
Hitting the nail of reification with the nail of emptiness

Public Talk

*James Low
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*Transcribed By Sarah Allen
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Excerpts

Tantric practice involves attending to beauty as beauty calms the heart; if one is held by beauty one has no need to make sense of it. That is to say, the presence of beauty allows us to move from the phallic nailing of the world, the penetrating of the world, the filling of it with our own interpretations, to a more receptive experience in which we open ourselves without any limit to the revelation of the unfolding of what is there.

In being touched and moved in this ceaseless pulsation of responsivity the burden of individual agency is released. In that way one finds oneself being part of the integrated flow of experience, which is described in terms of the three kayas or three modes of the buddhas existence.

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Generally speaking, buddhism is concerned with helping people who find the situation they are in not so good. The Buddha's teachings begin with an attention to the nature of suffering, in particular to the sense that suffering has a cause, a cause which can be removed. The cause is expressed in terms of both ignorance and attachment. The term ignorance especially relates to ignorance of our own nature, of how we actually are, and with that an ignorance of the phenomenological field in which we find ourselves. This ignorance continues through time due to the nature of attachment. Attachment is a kind of falling asleep into the dream of assumptions; we create a mental construction and then forget that it is a construction, taking it to be something existing in itself. We then rest ourselves on it as if it was the ground of our existence.

Therefore, in the general buddhist teachings we spend a lot of time reflecting on the nature of impermanence, the fact that all the phenomena that we encounter are moving ceaselessly in time. We ourselves are also part of the arising, moving realm of phenomena. Our bodies are changing moment-by-moment – chemical based messages travel through the body and so all kinds of chemical changes are occurring all the time – our faces change according to the emotions and the sensations which arise, and our thoughts are always changing. When we look we see that there is nothing stable in our world. The only thing stable in this room is our addiction to the concepts through which we stabilise it.

Nowadays people are worried about the spread of nuclear energy. Nuclear war would be a terrible thing, not just because the explosions would be extremely vast and destructive but because the chemicals involved would take a very long time to vanish as the half life for many of them is thousands of years. Our concepts are nuclear: when a thought arises in the mind, it presents itself for a very short period of time but it sets up a kind of toxic trace which permeates the next moment and the next. Sitting inside a concept, this perverse continuity seems to provide a stable basis for regularising and ordering the field of experience. For example, if you live in this town you know where the Post Office is. That is a useful thing to know. When you go to the post office it is just 'The Post Office'. The familiarity of the post office gives us a sense of knowledge and competence, but actually our knowledge of 'The Post Office' is the basis of stupidity; when you go into the Post Office you know what to do, you have to ignore ninety percent of what is occurring in the Post Office and attend only to the things that confirm your sense of individual purpose. That is to say, our habitual reliance on conceptual knowledge creates pathways of familiarity based on selective attention. Thus, when we start to look at the impermanence of what is arising we begin to see that there is no actual substantial basis on which we can rest. But, of course, this sets up a tension between the actuality of a dynamic world, a world which is unfolding and which will be forever beyond our grasp, and our desire to know what is going on. Therefore we have a basic choice. Either we can participate in this unfolding dimension or attempt to stabilise a pattern of impressions arising from it. The former choice is called nirvana and the latter is samsara.

What is the real basis between these two? The central point is the conceptualisation of one's own personal identity, the sense that 'I' exist as enduring monad, an individual, autonomous agent whose identity is based on a sense of apartness. This means that in order to be 'myself' I am forever alienated from the world which is all around me – and yet – my experience of myself, of other people and of the surrounding environment is one unified experience. For example, as I sit here with you something is registering for me. Some of the aspects which register I say are external or 'not me'; I can look around and think, "Well I am not you, nor you, nor you..." However, *your* experience is also part of my experience, and what I take to be 'me', as something which I experience on the inside – proprioceptive arisings, sensations, emotions and so on – are all something which I appear to *have*. Thus, I am the experiencer of my experience; something is impacting me. At this point, we usually become concerned with the nature and quality of what it is that is making the impact. We focus primarily on

whether what is impacting us is pleasant or unpleasant. If it is pleasant we try to get more of it, and if it is unpleasant we try to get less of it, and that becomes the basis of how we proceed through our lives day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

But who is the one who is having the experience? Is there a different part of 'me' that experiences 'you' from the part of 'me' that experiences 'me'? It doesn't seem to be like that in the direct immediacy of our experience. The entire field arises and is immediately there without any division of self and other. 'Self' and 'other' are a conceptual editing which occurs after the fact of the immediacy of experience. It is this function of editing, of adding, of creating narratives, that the Buddha's original teaching puts into question, for this editor or storyteller can appear as the unmoved mover, the one who creates everything but is never changing in itself.

