

How to Cultivate Mental Health in a World on Fire

James Low

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Transcribed by Ben Godfrey

Edited by Barbara Terris

How to develop mental health in a world on fire? In Tibetan the everyday word for beings who are alive in the six realms is *semchen* which means 'having a mind'. This is the basis for bad health because the mind is not something you have! If I have a mind then the ego is dancing on top of the mind. It's the other way round – I am the radiance of the mind and my mind is not what I think it is.

As long as I think that my concepts are going to reveal the truth of my mind and the truth of the world I will have poor mental health. We manifest in the world with the context, with the trees, the birds, the fish. Especially for us as human beings it's more complicated because we have what we call culture, civilisation - we already think we're pretty good. Maybe that's not true, maybe we are pretty blind and dumb. So the beginning of being freed from the troubles which come into us is to really get to know how the mind operates.

For example now I'm talking, so who is talking? We can say James is talking but James is a name, it's not even inherent in me. My parents gave me the name, it's extraneous but it has come to feel somehow essential to me. If I say, *'I am James'* that gives a kind of solidity, a sense of my existence. *'I am James, I live in London, I do this, I do that, I have agency, I make choices, I see the world as opportunities – opportunities to be generous or selfish, kind or cruel.'* The world is not fixed, the world reveals itself just as I reveal myself through participation. We're not all living in the same world. Language standardises the notion that the world is out there and I am in here. If I want to survive in the world I have to find a niche, I need to find a way of fitting into this complex system which is always changing. So if I start in that way - which seems like a good place to start – *'Here I am'*, sounds like a given, *'So how shall I proceed, how shall I live?'*. But if you start from that position Dharma is very difficult.

The Theravadan teachings say, *'Oh, this little James Low is just five heaps put together, he's a sophisticated kind of sandcastle like the ones children build on the beach.'* We dig the sand, put it into the bucket, then we turn it upside down. I am the product of construction. This construction when it spins around

the false illusory centre of a self can expand out into the world but it always comes back. I am the central point of reference for my life. So like a child playing with a yoyo that goes out and comes back, then goes out and comes back, we do many, many different things. But we squeeze them into this little bucket – *'I did this or this happened to me, I am the subject who acts, and I am the object who is acted on'* – so my frame of interpretation is duality. I go out, the world comes in and this is exemplified in what keeps me alive. I breathe in, I breathe out. I eat and then I go to the toilet. I'm part of an exchange between the environment and myself.

The fact that my life is dependent on breath and breath is uncatchable somehow doesn't seem to shock us or surprise us. When I stop breathing I'm dead, my life is the availability of the world coming to me. Without the other - the wind blowing in the sky coming in through my nostrils and my mouth - I'm gone. This breath is moving all the time; I am not a thing, you are not a thing. Thingness is the main obstacle to mental health. When we reify our experience of ourselves, of others, of mountains and rivers and fish and birds, we are focussed on our conclusion – on what I make of what is happening, how I understand it. Again I am returned to myself as the centre of the world. But this positioning in myself is a delusion because I am a process not a fixed entity. My thoughts are moving and changing as are my feelings and sensations.

We have two orders of experience that we tend to fuse together. We have the immediacy of the phenomenology of our presence - this moment, this moment, this moment. You have to be right here, right now, present with it as it is if you are to get the richness and the fullness of how these forms arise without solidification. That is to say the doorway into the simplicity of direct phenomenology is non-appropriation, you can't catch it by telling a story about it. Stories belong to the other register, the register of interpretation. This is the mental activity that I promote moment by moment in order to create a sense of meaning and value and understandability of what is going on. Concepts tell us

about what can be revealed by concepts; that is to say my mind as a kind of factory which makes different patterns and formations of self and other.

For example I am a man - I am a man because I am not a woman. I'm not very sure what it means to be a man, there are many different ways to be a man. In a sense, 'man' is an empty signifier. It's like a sausage skin, and you can put all kind of things in the sausage skin and fry it or boil it. Then I have my kind of being a man. But it's also influenced by the circumstances in which my experience of maleness arises. This becomes very complicated, my identity doesn't seem as simple as I would like it to be so I simplify it by saying: *'I don't know what it means to be a man, but I'm not a woman.'* So the negative or aversive position separates positions which I don't want to include within myself. If we attend to how we do this moment by moment and we see that we speak in different ways to different people, the construction or invention of myself is situational and it's artificial.

