
LETTING THE KNOTS GO FREE

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One of the factors that make the investigation of crime so difficult is that vested interests arrange a cover-up. Those with something to lose cover their tracks so that the source of their crime can be hidden – and if possible projected onto someone else in order that they take the blame instead. Detectives are trained to be suspicious, to resist the temptation to be taken in by taking the evidence and stories at face value.

Psychotherapy and dharma are also concerned with the exploration of cover-ups and the search for the true causal matrix of problematic experience. Of course, there are many different kinds of psychotherapy and many different schools of dharma, but I hope to set out some of the key themes in the two traditions to illuminate the differing notions of what is being covered up, the styles of response to this, and where they lead.

In the area of psychoanalytic psychotherapy one of the key concepts is repression as a method of defending the ego. Our ordinary sense of self is fragile; a lot happens in the course of a life that the ego finds hard to bear. These events are often managed by repression, by putting them 'out of mind', forgetting them so that they don't come to mind. This is further strengthened by forgetting that one has forgotten, so that it is as if the events had never occurred. This leads the ego to believe that it is safe, standing on solid ground...but then symptoms start to manifest. Anxiety, dread and confusion reveal that all is not well – yet the cause is now hidden from consciousness. The therapist has to be very attentive to the nuances of the patient's presentation in order to get a sense of the hair-line cracks in the seemingly smooth surface of the narrative.

By the gradual dis-covering of the original trauma or unbearable event, the therapist and patient can together release the trapped libido allowing the patient to return to a felt sense of being more at home with themselves. This dis-covering thus leads to a re-covering, in which the patient is more able to get on with their life.

Yet, is this re-covering not simply another form of cover-up? In the moment of becoming aware of aspects of myself that I have lost touch with, my usual sense of self is in question. What does it mean for me to feel 'I am me' when so much of what I am is hidden from me? How is it that I weave my sense of self? What do I create it from, what sort of selective attention gives it shape and maintains it? All these vital and fascinating questions can be lost in the happiness of re-covering. Now that I feel myself again, I just want to get on with my life, acting and reacting in the drama of daily events. The confidence and clarity that comes with such a re-recovery seems to be self-validating.

The new state seems obviously more beneficial than one's previous neurosis so why should it be undermined by continuing enquiry? The patient is cured. Life goes on. The crime has been solved. We can now relax, for good work has been done.

It is as if the continuity of our sense of self was like a necklace; the beads of experiences are strung along the thread of my felt sense of being me. If the thread breaks, the beads fall apart and we have a break-down. The therapist provides a containing bag to hold the beads while the strands of self are gradually spun back into a thread flexible and resilient enough to carry the weight and movement of the dynamic beads of our life. The sense of going-on-being is restored yet, so often, without really being put into question. If I can go to pieces and yet still be here, perhaps there is an invisible holding and continuity, a deep presence quite other than the felt sense of self or the thoughtful holding of the therapist.

This approach can be applied whether we think in terms of intrapsychic conflict or developmental deficit. The cause of the distress has to be identified and dealt with. Generally, the cause is the action of someone else. For example, a parent is abandoning, unloving, uncaring or intrusive, invading, devouring, or merging. The young person cannot cope and so cuts off, shuts down, or goes under-cover, developing a false self, a survival facade. This view of development installs a strong sense of the self as an object, something, some-'thing', that can be acted on, shaped and distorted by others. We are created out of the interactive force field in which we live and from which we are not separate – and yet we struggle to separate from it in order to achieve the mature goal of autonomy. To be a reflective agent, a person capable of being aware of who they are, what they want and how to get it in a socially adaptive way, is the image of healthy functioning held by many schools of therapy.

From the point of view of buddhism, this approach to examining life merely scratches the surface and indeed is itself a reassuring form of cover-up that can create obstacles to awakening the insight that reveals our actual situation.

The historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, was stopped in his tracks by the sight of events that challenged the worldview he had been raised in. Kept in comfort, far from the troubles and woes of ordinary life, the young prince Siddhartha lived in a fantasy realm of instant gratification and freedom to do as he liked. However, on encountering an old person, a sick person, and a corpse, through a leap of recognition he understood that he also could and would grow old, get sick and die. His cocoon of self-affirming assumptions was pierced and he uncovered a truth about his existence that he could not recover from. And so, he left his palace, his fantasy and friends, and went in search of paths to discovering if there was any way of finding freedom from the endless cycle of birth and death.

He learnt many techniques of yoga, meditation, and mortification yet found that they were also nothing more than new forms of cover-up, new clothing that obscured the naked truth he sought. Finally, he sat down under a tree and vowed not to move until he was free. This came about by dropping all covering. By letting go of thoughts, feeling, memories, identification, hopes and fears, he let the mind run on, let it be as it would be, and came to rest in an open, naked acceptance of how things are. As all the conditioning factors out of which his prior identity was constructed were let go off, there was a great release of tension

– nothing to defend, nothing to develop. The house of self was shattered, the parts were still there but no longer did they generate the epi-phenomena of the whole which is taken to be greater than the sum of its parts. Awakened from assumption, he saw with fresh eyes free of attachment. This is the founding moment of all the buddhist traditions and the source of inspiration for the many methods of meditation which have been developed.

We can now look at some of these, particularly mindfulness, and see how radically this approach to existence differs from the humanistic orientation of modern psychotherapy.

The first aspect to consider is conception and birth as it applies to the human dimension. Rather than seeing the developing foetus as the product of DNA material of both parents, the buddhist view is that the ripening tendencies of a stream of consciousness create a pull towards the couple having sex. Consciousness engages with the material basis offered by the union of the male and female essences and this interaction evolves as the foetus. Each moment of experience in the womb, in the birth process and after birth, is influenced by the arising of tendencies which originate from previous lives. The child is not entirely developed from factors in the visible interactive field but also manifests tendencies arising from volitional acts performed in different settings prior to this existence.

Clearly, this indicates that the child and the later adult it becomes are not ‘victims’ of circumstances, of actions done to them by others. Rather, one’s own individual life is better seen as the arising of moment after moment of choices made with regard to multiple options. These choices are exercised consciously and unconsciously within a complex array of internal and external factors which include memory, intention, mood, sensation, impact of events and orienting beliefs. The task, then, is not to ameliorate the impact of the actions of others nor to manage or alter one’s own adaptive patterns. Rather, one is called upon to examine and recognise what one is up to, not just in one’s behaviour but in the core beliefs one has about who one is and what the basis of our existence is.

The first step in this enquiry is to develop a capacity for focused attention so that distraction can be avoided. Distraction here indicates getting lost in any arising phenomena, be it memory, emotion, cognition, dream, daydream or external event. This is the beginning of mindfulness, the capacity to be present with emerging experience without either fusing with it or cutting off from it.

The basic method is to sit quietly with a posture that allows free movement of the breath and for the muscles to relax while supported by the skeleton. One then focuses attention on a simple object such as the flow of the breath through the nostrils, a smooth pebble, a statue of the Buddha or a painted disc. Whenever one finds oneself being distracted from this task, the instruction is to gently return to the focus without blame and without trying to work out why it occurred. Psychological curiosity, the desire to make sense of the details of one’s individual experience by reflecting on them in the light of other experiences, is a real obstacle to developing skill in this practice. Knowing more about oneself as a complex person is a fascinating temptation but it leads into the labyrinth of narrative elaboration in which one idea follows another until life goes by in a fantasy of value and development, a sense of being more alive, when in fact, from a buddhist point of view, one is just asleep in a different way.

Once the ability to maintain focused attention has been developed and a degree of calm is achieved, there is the basis for developing insight or accurate perception free of projection. In everyday life it is quite usual for our perception to be mixed with assumptions, beliefs, moods, and intentions, most of which operate outwith our conscious sense of what is going on. This creates the experience that our opinions, judgements and so on are embedded in the object we see rather than being factors we bring to the situation. Thus these ideas and assumptions are projected or transferred from the domain of our activity to become factors that seem to be operating in the world independent of our character. Furthermore, there are then taken to be impacting on us due to the actions of others. The more we can pay attention to the movement of our mind as it occurs—rather than talking about it after the event—the more we develop insight into the phenomenology of becoming.

