

Clear Light¹

Extract taken from 'The Happy Twins: Dzogchen and Mahamudra'²

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FOR EXAMPLE, ALTHOUGH THE TERM 'EMPTY' IS APPLIED TO SPACE, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SAY HOW SPACE ACTUALLY IS. [Lines 25 & 26]

This is very helpful for us. Once we start to learn buddhist vocabulary and begin to feel more comfortable and confident using buddhist terms, this can be another way of becoming stupid! Although we say that space or the sky is empty, 'empty' is just a word. It is a sign, and the sign cannot catch what space is. Try to remember that when we use the word 'empty' it should function as an encouragement to look at space, rather than being a substitute for space. Does that make sense?

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I have described before how I had to learn all kinds of things at school. For example, I learnt the names of the rivers in South America, like the Orinoco. I have no idea now where it is, but at one time I did know and I liked the word. I had a map of South America and I would draw my little blue line of the Orinoco River. What did I know about South America? I knew a squiggle on a piece of paper; that was my South America. The teacher came and said, *"Yes, at least you have got it in the right country so I'll give you a good mark because you know something."* I knew where to put my

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1. This was how James commented on Lines 25 and 26 of the mahamudra text.
 2. Two texts were studied on this retreat. The Mirror of Luminous Revelation (from Nuden Dorje Drophan Lingpa) and The Mahamudra Middle Way of the Ganges (from Tilopa)

squiggle. You get a lot of that in schools, don't you? Empty signifiers. I hadn't been to South America. I hadn't felt the moist tropical air or seen the particular kinds of sunset they have nor heard the local birds. None of that was available to me. There was just an abstract empty signifier 'Orinoco' which was being filled with the significance of the need to pass an exam. Perhaps you can see how alienation and abstraction become the path to power; it doesn't really matter if or what the signifier refers to.

In the same way, although the mind is said to be clear light, there is no such basis for conventional terms that assert it exists in this way. That is why we have the Five Questions about the mind; so that we look for ourselves. When you are there it is more like a phenomenal experience of the mind itself. The mind shows itself and you are there, and that is very different from learning about the mind. Tilopa is advising us to be very wary not to delude ourselves by substituting the word for the actuality.

When we say the mind is clear light, it simply means look at clear light; it is a metaphor. From where you are sitting you can look towards me, and if there is some tall person in front of you what you see is the back of their head, so your space of clear light is limited. If their head moves to one side you can see more, because the clear light continues unobstructed until it hits the painting on the wall behind me or my face. In this tradition, this is what clear light means – unobstructed immediacy – just this. We get up and go out of the room into the garden. If you go down the path you are in the forest. Moment-by-moment there is unobstructed immediacy; the revelation in the field of unobstructed clear light.

What is that like? It's not like anything. Clear light is there and invisible. It clarifies, but you can't see it. Rigpa is not a term that is used very much in mahamudra however awareness (rigpa) illuminates unobstructedly and yet it cannot be seen as it is not a thing. Then you can see why this term *öse!* [Tib. Od gSal] clear light is everywhere. It doesn't mean that it is pumping out light, like a lighthouse; it is not producing something, it is not enlightening as in putting on the light switch. It means it is translucent, transparent, unobstructed, and cannot be found as a thing. The illuminating is never illuminated since it doesn't need to be illuminated because it is self-illuminating — but it is self-illuminating in a way that is different from how it illuminates an object.

Light moving through space gives us a sense of the light in the room. For example, when it is dark in here and somebody switches on the electric light, the bulbs send rays which move through space and they illuminate the space. Otherwise, you would be in a dark room, but the actual bulb is also illuminated. However, the illumination of the object and the illumination of the rays of light are both the same and different. That is to say, they are the same because it is just light. But in one case light is showing itself as something, because when the light strikes this painting behind me many different colours arise as the light moves into conversation with the potential of what is there. The

different pigments in the painting absorb frequencies of light, and therefore reject or repel or send away other frames.

Clear light doesn't have colour. Objects have colour. If we were made of clear light, light would pass right through us. We have colouration. We see our faces are kind of blotchy white, or brown or whatever it would be. We have these different colourations, which means that the clear light works with the pigment of our skin to show particular formations. It is the quality of the object, it is not clear light. Either way, it is the same.

When we do the Guru Yoga with a White Aa, the White Aa stands for clear light. It is emptiness – unobstructed spaciousness. Coming from it are these five colours of light which represent the movement of the five elements, the five wisdoms, the five obscurations, and so on. These feel palpable.

