

Let the mind play

James Low

Zoom talk, 27th January 2021

Video: <https://youtu.be/D35WNOgcGAA>

Transcribed by Paula Aranibar

Excerpts

...I am a temporary construct, a tent not a palace. In fact I am not even a tent. I am just some branches and leaves put together like an overnight shelter.

...In Canada and Sweden people chop down trees and float them downstream. Sometimes they jam and have to be released by men running on top of the logs and prodding them free so that they flow like the river. It's the same in meditation. When you get a logjam, a blockage in your mind, from the ego's point of view this logjam is wonderful. The ego operates to build up compounds, houses it can inhabit. But just as the logs are not stable in the river, even when stuck together, our mental constructs, even if we keep polishing them every day, are fundamentally unstable.

...In the practice of dzogchen we shift from playing a game to just playing. We are simply sitting, life is going on and we are not trying to control what is happening. Things happen. Sounds, sensation, thoughts, feelings and memories come in this pattern, then in that pattern. What does it mean? Nothing. Meaning begins when you take it seriously, when you respond to what is with like/don't like.

TABLE OF CONTENT

Impermanence	2
The meaning of play	3
From playing a game to just playing.....	4
Mental logjams.....	5
Control or happenstance?	6
Do we need to do anything?.....	7
Awareness.....	8
Nothing to do	9

Hello everyone, we have some time to look at the nature of appearance and how we can stay open and fresh in the midst of changing appearance.

Impermanence

We live in a world where of course we see many problems. It seems obvious that we need to take many things very seriously. When something is serious it seems worthy of our thoughts, our respect. It is something that is there in the world, that exists, and gives us an intensified sense of subject and object.

If you have any unusual pain in your body you might think you have to take it seriously and go to the doctor. Clearly the virus is very threatening, many hundreds of thousands of people have died and surely we should take that seriously. Political troubles, economic troubles, climate change...there are many important heavy issues to attend to. This is the view as it appears from inside samsara: *"I am real, my life is important, these events are dangerous so I have to take them seriously"*. And, of course, day by day, week by week, year by year, new provocations arise: disturbances of how we are or what we imagine the future would be.

It is very easy to be pulled into anxiety and worry. In some ways, anxiety and worry are born together with the importance of events. We find some things in this world meaningful, other things not so meaningful, and we want to protect the integrity of what is meaningful. This could be democracy or social justice, it could be ideas and values which clearly can help many people in their lives. So we see, even in this very cold weather, there are people out on the streets in Russia protesting about the government behaviour and risking going to prison and been beaten.

Inside the frame of reference of human life, of bringing security and justice and fairness into our world, these struggles are very important, however new provocations continually arise. History is full of terrible events. Human beings behave badly. We don't expect lions and tigers to be vegan because we can see they like to eat meat. So, if we look around and we see how unpleasant and cruel and selfish human beings are, why do we imagine that they are ever going to be nice? Maybe such a hope is just a form of stupidity.

The Buddha began by explaining that suffering is all pervasive. Each of the six realms of samsara has its own kind of suffering. We are invited to look at the actuality of what occurs. What is happening? He says: *"Happening is happened."* This is to say, everything is impermanent. Some appearance arises and vanishes, some sensation arises and vanishes, some thought arises and vanishes. Of course, we can add on to the actual transient events our naming and our sense of what it actually is. Then, on top of that, we have our value judgements— this is good, this is bad— and our

sense of how we might participate. How could we change something, either to help ourselves or to help other people?

With this sort of response we are moving in a field of our interpretations. We think we are considering the world as it is but in fact we are considering our interpretation, which is to say our own mental construction. The actual appearance is arising and going. On the television you can look at the news; it shows you what has happened. It has already happened. Even if there is a riot and they are filming the riot and you see the journalists having to dodge stones that are being thrown, you are watching impressions on a screen in front of you, a representation not the immediate. The actual is always going; it is activity and activity is movement.

The meaning of play

We have the notion of play. Culture tends to cook whatever is simple, so take a game of football, for example. We say people play football but it's a very sophisticated rehearsed kind of engagement. In the beginning of the football match the two teams are lined up and both have an intention and the hope that they can win. If they run around just *ok, let's see what happens*, then the manager will not be very happy. You need to put the ball in the goal.

