
Looking with fresh eyes

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Quitting samsara's storyboard

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Excerpts

The function of the practice is not about becoming a buddhist. It doesn't matter if you are a buddhist or not. 'Buddhist' is a name and we already have a lot of names. The main point is to recognise: 'Who is the one who is here?', 'What is this arising?' These two things are inseparable

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Prince Siddharta—in looking at life in the palace that he lived in—started to see that things were not quite what they appeared to be. He was looking with fresh eyes ... So he left the palace and spent many years practicing different kinds of meditation ... many kinds of self-restraint, diminishing the amount of food he ate, holding postures for a very long time and so on. But after some time he found that these practices were not taking him very far. And he decided that he needed just to sit and be with himself.

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He wouldn't move until he had awakened to the truth of existence ... By doing nothing, everything was achieved. Up until that point he had been pushing himself ... but then he was just sitting: breathing in and out, thoughts and feelings were coming and going, but he was not getting involved in them. And through that he was able to see what is actually the case. It's not so complicated.

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In our time, many people have an inner desolation, a lack of a sense of meaning, and that is clearly not a healthy place to be ... The best places tend to be far away. So—because we tend to believe this, because we tend to believe that we are a little bit unworthy— it can make sense to engage in a practice that will take us somewhere else. This is a kind of problem-focused-dharma.

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The ego-self is very fragile. Happiness is easily lost. We built our house on sand. The various factors which continue to give us the sense of who we are. don't fit together all that easily... Just saying, 'I exist, I exist', doesn't really give us a certainty ... Who is the one who is aware of the thought, the feeling, the sensation? This is the natural purity, the natural clarity of the mind itself.

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Siddharta’s awakening

In the traditions of Tibetan buddhism there are many styles of practice and many different lineages; these have historical evolution to them. However, the main point for *us*, in the West, when we do this kind of practice, is both what kind of *intention* does it develop in us, and what kind of *understanding* do we develop from it—about who we are and the nature of our existence; so it’s a question of how do we understand our own life. This is the beginning point of buddhism.

Leaving the protective circle

When the first Buddha—or the Buddha of our time—*Shakyamuni*, was starting his spiritual journey, it began with a series of questions. He started to see that his assumptions about life, the assumptions that he had been raised in, were not the whole story. That is to say, he had been raised in a secure environment, free from difficulties. Then he started to see, that beyond the protective circle of his own existence as a privileged person, there were many difficulties. And the encountering of these difficulties caused him to question some of the assumptions he had about himself. So, according to the tradition, he saw an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. Through reflecting on these events he came to see, that although he was young, he would also get old, although he was healthy, he would also get sick, and although he was alive, he was also going to die.

That might seem very obvious—but of course for us it is quite a surprise when we become sick. We see being sick as some kind of accident or something going wrong or it is being something that shouldn’t happen. In this town there is at least one hospital, many pharmacies, doctors. They are there because people get sick. Which people get sick? Other people! [*laughter*] That’s what, how we like to imagine our life could be.

So when this young man Siddharta—sometimes they call him a prince, he was from a wealthy family—started to see that what happens to other people and what happens to himself are not two parallel but separate streams, but actually the existence of others and our own existence are always woven together... what happens to other people, can easily happen to us; then what happens to us, can happen to others. It’s because of this that studying the world helps us to understand ourselves. So, as is well known, the buddha started to examine his environment more precisely; and seeing the illusory quality, the seductive narrative, within which he was living, he decided he had to leave.

Because every culture provides stories, or ideas, which give a sense of meaning, and when we grow up in a culture, we adopt the values that that culture offers us. In order to be a functioning member of our society we have to take the beliefs that are offered to us, and take them into ourselves, so that we become a normal person. That which was *outside*—which was held by our parents, schoolteachers and so on—gradually becomes incorporated *inside* us as our way of understanding the world. This comes to be our sense of who we are and of what the world around us is.

Doing nothing, achieving everything

So, *Prince Siddharta*—in looking at life in the palace that he lived in—*started to see that things were not quite what they appeared to be, he was looking with fresh eyes*; and that caused him to want to leave. And so he left the palace and spent many years practicing different kinds of meditation. He learned this meditations from various yogis, who he met wandering in North India. He practised many kinds of self-restraint, diminishing the amount of food he ate, holding postures for a very long time and so on, but after some time he found that these practices were not taking him very far. And he decided that he needed just to sit and be with himself.

