is unfolding is referred to as the *dharmadhatu*, the space of all *dharmas*, of all phenomena, of all experience. It is both an infinite source and an infinite hospitality. It is called the source because there is no other base or ground for appearances. It is also the site of hospitality in that it is spacious enough for every appearance to get exactly the right room to be as it is.

Non-duality of the mirror

The traditional example often used to show the non-duality of space and appearance is that of a mirror and its reflections. The reflections are in the mirror. You can't take a reflection out of a mirror. The reflection is **in** the mirror and it both is and is not the mirror. Without a mirror you wouldn't have reflections. When you look in the mirror, you see reflections; you don't see the mirror. The mirror is the infinite invisible host which generously shows itself in the form of its transient situational content.

We go to the mirror for the reflection and take the image to be the thing itself. Yet without the mirror, you wouldn't have the reflection. When we ignore the mirror and focus solely on the image it is as if image is there by itself. It is the emptiness of the mirror which allows it to show endless reflections. The reflections are in the mirror without touching or marking it.

Similarly, it is the emptiness of the mind which gives rise to ceaseless experience. The emptiness of the mind is the unimpeded expanse of awareness. This clarity is the illumination of both experience and experiencer. Neither aspect of co-emergent experience has inherent existence or enduring identity. They are always fresh and never repeated. They are not representations and do not stray from simple presence. They are manifest illusion – precise, unique, mutually impactful and ungraspable.

In *tantra* ignorance is to be transformed into wisdom so that it ceases to be an obstacle. By containing every occurrence within the mandala of the deity these appearances are transmuted from existent entities into the illusory display of wisdom. This requires great concentration and commitment since the temptation to reify still lingers.

In contrast the view of *dzogchen* points to the clarity of intrinsic wholeness. Everything that occurs is an apparition in the mind and so the view of *dzogchen* indicates that there is no need to try to correct ignorance and the problems that arise from it. Ignorance is an illusion within the mirror of the mind. The source base has never been lost for it gives rise to all of *samsara* and all of *nirvana*. Whatever occurs is always within the infinity of the non-duality of awareness and spaciousness. There isn't a subject on the one side and an object on the other. There isn't an 'inside' on the one side and an 'external arena' on the other.

Although we experience subject and object, inside and outside, these are merely empty concepts in play with empty appearance. They have no power to establish even one atom as a separate entity with inherent existence. Seeing the empty nature of appearances paradoxically makes them more bright and distinct. We discern the variations of shape and colour within the whole. This discernment is enlightening whereas differentiation, the act of distinguishing this entity from that, is a dulling reinforcement of the delusion that separate entities exist in themselves. Seeing the self-arising and self-vanishing of all phenomena – including all the mental phenomena of thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and plans – shows us that there is no basis for the construction of dense dulling entities. Everything is the play of luminosity, the unborn generosity of the source. To see this is to relax and release oneself from the effort to maintain duality.

The dissolving of the delusion of real entities frees us from appropriation so that our clarity gives rise to appreciation of the aesthetic richness of the variegated display. The one taste of emptiness and the variegated tastes of appearance are inseparable. Form is emptiness: emptiness is form

When we see the diversity of colour, shape, taste and so on arising for our senses, we feel internal responses of enthusiasm and eagerness or shyness and moving away. This rich pulsatory movement is illusory. All of this is happening and yet nothing is happening. This is the great mystery of emptiness.

Our minds develop dualistic categories such as ‘only one thing or many different things’. Our mind works by setting up oppositional categories, each of which defines itself in terms of exclusion. If something is hot, it’s not cold. If someone is tall, they are not short. But, of course, they are only tall in relation to some people. Someone else who is seven foot tall could arrive and suddenly the tall person starts to look small. Something that is hot to the touch is not hot at all in terms of molten steel.

All of these categorisations are relative and yet our mind structures our experience as if mutual exclusion, ‘this’ is not ‘that’, is based on internal essences. Yet it is the very dynamic of exclusion that creates the seemingly separate singularity of ‘this’. ‘This’ is ‘this’ because it’s not ‘that’. So, the this-ness of ‘this’ is inseparable from ‘that’. ‘This’ and ‘that’ are born together and it is the dynamic of seeming exclusion which allows us to take ‘this’ to be ‘this’. In this way ‘this’ is linked to ‘that’, and ‘here’ is linked to ‘there’. The absence of inherent existence in any phenomenon is the relativity of all that is encountered since all the phenomena in the world are mutually arising.

