

# Staying open and relaxed in times of war and conflict

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## Book launch for “Me first!: an account of the rise of the Wrathful Buddhas”

Today I got a new book back from the printer. It is different from the previous books we have done. It's illustrated by my friend and colleague Diana Collins. The book is a retelling of a traditional Tibetan text which you can find in Section 4 of my previous book, *This is it*, which is about the origin of Heruka. In *Me First!* I have retold that story in a simplified form to bring out the themes which are then brought to life by the images. This is the cover:



You could just have the cover; this would be the whole book. When we look at the big dictators all around the world, this is what they say, “*Me first! I am a wolf and I will eat you!*”

I won't go through all the pages, maybe you will want to get the book. It's rather charming and it begins with a very important point for meditators to consider. Two young men go to see a dharma teacher, and the teacher tells them, “*The basis of all you experience is your simple presence, pure and uncontrived. Rest in your unchanging open awareness and all limitations will vanish like clouds fading into the sky.*” One young man is the master, and the other is the servant. The young master is used to telling other people what to do. He is used to being correct and so he assumes, ‘*My mind is like the sky, everything is the radiance of the sky, so everything I do is good. I can do as I like.*’

The other young man, the servant, heard that, ‘*My mind is open and free*’, but he thought, ‘*Oh, I don't experience it that way. I have to really look.*’

The young master assumed that his understanding was correct. But the site of this understanding was his own ego-self. And when he heard that his mind was like the sky, it allowed his ego to increase like a balloon being inflated.

The servant, in contrast, heard the instruction as an indication that there was something which he could not currently see, and so must learn to see. His humility protected him against the arrogance of assumption.

They both practised but they could not agree about the proper attitude. The master got really annoyed with the servant and told him, “*You don't understand! We are going back to the teacher, and he will show you your error.*” But when they went back to the teacher, the

teacher said, *"It's the servant who has understood. You, young master, have not understood anything."* This did not please the young master. He kicked his teacher and his servant out of the country and he then settled into enjoying his freedom to do whatever he liked. He was untouched by the suffering his behaviour brought to others. The rest of the story shows how the Buddhas had to manifest their wrathful forms in order to tame and control this demonic urge of the young master. It is a very deep and powerful story.

### I imagine that I am me

But for those of us who are on the path the key point is the two interpretations of the teacher's words. We all say 'my mind' as if we know what we are referring to. I have thoughts in my mind, feelings, sensations. It's my territory. If I want to read, I can read. If I want to make a cup of tea, I can do that. My mind feeds me ideas about what to do and feeds me ideas which help me to organise the world for my purposes.

When we come to dharma we find a lot of talk about 'mind, mind, mind...' and it's very easy to imagine that I know what my mind is: 'My mind is like the sky. Oh, what a big mind I have!' But the ego itself can't expand very much. The sky has no boundaries. You can't divide the sky into 'my sky' and 'your sky'. However the ego survives by dividing the non-dual open field of phenomena into 'self' and 'other'. Even if I wanted to expand, I need my difference from you to confirm this unique specificity of myself.

Once we see this clearly we understand that the ego belongs in duality. The ego is the dualistic formation of the subject side kept separate from the object side. If we want to find the mind which is like the sky, this is not the ego. The ego is an imposter, it has crept into the palace in the middle of the night and sits on the throne as if it were the true ruler or the true presence of the energy of the source.

The arena of the ego is framed by polarities: pleasure versus pain; fame versus disgrace; praise versus blame; gain versus loss. Its world is mostly either/or and only rarely both/and. Either/or is the dynamic of the zero-sum game, the structure in which there are limited resources and the urge to gain more is strong. If I gain more you will necessarily get less. My gain is your loss. When this view is strongly held only winning matters since even compromise is considered failure. The young master is used to being superior and for him losing is not an option so he mobilises his full force to break boundaries and is willing to do anything to win.

When we see the world as a domain of things, both animate and inanimate, then they can be defined, summed up and accounted for. Everything can be known and totalised. This approach is fundamental to totalitarian regimes which aim for total control on the basis of total knowledge.

The view of dzogchen dissolves the delusion of totalisation. The ground is uncompounded, uncomposed, untotalled and untotalisable. The great completion is complete in itself from the very beginning. This intrinsic whole is not composed of parts. It has never been split or fragmented. It is complete and perfect and free of the effort of construction and destruction.

This is why when we do our practice of the guru yoga of the white A, we relax out of our commitment to our ego identity. We release ourselves from the shell or the shape or the clothing that we have been dressing ourselves in. We see that the ego is like a kind of box of old clothes, scarves, funny hats and so on that you might keep at home for children to play

with. Then they can dress up and become kings and queens or animals or whatever since they are able to allow their imagination to take on identities which seem true.

