
Discovering the Natural State

Session Two

*Using shiné [shamatha] practice to
discover the natural state*

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Excerpts

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Let's start this morning with some *shyiné* sitting, focusing on the breath. Just remember relaxing, making sure that your body is supporting you, your skeleton is holding everything in place, stomach moving freely. We don't want to have a belt on too tight, so the breathing goes in and out very relaxed. If you find that you are easily getting distracted, then maybe just breathe intensively, a few times through the nostrils, just to get clear this sensation that is up here and then relax the breathing again, but keeping the focus on it.

Now I want to stay with this practice of shiné and link it, through tantra, into the basic examination of the nature of mind. As we can see from the little we have done, in shiné practice the focus is on separation. Ordinarily we live our lives caught up in the flux and flow of events that are arising for us; perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sensations. So essentially through this practice we are separating out an observing, focusing, aware position of the self from an involved enmeshed position of the self.

All of us are prey to karma, which is essentially the fact that any action has a kind of echo that continues through time. So it is both a particular sensitivity and a propensity. So that for example some people have a tendency to with very little energy, a bit kind of lazy, living their life on the edges of things, never finding a way quite into life. Other people are very busy and active, maybe driven by a need to be in control of the world. But one could elaborate many kinds of these patterns, but I think if we start to look in our own lives we can see that we take up a fairly consistent positioning vis-à-vis other people. That could include addictive behaviour, addictions to alcohol, sex, whatever, but it means that essentially there's a kind of pre-determination in the way we encounter the world.

First stage: separating our karmic tendencies from our focussed attention

In Buddhism this view is often described as dependent co-origination, and is often referred to with the Sanskrit term *pratītyasamutpāda*. The basic idea of this is that on the basis of this, that arises. That is to say that having this particular position or this particular view on the world it is a necessary concomitant that something else will arise from it. So being born with a human body, I have these senses which link me to the world. Because I have these senses I have sensation, and this sensation, on the basis of having sensation, I have feelings.

So, I am in my body and now I can feel sometimes a cool wind blowing in the window. So I have the sensation, and then I have a feeling response to that. Sometimes it feels pleasant; sometimes it feels a bit cold. So if I'm feeling very hot, I'll want more of the wind, so I want the window open more, and if I'm feeling cold then I don't like the feeling of the wind and I want the window closed. So we have consciousness in a body and senses generating feelings, leading into actions in the world. So that is just one example of how this dependent co-origination would go.

On a more psychological level it could be that I have grown up in a family where it was important to be very tough. Then if the window is open and the cold wind is coming in and I have the sensation of being cold, my response is not to get up and close the window but to say, huh. In that way we can see how these habits take us into an interactive experience of the world and it is as if we have glasses and we drop another lens onto them. Karma you could see as particular lenses that we drop between our potential to have an open free response to the world, but we block this with these lenses with these particular ways of viewing which have been generated out of past experience.

In Buddhism what is called enlightenment is basically the freedom to respond in an open compassionate manner to the world. With a compassion that goes in all directions, including to oneself. So all the Buddhist practices are designed to help us become aware of the restrictions to our spontaneous reaction to the world and to help us remove them. Enlightenment is then not a state of being as in the sense of being oneself, but it is a way of being with others in the world. It is a responsive position rather than a secured position. That is why I was talking yesterday about the issue of anxiety, because anxiety is one of the main filters that comes between us and the world, and that we often deal with anxiety by seeking to be in control. so when we do shiné practice, we are trying to get a kind of control, but it is a control as part of a path leading us beyond the issue of control.

So at first there we are just caught up in our ordinary lives, responding on the basis of these karmic impulses moving through us in terms of the stimuli that are coming from outside. We are just swimming about in our lives. But at a certain point we start to feel that that doesn't work. Now of course I am talking about people entering Buddhism who are not born in Buddhist families. If you are born in a Buddhist family in a Buddhist country you become Buddhist because it is in your mother's milk. You don't have to think about it, and perhaps you never think about it. So in my ordinary life here I go, wandering about, and facing me are all sorts of walls made of glass. I don't see these walls and I bang into them. I have a drink, feel better; now I'm drunk, fall down.

