Ethical Action in Emptiness

How to act for the benefit of others and the environment while maintaining a calm clear ethical effectiveness. This is a question that should confront all Buddhists since the suffering of others is our concern. The tension of duality that drives the structures of samsara including the heartless exploitation of beings needs releasing. This can be done only when we open to the unchanging ground. We will look at how to open and how to remain open under pressure.

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English makes a distinction between morality and ethics. Morality tends to refer to rules and rules can be established in a general way and be applied onto situations. Ethics is concerned more with how we bring ourselves into the world in specific situations, situations that are usually quite complicated.

Take the question of euthanasia, for example. We may accept the general proposition that all life is precious and that killing is a sin. However, if somebody has great suffering not eased by medication, or if their life situation is very limited, then they may wish not to live anymore. This raises such questions as: is my life my own? Is it something which belongs to me? If my life belongs to me then some would say that I can do whatever I want with it. In buddhism the question is complicated by its understanding of the ego: if the ego is a kind of imposter and my true nature is awareness, then my life is being appropriated by the ego-imposter who tells me that my life is my own.

We are meeting just now thanks to Zoom and we greet each other and say hello. We feel that we exist, that other people exist, and we use the computer as a way of making a connection between these two separate islands of existence. Being human beings, we are able to feel both pleasure and pain and in general, we prefer pleasure to pain however, since we are human beings, we experience many levels of complexity. For example, in London it's the evening just now, dark and raining, yet there are people out running on the street. For me the idea of running in the rain is painful but for these people the idea of running in the rain is pleasurable, even although the experience may be painful. It is our capacity to engage with complex experiences in this way that makes possible our wish to fulfil the bodhisattva vow and work for the benefit of all others. However, the same capacity can also make it difficult to be a sentient being.

To have feelings, sensations in the body, emotions, hopes and fears and so on means that we often live with conflicting currents inside us. We might have a conflict between our rational self and our emotions, and we can try to think our way out of these difficulties. Thinking arrives after the fact of the situation or it may come in advance of the situation: should I do this should I do that? But in the immediacy of having to make a decision there's often little time for reflective or analytic thought.

## Reacting to what we experience outside

So, from the buddhist point of view, we want to optimize our capacity for calm and clarity but for as long as we are bound into reactivity to whatever we experience —through our senses, or things happening in the body, or in our mind — we don't have much calm. Nowadays people have access through their phones to streams of information about political activity, injustices, gossip etc and so there are many possibilities of intense reactivity. In the face of injustice many people feel called upon to go out into the street and protest and of course in many countries the state takes these protests as a kind of provocation and so the police come in and then there are even more reasons to protest. There are many many things to be upset about: the destruction of the environment, homeless people, the people who become refugees due to war, the abuse of children and women — all of these situations where we encounter suffering are causes which can bring about excitation. We are aware of political and economic theories of prejudicial causation which give rise to such problems. We can track the destruction of the rain forest back to the desire to plant soya or palm oil in order to feed the desires of gluttony which are pervasive in capitalist commodity countries. If we could stop people consuming so much beef, for example, we wouldn't need soya to feed the animals so we wouldn't need to chop down the forest. Then we can formulate a solution such as that if more people become vegan then we won't lose the tropical rainforest. In fact, if you don't become vegan you become personally responsible for the destruction of that forest now.

If somebody gives me a reason to feel even more guilty and bad about myself, am I likely to say, “*Thank you so much for informing me that I have even more faults than I knew about already? I was beginning to get bored but now I have something else to worry about so that's good.”*  This is not likely to happen, so although there are many non-governmental organizations and charities with really committed people operating in the field of climate change and protection of the vulnerable, these activities all too often are ineffective.

It's not that we should just try harder to be better or to make the world better. From the Buddhist point of view, there is a paradigm or interpretive system which provides a frame of reference inside which we consider the problems in the world.

Nowadays with the rise of the cult of the individual, we have the assertion of individual human rights, a right to self-definition: no one can tell me who I am; I am who I think I am. On one level this sounds very good but of course we tend to have a lot of thoughts about who we are and so, instead of being able simply to define ourselves and gain some clarity, we are endlessly processing ourselves and coming up with new senses of who we are. This leads to even more turbulence. The more we read and study about economics and social construction the more ideas we can have about what will be effective strategies for change. We know, for example that President Obama tried very hard to get a general public health service available in America. Then came President Trump who set out to bring that system down. Perhaps now President Biden will attempt to put it back up again. In each of these three moves so much thought and feeling and hopes and fears goes into the production of planning and analysis. Expansion and contraction.

This is the world we live in daily. We are going to be confronted by situations in which there is unhappiness, and we can identify seeming causes for these unhappinesses. These interpretations are all based on duality. That is to say, “*There are some people who are suffering, and their suffering is real and they are real, and there are some actions which could be done to stop their suffering, and these are good actions, so the people who perform these good actions are good people, and we should support the good people in doing the good actions.”* This is the general way in which we think about the problems of the world and we will be encouraged to think in this way by the cultures that we live in.