Buddha Shakyamuni said all compounded things are impermanent. Now I'm getting old and my health is not so good, I'm going to die. All the things I've done in my life, all the things that I know will just vanish like the day vanishes into the sunset. What have I achieved, what have I accomplished – the past is gone. I can look in my drawer and see all the old certificates and degrees I got from my years of study. They have my name on them, I did that. 'OK' you might say, *'Well then James if you did that, do it again – we'll give you another examination'*. I would have to say *'I'm very sorry, that James is not available at the moment. This James is a little bit tired now'*. So the stability of the name supports the delusion of the continuous identity of I, me, myself. This is a house made of concepts, of ideas, of cultural appropriation, things I have internalised from the world around me. Then I say *'Oh, I'm not who I think I am and you are not who I think you are and I am not who you think I am and you are not who you think you are'*.

We are just like children playing, we invent these fantasies of identity out of what is available. When you grow up in difficult circumstances; when other people invade your body through unwanted sexual activity; when people invade your mind with non-sensical economic theories, political theories, sociological notions of what it means to be Brazilian, or Scottish; and we think how the culture has changed year by year and what I used to know and what seemed to fit into my social context has started to come apart... I don't really want to taste the bitter flavour of this. I am not who I think I am, because my thoughts are a process which is moving in this weaving frame of subject and object. But at the same time I feel pulled towards establishing myself as someone knowable, so someone who knows me over the years might say, *'Yeah but James over the years you've changed so much'*. Then I say, *'Yes well I'm entitled to change my mind'*. Now this is very tricky, this shows that I am a very good confidence trickster, a good thief. *'I change my mind'* – actually my mind changes. I have thoughts I never imagined I would have. Getting old I get pains and sensations I never thought I would have when I was young. So the definition I have of myself and of other people is a denial of the ungraspability of the co-emergent process.

The direct phenomenological display that I am part of, and the discourse and the multiplicity of the stories that I can tell about myself in order to create the delusion of a reliable self are in deep contradiction. I manifest moment by moment in dependent co-origination. On the basis of this happening to me I respond, we have to work with the circumstances. Other peoples' feelings, other peoples' activities, whether they like me or don't like me – these are little energetic vectors moving around me. What I take to be myself is unstable, what I take to be my world is unstable, so no wonder that mental health is something rare.

There are so many variables operating at the moment - with climate change, with economic insecurity, with inflation, with tariffs, with the corrupt narcissism of our world leaders; it's all too much. *'The world is not the world I would like,*

what am I to do? Well what we do is we pretend. We invent a portfolio of identities that we can bring forward or back according to circumstances - we are plural. To give a Dharma example, there are 21 Taras and the 8 forms (or 8 names) of Padmasambhava. That sounds like a lot, but there have been thousands and millions of Jameses in the course of my life. The only stable thing about me is my name, a name given to me; it's not inherent. *'Oh, so who am I?'* If we want to find stability we have to go under the level of the waves that are always moving on the great ocean of experience. That's the meaning of meditation – not to be swept this way and that way in reactivity. To see that I'm not something floating on the surface of the ocean like a cork, but I am fluidity in the field of fluidity; moment by moment how I manifest is part of how the world manifests.

In the Buddhist texts this is described in many different ways. In general Theravadan teaching we say it is called dependent co-origination, that on the basis of this that arises. Not on the basis of this thing that thing arises, but on the basis of this pattern - this momentary pattern - the next momentary pattern arises. The basis of these patterns, what it's resting on, when we look we say, *'Oh this is a conceptual interpretation'*. The concept is moving but its function is to generate the falsity, the delusion of stability; because the concept is a kind of wrapper.

If you go to the fruit market and you pick out five mangoes it's difficult to carry them home in your hands, so the person who is selling them to you puts them in a paper bag. That paper bag is your self, the self is not some central unchanging core. In fact it's the container of the patterning of the moment. When we look at the status of this paper bag it has no substance, it functions because I believe it is reliable. It is a functionality, not an entity and the mangoes are also a functionality. The ingredients of myself are an ever-shifting pattern like a child's kaleidoscope. When you look into the kaleidoscope you see a pattern but it has no stability because you just turn the bottom of it and a new pattern arises, and a new pattern arises. So given that the patterning of how I arise is

influenced by or even inseparable from the patterning of the field around me, we can see, *'Oh, how will I find peace in the midst of all of this'*. I am movement in a world of movement. If I keep looking for some inner truth of my existence I think I am an explorer revealing what is there; but actually I am an inventor, I'm making it up. Moment by moment I'm constructing my notion of who I am.

