

Identity and Presence in Education

Talk by James Low
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The hosts gave this title to the video. *Journey into Meditation: Non-duality Wisdom.*

You can watch it at <https://youtu.be/vu3oT8OzpBE?si=X2PTxtWaK4sKeeoi>

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Introductory words by the host

Welcome to this session! I'm absolutely delighted to be joined by James Low. I think James is one of the coolest people in the UK right now - but I'm sure he's too modest to admit to that. James Low is a Dzogchen and Buddhist lineage holder, which is amazing because there aren't so many Westerners who are given that responsibility. It follows from an awful lot of study, practice, following, spending time in India with various Rinpoches, and writings and translations in this area. So, a lot of what James will be talking about comes from the ancient lineage; it's not opinions.

What he's going to be looking at in this particular session is right into the inner learning, where we look at the innate potential in humans, what's latent in that, and how we can explore that through consciousness.

I should also add that James's background is as a consultant psychotherapist as well, so he has a deep understanding of the human mind, human relationships, and how that moves together. So, absolutely fascinating, and I am delighted to be joined by you, James.

Identity and Presence in Education

I'm going to be reading out something I've written, and I hope you feel a connection with it. The heading is "Identity and Presence in Education," and I'm going to highlight the ways in which our Western culture emphasizes—and what I would see is an overemphasis—on identity and defining and clarifying the particular patterns of our existence which hide the basic presence behind all that.

As the paediatrician Donald Winnicott famously said, “There is no such thing as an infant, meaning of course that whenever one finds an infant one finds maternal care and without maternal care there would be no infant.” Thus, the individual emerges through relating firstly to the primary caregivers and then to the possibilities available in the lived environment.

The notion of a “self” in psychology and in Buddhism

The Buddhist view is more radical, indicating that there is no such thing as a person. A person emerges through relating to the environment of which it is always already a part. Life is not something we have, and neither is our ‘self’. Both are processes of the patterning and re-patterning of potential through interaction with emergent factors. Whether we thrive or not depends on our compatibility with the factors we encounter. The ever-increasing variety of factors which impinge on the young places great strain on their capacity to maintain a functioning sense of self while responding to the impact of unpredictable stimuli.

Our sense of identity needs to be stable enough so that we can make choices in harmony with our core beliefs and yet pluralistic enough to permit us to engage with a wide variety of interpersonal demands. The resilience of our sense of self can be sorely tested by the demands to keep up with our peer group, with technological innovations, with the uncertainties of the job market and so on. How can a young person shape themselves so as to find a niche in a shape-shifting world? When a child is encouraged to ‘be yourself’ this implies that the child already has a self and that their task is to be in authentic alignment with that self.

Modern developmental psychology and Buddhism would both agree that the notion of a fixed self-entity is false and misleading. We do not exist as someone who can be defined by our way of being, for our way of being is not fixed and knowable. Our existence is the dynamic interactive co-emergence of our potential with the potential of the field factors we encounter in any given situation. If we consider our life in this way, we see that we each emerge at the point of contact between the current content of our mind (including thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations), and the content of our situation (including people, animals, food, climate, demands and encouragements). Success in life then becomes a matter of managing the conflicts between these factors and the tensions that they generate. For example, a common tension for children occurs when they have to decide whether to play football

and so strengthen their peer group belonging or to do their homework and thereby reduce tension with parents and teachers.

Buddhism offers diverse views of our situation as human beings and lets us see that the usual definitions of identity and ascribed tasks are unnecessarily prescriptive and unhelpfully limiting. At school and at home children learn that they have a mind and that they should use it well in order to ensure success in education and in life. They should sustain their curiosity so that they open to the world. Learning is often presented as a process of receiving information and experience, retaining it, and applying what has been retained effectively and appropriately. However, distraction, intoxication with one's own ideas, boredom, overwhelm and pointlessness are common obstacles to such learning. This is particularly the case when it appears that, *"I need to learn stuff. If I stuff myself with the right stuff, I will be able to give others the stuff they want — information, skills, competence and so on."*

If the child can experience their 'self' as the function which organises their participation, then this can help them to collaborate with the field factors of education. But if they feel incompetent and inferior, their capacity to participate will be diminished. Thus, a relaxed responsive sense of self as interface with the world promotes ease and competence. Whereas a definitive sense of oneself as being less than others and unable to compete, reinforced by having no access to and no place within the structures of success, will lead to disinterest, frustration, anger, self-sabotage and attempts to sabotage the learning situation.