So, according to the tradition, he found a place under a beautiful bodhi tree, put some grass down as a mat, accepted the offering of some rice milk from a young person from the nearby village, *which symbolically is a kind of connection with the world*. Because delicious food is a concentration of the *good* things of the world, and up to that point he had been trying to free himself by pushing away all the normal hooks and attractions and habits of *being* in the world.

Then he sat in meditation and he decided he wouldn't move until he had awakened to the truth of existence. And according to the tradition many different kinds of problems, threats and temptations came to him as he was sitting. They came in the form of demons or nightmares and fantasies that seem to be attacking him, and also visions of attractive people who offered him the possibility of re-entering of a world of ordinary pleasures. But he just sat, and these temptations couldn't penetrate the simplicity of his sitting.

By doing nothing, everything was achieved. Up until that point he had been pushing himself, feeling that it was all up to him, that *he* had to make a great deal of effort, that he was acting in a heroic mode—but then he was just sitting: breathing in and out, thoughts and feelings coming and going, but he is not getting involved in them. And through that he was able to see what is actually the case. It's not so complicated.

The drama of our life

Today, when I was coming in the car, the car was going quite fast at first. When the car is going quickly, you don't see very much. But luckily there was a traffic jam [*laughter*], so the car became very slow, and we could look around and see a lot more. It's like that in life. When we become worried and agitated thoughts and feelings go quite quickly, we experience ourselves as being caught up in them and carried along by them; and inside that it's difficult to really see what's going on. Because the thoughts and feelings become an interpretive medium *through which* experience is cooked and presented to us. And the function of meditation practice is to learn how to stop cooking. To stop mixing things together, so that the qualities of the individual ingredients can be seen just as they are—and when we see each ingredient, we recognise that they have the same structure.

The actuality of our existence, what it is as it actually presents itself, is momentary experience. There is this moment, and then this moment, and then this moment... they are not the same, and yet they don't seem to be so very different. When the moments are made up of multiple layerings of experience, it's more difficult to be precisely with what is there.

'There must be more to life'

In our time, many people have an inner desolation, a lack of a sense of meaning, and that's clearly not a healthy place to be. So there are many methods in which people can be encouraged to find a new way to make meaning in their life. And so the people who have depression, for example, they are encouraged to get some physical exercise, encouraged to make some connection with people as a possibility of interrupting the mood that they got trapped in—because there is a sense that to be depressed is not a good state. They think, *'There must be more to life than this!'* How do you get more life? *'You should be doing more. Come to the day centre!'*—a certain place where people with problems come and meet together. *'Don't be depressed on your own, come to us!'* [laughter] So, this is very important, because it is a sense: *'We, through our own effort, should be able to transform ourselves and make our lives go in the right way.'* Clearly, this helps in many ways: If you have, in the course of a day, simple tasks to attend to—that have a beginning, a middle and an end—it gives a sense of purpose and direction, and you feel yourself as an agent, somebody who can make things happen.

This is the world that we all live in. The world where developing the capacity for focused activity seems to be a good thing; and in buddhism there are many kinds of practice that you can do that will help to develop your life. There are many kinds of meditations to learn, there are many activities that you can learn how to perform. You can learn to set up the altar and clean the bowls. These activities connect us with a stream of value and meaning. We go from being *outside* the dharma, or the practice of buddhism, to be on the *inside*, we become people who participate in a particular way. This gives a sense of direction, purpose, value, with the possibility, *'If I continue to do this for a long period of time, something truly good and meaningful will arise in my life—and the reason, why I have to make this effort, is because how I am now, is not very good.'*

'I want to be in this better place'

For each of us it's fairly easy to think, *'Well, I have lots of problems in my life, I am not as good a person as I would like to be, there is some room for development—so, where I am now is not where I want to be. I want to be in this other place, and when I get to this other place, I will feel better. So I have some hope and if I add to the hope some effort, and I have very good binoculars, then I can see far away, I can find out where I am going.'* So in buddhism there are many practices for going really quite far away. For example you can go to Sukhavati, to Dewachen, this is the pure land of the Buddha Amitabha, it's a very nice place, everything you want is there, it's very easy to get enlightened when you are there—it's just quite far away!