##  Exploring change

The buddhist view is very different. The Buddha set out in his very first teachings that suffering is a fact and he said that suffering comes from attachment and ignorance. It comes especially from the desire to have things that we don't have, and the desire not to encounter the things we don't want. He didn't blame governments or tax policies or greedy capitalists for making us unhappy. He said the cause is in the mind. The body moves because of the mind. The thoughts which arise in the mind, and which are adopted and carried forward, mean that my body engages with the world to transform situations. So we have to look at our mind.

As long as we are looking out onto the world and seeing what seem to be stable things — like my chair, my shoes, my cup and so on — the presence of these ‘reliable’ objects outside my body seems to confirm that my own body is also reliable and predictable. So, the first thing we start to explore in dharma is impermanence.

History shows us empires expanding and contracting. When the Spanish first went to South America, they got a lot of gold and other resources. Later, as they gradually lost these colonies, they didn't have access to the gold. The golden period of Spanish culture was dependent on someone else's gold and when they didn’t have that gold their own culture started to decline. Political ideologies change; the economic situation of different countries changes.

We look at our own bodies and can see how they change over the years. We look at attitudes to different social groups, to different religious groups and we see how they change over time. Nowadays Roman Catholics and Protestants have to show respect for each other. It's no longer considered ethical to classify some people as ‘heretics’ and burn them in public squares. At one time it was obligatory to go and observe such events. The clarity in ‘knowing’ that one religion was right and good and that another religion was wrong and bad has been lost. Now we cultivate a liberal acceptance of many different views. What once seemed very true and important has become less true and important. Ideas are always changing.

Looking towards our own mind, we find that our thoughts and feelings never stop moving. Sensations come and go in the body. Even the idea that ‘this is my body’ is an idea which comes and goes very quickly. Whatever we take to be permanent and stable is established by thoughts and beliefs which are impermanent and unstable. The thoughts that we have, that we believe in, were not thoughts we were born with. They have developed inside us according to our education, our culture, the kind of people we hang out with, and so on. Buddhism refers to this as ‘dependent co-origination’.

## Establishing our values and ethics

However I position myself in the world, my positioning is going to stand in relation to other people's positions. We grow up in a family with certain expectations and even if we decide that we don't really like our parents’ value system and turn our back on it, our new positioning has been formulated as part of a dialogue with their positioning. We develop our value system and our ethical principles through dialogue, whether internal or external, with other people's ethical and value systems. That is to say, my value systems are relative. They arise due to causes and conditions.

Most societies try to elevate the rules of society into a kind of absolute truth. So, Moses goes up the mountain and receives the Ten Commandments from God and he brings them back down and says*, “Listen, don't argue with this. This is not made by human beings. This is the word of God. You must follow it. You can't argue or disagree or choose just a half or a quarter, because it's all true.”* Most religions and social systems assert that their way of behaving is the right way and that this is how we all have to behave. Likewise in Buddhism, we have lists of good and bad behaviours for people, whether they are lay people, monks or nuns.

An ethical system can serve as a kind of compass in that it gives you a sense of direction in life. The problem is that you have the actual world (which you are experiencing through your senses), and then you have your map. You have bring your compass, and the map, and the territory all into line. If, for example, you are a soldier, your general may tell you that your government has decided it is now at war with people who yesterday were our friends. Today they are our enemy. As a soldier you salute the flag. If you are commanded to kill the enemy then this is a good and noble deed. Why? The government has the authority to decide when yesterday's friend is today's enemy. *“Killing the enemy is your patriotic duty; it protects your family, so kill the enemy.”* Even in the midst of the confusion of impermanence and change, people are trying to write rules and regulations and fixed definitions. It like writing on the flowing surface of the water of experience.

In the general buddhist view we see how relative, how interdependent, are all these definitions of the qualities and values of the items of the world, and also of ourselves. We then understand that our values have no inherent truth to them, no inherent existence. For example, when I was a young student I didn't like the idea of having to respect my elders. I thought*, “Old people, what do they know?”* but the circle of life turns and now I am an old person. In Britain today old people don't count for much. The idea that old people have wisdom has vanished. If you can get all the information you need from your mobile phone you don't need to go and talk to your granny. In that way the belief structures that we grow up with start to change.

## Does anything have inherent value?

 This is what is meant by emptiness in buddhism — that the seeming true existence and true value and unchangeable importance of any situation is floating in air. It's not supported by any solid foundation. It means it is empty of inherent existence. It means its existence is not supported by any personal essence or substance.