On an ordinary level this is the experience when we think, "Well I am just 'me'. However I am I am just me." In that way it appears as if there is some kind of transcendent self which hovers above the actual contents of the moment-by-moment presentation of the self. The Buddha's original teaching points out that this is a false understanding; that this whole, or this seemingly self-existing point, is in fact the fruit of a construct – when the various aspects, the constituent parts of our existence are brought together, when they lock into their pattern of functioning, it creates, as a kind of epiphenomena, the sense of an enduring self.

Five Skandhas

Traditionally, in the buddhist tradition it describes five heaps or skandhas, which are seen as the basic constituents of an individual identity. These five skandhas are form, a basic sensation of positive, negative and neutral, perception which is always already carrying some degree of colouration, accumulated assumptions, habits, interpretations, associations, and the function of consciousness. Furthermore, in the early teachings of the Buddha, they said that when these five operate together this generates, without anything else being added, the experience of there being an individual person, and that we exist in our individual selves as this illusory point of identification. But because we see ourselves as something enduring – living our lives as if we were immortal – although we have some sense that we are going to die, the actual information that comes to us moment-by-moment revealing that we are construct, that we are changing, that everything about us is unreliable – has to be denied again and again.

Therefore, the purpose in the most general forms of buddhist meditation is to slow our existence down. This is achieved through the practice of *shine*, by focusing on the slow in and out movement of the breath, or a simple external object of attention. This allows us to gradually start to be able to see the joins where these five skandhas meet together. Just as in a traditional cinema where they used rolls of film with separate frames in them, which when accelerated in the movement of the projector would give the appearance of a continuous flow of images, so by slowing down the busy projector of our ego-self we can start to see the constituent frames of the movie of our existence.

However, even if you slow this right down and you see these constituent parts, there is still someone who seems to be doing this analysis. Thus there are now two aspects: the absence of some truly inherent or innate self-nature – some essential form that endures through time – and appearance without substance. Traditionally this is compared to being like a rainbow in the sky, or the reflection of the moon in water, or a mirage. For example, as we look around this room, clearly, we see lots of things and people here. That is something *seems* to be here. We can reassure ourselves that some-thing is here because we can put names on everything that we see, and the name seems to fit exactly on the thing being named. We are recognising

what is there, but, of course, it is the very process of applying the name that calls the so-called identified object into being. This is an interplay, an intercourse, for when the word, which carries with it all its semiotic chains, and the appearance meet together they give rise to the instant child of the true object. These children mesmerise us moment-by-moment every day. But on the object side we can see, when we look clearly, that there is nothing substantial there. The object field is the appearance of emptiness; all the so called objects of the world are simply names put by our mind.

On the walls here in this room we have some buddhist thangka paintings which are full of symbolic information. If you see one of these paintings for the first time you see it according to your own frame of reference and it might just look very strange. You may then learn a few things about these paintings which enables you to say a few more things to it. You may then study more so that you can know everything which is in the painting, so that when you look at it all your knowledge seems to be in the painting. However, this knowledge is not in the painting. There is a potential in the marks that a painter has made but the key of your own concepts, formulated in language, is necessary to unlock this or bring it into being. That is to say the meaning doesn't reside only in the object, nor does it reside solely in the subject. Rather, moment-by-moment, through the interplay of subject and object, the field of experience unfolds.

Emptiness and tantra

Emptiness is the term given to this, which means the absence of any true substance in anything. It is sometimes given a kind of metaphysical existence in that people talk of emptiness 'does this' or 'does that', and it can even be seen as some kind of substitute for a concept of creator god. But emptiness essentially means 'nothing at all'. What you have arising within emptiness, or from emptiness, is illusion. That is to say, nothing has ever come into creation – there is nothing existing.