We are used to this kind of intentional activity and, as many of you know, this is also the basis for the accumulation of karma. Karma begins with being a subject and an object. The framework of separation and duality. I am not you, but I'm not entirely apart from you because I have an intention. My intention could be to help you or to harm you. When I see how you behave I might want to get closer you and be your friend or I might think *Oh, oh, not for me* and I keep my distance. My intention establishes a connection between subject and object or subject and subject, which when I act becomes strengthened into an orientation of my energy. I help you or I harm you, and then I am happy that I help you or happy that I harm you. That is to say, there is a clear outcome to the performative action fulfilling my intention. Now I am clear I have done this, now I have something to say, *Oh today I robbed Bartek or today I bought Bartek a beer*. Something happened.

If we simplify our play — like children of two and a half or three playing on the carpet — we have our toys and our building blocks and arrange them in one pattern and then move them around... we are playing. If someone ask us what we are doing... we say, *I am playing*. If they ask, "*What are you playing at?*" we tell them a story. This story may be completely fresh in our mind and not at all connected with what we are doing. It is not that we are telling a lie, because we don't take the story we tell about what we are doing very seriously. It could be anything. This is the meaning of play.

With play—this kind of free, fresh play that children have — the performance of the body engaging in what it is doing and the interpretation are two parallel streams. As you put the toys down

in the floor, something arises. The patterns, the colours the shapes, some echo-memory, gives rise to *Oh! I'll do this!* The idea in the body usually moves quite quickly. Some intuitive possibility arises and your body is already engaged. For example, you might pile the building blocks one on top of each other in a big tower and then you hit them and they all fall down. This is clearly very important so you have to do it again. What are you doing? That's a stupid question. What is happening in the child's mind? It could be a thousand different things. That is to say, the interpretation is not so important in terms of the activity.

By the time the child is eight or nine, the need to win and not lose becomes very important: *I want to have success*. Success allows me a moment of glory. So, these worldly concerns are starting to permeate how I engage with the world. The fragility of my sense of self starts to be vulnerable to shaming.

From playing a game to just playing

We can apply this to meditation. There are many kinds of buddhist practices which are like a game. They are ruled-directed activities. So, if you do a tantric practices, say practice on Padmasambhava, you are engaged in following a set of rules. You have to do this bit three times, this bit one time, this bit twenty one times, you ring your bell at this point, with your vajra at your heart, then you hold your vajra and your bell and you try to do it all at the same time as everyone else! So, there is a lot to learn, because as we all know, conformity is the path to liberation. This is ironic. It is not true, just so you are clear.

From the point of view of dzogchen, the mind is already free. What we do in tantra is we make a parallel system to all the rules and regulations of the world so that the view of form and emptiness, appearance and emptiness, can be woven into the meditation activity, which is quite complicated.

As we know tantra is called the path of transformation. If you have a job working in a factory or an office what you do is important, if you don't do it right you will get in trouble. This is the same in the dharma practice, you have to do it in the right way otherwise the dharma protectors and the dakinis get angry. You start to see that although everything is empty and doesn't have any inherent self-substance or existence, nonetheless the shapes and structures and patterns of the world impact and that impact has consequences. You don't want to be late to work every day. In visualization practice you want to do things at the right speed and make sure that you purify the offerings before you offer them and so on.

This is a game, like a game of football. If you are offside, and you score a goal, your goal doesn't mean anything. The same with visualization, you have to have bodhicitta in your heart, and do it with a genuine concern for other people and an awareness of emptiness. These tantric methods are very

powerful but they take quite a long of time to do. If you are working all day, then the thought of doing a long ritual practice is not so easy. Especially when you have to do it very precisely in the right way.

In the practice of Dzogchen we shift from playing a game to just playing. We are simply sitting, life is going on, we are not trying to control what is happening. Things happen, sounds, sensation in the body, thoughts, feelings, memories, comes in this pattern, then in that pattern. What does it means? Nothing. Meaning begins when you take it seriously, when what is happening for you is something you really don't like or you really do like. Then you have aversion and desire. You feel *I don't like my mind to be like this, I don't what this. How can I be me if I have a mind like this?* In order to preserve the shaping or patterning or identify which you think you have, it becomes very important to make some adjustment. This is where you slip from play into game. This is the game of *I exist and I am a nice guy and I am a serious buddhist..* Very important, but also a big problem.