When we first study this in dharma we do it in an analytic way. We look at different phenomena and we see how they arise through the placing together of different factors. So, if you have a book, you can look at the binding, you can look at the spine, and you can notice that it's either stitched or glued. The ‘book’ is a collection of separate pages. By the juxtaposition of placing different pages of text and pictures in a particular order you create the illusion of the book. If you like the book you believe it's important but there will also be people who don't like the book. When the Chinese came into Tibet, they forced the monks to use their buddhist scriptures as toilet paper. It was saying that what the monks thought was holy and high, was not holy and high for the Chinese. In the cultural revolution in China when the Red Guards became very active, they did a lot of confronting people to try to change their attitude and beliefs. They would say, “*Oh look at these holy lamas! They're not sitting on their throne now. Where are their magical powers?”*  They would encourage the lay people to beat the lamas*. “Oh, see they suffer. How can they protect you? We communists have guns and so we can protect you.”* A lot of that behaviour went on. Similar things went on in Russia and in many other countries. When we really look, we see there is no end.

There is not the least atom of inherent truth which is manifest as a substance. Buddhist books only have meaning for people who believe in them. You might think they are important but maybe your parents say, *“Hey, don't waste your life in these nonsense things. Go out and have fun with your friends. Go dancing. What is buddhism going to give you? It is just turning you into a strange person.”* We have to see that something is important for me only because I believe in it, and that it is the energy of my mind which is making it important for me. It is not inherently important.

This is why many monasteries have been pulled down and the statues sold, jewels taken out of them and so on. A statue is made to be hollow inside and things are placed inside. They are referred to as ‘zung” (Tib. gZungs), Skt. dharani) which means to hold things. They hold the blessing and help the statue be more powerful, be more real then. They then put a metal plate on the bottom to seal all the jewels and the blessing objects safe inside. They then bless the statue and finally paint the eyes in. Then you believe, *“Oh, now this is really Padmasambhava”* or Tara or whatever deity. If the statue is small somebody might take it and put it on top of your head and then you say, *“Oh, thank you for this blessing.”*  Let’s imagine that I am giving you the blessing of Tara just now, I don't say, *“I give you the blessing of the* statue *of Tara.”* Tara is with this statue. The real Tara is here in the statue, but all compounded things are impermanent and since the statue is held in place by faith, when the faith goes down, the statue becomes just an object that people might try to sell. Britain is full of churches which have been sold and turned into houses. The number of people who go to the Christian churches in Europe are fewer every year. These are all signs or teachings on impermanence. People once gathered money to build a church because it was very important to have this one. The church is built by the mind. Dharma centres are established by the mind. The mind comes first. From the mind comes the money to buy the resources and the physical willingness to make the actual building.

The mind is the most important aspect of your existence but what is your mind? Usually we think of our mind in terms of its content. If we want to know what's going on in someone else's mind we ask, *“Oh, what are you thinking?”* as if were they to tell you what they were thinking about you would somehow have access to the actual shape of their mind. But of course, we think many different things. As soon as a thought arises in the mind it is vanishing. You remember something and then the memory fades. Is this the mind? Thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears — these are experiences. An experience arises and vanishes. The experience is a showing of the potential of the mind, the possibility of the mind to display or lay out or reveal many different patterns.

Buddhism talks about the mind itself as being the ground or the source or the basis so if you imagine the earth, then out of the earth many things can grow: flowers, potatoes, wheat and so on. If you look at the flower it doesn't tell you much about the earth. The flower may be blue, but the earth is not blue. You look at the potato yet the fact that you can eat a potato doesn't mean you can eat the earth. The earth shows its potential in forms which are not identical with it. It is the same with the mind. If somebody always looks very sad and physically, they're inactive and they don't know what to do with their life, we might say that they are depressed. As if there is something wrong with their mind and if they go to the psychiatrist, they can get some medication. Because there's something wrong with the mind if you take the mind to be the brain. The medication alters biochemistry in the brain and then the person might feel better but is this the mind? This is a flower arising in the mind and the psychiatrist is a very good gardener who knows that if we apply this chemical to the weed it will turn into a flower. So now the mind is showing many happy flowers but what is the mind itself?

## The mind and the contents of the mind

From the very beginning our mind has been unborn. Unborn means it doesn't become something, because the mind itself is not a thing. What arises from it is also not a thing. Something appears. We have thoughts and feelings. On the basis of feeling hungry you might decide to eat an apple. We appreciate the apple by destroying it, because the apple offers itself as you chew it. It mulches down and then you can swallow it. If the apple was like a stone then it wouldn't be much use to you. The value of the apple is its destructibility so as you chew it, these enzymes in your mouth start to break it down. Then it goes into your stomach and you metabolize certain aspects of it. The apple is empty of apple-ness. What we could say is that the essence of the apple is emptiness. It doesn't have any essential positioning. The centre part of the apple which in English we call the core, indicates something basic: it's the area where we find the seeds and from the seeds other apples can arise. If we grow an apple tree the seeds are not the essence of this apple; they are the potential for another apple.