Thus, if we start with the belief that children can be known and defined, that they exist with and as a self with a specific range of abilities, then those with limited abilities — as defined by others — will not fare well. They will not be considered as suitable vessels for the stuff required for success in the world.

This brief account highlights the notion of people as knowable and definable: *"by their fruits ye shall know them"*. This focus on performativity as

the site of value creates anxiety since we cannot be sure that what goes well for us today will go well for us tomorrow. Here again we see the difference between the sense of self as participative emergence beyond reification, and the commonly held view that our qualities and capacities are immutable and definitive. Can we find a way of relating to self and others that encourages a less defined and more playful sense of self? Although we may have a sense that education has or should have some relation to educating or bringing forth the potential not yet brought forth, this can be difficult to hang onto in the face of the demands of the syllabus and the need to demonstrate specific forms of competence.

Experiences are fleeting

It might be helpful to consider the Buddhist view of intrinsic potential and how this might be revealed to students no matter what their capacity for formal learning appears to be. In order to do this, we need to consider the difference between the mind as we have learned to take it to be and the actual nature of the mind. Sadly, our culture hardly concerns itself with the latter. The mind that we can access through our thoughts and reflections tends to be composed of the things we might write about in a journal: accounts of events and our reactions to them, our sense of inclusion or exclusion, our sense of the shifting emotions that arise towards others and towards ourselves. This is our dialogic self, our self that emerges and alters in interaction with our ideas of ourselves and of others. We change and they change, and this unfolding of patterns infused with liking and not liking, winning and losing, closeness and distance, becomes the story of our lives — a life of events and opinions.

Yet these events, feelings, opinions and conclusions are fleeting. They arise in the mind and immediately pass away. You cannot catch a thought — you can only think about a thought that has already gone. Thoughts and feelings and sensations are not entities; they are experiences. Although we apply nouns to these transient phenomena this does not establish their real existence. Imagining that we live as a thing in a world of things, we delude

ourselves as to the actuality of these factors of experience. All that occurs, occurs; yet not one occurrence occurs as something with inherent existence.

Moment by moment, experiences are arising; we feel hot or cold, we feel like having a walk, something arises—'Oh yes, this is me!'—and that moment is gone. I think about the moment; the moment is ungraspable, yet my conceptual take on the moment appears to be the establishment of some enduring truth about myself. What's it built on? It's like walking on clouds; there is no substance in the thoughts, feelings, and emotions which arise. When we take them to be solid and reliable, it is at that point that we start to delude ourselves.

Our life is a flow of experience. The actuality of experience is ungraspable yet vibrantly present in each moment. The conceptual interpretation we make of our experience involves selective attention, reification and composition. Conceptual identity is a story. Our direct experience is not to be found within a story; indeed it does not need a story since it is luminous and free of reification.

We are alive. We know we are alive. This has two aspects. We can know *about* being alive. I can stand in relation to my life, consider it, and communicate what I think about it to others. This allows me to say both that 'I am alive' and that 'I have a life'. This is to take my life to be a knowable entity, even though the very activity of considering it in this way composes it as an item of artifice.

Consciousness vs. awareness

In the Buddhist tradition this is seen to be the activity of dualistic consciousness. Consciousness needs an object to be conscious of. So, today I might be thinking that the room I am in is a bit cold. With this thought it seems clear that I know something definite about the temperature. Yet if I put on a sweater, the room feels less cold because I feel less cold. The coldness of the room was relative to my clothing. Often and misleadingly our subjective experience is taken to be an accurate account of the objective situation. Thus, when 'I am conscious of something' the condition of 'I' in that moment is often

ignored. Consciousness is object-focused and so I do not focus on my subjectivity, on the fleeting immediate presence of an already vanishing experience.