There are many, many different Buddhist paths. Some spend a lot of time trying to simplify and purify the ingredients of this patterning; but this is difficult because the forces of the world keep interfering with the seeming clarity of my interpretation. It looks as if there is a continuity to my self – this can be compared to the thread that runs through a mala, the beads we use for counting mantras. Moment after moment after moment of experience, experiences come and go – *'Huh, but I'm still here, I am the string'*, ok let's try to find this string. When we look for the string it dissolves but our life is not just chaotic. So maybe the patterning is intrinsic to the nature of manifestation or emergence. The ordering that we would have by making little holes in each moment and putting a thread through it is an unnecessary artificiality. Something surprising or shocking happens and then the thought arises, *'Oh I have to think about this, I wasn't expecting this'*. I'm relying on concepts to give a reliable shape and this is a madness. Concepts can't do this because they are impermanent and changing and manifest according to circumstances.

Buddha Shakyamuni said we imagine the existence of phenomena; this is the process of mental activity. If you live in Brazil where is the centre of Brazil? Is it in the capital where the president and the big politicians live or is it a geographical centre which might locate it in a big forest? It depends on what you're looking for – there is no centre because the centre moves around on the basis of human interpretation.

The main tradition I follow is called *Dzogpachenpo* which could be translated as the great integration, or the intrinsic integrity. Well if integrity or being together is intrinsic I don't need to link and make patterns by myself. Linking is

thinking, thoughts arise and go down again. The waves don't take you to the depth of the ocean. There's nothing wrong with waves they're made with exactly the same water as the depth of the ocean. But their motility, their ongoing movement brings us up to the surface as we're trying to work out what the hell is going on.

The basic principle of Dzogchen is very much in harmony with the teaching of the Buddha; the Buddha said all beings everywhere want happiness but the things that they do bring them only the opposite. So we have a problem with the method - I am using my thoughts, my interpretations, my constructions to bring meaning into my life. This is what we've been trained to do in the family, at school, at work. But these interpretations, although they have a degree of clarity, simultaneously they bring an opacity. They seem to be showing something but it's not a translucence it's a presenting of something. So I could say, *'Oh let me tell you about Scotland'* and I will tell you about my Scotland. Only I live in my Scotland, only you live in your Brazil, because Brazil is a potential revealed by your participation – Brazil is not a thing. How many Brazilians are there! And they have moods, and they have happy days and sad days.

You get a Brazilian passport or identity card but what is the actuality, the immediacy of Brazil? You try to stabilise that by telling stories about Brazil. In the relativity of this thought to that thought the interpretation you make of Brazil is illuminating - but it brings us to conclusions. And actually as you're telling the story of your Brazil, this is a flow of thoughts, of constructions, of imagining. Where does this come from? Normally we say, *'From me! I am the thinker of my thoughts, I am the doer of my deeds'*. This is a relative clarification but it obscures the actual ground from which thoughts, feelings, sensations arise. So in Dzogchen we don't start with assumptions and conclusions, we start by bringing ourselves into nondual presence with the ceaseless flow of experience. Whatever comes, comes; whatever goes, goes. This sounds nice but if I'm

trying to protect an image of myself, a definition of myself, it's always going to be pushed this way and that by events.

So if you want to have a profundity of mental health we have to directly allow the mind to show itself and stop telling our mind and our body and our world what it is. We allow the showing, then we see, *'Oh, I am part of the showing'*. What I call James is a flow of images within the site of revelation. The traditional symbol for this is a mirror – my mind is open and empty like a mirror but also non-judgementally generous and hospitable. The mind shows what is there, just for this moment; it's so quick, so fluid, so unpredictable. Conclusions are too slow and heavy. The luminosity of the mind is ungraspable but actual, true, intrinsically true. Whereas my stories about myself – they seem graspable but they are delusions, they are not true. We have to find the mind, stories are not enough.

You think you have a mental health problem, you think you need therapy; that sounds ok, but what kind of therapy – there are many kinds of therapy. You choose the kind of therapy you think is good for you, but then you have the problem of which therapist. These are all cul-de-sacs, they're dead ends – relax, release identification, and just be with how it is. Easily said, not so easy to do, because actually we don't do it. I am the radiance of the mind I am not the source but I am not other than the source.