You grow up in a family with certain expectations and even if you decide that you really don't like your parents’ value system and turn your back on it, your new positioning has been formulated as part of a dialogue with their positioning. It is important to see that emptiness doesn't mean an opposition to appearance. We live in a world of appearances; we ourselves have an appearance. Our appearance and our embodiment has solid bits like our bones and softer bits like our flesh. The bones themselves, if left alone, will gradually dry up and turn to powder. Due to causes and conditions our body continues. There are many factors which can cause us to die. This body has no essence of its own. If you stop breathing, you die. When you breathe you take that which is not you, into you and it becomes you. Then when you breathe out that which was you, becomes not you. It's very important to observe this. You, your embodiment, is a conversation with the air and with the ground under your feet and with your food and drink and clothing. You are the movement of the world. Your body is made out of the elements of the world. You are part of the world. You might think. *“No, I am an individual and I act onto the world.”* but you act on the world in the world. You can't come out of the world. Even if you close your eyes and cover your face, you're in the world.

This shows the emptiness of our ego. Because I believe I am a separate person I can say, *“I am different from you. I’m not like you. Your body is made of the same basic elements as mine; we both have thoughts but your thoughts are not my thoughts. In fact, I have better thoughts than you and I know this is true, and I know that you don't know that it's true, because you think that your thoughts are better than mine. This is why we don't like each other.”* This is why wars arise, on the basis of difference of thoughts. You could probably imagine that if you were very desperate you might want to kill someone, or steal their gold. You can do something with the gold but if I kill you because of your thoughts, I can't catch hold of your thoughts. Thoughts are part of the inner movement of our existence. The body is moving, thoughts are moving, emotions are moving. I am movement in a world of movement. This is all I am. This is all you are. Our feedback is freedom to influence the patterning of our movements.

 Although these movements are not things you can catch, since they are dynamic and unfolding, this doesn't mean that they're not impactful. We know that if somebody is sweet to us and smiles at us and appreciates us we feel good and if somebody is unkind or insulting we don't feel good. The breath comes up through the throat; the vibration of the muscles and skin in the throat creates a vibration of sound that goes out in the air. This travels through the air and it comes in my ear. This is a vibration but it's revealed to me as*, “You have insulted me. That is a horrible thing to say. Why did you say that? You want to upset me. You want to break my heart. Why would you do that?”* We take it for granted in these situations that there is a real person out there, outside me, doing something to me and they have just attacked me by sending vibrations through the air. *“This is terrible. We should have a law against vibrating the air!”* But then if they say, *“I love you”* then that's a very nice vibration. So we need to get a little monitor for the vibrations coming near us since my sense of self is very sensitive and quite unstable.

Although I might think that I exist and that I am a certain way, it changes so quickly, so easily. I am empty of self-essence and yet I appear. I manifest, I show posture, gesture, facial expression, and so on. I am movement in movement; I am not a fixed thing and therefore I need to work with circumstances. You are movement in my mind. Whatever you are for you I don't know, but you arise for me as my experience. So, you may think that you live outside and that you walk around and do many different things, but for me you are revealed as the movement of my mind. I look at your face and I see movement. I can say, *“This is your face”* but that is only an interpretation. What I see is shape and colour moving. I hear you speaking. That too is an interpretation. Interpretation means my idea identifies what you are doing. You are only talking if I have the idea that you are talking.

In fact, at this moment I can hear Milton talking and he is talking nonsense! That’s because he's not speaking in English and for me meaning is embedded in English. Milton, unfortunately, is saying some funny words which have no meaning. If I knew Portuguese, I would understand that these Portuguese words are the movement of the mind. The meaning is not in the words. The meaning lies in being able to vibrate in the resonance which allows the word to reveal its meaning. If I don't have access to that vibration it's meaningless. The mind generates meaning. Without the mind there is nothing at all. When the mind moves, experience arises and there are many kinds of meditation where we can explore this.

For example, in many forms of tantric meditation we dissolve into the deity and together we dissolve into emptiness. That is to say, the elaboration of the visualization of the deity becomes a method for deconstructing and dissolving the habitual elaboration of my sense of self. Then there is nothing; it's just empty. Gradually some movement of the mind occurs and gradually the world arises for us. Where did the world come from? From emptiness. The purpose of this kind of meditation practice is to see directly that in this moment the world is arising from emptiness.

Everything you see is the radiance of your mind. Your teacup, the cheese in your fridge — everything is the radiance of your mind because you are experiencing it. If there is no one to experience the cheese is it cheese? We may grow up in a cheese-eating family and become familiar with what cheese is and all the different kinds of cheese. We know the colour, the smell, the taste, how it is made and what one can do with each cheese… Some of the potential of the cheese is revealed through the smell and the taste but largely its potential is revealed through our conceptualization that, for example, *“This is Manchego cheese.”*

I will go on to link emptiness and ethics together, but the key point so far is to observe for yourself that you are movement in the space of unfolding.