If our sense of our identity is mediated through consciousness, then I will take myself to be someone, a human being, an existent entity. This is the framework within which almost all of our experience is processed. If the dualistic consciousness supporting our ego-self wants entities to consider, then the whole world can be conceptualised as entities. This gives us the power to edit the traces of experience and to formulate life as the patterning of entities. It is within this framework that our familiar culture operates. The worlds of learning, of relating, of working, of enjoyment, are all organised by dualising consciousness whereby the self, the subject, is structurally separated from the object, the other. This framework is called “samsara” in Buddhism.

Samsara indicates that the ego-self finds itself in birth after birth in new settings which it relates to as fundamentally other. Success in life is then a matter of optimising the possibilities of relating to the experiential factors which will sustain the ego-self and not harm or undermine it. In each life and in every life our inner experiences revolve in relation to our outer experiences. Events are always changing and yet our consciousness finds ways of editing events so that our experience of them sustains our sense of having and being an enduring self.

So, this is considered a delusion because we are constructing particular patterns and interpretations and then taking them to be some truth, some intrinsic truth being revealed to us. So, we make something and then deny that we've done it, just as a small child may eat the last biscuit and then deny completely that they ate it: "Wasn't me! I'm not responsible!"

In this way, we don't recognize the dynamic nature of our participation because we're condemned to see ourselves as something separate from the environment, and yet we're entirely dependent on the environment. So, it's either we're the slaves to the

environment, or the masters of the environment, rather than participating in the emerging field along with everything else which is present in the field, which is our intrinsic belonging.

Consciousness is concerned with occurrences, with events. However, this is not the limit of our potential. When we look for the mind itself we cannot find it. It is not something existing within the frame of duality. The Buddhist tradition points to the mind itself as being like the sky — always present, yet not present as something. If we look for the mind itself as something, (That is to say, inside our habitual paradigm of dualizing self and other) we might conclude that it does not exist or does not concern us since we cannot find it. Consciousness cannot find the mind itself, yet we can access the aspect of our presence which can relate to the mind itself — albeit in a non-dual way.

So, talking here about the having attributed identity or definition to ourselves, to others, to everything that we encounter—this gives us a sense of our separate existence: "I am an entity." But once we allow ourselves to be present with what is occurring, we find that "I am an experience revealed within the field of experience"—that is to say, I am not the starting point. I am like a flower blossoming; I'm not the earth or the ground or the source from which the shoot arose, and then the stalk, and then the flower. We are constantly flowering, moment by moment, according to the environment in which we find ourselves.

This aspect is usually referred to as “awareness”.

Now, of course, there are lots of problems here because very often, in English, "consciousness" and "awareness" are used as if they were synonymous. But here, I'm making a distinction that consciousness is essentially consciousness of something: "I am conscious of this," whereas awareness is a quality of presence which is inclusive, and it includes the site of our presence. So there is no division in the field of experience. As soon as that division arises, this is a sense or a sign that we have slipped from our relaxed, open awareness into a busy consciousness that is trying to work out what on Earth is going on.

This is not the same as being aware of something, since in that case awareness is just another term for consciousness. Awareness, or pure awareness, is the illuminating power to directly see how we are.

"Directly" means not mediated by conceptualization, by received opinions, by the beliefs of our family or culture.

In order to be aware of the mind itself we have to let go of our habitual belief that we could know it in the way that we know our hands.

So, I have two hands; they are my hands, but I can look at them, and when I look at them, they appear to be objects because I can think about them and talk about them, but they're also me. So, I can move between my full embodied presence as a subject knowing things in the world, or I can be the owner of my feet, my knees, my hands, and so on.

So, in this way, we're used to being quite tricky, quite slippery, because we're determined to maintain the notion of "I exist, I know who I am, and this is what I want to get," and this has power—clearly, it has an enormous amount of power; our whole modern world is based on pushing through of our individual capacity—but, at the same time, it blinds us to the fact that there is an intrinsic presence which is not created by effortful conceptualization. And this is vital in relation to helping children who have difficulties staying with a conceptual version of the world.

One of the reasons, I'm sure, that football is so popular is that you have to keep your eye on the whole field; you have to watch where the ball is moving, where the opposition's moving, where your friends are moving, and you've got to get the ball to them without giving it over to the others. This is a whole openness, and the whole body is responding to what is there. That is not an experience often to be found in the classroom.