This is not an abstract knowledge, a knowing about, but a living engagement with the flow of becoming as we start to see how our identity is built up of moments of identification with transient arisings. This opens the way to real-time deconstruction of the habit of merging with the arising, which the habit creates the sense of there being true, self-existing states. When abstractions appear to be actual, their true status as compounds and constructions created out of momentary events is hidden. The never-ending sequences of cause and effect, where each effect in turn operates as a further cause *ad infinitum*, is then not recognised.

One way of thinking about ignorance is to see it as the practice of taking for granted, of believing and assuming rather than actually looking. The map developed through conditioning becomes the template of 'reality' and all that actually occurs is edited to fit the template. Once the map is in place, once we have developed our sense of who and where we are, it seems easier to take this for granted, to take it as truly self-existing, a done deal, rather than attend to what is going on. In fact, this choice condemns us to a great deal of on-going effort, as the work of selective attention and editing is not easy – for it involves a falsification of what is. Deconstruction of this effortful illusion comes through the practice of meditation – and yet there is often a great deal of resistance to doing the practice. Attachment seems normal; part of how things are, just how it is. It is usual to be taken in, to suspend disbelief, as in the theatre, to allow ourselves to enter a world of make-believe as if it were truly real. Knowing about this, knowing the 'theory' doesn't help much – we need a practice that brings us into a state of presence with the immediacy of events so that we can truly exercise choice and discrimination.

The basic method of insight is as follows. Having focused attention, by means of the practice described above, one brings that attention to the top of one's head and then gently moves it down through the body, noticing all that is arising. This is a 'bare' noticing, a non-elaborating description that attends to the arising just as it is. For example, when your attention reaches your knees and you think, 'they are sore', this description is an abstraction or elaboration. That is, it is a conclusion or summation of actual presenting experience. So we need to attend to what is there. This might be something like, 'stabbing', 'hot', 'tearing' – we seek the simplest term that can fit the simple immediacy of what is there. It is not a rounded conclusion, it will not fit easily into our usual narrative of ourself and who we are—yet it is our experience.

This scanning of the body continues slowly and carefully, noting the moments of experience. The dynamic unfolding of the body starts to be revealed to us until it becomes our way of being present in embodiment. This body is alive, vital, ever-changing; the actuality of impermanence. When we reflect on impermanence from the position of our beloved flesh and blood body in which we are so invested (sometimes with hate and disgust), there is often fear and anxiety since change brings new challenge, and especially the great challenge of death. Yet, through the practice of insight, the ungraspable emergent nature of the body, and by extension of the practice, our mental world and our environment, brings relief. There is nothing to hang on to, and yet here we are – so who are we?

As we practice insight, the stitching on the clothes of our assumptions is unpicked, then the weaving unfurls and the threads unwind – there is the immediacy of arising without anything solid being created. We are alive, here, present, yet if all these assumptions, memories, intentions and so on that we have relied on as mirrors illuminating ourselves are seen as mere constructs, then who are we? The mind itself, simple natural awareness is unchanging in the midst of change. Naked beneath all the clothes we have worn, our fresh, raw awareness is ready in each moment to accept whatever occurs. There is no map to be privileged over the territory; since awareness itself is not an active player in the world, it is not trying to find its way nor to impose its will. The ego cannot participate in this for it is trapped in self-concern and the maintenance of its map, its rule book, its sense of how things should be.

This is exemplified in the ancient Greek story of Procrustes. He lived in a house in the middle of a vast plain across which travellers would walk. In the evening he would look out to see if anyone was near and call to them and offer food and shelter. After the stranger had eaten he would offer them a bed. When they lay down on it he would check if they fitted perfectly. If they were too short he would stretch them on a rack until they were long enough. And if they were too long he would cut off their feet. When our idea is over-invested we have to attack the world to make it fit.