Dealing with life’s uncertainties

Here we are in this room together. We look around, we see different people. Some people we know a bit, other people we don’t know. Bits of history we’ve had with people arise in our minds, different possibilities of stories... What is all this? This is the creativity of the mind. What is established by it? The potential for patterns generated from the arising and vanishing of appearances. We see someone we haven’t seen for a while and we go towards them to say hello. We are assuming that they are knowable. We have condensed our past experiences of ‘them’ into predictive knowledge that is valid across time. For us they are our interpretation of them. If we meet someone whom we don’t remember having met before, we are a little more hesitant because it seems there is no real bridge that allows us immediate access to that person. But if we smile at them and they respond, then some tentative bridge of connectivity develops as we build up a narrative picture together.

Our actual encounters are not between myself and yourself as existents. Rather, the current patterning I take to be me encounters the current patterning I take to be you. We are so skilled at imagining existents that it seems obvious that both you and I exist as separate people. In fact what we are experiencing is the excessive activity of the mind, a congealing of idea and appearance which thickens the appearance so that it can be conceptually seized as an entity. This is self delusion

generated by residual excitation. We are rarely relaxed and at ease. We tend to be anxious as our thoughts scan past and future, judging and solidifying the vanished and the not-yet-come. The light of the mind is the lived vibrancy of direct experience. What blocks this is not the hard, self-existing nature of things out there in the world. What blocks our appreciation of this is the gravitational pull of the solidifying orientation of our own conceptualisation.

The ego, our felt sense of self, our sense that we exist, that we know who we are, is not reliable. We are not a fixed thing. We are patterns arising and vanishing. Yet in our egoic belief that we do exist we avoid opening to our intrinsic unborn openness and turn towards enclosure, separating self and other, past and future.

We install concepts as the vehicles of truth but then we suffer because we do not actively think most of our thoughts – they arise for us, suffusing us, taking us over. We are the site of the arising of the results of previous actions. We are our karma, and unless we are able to recognise the fusion as it occurs, we will be swept into reactivity and impulsivity. Being certain that we are someone, we rely on something other to resource us. We are not complete in ourselves. We need something else yet each something is impermanent and leaves us still needy.

It is impossible to hold on to the always-already-vanishing. If we see the vanishing as vanishing we can work with the circumstances of dynamic phenomena. But if we deny the vanishing we are condemned to strive to maintain the continuity of our mistaken idea of the reality of the ‘things’ on which we rely. This effort is the energy driving samsara since it is the root of karmic accumulation in its linking of deluded dualistic conceptualisation to intention, to enactment, to validating conclusion.

Choosing habitual formations over the infinity of space

Due to concept-based striving, the relationship that we have with the world is no longer direct. It is refracted through a cloudy crystal which casts an opaque light that appears to reveal substantial forms. This is very different from refraction through a beautiful crystal which increases the potential for experience.

If you feel depressed, hopeless and worried, this mood can permeate any situation. Then, perversely, hope can be upsetting whereas hopelessness can be very reassuring. *“My life is shit. It has always been shit. It will never get better. At least I know who I am. What about you? You look chirpy and cheerful. Ha, you’ll be sorry!”* In that way the stasis of fixed belief can wrap itself around us as if it is giving us definitive knowledge. The accumulation of knowledge is, as it were, the internal paralleling of the external accumulation of things. As these linked structures are built up it can appear that we are creating an edifice that will protect us against the vagaries of existence. However when we observe what is actually occurring the attrition of structure is constant. People lose their faith, their jobs, their health. Whatever we have ebbs away. So what will I rely on? What will I take refuge in?

We can take refuge in the Buddha. That’s fantastic. Take refuge in the Buddha. We don’t know where he lives – nobody has seen him for quite a while – but take refuge in the Buddha. Take refuge in the *dharma*. We’ve got a library of *dharma* books here, buy more *dharma* books, take them home, read them, think about them, put them on the shelf, bow to them every day, take refuge in the *dharma*. *“I – take refuge – in the dharma.”* Subject – verb – object. I – am made secure – by what I have, if I possess these *dharma* objects. If I have a shrine, I can clean it every day, offer a lamp every day, fill the bowls every day. This will give me a sense of security based on object constancy. Object constancy is very important for small children who need to know when they are going to be fed, where their toys are and where they are going to sleep for the night. It helps them settle.

However, for us as adults this kind of security is unreliable since we are the ones who are making it happen. Rather than reassuring myself by stabilising the patterns of my life, perhaps I can find who it is who is doing what I am doing. What is the true source of this activity which I claim to be mine? Our ground, which is emptiness free of the division of subject and object, of self and other, gives rise moment by moment to the variety of empty appearance. All the dualistic activities of daily life are not actually different from the unborn source and if we see this then they have no power to limit us for we truly see nonduality. You don't have to change what you do or what you wear or what you eat or how you talk. You don't have to try to be a better person. You simply have to observe in each moment of arising that this is the display of the source. Unborn, it is always fresh, self-arising and self-vanishing.