In fact, the best places tend to be far away. So, because we tend to believe this, ***because we tend to believe that we are a little bit unworthy, it makes sense to engage in a practice that will take us somewhere else***, so: *'When I get somewhere else I will be someone else and that someone else will get enlightened. Because I couldn't get enlightened because I've got too many problems. Only people without problems get enlightened, so the first thing I have to do is to work on getting rid of my problems.'* ***This is a kind of problem-focused-dharma.***

So, the Buddha kindly said, *'The most important thing to know about your situation is suffering.'* Why do you have suffering? Because of attachment and ignorance. Who is attached and ignorant? You are. *'That's another heavy stone in my rucksack. A long way to go, and I've got a heavy rucksack. But I have faith.'* This is a quite normal way of entering into buddhist practice, and we can see that as a pathway this makes sense to many people because it confirms the beliefs they already have about themselves. And buddhist teachings—and there are many many books in buddhism, many different kinds of teachings—teachings provide an answer.

So what's the question? 'Who am I?' and 'What should I do?'

'Ha, wonderful, we have many many answers! I am so glad that you asked that question! Let me tell you we have millions of things to do, you'll never be bored in buddhism. In fact, we have so many answers to your question, you will never have to ask that question again.'

Now that can seem like a great kindness, because there is a lot of reassurance in it, somehow there is a path. But actually it is a covering over of the central point. So if we stay with the questions, 'Who am I? What should I do? How should I live?'—questions call for answers, but they also call for inquiry.

The answer is a quick solution. That is to say, you get the answer quickly, but the consequence of accepting the answer takes a long long time. If you take the other line, of inquiry, the inquiry into the immediate presence of our existence, that's more difficult. It takes a calmness and a focus and a clarity of mind. But when we see who we are, there is the solution. And this is the particular path of *dzogchen*.

The path of dzogchen: Starting to see how things are

The dzogchen lineage came into this world through *Garab Dorje*; Garab Dorje's teachings are now very famous and translated into many different languages. The essential point of his teachings is that *from the very beginning your own nature is perfect*. What does this mean? At this very moment we are sitting here in the room and hear things that Matthias [*the German translator*] and I are saying. Thoughts and memories and feelings, sensations, come and go as your experience. We have been sitting together now for about forty minutes. Not so much is happening externally. But we are not dead. How do we know that? Because something is happening.

That is to say, the proof of my existence is what is happening to me. And if somebody says, '*How are you?*', we tend to give a description in terms of what is *happening* to us and for us. So, somebody says, '*How are you?*', you say, '*Oh, pretty good, but I am very busy at this... at that...*' That is to say, *we understand our identity, who we are, in terms of things that we do and things that happen to us.*

Caught in concepts and endless stories

Who is the one who is doing? Who is the one who is experiencing what is happening? Garab Dorje says, '*The mind is pure from the beginning.*' It means, thoughts come and go. When the thought goes, another thought comes. On the level of the thoughts it is often as if one thought is binding itself into another thought. We get to have chains of thoughts that weave themselves together in patterns. We don't usually experience one thought just on its own, but chains of narrative, chains of story telling, which create moods, feelings, out of which we say, '*Oh, I feel really good today!*' or '*I really want to do that!*'

Something is happening, the thing which is happening is already gone as it arises; the thing which is coming is already gone as it comes, it vanishes very quickly. Like in early winter, when the first snow is falling, if you watch it falling onto a pond, the snow flake—usually the big ones that are coming down slowly, swirling—and as soon as they hit the surface of the water: they are gone. The thought is there in our mind, or the feeling is there, the sensation in the body, and then it is gone. Through meditation practices we can come to attend to our actual experience more and more precisely, and we can see that moment by moment arising and passing.