 Okay, so we're going to take a break now for 20 minutes.

**[Break]**

## Radiance

Let’s return to the way in which, for me, what Milton says in Portuguese is meaningless. This is a way into understanding what we read in the text as sound and emptiness. When I hear Milton speaking I hear sound the sound. It is as if the sound is thin. If somebody understands Portuguese when they hear Milton speaking the sound is thick. They hear the sound as full of meaning.

 If the meaning was in the sound I also could understand it but the meaning is in the mind of the person who understands Portuguese. That is to say, the movement of their mind unites with the vibration of the sound to generate meaning. In other words, the meaning is not self-existing in the words. As we explored before, due to dependent coordination when the particular sounds coming out of Milton's mouth and the quality of understanding the Portuguese language, when these two arise together, then the person understands what Milton is saying.

 Dzogchen teachings say that the basic radiance of the ground comes out as light, as rays of light and sound. Then the light refracts and seems to manifest as five-coloured light. Imagine you have a red wall in front of you. When you look you see red; you don't see the clear light, which is the invisible medium. Light becomes visible when it shows the vibration of its potential (e.g. colour). This energy manifesting, which is the basis of everything we experience, thickens more and more as various vibrations which are inherent in the empty ground start to manifest.

So for example, we have the vibration of mental dullness or assumption. You see someone you know out on the street. You say, *“Oh, so-and-so is there.”* That is to say, you believe your interpretation. A bird doesn't identify and see a person. A fly doesn't see a person, but you do. Due to the particular patterning of your sense organs you see a person.

Buddhism says that we have the familiar five sense organs plus we have a sixth sense organ, which is the heart, which is where the mind is. ‘Mind’ here has a particular meaning. It means consciousness. ‘Consciousness’ here refers to our capacity to apprehend, to take hold of something and identify what it is. With these six consciousnesses operating I identify that ‘here is a person’. Sometimes when you walk down the street you may have no conscious identification of the people you're walking past. There may be a lot of people but they hardly register.

## Thick and thin: the process of solidification

When the first of the five poisons or afflictions, operates then you experience a kind of solidification and being hereness of the person you encounter. For whatever reason —maybe because they're very big or very small—they just impact you and say, *“Oh, someone is here.”* and you might have some positive interest in them you might feel some desire or curiosity or you might not like them. They might look a bit scary if it's a dark night, you're outside and you don’t want this person to be so close to you. With your eyes you are seeing a shape with colours. *“But I don't like this person near me.”* This is your mind. What you see is thin but with your responses — *“This is a person. It’s a dangerous looking person. I don't like this person.”* —they now become thick.

This density is your mind's mental activity but usually we don't recognise this. We think that we are accurately identifying a property of the object and the fact that I don't like this person strengthens my belief that I am me, and they are somebody else and I don't like them. So the sense of duality, of separation, of differentiation, is generated moment by moment by one's own mental activity. This may apply more generally as a prejudice which could be on the basis of gender or age or nationality, or accent, or skin colour… As my prejudices, my beliefs, my ideas get projected into the other person, they are thick and negative for me. When a social group has become dense for me, it's easier to pin new definitions onto them. We make decisions about their collective value.

The great dzogchen teacher, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, said many times, *“Do not enter into judgment.”* Judgment is very attractive because it's very quick and very definite. We seem to know something about another person or a situation. However, if we spend time with people they show themselves in different ways. We see them when they're happy and we see them when they're sad. We come to realize that they are complex human beings. But when you move towards the person with your judgment and you pin your judgment on to them, there is no space for their lived complexity to show itself. That is to say, you have installed knowledge about someone whom you take to be real and truly existing and you put this in the place of experience. Once you get to know someone, you experience them showing their different flavours and then it's much more difficult to make any definite statement about them. When you can't slap your judgment on to them they are ‘thin’. Since the more you see the variety of how a person can present themselves, then each of these presentations is very thin. If we say, *“Oh, John is always boring.”* then that's all John is. If we say “*Oh, sometimes John's a lot of fun but my God, sometimes he's really boring.”* then for him to be a person who is sometimes fun and sometimes boring is an intriguing contradiction. It makes us more curious about him *“How come he's like that?”* The closer you get to the person, in the details of how they show themselves, the less possible it is to put them in a box. So we see something very interesting here. If you thicken people, or any kind of being or object, although you seem to have a definite knowledge, you lose variety and subtlety. When you allow this multi-flavouring, or multi-colouring, of a person then each of these different qualities that they show in different situations becomes lighter and thinner and more able to play with other qualities.