This doesn't mean there is nothing at all, for we are here, but what are we here as? We all have many stories in our heads that we could tell. We can talk ourselves into existence, and that is what we do. Our existence is a co-creation moment-by-moment of many different streams which flow through us. There is the stream of culture, which comes through us via our family, our education, our particular interests and so on, and this manifests in the way we speak, the kind of vocabulary that we use and so on. When we speak we feel that 'I speak' but of course language speaks us. We were born into a sea of language; language was there before we were born. On the wall here there are some photos of people who are already dead, and we can talk about these people. All we have is a photograph but we can, because of the particular skills we have developed, can talk to a photograph as if it were real. This is our marvellous capacity to be enchanted. Just as children like to have a story read to them at bedtime, so that they feel safe and secure enough to fall into the great mystery of sleep, so we tell stories all day long in order to keep ourselves mediating the great mystery of life.

Understanding emptiness is the basis of all the practices in tantra. The word tantra means continuity. It speaks of the unbroken, seamless flow of illusory existence. When we sit inside our concepts, moment-by-moment we go from one world to another world, to another. One moment you are feeling happy and relaxed, and then somebody gives you some bad news, or something happens that you don't like and your mood shifts, and what you had before is gone.

Very often we are obsessional about particular things as then we know where we are. For example, often children can only eat their food in a certain order, and if somebody puts it the

wrong way it is spoilt because things have to be just so. This habit of placing things, of seeing 'this' is radically different from 'that', the habit of discrimination and judgement – which allows us to particularise our field of experience in terms of 'good', 'bad', 'right', 'wrong', 'I like', 'I don't like' – is clearly the basis of a great deal of our competence as adults living in the world. For example, I work in a hospital and part of my job is to diagnose what is wrong with people. The diagnosis gets fitted onto the person and from that a whole stream of consequences emerges: we think this person is likely to kill themselves and therefore we should be careful. We can't be sure if they are going to kill themselves but we have to take this risk seriously, and so this person gets a different kind of treatment from the next person. That is to say, the naming leads to a prediction. We do this all the time. You listen to the radio in the morning and they say, "It is going to be very wet today," and so you put on your coat. This is what our world is made up of.

However, from the point of view of tantra this is just building sand castles. No matter what elaborated shapes are identified, no matter what over-layerings of narrative and interpretation are placed on them, nothing has truly come into existence ... but something is appearing with shape, colours, smell, texture and so on. For example, if we take this glass that I have here and we hit it, its hardness seems to confirm that it exists. Moreover, we could say, "James is holding the same glass now as he did when he began talking and so the glass hasn't changed." From the buddhist point of view what that means is that our capacity to put the name 'glass' onto what is in my hand hasn't changed since I began talking. That is to say, our habit of naming this as 'a glass', is what has not changed. However, from the time when I first picked it up, the glass has changed quite a lot. The glass is existing incorporated into the field of my lived existence for the time that I am using it. When this glass is sitting on a shelf in the kitchen and when it is in my hand, it is not the same glass, unless we believe there is some glassness of the glass existing in itself. However, there is no neutral context for a glass to be in. How it appears is always being mediated by the context in which its appearance occurs, and all these differentiations hover across it like a shadow on a hot summer's day. When you look at something which is in a shadow you don't see it so clearly, especially if you are standing in the bright light. You can think, "Oh, the object is still the same." But for whom is it the same? For the abstractor in your head. But we don't live in this abstraction all the time, actually we live in an embodied relationship with the world which reveals itself through our participation, and this participation brings changes with every move it makes.

Vajrakilaya: nailing the nail

Thus, the central function of tantra is to release us from the fixation on these seemingly real, separate entities, which frees the object world from all that is imputed onto it, and frees the subject side from its busy preoccupation with the ongoing task of imputation so that the unchanging, unbroken, seamless, ceaseless flow of illusory experience will be revealed as inseparable from the ground of emptiness. For example here on the wall is a painting of Vajrakilaya, a deity whose lower body is like a great nail. We are all familiar with nails. We nail things so that they don't move. All day long we nail things with our concepts. We are like carpenters, cutting the world into pieces and then nailing all the pieces together to make things so that these things appear to be self-existing. As we have already been looking, when we are caught up in this activity it appears that the 'thing' doesn't move because the thing is 'just itself'. It is if you see a very beautiful old cabinet where you cannot see how the joins are made. They may have used different kinds of woods but the way in which they have been cut and placed together just seems completely seamless.