Our mind itself is not an object of knowledge — it is simple knowing free of the duality of 'I know this'.

So it's a knowing prior to knowing. So, for example, if I say, "I" - very open. "I"—it can express everything, but it doesn't define it or chop myself up into "this" or "that". As soon as I say: "I am," it could be a more philosophical statement, "I am, I exist," there's a kind of solidity coming into it. "I am Scottish," so now there is a definition; what I am can

be subsumed inside "Scottishness." This is somehow pervading me and should express every aspect about myself. "I am good, I am bad, I'm hopeless at maths, I'm quite good at French," all the things that we experience in the school environment have part of the expression correct.

"I'm not good at maths." So, if we did a little bit of grammar and put a comma after the "I," - "I" (all of me), "I, am not very good at maths," so that now shrinks not being good at maths, and it locates it into this wholeness of my being. But if I say, "I'm not very good at maths, I hate this, I can't do it, I don't want to do it," I'm shrinking because I'm being defined by a performative deficiency, as if it was in the expression of some essential truth about myself.

We are many possibilities in a world of possibilities

So, the way I'm using this term "awareness" is to go back to the sense of "I", just present: I. No content, lots of content." The "I" itself is empty, and therefore it can show many different formations, just as if you look in a mirror, you won't find the essential content of the mirror; it doesn't have any. And it is exactly that absence of an inherent content that makes the mirror a mirror. A painting has content; it's been painted on, it's become the canvas and the oil paint has, as it were, entered into some almost symbiotic fusion. So, we look at the painting and it is what it is. You can apprehend it, you can make a comment. If you know about art you say: "In this way, Cezanne is different from Matisse."

When you look in the mirror, you find reflections. There is no end to the reflective possibilities of the mirror; it will just keep showing and showing and showing. So, awareness is like the mirror; whatever patterns arise are clearly there. The emptiness of the mirror doesn't mean the emptiness or absence of reflections. The emptiness of the mirror is simultaneously the fullness of the infinite capacity for reflection.

In order to awaken to our own awareness, we have to open to the open. To be open in this way is like being naked. To be naked is to have no pockets in which we can secrete items we take to be self-definitive. We are not composing a sense of identity. We are not fabricating an image of ourselves. We simply relax and release and find that we are present as sky-to-sky — neither identical with nor different from all that occurs.

We are open, and the world around us is open, and so there are always possibilities and pathways which are ready for us to respond into. We simply relax and release, and this presence which is then revealed shows that we are neither identical with, nor different from, all that occurs.

So that, for each of us, since we woke up this morning, we have many, many kinds of experiences. In the moment of the experience, there seems to be some truth: "I'm thirsty! I'm really thirsty, I need a drink! My kingdom for a horse! I'm desperate, give me a drink!" You have a drink, thirst is gone. "I'm full of thirst!" - and then it's gone.

And that's the same with every event. You're dreading going into another tedious management meeting. *"Oh my God, these people never shut up!"* And then you sit your way through it, you can doodle or work out your shopping list, and then the meeting's over. *"Oh, thank you very much,"* and off you go, no harm done. But if you grasp it and think, *"I can't bear these people, they're so stupid, I'm going to have to complain..."*, you haven't left the meeting; the meeting stays with you, you're permeated by the sense of being connected with something that is wrong. It niggles, it gets to me. Relax and release, it wasn't so important.

With this it is obvious that the true nature of our mind is no-thing. This no-thing is not nothing at all since experiences ceaselessly arise. We relax into open presence which does not block or edit or create experience. This gives us access to our open potential which is much more rich and varied than the ego's limited potential. Resting in this openness we can open to the free flow of whatever occurs. Moreover, within this occurrence is the patterning of dualistic experience and we can respond to this without losing the unlimited openness of our open source.

That is to say, in the moment when the mirror is full of complex reflections, all kinds of patterns and colours and so on, its openness is still present. The openness of the mirror is not removed by the presence of the reflection; the openness is continuous.

The openness of our awareness, of our availability, is there. But if you fall out of the mirror into the reflections, then there's all this stuff, and the reification, the solidification of it, and then you're positioning vis-à-vis: "How do I stand? Do I like it? Do I not like it?"