Mental logjams

Let's go back to our favourite theme of thinking about ignorance and how the mind becomes obscure. From the very beginning the mind is completely open. When we look for our mind we don't find any particular thing. We find thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations...but each of these vanish by itself. They are there, they are the familiar content of the mind, the flavours and the richness of the structuring of ourselves, but they vanish by themselves. This is how it is. We see this very briefly. We can't stay open because our mind thickens into a sense of a separate self.

In Canada and Sweden people chop down trees down and slide them down the hill into the river so they can be floated downstream to the sawmill. Often the logs jam together and then the men have to run out with special spiky shoes and a sharp stick to prod the logs and turn them to break the logjam. The river is flowing and the reason those logs are put into the river is so that they flow too.

The same in the meditation. When you get a logjam, a blockage in your mind, when the ideas and feelings pack together, then you get a construct; you get stuck in a day dream. From the point of view of the ego, this logjam is wonderful because as the logs come together they form structures, compounds. Something is been built up by these different pieces of wood being placed together.

The activity of the ego is compounded-ness. The ego operates in order to build up houses it can inhabit but, of course, just as the logs are not stable in the river, even when stuck together, our mental constructs, even if we keep polishing them every day, are fundamentally unstable. The ego is the doer, the maker, the builder, the constructor. It is not a separate autonomous entity with great power, although we might like to think that we are very powerful wonderful people.

We have both: a knowing aspect and a doing aspect. If I know that I am walking — *Whoa! I am walking! That's pretty impressive! I walk myself!* — this is nonsense. I find myself walking. My

walking is revealed to me by my knowing. Who is the walker? The walker is our participation in the world.

Self is not isolated, although we think of ourselves as such. Our self is a mode of participation in the world. If you walk in wet grass, or on snow, or on ice, you walk in a different way from on an ordinary pavement. Snow and ice walks you in a particular way. The sand on the beach walks you in another way when you have bare feet. That is to say, agency is not internal. It is participative, it is the meeting point of the field and our participation. When patterns arise and we make sense of them, the patterns have already occurred. When the logs slip down the hillside and drops into the river—because the log is arriving fast with a lot of force — you don't want to be near it. So, when the logs turn and twist and meet each other, the logjam forms. It happens, but nobody does it.

Control or happenstance?

If you go climbing in the hills and the rocks are firm for a while and then unstable, you don't need to have a big internal discussion to work out how to walk. You put your foot on an unstable rock and immediately your pelvis is moving, the muscles on either side of your spine are adjusting, so you maintain your balance. What I mean is that our sense of agency is largely a story, or an interpretation after the event. If I am on the mountain and I say, *Ah! I almost slipped!* Or if my companion asks me, *Why did you want to slip? Don't be stupid I didn't want to slip, I almost slipped...Slipping slipped me!* That is how the logjam goes.... and we have to free it.

You sit in meditation and you find yourself suddenly off on a day dream: *I got distracted...distraction happened to me...Oh Mr. King of the World, Mr. Master of Everything, why did you distract yourself? I didn't distract myself, I got distracted. Who did this to you? Is your own mind! It just happened. Oh yeah...Mr. Control.*

This is the actuality of our life: happenstance, occurrence. It brings us to a crossroads: *Should I make myself sharper in order to try to control the patterns of happenstances?* We know how to do this. When you are a child and you are learning to write, you get some of the letters the wrong way around and you have to practise again and again. You learn to control your pen, your body, your voice, your mind. It brings you rewards. *Or should I let life happen?* When you stay close with the mind as it is, appearance, occurrence, arises by itself. It comes as it comes. Suddenly your mind is full of this idea or your body is full of this sensation. Life is happening and if I strive to stay apart from it and make it happen the way I want it to happen, then I am going to be at work all the time, keeping myself on track, making sure that the right things happen.

I may be willing to work hard, but the problem is the boss is not very reliable. The ego has moods: what it regards as important in the morning it might not regard as important in the afternoon. I have a variable field of arising and very variable set of criteria for evaluation and intervention.

That is why in Dzogchen we say that you can't think your way out of samsara. You can't buy your way out of samsara with lots of merit and the accumulation of mantras and so on. Following the path of wanting to be in control is the path of delusion. Is not a polarity between been in control or out of control but rather the middle way of working with circumstances. If we are going to be working with circumstances and not get tired, then we don't want to be in a reactive position where anything that happens become a provocation that sets us off into an activity.