Therefore, part of the function of the meditation on this deity is to take a different nail, the nail of emptiness, and put that nail through the heart of the nails of reification. In that way,

by nailing the nail that creates entities, everything goes free, and through that one comes back into the aesthetic flow, or movement, or freshness of the unbroken field of experience.

Tantra and beauty

Generally speaking, tantric practice involves attending to beauty as beauty calms the heart; if one is held by beauty one has no need to make sense of it. That is to say, the presence of beauty allows us to move from the phallic nailing of the world, the penetrating of the world, the filling of it with our own interpretations, to a more receptive experience in which we open ourselves without any limit to the revelation of the unfolding of what is there. In being touched and moved in this ceaseless pulsation of responsiveness the burden of individual agency is released. In that way one finds oneself being part of the integrated flow of experience which is described in terms of the three kayas or three modes of the buddhas existence.

Dzogchen is not so very different, and yet it is subtly different. Dzogchen means the great completion or the great perfection. It starts with the experience that from the beginning everything has been perfect just as it is, and so there is nothing to do. The very doing, by which we set out to improve and develop ourselves, is the basis for us never arriving where we need to be. To put it another way, the unfolding of the infinite awareness which pervades all space, the unfolding moment-by-moment as 'this' and 'that', creates a movement of self and other, subject and object, and this movement is an illusion. Illusion means something is there but it is not really there. It is the Buddha's middle way: not strongly real and not nothing at all. Here we are in this room breathing in and out, and aware of each other. This is experience. Experience is dynamic, it never ceases and it is ungraspable; nobody can catch this moment and put it in their pocket. The ungraspability of experience is exactly its primordial purity; nothing arrives in this moment except this moment. Thus, dzogchen is the unchanging immediacy of our presence moment-by-moment. It is not moving across time. It is not weaving stories across past, present and future which help to interpret or reframe. Through relaxing and releasing fixation on the need to move moments of experience around as if they were figures on a chess board, the freshness of the revelation of what is here moment-by-moment can occur.

"But it might not be what I want. What will I do then?" Who is in charge? "Me ... it is my life so why shouldn't I have it how I want it!" The door into this is to understand emptiness, which means that we are not very important at all. If you want to have everything you have to become nothing. But in the process of becoming nothing there is no guarantee that you will get anything at all, because of course if you are hanging onto something you won't get into nothing. Therefore, when we talk about relaxation it means really letting go of all the complex patterns of association, habituation, prediction and so on, out of which we create our familiar world.

Dzogchen and light

The heart of dzogchen practice is to engage in the experience of being light. This refers to visual light, but it is also the light of *all* the senses. It means to really be present in your existence as an energetic formation which is moving and changing all the time. Just as you can't grasp water, as it will flow out of your fingers, the more we experience our existence as dynamic, the less desire there is to grasp onto it. When we stop approaching the future like this [James closes his hand] we can start to approach it more like this [James opens his hand]] – open to what comes. This is what is happening ... and then it has gone. We can be present with it as it reveals itself if we give it a chance, if we don't burden the moment with a heavy layer of judgement: "This is terrible." "This is horrible." "This is wonderful." Then the

particularities of this moment of arising are there in all their beautiful, powerful impact, and they are gone. Everything is impermanent. Moreover, this impermanence is not something done by us; we ourselves don't have to push things away.