### Ethics is concerned with thin-ness

Ethics, in that sense, is concerned with attention to the thinness of the moment whereas morality focuses on the thickness of knowing something definite. Once we start to experience our own motility, our own movement, we realize that we can't define ourselves. Everything I say about myself is just a little part of the whole. So if I say something about myself in a strong way such as *“I am very lazy”* then somebody may come along and say*, “Oh no, you’re not. I saw you last week cutting down trees and chopping logs. You were hard at work for a long time.”* Immediately you have this other version of yourself too. It thins out the idea that you are lazy. Hopefully you start to see that ethics is concerned with movement, which is actual, and morality is concerned with freezing and fixing and making solid

Let’s now turn to emptiness, which is ungraspable. Ethics is pointing to relating in the moment, so what use is this going to be to me? How will I know how to behave. I’m empty, you're empty and it's all only just this moment. What will I do?

 From the point of view of meditation this is an unnecessary question. The anxious question, *“What will I do? How will I behave? What will I say to them?”* becomes a kind of wedge that separates subject and object. Or subject and subject, since “*What will I say to them?”* means that I’m already developing some idea in my mind about what they are like and wondering what I must do to please them, (or annoy them, if that’s what I want to do). When I get to know a person better then I feel more at ease because I think I know what they’re like. You can see how the walls of the prison are getting thicker! *“I know who you are. I remember what you did last week. You are going to be the same today. I feel safe with you since you are predictable. So, no playfulness. No creativity. No imagination. Please just be an ordinary person and don't cause me any trouble.”* Can you see how in order to diminish our anxiety in the face of the unknown, we want to squeeze the other into a very small frame.

## Anxiety

This is exactly what we want to avoid in the practice of dzogchen. We need to become very aware of the first arisings of anxiety since anxiety indicates that there is something not quite right. That would imply that ‘I know what is right’. Whenever the actual situation veers off — if it goes away from my notion of what is right — then I start to feel anxious. This means that I am now the measure of all things. According to the patterning of my mind I will know the truth about everything in the world and the more successful I am at predicting how it should be, the less I need to look! I can now be fully confident in the power of my stupidity! Nothing should disturb it!

This is not how to live as meditators. Anxiety is a basis of violence since we feel we have to keep out and control those people who make us feel anxious. But what about looking at me? What is my anxiety? I don't feel comfortable. What is that I don't feel certain about? I don't know how it's going to be.

My knowledge lies at the basis of my sense of security so it may be useful to look again at the nature of ignorance. Our mind itself is pure from the very beginning. ‘Pure’ means there's nothing there which could be touched by anything else or contaminated. The mind itself is whole, is complete. When we are aware of that, the mind is like space; it is infinite and has no substance.

We don't know our mind in the way you might know where your keys are. It's a different kind of knowing. As a revelation it's very open but then in a flash from the same ground there arises a little whirl of density that seems to be a something. It is a pattern but if it's taken as a something, then density immediately seems to belong in it. Who does that? A slightly dulled or separated aspect of awareness.

So for example, if you are outside, maybe in the summertime when the sunlight is very bright, and you turn a corner and it's dark, it takes a while for your eyes to adjust. There's a disorientation in that moment. Nothing bad has happened; there's no hiatus or tear. It’s like a disturbance, your eye adjusts and then it's fine again. It's like that. Now if when you turned into this side street and you could not see at all, you’d feel shocked and perhaps thought that you didn’t want to be there. Immediately you’d have subject and object rather than a flow of experience arising and passing. It sets up a vibration which continues along the lines of*: “I don't want to have that again. I must be careful.”*

To describe this in language is difficult because it's something which is happening before an established ego identity has come into being. It's the very beginning of the separation of a moment from the flow of moments. In fact, the moment of shock has gone so it's not like a trauma since there's no substance for the wound to be made into. It was more like an explosion that now has gone. Nobody's died but what was it? Who made that? Why did it happen? Instead of a resettling in the flow of experience, this one moment is turned into something special, something apart. And of course the more you think about it, the more you investigate it. It becomes more dense for you.

 This is where we see the tragedy of samsara: through the very activity of trying to make sense of what happened I make it more and more difficult to free myself from that moment. What was it? Nothing. You're walking down the street and a car backfires. *“Oh my god! My heart is pounding! I better take my pulse, boom boom boom boom. I must phone my health insurance company. This is terrible. I better phone the police to tell them that a car is a setting of bombs.*” The agitation and planning gets built up in this reverberation where you try to work out what that bang meant, who did it and why did it happen.

All of this leads to your being unsettled and so you try to give form to the situation, pulling in the earth element, with lots of nouns and definitions and substances all on the basis of a moment which has vanished. Rather than being whole with that moment, comes a separation into subject and object which vibrate more and more, with evermore concepts and histories and plans. We find ourselves in this body looking at the world around us, not quite sure who we are and how we want to be. *“How will I live? What shall I do? Does my life have a meaning? Has my life got a purpose? Has God sent me here in order to do something?...”*

We can develop many such questions and each of them looks as if they are going to stabilize our situation but by asking these questions we make more turbulence. It’s like stirring a pond. By bringing the mud up to the surface the water becomes even more cloudy. I imagine that I have to think about something in order to make sense of it, that the activity of the mind will explain the mind. Actually all that happens is that we get even more mental activity because we find that we are looking at the movement of the mind, and not at the mind itself.