Q: A question from someone who has been experiencing a great deal of psychological suffering/depression, which is always worst at the time of day when afternoon turns into evening. She asks how it is possible for us to let go of the identifications which appear within the flow and open to what is emerging, when in samsara we are constantly called upon to act within a certain pattern.

A: If you are invited to someone's house for a meal you will be exposed to their cooking and they're not going to cook exactly the way you would cook. If you have your own recipe and your cooking method within your mind then you

end up judging, *'Oh this is not quite right'*. If we relax a little bit we think, *'Wow, what an amazing thing to do to an aubergine, I have never had this taste before'*. So here we have a choice: I can pull the taste which arises from their food into my interpretive schema – then I judge it as good, not good, tasty, not tasty; or I relax in the out breath, *'Oh, how is this? Something unusual is in my mouth! It's food, but not food as I know it'*. So it's the same, your karma which is a kind of cook has now started to cook depression for you. You think, *'I don't want to be like this, how can I get rid of this karmic cook. My life didn't always taste like this!'* But this is what is being cooked. Can I taste it without putting it into my schema? Not going to the conclusion, *'I suffer from depression'*, but *'How is this? In the afternoon, my body gets a bit heavy, I feel a bit dull and oppressed.'* If you think *'What is this?'* then you come to the conclusion - *'This is terrible'*.

You just have to tilt a little bit, away from what to how. How is this? So for example, if you do vipassana meditation in the Theravadan style and you scan down through the body it's quite surprising. Something which is there on the way down has vanished by the time my mind is coming back up through my body. Phenomena are just sparkling, they are on the edge of revelation, but my conclusion is to say, *'I hate this depression, it's spoiling my life, I wish it would go away'*. Now you are fighting with your own dinner like an angry child – *'Mum why did you cook all these vegetables?!'*. Don't think, make a friend of your tongue, *'How am I today?'* and you will find each day is different, each hour is different, moment by moment my depression is an unfolding of many different flavours.

When we turn our back on our life, *'I don't want this'*, this seems how it is! I don't want to give into it, I don't want to be a victim of depression, but if I turn towards this and I don't tell it what it is - *'You are the horrible depression that's messing my life'* - then you can start to be with it in its unfolding. Then we see this is movement so I allow the movement to come and to go. The more I stay with the movement the more difficult it is to come to a conclusion: *'I am depressed, help me!'*. So in a sense you are not the victim of depression you

are the victim of the conclusion that you have about depression and that's your own mind, your conclusion.

Q: How can professionals working in the mental health space with people who aren't connected to dharma provide the opportunity for them to view the world through the lens of co-emergence?

A: I would say the main problem with professionals is they take themselves very seriously. Other people expect them to know what to do so they're often caught up in pretending to have a clarity that they don't have in the moment. So coming down from the top of the mountain, from being the expert, and letting go of the idea *'I know, trust me'*, we can open up a different path. *'Let's see! I don't know, but I'm interested, I'm available, let's see!'* - that's quite vulnerable when people expect you to know, because knowledge gives you a kind of power in the world. The problem with that is you then put on this mask of the professional and the mask doesn't feel very much. Whereas this marvellous skin is absorbing a lot, it's coming and going.

Wisdom is to see the absence of inherent existence in phenomena, that it's like an illusion, but people find that difficult to see. So if the expert is over-definitive and the patient is trapped in their self-definition of what happened to me, my trauma - *'My father did this to me, my mother didn't protect me'* and so on - then the expert confirms that the patient is the story they tell. But we don't just have one story, so you might say to the patient - *'The story you told me is very, very sad and we have to take your suffering seriously but imagine we were going on a date, would you tell me the story in that way? Perhaps you could make yourself a little more interesting, I'm not just my sad story'*. Then they start to see, *'I am not a story I am a storyteller! And I can tell so many stories.'* So the patient can see that they are the daughter of Scheherazade, so that could loosen it a little bit.

Q: More of a statement of gratitude than a question: I am so glad to have come into contact with these teachers, and this view, I love the playful approach that it encourages and the recognition of ourselves as transitory beings (summarised).

A: Trauma is a kind of hiatus, a kind of tear by which the flow of experience suddenly freezes and it is as if we become ice. So to find freedom we have to allow the ice to dissolve. Ice is not other than water, nothing fundamental is lost when we become like ice but the form of ice and the form of flowing water is different. That's why if we take our situation too seriously we consolidate. The Dzogchen teaching is like having a little tickle and we loosen up, the ice melts and we see the nonduality of the flow of experience and the ground of experience.