It's like being in a pinball machine. All the time I am reacting and I'm trying to get through to something but there are these forces, you know and each time I get hit by one wall I go and look for a compensation somewhere else, but that compensation, at first it's very nice, then I start to feel guilty or bad, so I have to run in another direction. This is ordinary life. Then at a certain point I may think, ah, the whole thing is just a disappointment. Then we recognise samsara is a bitch, and this becomes the basis for our dharma practice. But most of us, by the time we get there, we are so bruised and so wounded that meditation is very difficult.

It is on the basis of that, that meditation is difficult; because of all these bruises you get distracted. What we usually do in life is, if we hit some difficulty, we seek to get out of the way of it, either by some compensation or by distracting ourselves in some way. So if somebody says you are better off looking directly at the nature of your problems, rather than trying to avoid them, that's often difficult to believe, because when you start to look at your problems you hurt. So pain and confusion are things that we seek to avoid, but paradoxically in order to do mediation we have to be more in touch with some of the pain and confusion that is around in our lives.

Is meditation a method for happiness?

I think sometimes we can confuse ourselves by thinking that meditation is a simple means to be happy. I think it is more like psychotherapy. Many people go to psychotherapy because they are hurting and they want somebody to help them feel better. But like I was saying yesterday, they expect the psychotherapist to be some kind of suffering extractor, some kind of vacuum that will suck it all out, but this is not possible. In fact in psychotherapy you have to work, you have to struggle to understand your self, your patterns and try to change them, and it's often very difficult.

Meditation is the same. We meditate because we are trying to change the patterns that we have which take us into states of suffering, so that we will have more space to be relaxed and

playful and compassionate with other people. In order to make this transition we are going to have to push against forces which are very powerful in ourselves, and that requires work and effort. So if we come into the practice of meditation seeking an instant easy solution to our distress, we are likely to feel disappointed.

So if we think of it that in terms of karma here we are caught up in these habitual patterns which have been running for a long time, from a Buddhist point of view we have been running it for many lifetimes, very deeply embedded perceptions of a separate subject and object, with a strong commitment to being caught up in stupidity, anger, desire, jealousy and pride. And then we decide that we want to change this, and that the absolutely perfect method that we have for changing it is trying to do ten minutes meditation at the end of the day when we are already completely exhausted. It doesn't sound very effective does it? And then we wonder after a while why meditation isn't really having much of an effect on our lives.

So this is a fundamental issue. If we are trying to use meditation just as a means to marginally improve our ordinary life, then we can have some success with that, but if we really want to transform things, we actually have to put a lot of energy into that. I think we have to discriminate between state transformation and structure transformation. For example if you are feeling a bit tired or sad or something and you meet with some friends and have a couple of beers and you feel a bit better. The alcohol shifts your state. But the alcohol doesn't stay in the system very long, so again you know the state of being with the alcohol vanishes, and the structure which has generated the depressed, anxious, stressed feelings continues to produce these symptoms. And it's the same, you can go to lamas and get blessings, and initiations, and they can make you feel good for a week or a month or a bit longer, but after a while the state shift that is evoked by that powerful experience drifts away, because it is an impermanent phenomena.

Essentially what we are trying to do in the *dharma* is effect a profound structural change, and in order for that structural change to be effected, we need to make a continuing series of state changes and try to intensify the depth of the state change. So that it is important to get initiations, and blessings, to go on pilgrimages, to offer butterlamps, to make shrines, all of these things that can make us feel better are very important. However we also need to use the energy of these moments to strengthen us in the long term, slow work of making the profound structural transformation. Otherwise we are in a kind of manic depressive movement of when the lama is there you feel very good, and the practice goes well; the lama goes away and gradually the energy goes down; another lama comes and you just ... That's not different from any kind of addictive cycle.

In the shiné practice what we are attempting to do is to separate out from the enmeshment in these karmic patterns, the possibility of a clear focused awareness, an attention which focuses my attention onto an object, and by keeping that attention on the object I am not being caught up intense tempting object arisings which would be the seduction of the karmic pattern. What we need to do is build on that and this is something you can continue to do for a long time as part of your practice.

What is the object and what is the subject?

The second stage that we come to is here am I now, able to keep my attention on my breath for fifteen minutes or so, without wandering too much. Now we have the question, what is the object and what is the subject? Who is the one who is attending to the breath? Because even if

our shiné practice, our calming practice, becomes very good so that—to take the traditional metaphor—I am now no longer caught up in the river, I am sitting on the bank, watching the water flowing, we never know when the river will flood. The water will rise and we could be back in the river! Because the river and the bank of the river are in a dualistic position. They are opposite. First of all they are different, they are opposites, and are potentially in conflict. The river seeks to undermine the bank. The bank seeks to hold the river in place.