This is the tedious, dualistic mental activity with which, unfortunately, most minds are busy with from morning to night.

So if we relax into open presence, we find that this does not block or edit or create experiences; it gives us access to the many, many possibilities which normally we wouldn't open to because our point of reference is "I, me, myself," "because I like this, that's not for me, I've never liked it, I don't want to do it."

The potential of the field is then separated into what suits me and what doesn't suit me. This is a very, very limiting position to take up, and it's self-referential, whereas if we're going to participate in the world, our energy, our coming forth, our co-emergence, being with the other, it requires us to have some sense of the other. And if I'm self-preoccupied, there is no space to relax and receive the optimal phenomenological contact with your embodied being.

If I can get that vibrant contact, then my response will be, as far as possible, direct, because I fully receive and I fully respond, like the tide coming in and the tide going out. Receive and respond. But if I'm preoccupied, if I have a fixed notion of who I am, what my capacity is, my likes and dislikes, between the receiving and the responding will be the filter of the task of maintaining my inherited, attributed self-identity. And this is a great diminution.

Resting in this openness we can open to the free flow of whatever occurs. Moreover, within this occurrence is the patterning of dualistic experience.

So, we're not saying you have to let go of ordinary functioning in order to find this infinite lucidity, which is unconcerned with the goings-on of the world. It's rather that consciousness is not conscious of its own source because its source is not an object; its remit, its area of competence and operation is the dualistic field of self and other.

You cannot think your way into awakening to this open truth. The open truth is always present; you have to not stop thinking, but you have to relax from your reliance on thought, your dependence on thought, your identification with these constructs, because they always return you to a place of limitation. And awareness is infinite;

consciousness is concerned with the finite. So we have to relax out of identification with the finite, then we find the infinite, and then we see: Oh, all the finite forms are aspects of the infinite. There is no contradiction.

In this way we awaken to presence as openness, luminosity and responsiveness.

“Open” in the sense, just like the sky or the mirror, nothing there, it's open to whatever comes—and a luminosity, a brightness, ungraspable radiance of each moment of memories, thoughts, feelings. "Here, oh, I'm filled with this!". Suddenly I feel hungry! Oh, this is a shining revisioning of myself, I could collapse into it! Whoa, this is amazing, suddenly I'm pervaded with this sensation. What is that? I can fall into it: "I am hungry," or I can be aware: This is a thought-form and I can play with the thought-form without being trapped in it, without having to discard it. I follow the middle way of appearance and ungraspability.

Dynamic participation in an ever-changing world

If even a flavour of this non-dual inclusive presence is available in a learning situation, then the task of attending to what is occurring becomes much easier. The mood is trusting and connective — the learner is no longer a leaky vessel to be filled by the teacher and the teacher is no longer defined solely by the task of communicating information and skills. As trust in the depth and precision of our potential increases we have room for all the exam-oriented aspects of the syllabus as well as fresh openness to the phenomenological play of which we are a part. What we call ‘intelligence’ is indirectly increased by enjoying presence with and as the field of ever-changing experience.

That is to say, if the free flow of unpredictable experiences is occurring, and you stay in the game, this will keep you moving, just like if you're on the field playing a team sport. As the ball moves around, you move around; you're being exercised by the ball, and that gives you health and strength, and increases your competence in the game.

So, by being open to the field experience, the child gets a sense of: Wow, this is interesting! And I, myself, am not the decider of what is interesting and what is not www.simplybeing.co.uk © James Low 2024

interesting. I mean, that position which so many children get trapped in is like being Rapunzel: you're trapped in a tower and you can't get out. You created a castle, but you walled yourself in.

So, dynamic participation loosens us to see that actually the world is available, and that how we are is not yet known by us because we are, in our participative selves, being reborn moment by moment as co-emergent with the field.

It is not that non-dual awareness is good and dualistic consciousness is bad. Rather, it is that when consciousness is not over-relied on it becomes included within the ceaseless play of unborn awareness.

So, how might we open to the ever-open source of our becoming? Firstly, it helps if both teachers and pupils attend to the fact of impermanence in all their experiences.

This is not adding in some new information; it's simply to be in touch with how our life is.