I imagine that I am me, that I exist solely as the self I know. Why do I do this? Because of the lack of recollection of the actual truth of how I am: the unborn ungraspable, which is our source, our radiant field and our apparitional dance.

Five questions to explore the mind

We use these five questions to explore how our mind actually is:

- Does the mind have a shape? Does it have a colour?
- Does it have a size, big or small?
- Does it come from somewhere?
- Does it remain somewhere?
- Does it go to somewhere?

We can answer all these questions in the affirmative with regard to our ego-self. Does the ego-self taken as my mind abide somewhere? — *“Yes, of course it does. I am me, come on! I am me; I am here! That’s obvious. I came out of my mother’s body and when I die I’m going into a coffin. In between, here I am.”* Our various moods have a range of shapes and coloration as the movement of our energy generates new patterns.

If we identify these patterns as indicating states or aspects of ‘myself’ this will confirm my belief that I exist, that I am me. This self seems quite solid. It seems undeniable. I’m stating an obvious truth. Whatever else is crazy in the world with climate change and so on, there is one thing that is definite: I am me. I am not you.

Our own delusion is allowing us to take the ever-changing patterns of experience as proof but I have a stable existence. The fact of impermanence is being hijacked into the service of our false belief in a permanent self. Yet a little examination will show that the ‘reality’ of our separate ego self is born from duality. The gathering of certain experiences into the identity of ‘self’ is inseparable from the parallel movement of the rejection of everything else as ‘not self’. So although our ego doesn't have a fixed shape, it always has a shape. The ego is not other than the claim that ‘this is me’.

However, when we sit in practice and use these five questions to explore the uncontrived immediacy of our mind itself, we free ourselves from the assumption and start to develop a mindful insight. When egocentric answers to these questions arise in the mind it is vital not to be seduced by their familiarity. If there is a sense of ‘I am here, I am this’, we just sit with it. The proposition seems to fit me. But if I just sit then in a few seconds it's gone and some other proposition arises. It also feels true. And then it also is gone. Then we can see that the ego self is a pulsation of self-identifying fusion with some of the the shapes that manifest.

I am not a thing. I am a participant in a field of movement.

Our life, our self, our world, is the ceaseless arising of moments of experience. We are experiencing the potential of the mind to appear as unborn appearance. We experience the arising and passing of happiness or sadness or comfort or discomfort. Many different experiences arise and all of them are actually ungraspable and yet I grasp at my idea of them. This is the delusion or the self-deceit which is the formative energy of our ego self.

For example, painful feeling arises in the body. It shifts intensity and then ceases to impinge. But if we put it in the pot of the concept – *My back is sore. This is happening to me and I don't like it. This is negative. I'd prefer something positive.* – then our conclusion disregards the variation and transience of the feeling. By turning away from the actual and attending to our conceptual interpretation, we fabricate a sense of enduring reality which hides the flow of events. This reinforces the profile of my deluded sense that I exist as someone separate, as the 'owner' of my experience.

In this way the freshness and contactfulness of our co-emergent presence is hidden by our commitment to maintain our stale concept of our enduring personal identity which is forever seeking mastery over 'things that happened to me'.

The more we see the impermanence of the experiences of our mind and of the movements of our body as a gesture, a posture and so on, the more it becomes clear that we don't have one fixed shape, one fixed mood, one fixed permanent thought in our mind. The mind as experience is arising and shifting and changing, its potential or light being refracted through the particular crystals of the moment.

Rather than being the owner of my 'self', I am the thief which is my 'self'

I am not the owner of my self. I am the thief of myself. I am grasping at things which are moving past and claiming them, 'This is me. I am this, this is me.' Yet if I stay with the actual dynamic quality of whatever is occurring, I will see that everything is self-arising and self-liberating. Thoughts arise by themselves and vanish by themselves. There's nothing there to grasp. They are an illusion. Illusion doesn't mean nothing at all, it means appearance inseparable from emptiness.

When we have a sad thought, we often collapse into it. When we have a happy thought, we often seem to expand with it. Our thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, are movements in a field of movement. Nothing to grasp, nothing to own, no owner. This is the beginning of the dawning of awareness. The dark night of the ego is the world of graspability, holding on to something, that something is yours.

Small children are often very concerned with their special soft toy. They might not be able to sleep without it. To have something which is 'mine' gives me a shape. I feel like me when I'm falling asleep with my little dog next to me.