Do we need to do anything?

So, do I need to act at all? This is the base of Dzogchen meditation. We first investigate to find does our mind has any fixed position? It is inside the body? Outside the body? It is big, it is small? Does it have a colour or a shape by which we could recognise it? We look, we look for ourselves, nobody can do this looking for us. You look and you look and there is nothing to find. There is nothing to find and yet you are not dead, you are present, you are alive. Then you need to look. *I am alive as a what? As a something. I am stablished in one particular way? We try to find that. Actually I am shifting. What I take to be me is not reliable. In fact what I take to be me is a name that I apply to a particular patterning of movement in a field of movement. Now, I am binding myself into aspects of movements in the flow of becoming, this is to say, this is happening, that is happening, then there's a grasping or an involvement here. In Tibetan is called *dag-dzin*. 'Dag' means "thing" or "I" or "entity" and 'dzin' means holding on to, grasping — holding on to some thingness of me and what I take to be the some thingness of you.*

Now, you and your life are flowing along responding to thousands of movements in what is around you. Same for me. One moment I say I am like this and the next moment I am like that. Moment by moment new constellations, new patterning of what I take to be I/me/myself. I am like an infinite kaleidoscope but I am not the one turning the end of it; life is turning in this pattern and then that pattern. The sense of some thingness, which is also a sense of apartness — this is not that — is very insistent. It is something very strange: *I am this, this is who I am*. I say it with confidence and authority and power, yet it is not true because how I am is changing. I am this...for a while.

I am a temporary construct, a tent not a palace. In fact I am not even a tent. I am just some branches and leaves put together like an overnight shelter. The seeming items — the seeming particulars out of which, or with which, I make this self-construction — are inseparable from flow; they are impermanent. This is something we can all see for ourselves.

When you have a little time you can just see in a comfortable way with your spine straight and relax in the outbreath, and without editing or controlling, allow your life to manifest. There are noises outside, sensations on the skin, sensations inside the skin bag, memories, and plans. Here and then gone. I sit and coming, going, coming, going. Not coming like a bus coming up to the bus stop and then going away again.

For example, you are sitting and suddenly you are aware of some little itch in your back. It wasn't delivered by the postman. It arose where it is, and if you just leave it, then after a while it is gone. Phenomena arise in their own place and dissolve in their own place, if we leave them alone, if we are willing to let go of the sense of: *I have to be in control of my life, I don't like the itch in my back, I have to scratch it. My skin should to be a free-itch zone. My mind should be relaxed and peaceful.* Should is easy to say, should is the big boys' world, that is what the Queen can say. If the Queen says *you should do this*, we all say *yes, your majesty*. Unfortunately, in our little private kingdom we have a revolution. The royal ego says "*I am going to do this*" but the fingers don't do what they should do; the memory doesn't do what it should do; it is more like a socialist republic.

Again, we have the problem of control, because if you start from the proposition that *I should be in control of my body, my memories, my thoughts and my plans* then you have subject, object and the verbal connection between them. These three aspects, these three wheels moving together, are driving our continuous existence in samsara.

Awareness reveals the movement of the mind

Although it feels unnatural or unusual, we have to simply sit and not do anything. As we saw with slipping in the mountains, *I am slipping* means that I find myself slipping, not that I intended to slip. You have the same in the meditation, is not that I get lost in what occurs; it is that I find myself lost in what occurs.

This is the relation between simple knowing or awareness and the effortlessly arising energy of knowing. Everything that is occurring is the movement of the mind, but not the movement of *my* mind. *I* am a movement of my mind. I am not moving my mind, but I find myself, or I can be present, in the moment of the movement of my mind, which is the revelation of my body, speech and mind.