Now, *who is the one who is aware of the thought?* This is our mind itself. There is the content of the mind which is always changing. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are sad—these things come and go. No one is happy all the time, no one is sad all the time. Through all these fluctuating experiences there is a continuity of *me*, so we have a whole system of practice called *tantra*, *tantra* essentially means *continuity*. If you have some mala, some prayer beads, you have a thread with

many beads on, like a necklace, and just as you can pull the beads one by one along the string of the rosary, so the moments of our experience—good, bad, happy, sad—move like beads along this thread of the continuity of I, me, myself.

So, what is this continuity of self? Is it a thing? Is there a fixed, definite core of me-ness to me? Because we can say, *'Well, all this has happened to me. I have done so many things. The one who has experienced that is me.'* We all understand what that means. The reason we can all understand what that means is because we are all stupid!

According to buddhism, stupidity is to stop halfway-through the inquiry; so it would be as if you were watching some detective story on the television, and right at the end of the program it is revealed, *'The crime was done... by someone.'* You would say, *'That's crap!'* So, who is the one who is doing everything in my life? I am. But each person in this room can say, 'I exist, I do this, I do that.' This *'I am, I am doing this, this happened to me'* kind of explanation is both clarifying and stupefying at the same time.

It's clarifying because it means we always know who is doing things, and it provides a basis for taking responsibility. It's stupefying because it becomes like an invisible wall, a kind of perspex wall, which we can't penetrate because there seems to be a solidity and a truth and a definition which should just be accepted. Because it seems to have a kind of solidity and a definition, it seems there is no need to inquire any further.

In the same way we can say, *'Today is Friday.'* but what does this tell us? In Germany you say, *'Freitag'*. If it really is 'Friday' it cannot also really be 'Freitag' because we live inside language and we think that the language is giving us the definite truth of the situation. When you move from one language to another, you see that it is relative. However these words, when you are swimming inside them, seem to be naturally meaningful. The words are true, but actually they are concepts created out of causes and circumstances. Their truth is conventional.

Contents captivate our attention, space is taken for granted

We learn to put together certain kinds of concepts and when these patterns come together, it seems to become something. So, a child learns: if it gets a piece of paper like this [*James shows a paper and starts to draw lines*], it puts one line down, another line down and then two lines going up like that, and then says, *'I have a house!'* There are four lines on the piece of paper, but when the child shows this to their mother, the mother says, *'Oh, that's a house!'* This is a beautiful piece of deception. The mother is very kindly helping the child to be socially acceptably stupid. Because it's not a house. It's a representation, it's an image, and if we can see that this is how we operate, we take concepts and put them together in patterns and then we think, *'This is what it is! This is the truth!'*—and if we live inside these constructions, there is no end to them. There is always something new to talk about with your friends, endless places to visit, books to read, different kinds of food to eat; so thinking, feeling, sensation and activity chase each other round and round and round, and through that our lives pass by.

But who is the one who is having this experience? I am. ***Who is this I? This is the central point of the inquiry,*** because the content of the mind—that is to say, what is arising, what is experienced—is so intoxicating, so intriguing, that we tend to fall into it and take it to be the whole story.

Just as maybe sometimes you repaint your flat where you live, so maybe you decide to paint the lounge and you take the furniture out and put something down on the floor, paint the walls, you detect the room, *'Oh, it's quite a lot of space!'* You can see all the possibilities. But the furniture from this room is now... some is in the kitchen, some is in the bathroom, some is in the bedroom. So, you

put the furniture back into the lounge, you sit down, *'Hmm, this is good.'* Now you don't see the room so clearly, you just see what's in the room. This is what's happening most of the time.

The contents captivate our attention. If there was no space, you couldn't have any content—so the space and the contents are inseparable. But our attention is caught by the content and the space is taken for granted; functionally it's invisible, it's not something we attend to, it doesn't register with us. This is the same with our own experience. The furniture of our lives—external objects, internal memories, hopes for the future, current arisings of thoughts, feelings and so on—these captivate the whole of our attention. There is always something going on and we as the engaged subject are confirmed in our unique, individual existence because of our capacity to tell the story about what is happening to me. The more we experience 'this is happening to me', two things are being strengthened simultaneously: the sense of the real truth or existence of external objects and, separate from them, the true existence of myself as a subject who is aware of what is happening.