With the Five Poisons there is a sense of our own dullness and stupidity, aversion, desire, jealousy, pride, and so on. There is something palpable. We all know what it feels like to be angry, and it is not the same as feeling jealous, or proud and self-satisfied. There is a particular vibration or presencing with these emotions, which is the same in the five colours. When you look at green it impacts you in a different way from red or a blue. Each colour has a visceral embodied resonance, just as desire and anger do.

It's the same as for the Five Elements. The quality of wind is different for fire or water. When you go out on a very windy day it is very different from a very wet day or a very hot day, where you can lie on the ground and feel the warmth of the earth. In that sense all these manifesting forms are vibrations which are contained inside the clear light.

Considering this from the dzogchen point of view, the ground of everything is sound and light. Light comes as rays and as particular pulsations or *thigle*. This is all energy and energy manifests as formation. Everything we see in this room is energy. We don't see it as energy because we live in a world of concepts, so we see pillars and people and cushions but when we go back to our senses what we are feeling is the energetic feeling tone of situations. So how can I relax and open and allow the energetic vibration of the situation to fill me? It will not stay. I'm not going to be taken over by vibrations since I'm not vulnerable. The mind has no content, being like a mirror or like the sky.

You talk with someone maybe about politics and you feel very engaged. That is a set of vibrations. You talk with someone else and they are talking about their garden and their plants. That is another vibration and it feels completely different. Why? Because it *is* completely different. It is a different activation of your chakras, of your potential. Both are patterns of energy. Nothing is established, which is why in our practice we stay open to life events; how it comes. If this comes – wow! If this is not going to stay, wow! So there is nothing – something – gone – loss – something.

The key issue is to stay in the moment with the revelation of the completeness of the feeling tone, which means receiving and not interpreting.

We spend so much time interpreting experience rather than just receiving. If somebody caresses your wrist there is sensation; that is all there is. So what is sensation? Ungraspable. It's quite nice if somebody does that. What will I do with it? Nothing. There's nothing to do with it. But it is wonderful because it is a dharma door. When somebody smiles at you it is a dharma door. Somebody looks at you as if you are stupid, that is also a dharma door because now you see I am shaping with pleasure, shaping with fear, shaping with shame. This is filling my world like a cloud, like a reflection in a mirror, and it has gone. You may not like it but that is part of the experience. Most of us have a hole in our face called a mouth. That mouth is not just for eating, it is also for speaking. As human beings we are very lucky. We can say do it again, or please don't do it, or make it stronger, or make it weaker, or why are you saying that to me? We can engage in the pulsation of interaction. It is not about telling someone else what to do or what not to do; it is pulsation. It is like doing a pushing hands exercise in tai chi. Who is leading? It flips, and it flips. When you are having a conversation it flips and it flips. You receive and you offer in a conversation, in an embrace, in doing gardening together; it is always like that.

This is what Tilopa is pointing to here. When you have conventional terms and you feel you can come to a conclusion and know what's going on, you are already out of the game because the game is process, flow, and interaction.

Someone may say, 'I've been thinking about what happened.' What does that mean? What happened for who? What happened for you? Who were you when it was happening? Are you now the you, the who that it happened for? The one who is thinking about what happened was not the one who had the happening.

This is what he means by conventional terms: you come to a conclusion, you come to a shape, and the shape is always a substitute for immediacy. Life has patterns arising and moving. It is not of course that you don't have a feeling after an event and you are happy or unhappy, or don't think you can proceed, or whatever. These are moments of light rays shooting out because sound and light also means speaking. Speech is energetic movement between points. Just movement.

When you want to tell someone something, someone is there, you have got something and you are going to tell it to them. In English we say, 'I am going to give you a piece of my mind.' But you can't give someone a piece of your mind because what is arising is not what was inside. You can't say what you think and feel because when it comes out it is not the same outside as inside. That is why life is a little bit lonely sometimes.

Tea shops in India sometimes displayed posters of Hanuman. Somebody asks Hanuman, where is Ram? Hanuman responds by tearing open his chest and there is the god Ram inside. He is never apart from Ram, but he couldn't say, he had to show, and most of us can't do that. Speech is one step removed because language is conceptualisation. Sometimes you can look into someone's open eyes and see space shining through their eyes. That's a beautiful experience and that is actually how all experience can be if we don't block the other person with our interpretation.