The seasons come and go, the days get longer and then get shorter, we have school and then we have school holidays, we have a sense of how we are and then puberty happens. In each case we can focus on the events and note the changes. However, with a sense of what has been outlined above, it is vital to attend to the nuances of subjective experiences as they occur.

Rather than focusing on how I can give an account of what is happening to me, if I stay in touch with what's going on, it is so nuanced, so multifaceted, I can't grasp it, I can't create a realistic definition or composite account of what's occurring.

This doesn't mean I can't speak, or that it's useful, but I'm getting a complex message of my ability to receive and respond. If this attention to the actual dynamic unfolding of myself, moment by moment, as a field phenomenon—

If this becomes a practice done for even 10 minutes each day we come to see that, “I am change”. This is much more profound than seeing that change happens to me!

We actually see that, like the mirror, I am filling, I am filling.

If you have a side mirror on a car, as you're driving on a journey, thousands, tens of thousands of reflections are arising and passing, arising and passing. And this is the same for the children; so much, so much is occurring. You stay with that; it loosens you up, so that the tendency to grasp and make sense of it, and have something to say, and be important, and take your place and get the attention of the teacher—all of these constricting factors can be loosened, so that they still occur because they are modes of participation, but the basic sense of openness and freedom continues.

Our existence is the flow of changes in our body, voice and mind. We can note how it is to be hungry then full, thirsty then satisfied. We can check our own and other people's pulses and see that our blood flows as the heart pumps. We speak and fall silent, we listen and then respond. All that we say rests on the movement of the breath, our own ungraspable breath.

We're kept alive by a breath which has no substance.

We can attend to our thoughts and ideas as they arise and pass. Truly, although we might think we know what our body, voice and mind are, when we open to them as they manifest, we find that they are ungraspable. I, this self, this presence, am ungraspable. I am not a thing. I am this flow of subjectivity that wants to resist being objectified. Objectification hides the actuality of participative life.

We're very aware of the crude forms of objectification in racism, sexism, and so on, and how easily this slips into the demeaning of others and the sense that "I'm the winner, and the winner is allowed to define the other person". And it makes the world full of conflict and harshness, in which, when I meet a person - "Oh, I see you are a girl, I know what girls are like, I'm not going to play with you" - my knowledge precedes my experience.

So, the focus on relaxing into awareness means that awareness means you have to be present. When I say, "Oh, you're a girl," I'm leaping ahead of the game. I don't know anything about this person, but I know, because I can tell that they are a girl, I know what

they're like. This is a foreclosure, and this kind of foreclosure is limiting to the self, damaging to other people, and brings nothing really of value into the world.

Our in-breath supports mental activity. Our out-breath releases mental activity.

If you observe yourself, you find that this is true.

By examining this for ourselves we can see how different we actually are with the in-breath and with the out-breath. And if we calmly extend the out-breath we will release tension from our body and open to our spacious mind, the arena where all our experience occurs.

With these simple activities we can loosen the hold of attributed identities. Seeing them appear and pass they are manifestly not intrinsic. As situationally-developed patterns, we can, and do, give rise to multiple identities according to circumstances. The absence of a fixed sense of self allows our creative responsivity imbued with empathic attunement to meet the world with interest and kindness as we trust that open contact will show us how to be. We are then present with our openness, our potential, and our attuned responsivity.

Well, there's a lot more that could be said, but time is limited, so this is it.

Closing words by the host

James, you have such a beautiful way with words and a precision in what you're explaining. One of my absolute heroes, Vivian Robinson, who's also speaking, talks an awful lot about "open to learning" as a construct, and I think what you're encapsulating there shows the barriers, but how easy it is, just with that basic breath, the in and the out of the breath. And that's what we start life with, and that's what we finish life with. So indeed, so should it be.

So thank you so much for that. For those people who've not come across James's work before, if you go to www.simplybeing.co.uk, which is James' website, you'll find that James is so generous. People, and people around James, they record all his words of wisdom, and he works all over the world with these teachings and explanations, with such

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precision and beauty. They're there for you. I feel a much better human being just from being part of it, if there's any such thing as a "much better" human being, but certainly that openness and bounciness and joyfulness to life that you bring to people, James, it's an absolute delight. Thank you so much for sharing it with everyone.

James: My pleasure.