Through the teaching and our own practice we can start to see that this ego self is a construct. It is not inherent; it is not self-existing. It is the openness of the mind which is intrinsic along with its illuminating clarity and its unlimited potential to manifest diverse apparitional forms in responsive interaction with patterns in the field of occurrence. This is the intrinsic quality of the ground. It is not 'my quality'. That is to say, I am open and empty of existents and I am clear and luminous and I am the ever-changing patterning of apparitional responsivity. All that I take to be 'me' is the infinitely varied flowering of the potential of the ground. I'm not a thing. As emergent responsivity, each and every environment will evoke new paterings of illusory 'me'.

Some people like to swim in the sea around Britain in the winter. The quality of the cold wind and the strong waves and the shivering feeling collaborate to generate the specific situational sense of 'this is me'. We can experience swimming as an interplay or co-emergence of the patterning of the water and the body as the body moves around according to the pressure of the waves. Or I can tell the story in terms of myself: 'I love swimming in the cold

water. It makes me feel so alive.’ Even when I am swimming in the sea, my attention is on me: *I am swimming in the sea.*

Many climbers die trying to ‘conquer’ Mt Everest. When they were climbing Mt Everest, step after step after step, each foot was going down according to the rock or the soil or the ice or the snow they encountered under their feet. How they climb depends on, or is controlled or directed by, the nature of the mountain. They will conquer the mountain by doing what the mountain tells them to do. That’s the truth of it. If you fight the mountain, it’s very strong. The winds are very, very strong. You have to do what the mountain lets you do.

The reason I am giving all these examples is to encourage us to observe the simplicity of the co-emergence of our interaction in the world. If you are a participant within nature you walk up the hill according to the hill. You cook according to the fuel. If you have a wood fire or a gas cooker or an electric cooker, the way the heat arises from these particular sources of energy will impact how you cook. The desire for egocentric mastery is an obstacle to all attuned collaborative participation.

Hierarchical power structures in the workplace or in the family tend to turn attention away from easy collaboration and towards formal and less efficient alignment with the boss, with the one presumed to know. This can produce a climate of dependency where there is a need to rely on the boss even when they are manifestly deluded. Loyalty – ‘my country right or wrong’ – generates a lack of clarity and the loss of attention to the specifics of the situation. If I am the leader then my sense that I exist in and of myself – that I have always been ‘me’ – leads me to disregard my relative sources such as parents and education. As the boss or leader I am autonomous and not accountable to anyone else. Believing itself to be unborn and unceasing this deluded ego feels that it is infinite, with infinite powers and infinite entitlement. This is the blindness of the young master.

In the story of ***Me first!*** the young man who is the servant starts to observe that, ‘This is how it is. I am participating in this co-emergent field. I’m not the master. I’m not in charge. But when I participate and collaborate with the movement of the field I reduce the friction. I’m less tired and I experience more because I am present in my senses. I am revealed to myself in my participation.’ The more we relax and release ourselves from our fixed positions, the more we see that the ground of our presence is open, the field of our participation is open, and the patternings we find ourselves participating as are also open.

This is how we awaken to our awareness: by being present with the field; in contact with the field, neither merging into the field nor holding ourselves apart from the field. With this we directly see that the source-ground openness is not other than how we are. You will never find your source as something. It’s not a something. You can’t grasp it. And yet your source, your mother who gives birth to you without giving birth is always with you here and now.

In contrast to this, the young man who was the master remained encapsulated inside his ego identity, *“I am the winner. Me first. I can do what I like. You can’t stop me.”*

The divergence of these paths is obvious but the implications of this divergence take time to unfold. The unimpededness of awareness is the openness of space. When this is not awakened to the ego manifests and also seeks for unimpededness. It wants to spread out and win everything, like a child who insists on winning every game. If they don’t win, they get into a temper. There is a desperation in that need to win.

## The ego's will to power

This will to power and its need to triumph takes over the young master so he sets out to destroy every man he meets and to take every woman he meets for his own sexual use. *"Everything is mine. I do what I like. I take what I like. No one can stop me."* This omnipotent greed and disregard for others is the defining quality of all dictators. The dictator is born with a torture chamber next to them: *"If you oppose me I will destroy you."*

Having objectified the other and defined them as lesser, for the master only his own wishes are important. The other becomes a means to an end, something devoid of inherent value. The withdrawal of empathy for the other encourages abuse and exploitation as in slavery, enforced prostitution, imprisonment without proper trial and so on.