The traditional instruction is that when you are sitting allow your mind to move as it moves. We call it *rang-bab*. It means falling as it falls, or like the rain or like the river tumbling down a mountain side. It comes as it comes. If you are simply just there, with it — not as a distant observer, because where would you be if you were observing? *Oh! I am over here, I am inside myself!* Who is inside? *I am. Ego, you don't know nothing about meditation. Every time you get involved in meditation it goes wrong. You shameless, show off, narcissistic troublemaker! Awareness? Sweet, gentle, non-composed awareness, please show us how is done.*

Awareness is the revelatory displaying power of the mind. Just as the sun rises in the morning and its light illuminates everything, so rigpa illuminates everything. It is not a part of what is occurring; it reveals what is occurring, it is everywhere. Just as the mirror doesn't move but allows reflections to arise in it, so, awareness reveals the movement of the mind. The movement of the mind is in the mind; the mind is empty and awareness is not doing anything, it is simply revealing the movement as it arises and passes, arises and passes. Awareness, what are you playing at? I am just playing. I am sitting here in the river and the water is watching with me. I can be in the river without getting wet. I don't have to sit on the bank of the river and look. Dualistic ego consciousness has to do that.

Nothing to do

When we practise, we sit and you don't have to breathe. If you are not dead; breathing will occur. Don't do any special yoga breathing, controlling your diaphragm, nothing. Nothing. Simple stay open, present. Everything else is movement. Sensations, memories, thoughts, feelings: movements. The mind is playing by itself.

Now, if you catch a bit of the mind and you interrogate it — What are you doing? What game are you playing? — many games will unfold because the ego is extremely skilled in justifying its existence. Since the ego does not exist, so it is very, very skilful at inventing an existence in whatever form is required. These are the infinite games of samsara. There are no ends to these games. The games of the hells, the games of the god realms, the games of hopes and fears, regrets, the games of desire and aversion, and so on.

Everywhere you look, politicians play games, bankers play games, but in our practice we want to stay clear of games. Just sit, like a little child sitting in the park watching the big children go on the swings and down the slide. This is our goal in meditation. Just sitting, waiting, nothing to do.

Rigpa, awareness, can't get into trouble. Ego gets in trouble. They are not essentially different because they *are* no essential entities ever, anywhere, any time. Ego, individual intelligence, our performativity, is the energy of the mind. The energy of awareness moves like the energy of the mirror in its capacity to show reflections. The mirror is not moving, but the clarity of the mirror, or the showing-ness of the mirror, seems to move as it shifts around the reflections. The mirror moves without moving. If you hold up a mirror on a busy street, it shows many different things. There is no reflection without the mirror. Is the mirror doing the reflection? It may look that way because there is no reflection without the mirror but what is the mirror actually doing? It's just there. Open and available. That in itself allows the showing.

When we are sitting, a lot of experiences are occurring. We can't say it has nothing to do with us, because it is here with us. On the other hand it doesn't define who we are because it changes and changes and changes and we are just here as this open availability. The more you sit in this way the more the play of the mind becomes self-clarifying. There is play without intention. There is no game structure, no success and failure. If you enter into judgement you will find yourself already into duality. I don't like this: that is the subjective side. This is not good: that is the objective side. Both are movements of the mind.

The central point that we have to really become clear about is that I/me/myself, the subject, is a movement in the mind. I/me/myself is not awareness. As soon as we feel ourselves to be something and we don't see the ground of this something-ness, then it is as if I am 'something'. When you look in the mirror and you see the reflection — it shows a lamp or a painting or your nose or something — something is there. That is mental activity. It is illusion. There is actually nothing in the mirror. It is just empty show, pure appearance.

The more we simply sit, the more we see everything arises and vanishes. Then, when we arise from the meditation to make a cup of tea or to walk or to go to work, we do this like a reflection in the mirror.

It is the emptiness of the mirror—the fact that it is not full of itself — which allows it to show different patterns. It is the emptiness of your pure awareness which allows all the rich diversity of the events of your daily life to manifest. The more you do this—the more you have confidence that life will unfold — the more you can release yourself from the prison of anxious observation. *Did I said the right thing? Did I do the right thing? I must better/harder the next time.* No need, it's already gone. Stay with the freshness of the unfolding of this moment. Because the field is non-dual, that is to say, is not made up of separate entities— some subjects, some objects — you will find yourself intuitively, spontaneously in the right place at the right time.

OK so we came to the end for today. I hope you found it useful and that you were able to give it your focused attention. But, of course, giving your focused attention to something outside yourself is not so hard, and also not so beneficial. We will soon finish our Zoom time together and then it is over and life goes on. Then this Zoom time is just a memory. But, if you apply the same focused attention to the mind — Does my mind have colour? Does it have shape? — then when you awaken to your mind, this is something that will stay with you for ever.