It was through a consideration of this that you get the development in Buddhist philosophy of a critique, an examination of the nature of subject and the nature of object. I won't go into much detail about this, because there is a huge literature on it and you can read some books and in the library here they have books that deal with this. But just very briefly early on there was an analysis that all phenomena can be broken down into five heaps, or five key elemental forms, *skandhas*. And these five are form, feeling, sensation, perception, and an association-construction consciousness.

When these five categories were analysed they were found to be themselves without substance. It's a bit similar to the kind of western analysis that we could do with this pen which I am holding. It's a plastic pen, with a red top, orange white sides and a red bottom and it's made of plastic and other things. It has Schwan written on it, with a picture of a swan, Stabilo point 88/40, Germany. So we could think about Schwan. Swans. Very nice. Immediately in my mind comes Proust and his story of Swan. Then from Proust we go to madeleines, the cakes his mother made. My mind would go everywhere. Then we go Stabilo, stability, when was I ever stable in my life? So some anxiety about who am I?

In that way, through these words, the whole world of meaning, culture, history, everything can arise. From one point a million points can arise very quickly. But I can also reduce it. I can say, writing, picture, because there's a little picture of a swan, numbers. Writing, picture, numbers. So that's a kind of reductive analysis. All the infinite potential is collapsed into there are simply examples of these three types of presentation - language, picture and number.

So we can use this kind of analysis, reductive analysis, to stop the mind from stretching out and linking with many different things, to bring it more closely into one simple frame of reference. We can do the same with the plastic. We can collapse the plastic down into a chemical formula. So it's going to be some complex play primarily on carbon and hydrogen probably. Now these elements, basic chemical elements, brought together can generate plastic, and their combinations also generate a red colour or an orange colour. So if we stay with the colour red. We could quickly get all sorts of associations with red. But unless you are a chemist hydrogen and carbon are probably not very exciting. By thinking of this in terms of carbon and hydrogen the mind becomes less excited and more focused, and there is less stimulus around.

A lot of Buddhist analysis works exactly on this principle. By giving organising categories, which are rather boring and dull and technical, it's a way of bleeding excitement out of the perceptual field, in order to produce a kind of clarity which allows the mind to see things without getting too disturbed.

Now in about the 1890s, in science things were quite simple, because at that time you had these 98 elements and all matter in the world could be reduced to the 98 elements. But then people just would not leave it alone. They became curious and then they looked into these atoms of the elements and they found that inside the atom there were other parts. So then there was a nucleus with electrons going round it. Then the more people looked into this, the more they found this nucleus had things inside it. It had protons and neutrons. Then when they

looked into the relation of these things and they found there was neutrinos and quarks and god knows what, and the whole thing started to crumble away.

In that way we now have the position in modern physics where it is a very kind of uncertain, open field and people finding new things. Modern science is driven by the goal of finding some very complete mathematical formulation that will tie everything up and give a complete account of the universe. People want to find a general theory.

Getting to emptiness

In Buddhism you had exactly the same issue, except it happened a lot earlier, and the conclusion they came to is that there is no way of constructing a general theory because when you look into these small, small parts that construct the basic elements that seem to be there, these five heaps or skandhas, what you find is that at the very basis of everything is nothing. This idea of nothingness is the absolute essence of all the theories that develop some notion of the nature of the mind. All the Buddhist theories of the mind, in mahayana, in tantra, in dzogchen, in mahamudra, are all concerned with the nature of emptiness. That's why I've taken us through quite a few steps to get there.

So the first stage of doing the shiné is about cooling the system down, and open up some space where one can observe what is going on without being caught up in the impulses. Then once one is able to observe, one can then analyse the nature of subject and object, and through that one comes to a realisation of liberation and being able to respond in the world.

[Break]

Second stage: analysis. Who is the thinker of the thought?

The basic question. How do I know that I exist? One of the most famous replies to this is from Rene Descartes, who said "I think therefore I am". Buddhism would say, "But who is the thinker of the thought?" Because if we say, "I think therefore I am", that means I find myself, or I recognise myself as existing through the process of the arising and passing of thought. So we have two things. We have a thought and we have a thinker of the thought or a knower of the thought. But of course we have many different kinds of thoughts. Thoughts that are different not just in terms of their content, but in terms of the relationship we have with them. We have happy thoughts, sad thoughts, and all kinds of thoughts. But we also have, more importantly, the experience of sometimes thinking thoughts and sometimes thoughts coming to us.