However, if this is not clear for you in the moment of its occurrence – if you are not clear that you, with all your thoughts, feelings and so on are a part of this display – then you will mediate occurrences through the dichotomising of grasper and grasped. Projecting graspable existence onto what you take to be the object, you will find that you, the subject, are grasping at one thing after another. We imagine the handle on the 'object' and then we grasp that handle. This is the consolidating function of conceptual elaboration. We are lost in the forest of our own concepts, unable to see that this forest is also the radiance of the ground. The source gives rise to all the appearances of *samsara* and *nirvana*. If we see this non-dual emergence, there is clarity regardless of whatever concepts and assumptions arise and pass. But if the non-dual is not seen, then some arisings are taken to be self and others are taken to be not-self and the exit from *samsara* is hidden in plain sight.

There is too much going on, too many details to sort out. Analysis, planning and thoughtful intention will not bring us to the end of duality. Only the integration of the ego complex within the field of non-dual appearance brings true freedom. The seemingly born and existent is actually unborn. Opening to this openness shows the immediacy of self-arising self-vanishing appearance within which all dualities are self-liberating.

Who am I in the moment when I am my unpleasant ego-formation? When I am in my anger, or my jealousy, or my selfishness, or my pride? I am thought catching thought. One thought acts as the subject. The other thought is labelled as the object and these two tumble together, on and on and on, going round like a perpetual motion machine. The subject experiencer seems to be bright with its own intelligence and knowledge yet it is not stable, being reformulated through its interaction with the object. The actual illuminator of both experiencer and experienced is the mind itself which never changes, never moves. The constructed ego self is always changing and always moving for in fact it is the fresh energy of the mind itself unborn, ungraspable, arising as a specific transient pattern.

Everything is the imagination

These transient patterns are empty of existence. They are illusions which the deluded ego imagines to be real. Imagining is a mental activity, the formation of sequences of ideas. They are vehicles for emotion and it is this emotional intensity which generates the sense of something real existing.

In *tantra* we use intentional imagining to deconstruct the seemingly inherent validity of our habitual karmic imaginings. The ritual texts give us a script by which we enrol as Padmasambhava, Tara or any one of the vast pantheon of deities. The more we fuse into the presence of the deity the more we dissolve the false ground of existence and open to the actual ground of unborn space. By fully entering identification with diverse deities, the seeming 'reality' of habitual identity is revealed as just another empty imagining, an illusory apparition.

The imaginal is not imagined **by** someone. It is the instant presence of the potential of the ground. If we believe that we really exist as our opaque karmic imagining, then it is quite a process to become the deity. But if we relax and open to our unborn ground, we find that diverse imaginings are instantly present without effort, without the duality of subject and object.

Every appearance is the unborn display of the vitality of the mind

The mind has no definitive, restrictive, essential self-substance. It is open and empty and simultaneously the infinite potential of the imaginal. The imaginal is all that ever occurs. It is the sky, the earth, the ocean, the birds, the fish, the human beings. We are all moving in the imaginal, the patternings of light, sound and all the other ungraspables.

When we are aware of our ground and potential as present yet not personal or possessable, we have the freedom to be part of apparitional connectivity. With this clarity our forms are neither defined nor defining fixations but relational aspects of the unborn field. Freed of the notion that our form is an entity, we are present in the co-emergence of formations as we arise in specificity with friends, children, colleagues, and so on. We never arrive at our 'true self' since our selfless selfing is the truth of all selves. This is non-dual kindness as the many kinds of manifestation display as moments of relation. Kindness illuminates the intrinsic inclusivity of the ground source.

Our apparitional forms emerge within the apparitional field. They are aspects of it, and no matter how great their diversity, they do not separate from it. The circumstances of the current patterning of the field are the circumstances with which 'my' apparition emerges. The field is an integrated communicative field and the contact between field patternings and 'my' patterning is vibrant as the presence of awareness.

The empty unborn mind displays the non-dual field within which all movement is the kindness of responsiveness. The variety of responses is the ongoing co-emergence of patternings. For example, if you step on a pavement, on a wobbly stone or on mud, the field will respond to the pressure of your foot and your apparitional form will respond to that response. Thus potential is in play with potential and this frees us from the limitation of subject-verb-object. Unreified potential has no limit.

We're not setting out to correct other people or to impose our ideas on them. Non-dual relating is the emergence of formation in the moment of formation of the experiential field. We are all participating in the non-dual unfolding of the apparitional world.