It is a terrible thing in this world to be born in a country where you are identified as being in a minority group with very little attribution of rights and freedoms. If you are also under the power of a dictator then life can be truly awful. You are alone and there is no one to rescue you. Mao Tse Tung said that *"Power grows out of the barrel of a gun."* When somebody has a gun then life is scary. If the person with a gun feels unconstrained by the law, if they are confident that they can kill you with impunity, then fear and anxiety will suffuse your days and nights. They may feel entitled to kill you because of who they define you to be. They might even think that it is virtuous to kill you having declared you to be a terrorist or an enemy of the state. Who will then be brave enough to protect you? Dictators like to bring fear and anxiety into the population as a cheap and effective method of gaining total control. For most of us, when we are afraid, we shrink. And if we are self-shrinking, we are less of a problem for the dictator. That is why having executions in public and shooting people in the town square is helpful for a dictator. *"We want to kill the bad people, so the good people can sleep easily in their beds."* When we look in human history, we see this violence of oppositional polarities everywhere. This is the dark shadow of duality: 'If you are not with us you are against us and if you are get against us you are dead.'

## How the Buddhas dealt with demonic implacability

The view of Dharma is the exact opposite of this. We warm our hearts and open our minds with the power of the Four Immeasurables. *May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. May all sentient beings enjoy the happiness free of sorrow. May all sentient beings rest in the equanimity that is free of bias towards friends and against enemies.*

All beings are valid however they are, because their ground is the heart of Buddha Kuntuzangpo, the Always Good. This idea may seem completely strange. Why would the heart of the Buddha give rise to these bad people? They are horrible! Whether we are talking from the point of view of the dictator concerning the 'terrorists' who want to change the government, or we are talking about the position of the 'freedom fighters' who want to get rid of the dictator so that everyone can enjoy some freedom, from both directions they are saying the same: *"We cannot be free until that one is gone!"*

In contrast to this the generosity of Dharma is quite shocking. *"May all sentient beings be happy. May the enemies of dharma be happy. May the people who kill and torture dharma practitioners be happy."* This can sound almost masochistic – if you view it from the point of view of the ego. But in fact it is the view of infinite awareness which is the light that shines through all of us. Only this is open enough to encompass everything.

This is very deep and mysterious. We have all been educated in duality. We organise the world in terms of polarities: high and low, good and bad. How would we be able to think if we couldn't organise phenomena in terms of these binary oppositions? But the Buddha is not organising stuff, things. He's not categorising the world. Categorisation arises from ignorance. The mind of the Buddha is all-inclusive, spontaneous and intuitive.

In *Me first!* you can read how the demonic force of the out-of-control ego brings horror in all directions. This continues until all the Buddhas gather together and decide they have to do something. It is *not* one ego form seeking to dominate another.

This is not like the development of the Second World War. In the European sector you could say that under the power of Nazi ideology a kind of demonic will to power arose. Many people died trying to impede or stop this destructive force. Eventually the mighty army of the USSR came down to definitively crush the German forces, in collaboration with the Americans, British, French and others. Of course we want to defeat the bad guys. *"We defeated them, we won, we are the winners! The winner takes all!* But the USSR decided to eat Hungary, to eat Slovakia, to eat Poland. *"Its been a long battle and we are very hungry."* With this the USSR turned from ally to enemy and the Cold War began. In the war in Ukraine, we now see the consequence of this unfinished will to power. The desire for mastery gives rise to the sense that we are only safe when we are stronger than the other side. As long as we are under the power of duality conflict and brutal domination will not be far away.

However when the Buddhas, through the power of their meditation, bless the teacher and the servant so that they arise in the form of Heruka Wrathful Buddhas with full power, this is form and emptiness. Generally the view of karma indicates that dualistic activity will bring its own consequences and so we do not have to intervene. But out-of-control mindless destruction has to be stopped by the ripening of virtuous karma powerful enough to manifest a form of awareness that can cut through the cocoon of egoic self-entitlement. The roaring Heruka with great wings, bloody skulls and terrifying appearance is terror and emptiness. The Buddhas' awareness is manifesting a terrifying appearance which never ever separates from emptiness. It does not become a bad, angry person. When the Heruka enters into and takes on the demonic form of the perverse and deluded young master two forces meet together. The demon force is, *"I exist! I'm real! Me first!"* The other force is the Heruka who although carrying many weapons, manifesting many different arms and legs, and roaring wildly is empty of self, is an illusion. The power of the illusion is able to deconstruct and de-substantiate the form of the demon so that it too is revealed as an empty form.

This is an encouragement for us not to reify, not to make strongly real the people who do very frightening things in the world. They do not have inherent existence. They are the energy of the ground distorted by duality and by the force of karmic habit formations. When the delusion of real existence is released, the energy of the ground flows easily, moving without causing trouble. The only enemy is ignorance. And ignorance is unborn.

Our path is to awaken to the truth of our own mind so that we can engage in this complicated, difficult world without being pulled into the polarities of good and bad. When we see the equality or equalness in emptiness of all phenomena, no matter how they appear, then we can rest in equanimity, which frees us from egocentric reactivity. Then the non-dual co-emergence, of which we are a part, is self-arising and self-liberating.

This is the message of this wonderful book. Very interesting.