Awareness reveals the non-duality of self and other, of subject and object as it registers them equally without bias. The illusion of there being an 'inside', private, personal world of me and an 'outside' objective world of you, is dissolved. For this reason it is sometimes said that awareness is like a mirror; it shows all that is there without bias or prejudice. Moreover, the mirror is neither conditioned nor changed by the nature of the reflections that arise in it. The openness, the emptiness of the mirror is both its purity or protection and its generosity or immediacy – without hesitation the reflection is there.

When this is awakened to, all the knots in the mind start to untie by themselves. Obsessions, neurotic anxieties, assumptions and, more deeply, the habit of reification itself, untie and go free as they are revealed to be movements rather than entities. Awareness is open, still, unchanging, yet endlessly revealing movement; movement which shows the form of self and other, inside and outside. These forms are the energy or display of awareness itself. Like rainbows in the sky or a mirage in the desert, the display appears, has an impact and yet has no inherent self-nature. There is no danger to awareness in anything that occurs.

Of course, one of the things that does occur is my felt sense of I, me, myself, my body, my history, my work, my relationships, plans and so on. What does it mean to call this an illusion? The illusory nature of myself and my world is the absence of any truly self-existing entities in it. I am not a 'thing', a commodity, and in the course of my life I do not encounter even one 'thing' or commodity. Experience – which is all I have, and all I am – is dynamic, unfolding and ungraspable. We participate in the world, part of the non-dual manifestation. Our sense of ourselves is the arising of the energy of awareness; we are revealed to ourselves. We are both awareness (the 'mirror') and the arising, the manifesting experience (the 'reflection') displaying itself to that awareness. And when we look further, the experience is not coming from somewhere else, it is the energy of our own mind. The ground and what arises from, to, and for the ground are inseparable from the very beginning. This non-duality shows how to remain naked while wearing clothes, how to show whatever forms are required without being conditioned by them.

From this brief account we can see that the projects of psychotherapy and of dharma are very different although there are some points of similarity. Both seek to alleviate suffering and to bring greater freedom to be oneself. The central difference lies in the understanding of what 'being oneself' means. Generally speaking, psychotherapy strengthens the ego-self, for even the developing of a greater sense of unconscious factors leads to a capacity of the individual to be more open, flexible and responsive. However, the ego does not get enlightened. 'I' cannot become enlightened. Awakening is not the creation of something new nor the re-finding of something old. It is to step into the always already presence of luminous awareness, the natural state of enlightenment.

Some tourists were driving in Ireland along country roads and lost their way. They saw a farmer and stopped to ask a local for directions. *"How can we get to Limerick?" "Limerick is it? Well, if I was going to Limerick I wouldn't start from here."* It's not that you have to start from where you are in terms of where you think you are (the ego's domain) but from where you actually are; the unchanging dimension of awareness. If you start from the latter position, the journey is completed instantly and you wake up where you have always been.

Starting with the ego and trying to make it enlightened is like trying to turn coal into chalk. The aspects of effort on the path are ways of modifying energy and relaxing attachment and investment – they do not create nor bring about enlightenment. Enlightenment is already present. By ceasing from avoiding or ignoring it, it is revealed where it has always been – right here. Getting it is like getting a joke, you don't get anything yet there is a difference. When encapsulation in self-reference and self-concern ceases, we start to see with fresh eyes, and what we see is difference, the unique specificity of each moment. This stops us in our tracks. Our assumptions have become out of date and drop. There is just this! This opening into the non-dual field of arising is the heart of compassion for there is no difference between self and other. This is not based on a belief or an aspiration but is a direct simple fact and so all activity is for the benefit of all.

To be mindful is to begin to uncover the ever-fresh aliveness of awareness as our own natural state. Techniques, whether in psychotherapy or dharma, are forms of cover, ways of behaving – useful yet not without danger, especially that of evoking the will to power,

and the seemingly important seriousness of its intentions. As the knots untie and the breath flows freely, naked presence continues to play as always.