This is called *duality*, the separation of subject and object as if they were two separate domains, in which I—as the subject—can go into the world in different directions, and the part of my existential freedom is to choose how to proceed or not. That is to say, my existence is defined by the choices I can make. Who is the one who makes choices? I, me, myself. But when we start to look at the one who says *'I, me, myself'*, we see that 'I' is a sound, and it comes and goes. *'I exist'*, then there is silence. *'Meeeeee!'* ...silence. You have to say it again and again, so we do that a lot.

Ego-self means restlessness

When children are four, five and six, they tend to be talking all the time about what they want, what they do, and they want a lot of attention: *'Look at me, look at me! I exist, I am important, I am so important I should interrupt your existence. I know that nothing is more important to you than pushing me on the swings again and again and again.'* And all through our lives we find some kind of swing to get other people to push us on. Some way of pulling other peoples' attention into our life, our world, to validate and kind of massage our sense of truly existing. The problem with this is: this one who truly exists is in a body that is going to die. So the wonderful existence that I express is going to [*James claps his hands*] bang into a wall.

So, what's the purpose of life then? Maybe none; so, we can wake up in the morning, open a bottle of wine, get some chocolate and watch TV all day. For many of the patients whom I see in the hospital, this is their main occupation. Just passing time until they become sad enough or brave enough to kill themselves, because they can't find any way of plugging themselves into the world. They are alienated, and this alienation is hidden from us when our lives go well.

When we have a job, a relationship, friends, somehow we are on the inside. Yet still, there is a sense of, *'If I don't keep it going, it will stop and then it will be awful.'* Who is the one who has to keep going? Me. So I am creating my existence, I am creating meaning and value. This means, *'I can never rest, I can never relax, because if I do that, meaning starts to fall away.'* This is in a very brief way describing what's called *samsara*. Samsara means going round. It means our lives move from moment to moment round and round, we are always on the job, engaged, creating, saying 'Yes' to some things, 'No' to other things—and this busyness has to be maintained for us to continue to have our sense of existence.

The basis of our individual identity, what we can call our ego, is very fragile. Although we can say, *'I exist'* and *'I am different from you'*, if I am all on my own, I won't feel so good. Although I am not you, I need you to feel like me! That is to say, identity is social. This is why we have so much confusion, because the feeling is, *'I am just me. I am an individual. I am not like you, I am asserting myself. But please don't leave me or I will be lonely, because I need you to feel okay.'* Now there is

something funny in here, this can't quite be right. If I am so big and brave and self-existing, how come I am so vulnerable and needy? Both things can't be right.

*The ego-self is very fragile. Happiness is easily lost. We built our house on sand. The various factors which continue to give us the sense of who we are don't fit together all that easily. Just saying, 'I exist, I exist', doesn't really give us a certainty. So, who is the one who says, 'I exist'? **Who is the one who is aware of the thought, the feeling, the sensation? This is the natural purity, the natural clarity of the mind itself.***

Fixed ideas—but a dynamic revelation

The mind, our true nature, is not a thing. We can say that many things—or indeed all things—arise in mind, and the reason everything can arise in the mind is because *everything is nothing*. That is to say, all the things—the external things in the world, our body itself, our sense of who we are—none of this has a true inherent self-substance; that our world is put together. It is created out of the juxtaposition, positioning together all temporary, momentary, arisings.

Our bodies change all the time, the body is very very dynamic. Every part of the body is doing something. You know, if you see the corpse of a dead animal in the hills some place, maybe in Greece, it just looks like dry bone. But the bone is very important. The bone is holding the marrow and we know, nowadays, we found that many many complicated and wonderful processes occur inside these sticky substances which keep our whole existence alive. Our skin is so sensitive, it is full of pores, releasing vapour into the air, absorbing nourishment directly, our eyes, our ears, the blood system, every part of the body is dynamic. Nothing about us is fixed. Of course, we can have fixed *ideas* about ourselves. When we look in the mirror, you can recognize, *'Oh, that's me! I have seen this person before!'* But, nonetheless, the face is slightly different. Our mood is changing, the colouration of the face is changing, the eyes and so on. Moment by moment the body is expressing differences, so we have two separate streams running here: One is the phenomenological dimension, the dimension of the lived moment by moment actuality of what is there, and the other is the continuity of the abstract stories we tell about ourselves.

