

The Intrinsic Purity of the Obscurations: A Dzogchen View

James Low

November 2011

Samsara, the endless movement of sentient beings through the six realms of existence, generally has a bad press in buddhism. Arising from ignorance and attachment, it is compared to a swamp. Sinking in the dark stickiness of our habitual interpretations we act according to our assumptions which mislead us with their pseudo-clarity.

Buddhist practice is designed to get us out of this mess. It seeks paths to nirvana, a state of peace free of striving and woe. Of course there are many different styles of practice, each having its own view, meditation, activity and result.

On the most general level we have methods of avoiding what appear to be the causes of distress. Avoidance is dependent on our willingness to renounce the tempting pull of the objects and patterns to which we tend to succumb. This means that we have to reframe our experience. Items and situations that our culture says are good, now have to be seen as bad and dangerous. For example the loose sexual mores currently prevalent in Western countries encourage young people to leap into experience and to work out for themselves what they like and don't like, what as individuals they consider 'good' or 'bad'. Yet by the time we establish what is OK for us we are already embroiled in powerful patterns of repetitive identification and reactivity.

In order to renounce these cultural patterns we have to find somewhere else to go, an environment that would support a different way of living. Traditionally this would be a monastic community where the simplicity of the daily structure promotes a mood of calm introspection, optimising the possibility of seeing what one is up to. Unfortunately this way of life seems to be a bridge too far for most buddhists living in the West.

simply being

If we cannot or will not cut ourselves off from the daily turbulence of life in the world, how are we to proceed with dharma practice when we are so vulnerable to the power of the obscurations? The term ‘obscurations’ refers to those easily activated tendencies which cover, disguise and hide our buddha nature, or potential for awakening from the dream of ignorance.

They can be organised into two categories, the obscurations arising from afflictive moods, emotions and impulses and the obscurations arising from reliance on false knowledge, the manifold habits of taking illusion to be a ‘reality’. In particular, being under the power of the obscurations means that we don’t see the actual nature of all that we experience and nor do we see the nature of the one who is having these experiences.

Most dharma paths focus on purifying or removing the obscurations that make or misinterpret what is occurring for us. The first step of this is to formulate a more accurate account of what is actually happening. For example, we take phenomena to be self-existing, acting towards them as if they were separate entities each with their own inherent self-nature. Due to this orientation we experience a world full of things in which we also are things. We define the things we encounter according to the categories our culture currently provides and we describe ourselves similarly in terms of the attributes and qualities currently in vogue.

The reification and objectification that underpins these tendencies is invisible to those who believe that this is how it is, that life is like this. However, in the dharma attention is focused on the suffering generated by this immersion in happenstance. Analysing our experience of phenomena through the structure of the five skandhas opens up a new perspective that helps us not to be taken in. Becoming attentive to the impermanence of all phenomena, and especially the transient nature of mental events, opens our eyes to the dynamic nature of experience as an ongoing revelation free of fixed entities.

Yet we still find ourselves being caught up in the seeming reality of what is going on. There appears to be an awful lot of work to be done in order to clear away the obscurations and to develop the qualities of an enlightened being. Millions of lifetimes loom ahead, in which we will need to stay on the path. Developing the bodhisattva intention to save all beings can provide a sense of courage and purpose. This is strengthened by having a functioning sense of refuge, of not being alone, which provides protection from the cul-de-sac of the lonely hero immersed in the fantasy that ‘it’s all up to me’.

To this can be added the powerful practices of purification found in buddhist tantra. Linking our identity to the diverse beings in a mandala allows a transformation of our familiar, habitual way of going about living. Unstable karmic structures are dissolved into the reliable forms that emanate from the buddha’s awakening. We bind ourselves to these enlightened modes through repetition of visualisation, mantra, mudra, offerings and so forth. By means of this we are progressively freed from the samsaric domain where the obscurations are pervasive.

All these useful methods mentioned above have one thing in common; they are reliant on individual effort. If the practice is not done the result will not be achieved. Antidotes must be applied otherwise the poisons of samsara will continue to operate in us, dulling our judgement and promoting impulsive, enmeshed activity. Each day new situations confront us with the limit of our practice, with our lack of clarity and clumsiness in skilful means. The tree of samsara continues to grow and, as with Medusa’s heads, the more branches we cut off, the more grow back. Ceaseless vigilance is required and so we have to encourage ourselves to stay on track and avoid distraction.

The dzogchen tradition, however, offers a different reading of the situation. Instead of focusing on avoiding, managing or transforming what is occurring, it points us towards directly attending to the nature of the experiencer. Whether or not there is an ‘objective’ world, it is clear that we have access

simply being

only to our experience. Everything we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think or feel is an image, the product of our imagination. Our mind reveals itself through its ceaseless display of images which arise as our sense of external objects and internal opinions, understandings etc. The flow of experience is ceaseless.

In the dualistic frame of reference we experience ourselves as a consciousness engaging with the world around us. The plural nature of this consciousness is well described in the buddhist literature, and in particular the fact the subject, our 'conscious mind', always takes an object. That is to say we are always conscious of something; consciousness and its objects arise together and pass together. With this we can see that what we take to be ourselves, our particular, individual, personal identity, is a flow of seemingly 'internal' experiences arising in tandem with the flow of seemingly 'external' experiences. In fact these are not two separate domains. Subject and object are ever-changing. There is no fixed ego self. And yet there is a continuity to our sense of being alive, of existing, of experiencing.

If the content of our experience is ever-changing, what then is it that is stable and reliable? This is awareness itself, our true nature, which is not a thing, not a special secret substance or essence. Inseparable from emptiness, awareness is pure, free of any stain or defilement. Having no substance it is ungraspable and cannot be contaminated by 'anything else'. Indeed what else is there? When, in the practice of simply being present with whatever occurs, we attend to ourselves, to the experiencer of each moment, we do not find any defining limit. Our mind, our nature, is naked, not covered by any concepts, memories, habits or interpretations. It is fresh, open to each moment as to the first moment. In this state there are no obscurations and nothing to be obscured. Resting in awareness we are infinite unborn openness, the radiant field of experience and the unique moments of our co-emergent being in the world with others. These three aspects are naturally integrated; awakening to this, our usual sense of self relaxes into its own ground and is freed of the burden of total responsibility. The difficulties of existence look very different from the unlimitable vantage point of awareness.

How can it be so simple and yet we don't get it? Well, that is because we are looking for something. We are trying to find our buddha nature as if it was a better version of our everyday selves. That is a big mistake, a kind of anthropomorphic delusion. The ground of our being is open, infinite awareness always already present. We don't have to make it, or find it, or purify it or develop it. By relaxing our involvement in both the busyness of samsara and the busyness of the many paths to nirvana we will find ourselves where we need to be, where we have always been, nowhere, everywhere and right here.