 So why do we do this? If you look from the position of the individual subject it makes sense to look for a separate object. *“I want to find out who I really am.”* This makes sense*. “I exist, but maybe inside me there is also some true secret essence which I haven’t found yet so if I look for my self I will find a self.”*  But what is a self? It's a construct. It's a separated moment of manifestation, separated from the field of experience.

The thing about ourselves is that we are always changing. You never get to the end of yourself because you make yourself by being interested in yourself*. “I’m going to put out the fire by adding wood.”* This is what we do. But if you examine, *“What is my mind?”* or *“Who am I?”* the very formulation of the question has already established the fact that there is something to be found.

This is why in our practice, we simply relax in the out-breath and sit. All kinds of experiences arise. Some — like cars going by, or some sensation in the body, or some thoughts — may seem to point towards something definite. We may have some fleeting subtle feelings that ‘This is me’ but then it's gone! It’s so subtle that it hides. Carl Jung would say that the psyche likes to hide, that we never quite get in touch with psyche. I may conclude that I really exist and this kind of self-deception is very tricky. It is so easy to do since we are addicted to thoughts, to the elaboration of stories. So we need to settle ourselves and be present. Something arises, it feels like me and it's gone. If it feels like me, yet it doesn't remain, it was a manifestation, a movement of the energy of the mind, not the mind itself. *“But I can't find it.”* This is why we have the transmission. You could look again and again and again and *“It's obvious that I have looked so many times for that mind of mine. I have been honest and I have been careful. I have not found it so the definite conclusion is that I do not have a mind!”* Kaput! End of buddhism.

However the difficulty is not that you don't have a mind but that your mind is not what you think it is. *“If I can't name it, if I can't think about it, then it's nothing at all.”* It is nothing but not nothing at all. We can't find the mind as something, and yet thoughts arise; feelings arise; the body is moving; we hear the birds singing. The mind is invisible but it displays that which is visible. The visible is not the same as the invisible, but it's not different from it either. This is the meaning of non-duality. What arises are appearances, things which are appearing and undeniable: taste, sound, sensation… Undeniable but not something.

This is why it says in the teaching that you don't have to change your life. Our problem is that we are trying to add an extra ingredient, which is not necessary. We are like someone who goes into a restaurant, immediately asks the waiter to bring some salt, and when the food arrives, even if it's a pizza, puts salt on top. The pizza doesn't need any salt, but you like salt. Salt is reassuring because it always tastes just like salt. So we add the idea of ‘my truly existing individual self, my unchanging self’ as if it's some definite unchanging substance (like salt) inside me.

 *“You are close, you are so close,”* say the teachings, *“but you're very far away.”* The mind is vajra indestructible, but it's not an indestructible substance, it's not a thing, but it's always present. If your idea of indestructible is like a diamond, or like some very tough steel, then you are manifesting your imbalanced relationship to the five elements. That is to say, your vision of ‘reliable’ and ‘true’ is earth. Earth may look quite stable yet we do have earthquakes and we do have volcanoes. The Himalayas are still rising up. When the heavy rains come the Amazon River changes colour with all the earth that has dissolved into it by the rain flowing down to the sea. Earth is very cheeky. It cheats us; it looks stable but it's not. If you want stable, choose the sky. We can see pictures of these big atom bomb mushrooms. If they exploded this on the earth you would get a big hole, but exploded in the sky… nothing! Gradually, defined particles of radioactive waste settle down in the sky. The sky is untouched. The mind is like the sky, like space, emptiness. Emptiness is indestructible; our quality is indestructible; our basic awareness is indestructible.

The traditional example for the mind is that it's like a mirror. The mirror is not touched by, or rather is not changed by, whatever reflection. All the experiences you have arising and passing, arising and passing, are only possible because your mind is not something fixed. If you were one definite thing you would have a very restricted arena of experience. Here again we have a paradox: it is because of the emptiness of the mind that the mind is rich and full.

## Thinking about ethics

Let’s think a little bit more now about ethics in your life. Maybe you have family, friends, work, people you have to relate to. You know a lot about them. Is that useful? The teachings say that everything is instantly present, or effortlessly arising, or fresh in the moment. But I know what my children are like! Do they believe that you know what they're like? Probably not. You have your own idea. You don't know them. Does anyone know you? No, because you are not knowable. Not knowable in the sense of coming to a conclusion. You are experienceable. Someone can experience kissing you, or cooking with you, but how you kiss will depend on your mood in that moment. How you cook will depend on whether you're in a hurry or not, or whether you really want to please the person you are cooking for. How we are with people are gestures; they are relational movements of energy. We cannot get hold of people, we cannot capture a ‘them’ of them.