When we sit inside our story, we can weave these threads, or continuity, sameness, the past, the present, the future, our plans, our hopes—we have a kind of composite map of the world that seems to spread out with meaning. But when we look directly at the phenomenology, at the moment by moment movement, we find there is nothing substantial there; that the body is not a fixed thing but it is a site of experience which is dynamic and unfolding—and similarly with the field of perception opened up through the senses: sensation, colour, light, sound coming and going, coming and going. But the storyline about what we see, that has much more continuity.

Here we are in this place, this room looks in a particular way just now. In five minutes it will be different: people's bodies move, and as your own mood internally comes, your attention is drawn to different things in the environment. But we can say, *'Oh, but it's still the ngakpa house!'* 'Ngakpa house' doesn't exist. It's just a name. What is here, we can't say. But we have to call it something, so we called it 'the ngakpa house'. As soon as we call it 'the ngakpa house', we hit ourselves on the head and we become very stupid, because we then don't need to look at what this is, because we already know, *'Oh, it's a ngakpa house.'* This is the point where meditation really opens up, to see the stream of assumptions and interpretations which we wrap around ourselves like a duvet and cosily fall asleep—while feeling we are very awake.

Out of emptiness everything emerges

When we start to see how that is functioning for ourselves moment by moment, our awareness awakens as a sense of a fresh clarity which allows these patterns, these constellations, to come and

go. What remains is not a fixed thing, it's not a thing at all. Traditionally we would say, *'It is empty.'* *Our mind itself is empty, empty of a true essence, empty of inherent self nature; and yet, it's not just nothing at all. It's full of a radiant clarity, the clarity which reveals all of our experience.* ***So the function of the practice is to relax our fixation on definite entities, external and internal, and through that releasing to integrate into the natural spaciousness which reveals all things just as they are.*** In the same way, everything that we see has no solid essence to it, and yet it is there. So we have appearance, we can see clearly with our eyes, we have an experience with our senses, things are appearing, but they look it's like an illusion.

When we see, on a full-moon night, the reflection of the moon on a pond and the sky is very clear, it looks as if the moon is in the pond, but the moon is not in the pond. There is an illusion. Something appears to be the case, yet it's not the case. It's not just nothing at all, it is an appearance which is empty of truth. This is the meaning of illusion. It is the same with all the phenomena in this room. When we see an entity like a glass [*James grabs the glass from the table*], it's not very difficult to recognize that the object in my hand is a glass. Where is the glass? In my hand. Actually, the glass is in your mind. *You* are applying the concept and the word 'glass' to this. If you take this concept off—what is in my hand? I still have something in my hand, but now we don't know what it is. If we don't know what it is, we might start to look at it, and when we look at it we see that it reveals itself in different ways, depending on how you look at it.

That is to say, the appearance manifests in terms of what is called dependent co-origination. The perceptual field and the interpretive field come together to create momentary identifications which appear to be in this thing. But without the concept it is just open, nothing at all. With the concept we have a glass. This is amazing! This means, that ***you are part of the world. You are not a separate subject looking out at a world which is pre-existing, but you are moment by moment participating in the co-emergence of existence;*** co-emergence means like, subject and object... or things collaborate arising together. So from this you start to get the sense of 'subject and object are not two different things'. What we call 'subject' and what we call the 'object' are two inseparable streams of energy which weave in and out of each other all the time.

So the function of the meditation is to bring us into a relaxed open presence, whereby we become alive in the dynamic revelation of existence. It's not about becoming a buddhist. It doesn't matter if you are a buddhist or not. 'Buddhist' is a name, we already have a lot of names. What happens when we put a name on something? Nothing and everything. Nothing is really changed, but everything is changed. ***The main point is to recognize: 'Who is the one who is here?', 'What is this arising?'. These two things: inseparable.***

And so, on the weekend we will look more precisely at the classical lineage description of this using modern language and relating it to meditation practices. I have had the teachings on this from many different lamas, including Dudjom Rinpoche whose picture is on the wall here. I hope, this is of some interest to you and perhaps I will see you tomorrow... Good evening.