Impermanence moves us towards the experience of self-liberation. That is to say, if the wheel of mental activity and the wheel of perceptual activity stop running rapidly together – which is the normal experience of a subject experiencing objects in the world – then in relaxing into our presence, as a spacious awareness which is not a thing, which is beyond appropriation and yet is ever present, this mirror-like quality reveals the ceaseless flow of reflections, which arise and pass, going free by themselves. The good arises and goes, and the bad arises and goes. No power that anyone in the world has can alter this. Hubris is the most important thing to recognise about the individual ego. That is to say, because our individual sense of self is a story, there is no end to storytelling, and stories can be massaged and turned and made much more wonderful than the actuality of our lived existence. We can say something is wonderful or we can say it is terrible, but in the end it is what it is. What is it when you stop telling it what it is? If you give space to the moment to reveal itself it will show you its infinity just as it vanishes. In that way you will have everything but nothing to take home. If you want something to take home it won't be very much, but the ego can always imagine more than it gets. Awareness doesn't have to imagine because it is directly present with the entire field.

Two aspects of dzogchen: kadag and lhundrub

In dzogchen we are concerned with two main aspects. One is primordial purity, which is the experience that from the very beginning nothing has come into existence. The true nature or the actual nature of the one who says, 'I', 'me', 'myself' is not a thing but is lucidity without any content. It is not marked or changed by any of the many millions of experiences which have arisen. All phenomena are pure, as mere reflections in the mirror of this radiant awareness, which is never a thing. This is not some abstract construction but what we can enter into through the meditation practice.

The second aspect is the immediacy or the effortless arising of each moment. Activity arises as relationship. That is to say, if you relax and remain connected with what is occurring around you, what needs to be done will always reveal itself. We can retreat into ourselves thinking, "What will I do?" thinking we will get the right answer. And if our parents were reasonably nice to us they may have said, "Well just do your best." That is a beautiful, liberal sentiment which doesn't mean very much – for what is our best? How will we know? We don't know, for we don't know who we are because moment-by-moment the constellation of ourselves is changing. Some people wake up in the morning very bright and energetic and able to do things, and by the evening they are very tired. Other people take two or three hours to wake up and get going, but in the evening they are very bright and boppy. So when I say, "I should do my best," is that my morning best or my evening best? In that way, when we try to make sense of things, when we sit inside a conceptual frame, it is very problematic because each new event presents itself as something to be solved. But through entering into the experience of primordial purity, one can relax the habitual tendency to anxiety, and through that trust the immediacy of participation.

Our existence is embodied, it is part of a lived environment; there is no wall between me and the other. This means that how we manifest is co-created between the arising of energy on the subject side, and the arising of energy on the object side. We find ourselves doing 'this' or 'that'. "Was it the right thing to do?" That is probably not a very helpful question, because then you want to go back into a conceptual framework, thinking in terms of ethics: "But I have to think about it more." "How will I know that was the right thing to do?"

“How should I have behaved?” “I must remember not to do that again.” “Doing that is very bad and that is why I feel guilty.” “I should try harder, I want to be a good person but I am not sure how to do that.” Many hundreds, thousands and millions of people have studied in universities and come up with all kinds of theories about life, but life is not a theory.

Our participation is co-determined by the field. If you are going to meet a friend tomorrow night, maybe when you get home and look on your computer you find that they have emailed you, kindly sending you the script of all the things they are going to say tomorrow evening, so that you have twenty-four hours to think about how you are going to reply. That is to say, the endless convoluted turning of the mind cuts us off from the world. But the more we relax and open, the more we feel, on all the different levels of our existence, the nuance qualities of the emergent field, and with that we find ourselves being part of it. Moreover, through this participation of connectivity, gestures of welcome are made to whoever we meet, and that is the understanding of compassion in dzogchen. It is not setting out to save other people or to do something for them that we already know in advance that they need. Rather, it is a quality of ‘being with’ that allows their being to be welcomed into existence, an existence which has these two aspects of being infinitely open and ungraspable, and immediate and precise in this evanescent moment.

The key thing in the first instance is to get a very clear understanding of the view or the taste of what this is about so that, as we take it into the practice, we don’t fall back into reliance on our usual conceptual elaborations. However, as the familiar structures of our rigid self-identity are deconstructed, we find that there is a lot more freshness and freedom to interact and to play moment-by-moment. Therefore, over the next few days, if you are interested, we will have time to look at this in more detail. In particular we will go into the meditation practice to awaken the direct experience of the natural freedom. For freedom is at the heart of the path of dzogchen: a freedom from limitation, and a freedom to manifest in as subtly attuned and compassionate way as possible.