This is the problem of morality as a system of rules — it fits you into an identity. Then if you are a member of one group then you have to follow its rules but your mind is infinite like the sky. Being a member of any group is not going to be a total definition of who you are. In fact, belonging to a group may be a limitation on your freedom to manifest your potential in a fresh spontaneous responsive way.

In dzogchen we are more concerned with ethics and the basis of ethics is being present. I have to receive you which means I have to be able to see how your eyes are. Do you look very tired? How is your breathing? Are your shoulders raised in tension or relaxed? One of the very sad things of our life is how blind we are to each other's embodiment. We show so much through our postures and gestures and breathing but these are things you are already responding to through your own body. If somebody tells me that I look very tense that's probably not very helpful. Better to say, “Let’s go for a walk.” Ethical relatedness is about being attuned to your body. It is giving you a lot of information about where you are at with that person, how close you want to stand to them and so on.

Perhaps the person tells you that they have a problem and don't know what to do. *“What should I do?”*, they ask. How should we respond? We can think a thousand thoughts about whatever they said and what I think will depend on many things, but very few of them are you. You want my opinion. What will you do with it? You have your own thoughts and now you have my opinion as well. Which one will you give more significance to? The problem is not that we don't want to be helpful; the problem lies in the formulation of the problem. If someone says they don't know whether they should stay with their boyfriend or not, no one can know what they should do. Maybe things will change. We don't know the future. If you ask them why they are crying then you might get a bit closer to this embodied person.

*—Why are you crying?*

*—They make me unhappy.*

*—Then we have to phone the police right now! This is a very dangerous person who goes around making other people unhappy! This must not be allowed. How does he do this, making you unhappy?*

*—I don't like the way he talks to me.*

*—Does that make you unhappy?*

*—Yes, because I don't want him to be the way he is. I cannot reconcile myself to my mixed experiences about this person. If only I could fall in love with the right person I would always be happy.*

*—Remember Prince Siddhartha? He had a very nice wife and was allowed all kinds of extra girlfriends but he still climbed over the wall in the middle of the night.*

If you look to the object, to the other person, to make you happy you will be disappointed. Even Prince Siddhartha’s wife cried.

­*—Okay, perhaps my boyfriend is not so bad, but how much unhappiness should I put up with? 5%? 10%?*

*— Does he provide a regular level of unhappiness? Because if he gives you 20% unhappiness every day maybe you could get used to that?*

*— No, sometimes he's really sweet for weeks on end but then suddenly he's really horrible.*

*— Aha, so he’s not very predictable. Do you know much in life is predictable?*

*— No, but at least a boyfriend should be predictable. He should love me all the time.*

 *—That’s maybe not so likely. Perhaps you should get a dog instead; it might be more predictable*.

The problem in ethics is not that we are troubled by the behaviour of the other person but that we are unclear about what we can tolerate, what we should put up with. Whether something is fair or not. This is not a cognitive problem. There's no algorithm to compute what the right behaviour is. This is an existential moment. This is you with someone. Would it work? How will I know? You'll know if you make up a decision. Is the decision true knowledge? No, it's just a decision. I can't know. How can I act when I don't know? You look in someone’s eyes, you hear their voice, you feel their breathing, and then you find you're moving. You may move closer or you may move further away. It's not a problem to be solved. It's a question of the syncopation of energy. We are not people. We don't exist as some-one with fixed characteristics. We are movement in a field of movement. You might be able to move with this person for a night, or a week, or a year, or till you die. We can't know. In our cultures we have a lot of social freedom now in how we behave. We can have many partners or one partner. There's very little control coming from outside.

So this is where our meditation practice is very important. Don't fixate on the flow of thoughts, feel the whole wave of your embodied experience, feel your energy manifest through all your chakras. All of this is streaming out of you and out of that person and you find your life being like this. No one can know how long it will last. There's not much point in the Buddha saying that everything is impermanent if you want your romantic life to be very permanent. The main thing is to be loving, to be kind, to be concerned. We should always try not to put people in a box, not to sum them up, not to define them, not to say they are good or not good at something.

Generally speaking, if you start with a conclusion you're going in the wrong direction. If you start with questions you're more likely to get a multi-level description of the situation. It is always a work in progress. You might not be effective as a boss for one person, but you don't know how they're going to be with a different boss. So, if you write a reference letter to a prospective new employer saying, *“This person is a bad worker who cannot follow instructions.”* how do you know they will be the same with a different boss? Judgment, conclusion, freezing, is against the current of life. Being neither master nor slave, we are participants in life.

Now we come to the end of this talk. I hope it is useful in some way. Thank you to everyone who has helped host this Zoom event.