For example when I am talking just now I don't think about what I am saying I just speak. So in a sense these thoughts just come. I don't know where they come from, but they come and somehow blah blah blah comes out. So although I have to take responsibility for speaking, it's not as if I am somehow back thinking about what I am going to say, like as if I have a row of thoughts in front of me and I think, oh, I'll have that thought, take that thought out and then speak it. No I just find myself speaking. In both senses of that phrase. Because somebody is speaking - oh, it's me who is speaking. I find myself through speaking. So it's as if the I ,or the sense of self, seeks to secure itself, to give itself an identity, by fusing with the contents of the thoughts that are arising.

So this question, who is the thinker of the thought, is absolutely vital for trying to get a sense of the shape of the one who is I. Because usually we know who we are in terms of particular contents. So we take something like I am a man. Now, what's the relationship between I and man, whatever man would be? Is man an attribute of the I. Is it a quality of the I? I can be many things, and one thing is a man. Or is man a definitive factor of the I?

I think that the relationship between these two is not so much a cognitive one often, as an affective one. You might be feeling confident, be with some other people and think YES I am a man, yes I am a woman. Then another time you might think, I don't know what it means to be a man or a woman. So that the I as a sense of self and its contents are held together not because they are rationally true or because they are real, but because they fit in the moment, according the mood or the feeling that's around. You may have had that experience with a friend who is feeling depressed for some reason and they are losing any sense of who they are, and you say, hey come on you remember, and you try to tell things about themselves, to try to lead them back into who they are, but they keep slipping away. At that moment the words you could normally use to kind of peg out your shape and tell you who you are, they don't fit any more and you are just slipping away from it.

So we can see through that kind of example and an examination of our lives, that the sense of self that we have is a construct. That we construct our sense of self out of historically defined definitions of gender. After all to be a man or a woman in the 1990s is different from in the 1930s.

So we can link this with the Buddha's teaching on impermanence; that all phenomena, external or internal, that arise are impermanent. This sense of self also is a construction which we add to every day. We edit our sense of self. We try to rub out or cover over the negative things. We try to highlight with a little marker the positive things. We are always playing these games, but basically the continuum of ourself is an impermanent construction. Some things fall away, new things are put in place, and because we are very busy building it up it gives us the illusion of a continuity, but actually in terms of its content it is changing all the time.

Reorientating your thoughts and reflecting on emptiness

And I think it is very important to really think about impermanence a lot. All the preliminary practices that we have in the Buddha dharma are designed to help us shift the ordinary everyday thoughts that we have, so that we become more gradually aligned with a view of the world which will permit us to enter into the experience of emptiness. Because if we accept that most of the time we are very busy constructing a sense of self and holding ourselves in place in some way, and then we jump from that into a meditation that really puts into question the whole construction, the jump between these two can either be very difficult, indeed impossible so we never understand what the hell it is all about, or we get really in touch with it and we get such a shock that we can feel very anxious and disturbed.

So the absolutely vital thing is to focus on thinking about impermanence as much of the time as you can. You can link it to anything. You can link it to having a cup of tea, going for lunch, going for a walk, the history of architecture, the dating of cars in the street. You know all the time we are encountering impermanence, so we should try to build that into our ongoing perception. You will find a discussion on impermanence in many introductory books on *dharma* and there is a chapter on this in my book *Simply Being*.

It is often considered to be just an introductory idea, but the idea of impermanence is absolutely at the essence of dzogchen and mahamudra, which are often seen as being the highest and most profound Buddhist paths.

The key question for both mahamudra and dzogchen is, 'Who am I?' In traditional Buddhist terms it is expressed as 'What is the nature of the mind?' Exploring the nature of the mind is not like going to the butcher's and buying a brain and chopping it up to have a look. The mind we are interested in is our own mind. What is the nature of my mind? And since I am the one who is thinking and I am the one who identifies myself while I am thinking, basically the question is 'Who am I?'

So now we can take up this question together, just sitting quietly, and just sit and relax, very relaxed, and take up this question. 'Who is thinking?' And then drop it as a formal question and just try to be aware as thoughts arise, what is the nature of the one who is aware of the thought?

[End of this session]