In this way the empty integrity of *dharmakaya* awareness reveals the clarity of instant presence, the all-at-once-ness of appearance. Within this we arise as responsive patterning. We are neither pre-choreographed nor leaves in the wind, blown hither and thither by circumstances. Co-emergence is the subtle interfacing within which you are neither the controlled slave nor the controlling master.

Participation

The undivided whole is often described in terms of three inseparable aspects. The first aspect is **essence**. This is the face we had before we were born, the face we will never see. This face is awareness inseparable from the infinity of the space of all phenomena. Our essence is aware space. Like the mirror, it shows all without ever being seen itself. It is always empty even as it shows its fullness.

The second aspect is **nature**, the complexion of the face. Our face shows our life. Our energy, our health or our sickness shines through as our complexion. The luminosity of the mind itself is the display of this shimmering potential, as when the dawn light reveals the outlines of the world before the bustle of the day begins. The potential is the clarity of unborn-ness. The absence of thingness is the potential revealed in instant presence. Each moment is fresh, open. It is the opacity of conceptual identification that promotes the delusion of over-determined entities.

The third aspect is **kindness**, the movement of energy within this field. Kindness is our participation as one-of-a-kind. We are kin. We have the same source. There is no real difference between us. We are light moving in the field of light and even our darkest thoughts cannot separate us, or anyone else, from this field. With the dissolving of the delusion of duality, intrinsic connectivity replaces personal identity as our site of presence.

Participation is not subjectivity and is neither intentional nor effortful. It is the energy of the ground source responding with flexibility and sensitivity to other illusory phenomena in the field. The dissolving of the ego-nexus allows the whole to heal itself from its imagined wounds. With this we are no longer seeking others to validate that we really exist. We are free to respond, unreified and free of the tendency to reify. The reactivity of the self-referential ego is gone and clarity responds fittingly.

Being responsive with minimal intervention

We are not trying to enlighten the ego. The ego is itself delusion. Enlightenment occurs when we awaken to our intrinsic unborn awareness. The tradition of transmission is the means by which we are enabled to look for the light where the light **is**. The ego wandering in *samsara* exhausts itself by looking for light where it cannot find light, and then cheats itself by imagining that obscurity is light. We're not trying to turn darkness into light. We are finding light where light is.

The traditional example for this is the fact that if wash and wash a piece of coal it will never become chalk. Coal is coal is coal. If you don't have buddha nature, you can't be a buddha. Because, as with all beings, you do have buddha nature, you simply have to open to it. You do not have to improve it, or earn it, or be given it. What obscures the light intrinsic to your awareness is the habitual attempt to make light by rubbing concepts together. All such dualistic activity of seeking merely hides the intrinsic.

The aim is not to rescue people from *samsara* but to let the light of presence awaken others to their light. Rocking between the polarities we pass over the ever-open middle way – success to failure and back again, high to low and back again – caught up in the momentum generated by being always off-balance. If we can but rest in the midpoint where there is equalness then the light is relieved of its veils of projection and prejudice. We settle, we open, we receive, and then a response may or may not arise – it depends on circumstances. Emptiness is wisdom, connectivity is method. There is no need for technique. Rather than seeking how to do it we attend to how it is.

When we relax and receive, we see that the field of movement is not dependent on us. We are already within it and it is not what we think it is. However life is, do not reify it since that cuts you off from the source. As the texts say: *"If you go up to heaven, go to heaven. If you go down to hell, go to hell."* Some people have easy, happy lives, some people have a lot of sickness, some people have loneliness, depression, sorrow... however it is, that's how it is. If you take it seriously, you enter into judgement about it and say, *"I shouldn't have this kind of a life. Things should be different for me. I don't deserve this."* Taking this position vis-à-vis yourself is part of the endless fragmentation that the ego-self endures. With this there is not only me in my sorrow but also me with thoughts about myself in my sorrow: endless elaboration, endless commentary. Of course this fragmentation hasn't actually fragmented anything, yet if you believe your thoughts to be true they will fragment you!

The emptiness of the mind is the basis for its hospitality, for the rich diversity of experiences, of how we are in the night, in the day, in happiness, in sorrow. Being with how this moment is, is actually the only site of our presence. When we go into memories of the past or anxious expectations about the future, we find that we have entered into a place which is nowhere. And that nowhere-ness is very, very dangerous for us because there is no end to trying to transform 'nowhere' into 'somewhere', 'no-thing' into 'some-thing'. Yet the paradox is, if we settle into the nothing, the empty, the open, we find that everything is immediately present.

Now we come to the empty ending of the empty evening. It has been a pleasure meeting you all and I wish you well in your practice.