
Why is it so difficult to relax?

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Public talk, QiGong Kleinowitz Center, Vienna

September 5, 2019

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It's a pleasure to be here. We have a little bit of time this evening to look at the nature and function of relaxation in Tibetan buddhism.

We're all familiar with feeling stress and tension. We may have muscular tension, and find it hard to breathe easily. Tension may be a reaction to physical pain because when we feel pain we tend to tense up, as if that would protect us from it. People with chronic back pain are very often holding a lot of muscular tensions, ready to seize up against the insurgence of pain. Our general culture provides us with many ways of trying to relax.

From a buddhist point of view the main thing that one might want to address is the feeling of persecution that can go along with chronic pain. If I have a pain that I can't get rid of it gives me a sense of diminishment. It seems to shrink me or reduce me in some way. I don't feel free to be myself. If I get a bad cold in the winter I may say that I don't feel like myself.

Normally what we want to do is to get back to our ordinary sense of self, however from the point of view of meditation it's very interesting to not feel yourself. That is to say, I'm still here but I'm not me. So how can I be going on, knowing that I'm not really fully me? I'm still breathing in and out, walking up and down, but I'm not me. If we have to stay in bed a long time we get used to it. Then when we have to go back to work that feels like 'not me'. Even a good weekend can make a Monday morning feel like a persecution.

Through that we can perhaps start to see that our familiar sense of self is a patterning that I am habituated to. I'm used to certain patterns of feelings, sensation in the body, ways of

talking, which I take to be indicators of me being myself. *This is who I am*, as if there is some kind of template which, if I'm aligned with it, reassures me that I am me. So the proof of me being me is my idea of who I am. Oh! That's a little bit different from thinking that myself is something very authentic, or intrinsic, to me just being me. The idea of myself perhaps even precedes me as well as supporting me.

In terms of child development our parents have ideas of who we are, and they encourage us to align with their vision of our identity. That is to say, we're being initiated or inducted into the kind of identity which fits in the family, fits in the school, fits in the culture at a particular time. The self then is a construct, maybe even a process of construction, a 'constructing' as a work in progress.

As we go through the different stages of our lives we find ourselves taking on particular identities, particular patternings of liking and disliking, and at each phase of our life the seeming regularity of the pattern which is predominant at that time becomes my lived sense of self: *It's me because it feels like me. I'm like this because I know I'm like this*. But I wasn't like this ten years ago and if I'm still alive I probably won't be like this ten years from now. So a patterning which is situational, arising due to the interaction of many different factors, some seemingly internal, some seemingly external, is taken up as if it were the truth about me. When we meet someone and they say, "*How are you?*" we say something like, "*Oh, I feel okay, I feel good.*" We don't tend to say, "*I feel good just right now. As a multifactorial phenomenon I feel not so bad. However, of course, I am an unstable phenomenon and anything I say about myself is likely to change.*" That would be a slightly nerdy, obsessive way of talking because we take it for granted we can just be me, *this is how I am*.

Linguistically this gives the sense that the how-I-am-ness is something to be found expressing itself through my embodiment, as if it had been generated by some internal essence. But because the manifestation is always changing and changes circumstantially, that might indicate that there isn't some inner essence self, that my existence is not something I have but rather is something which is revealed.

I am the expression of this existence which is a co-existence, because I'm breathing in and out, I'm looking around, I see different things, I respond to them. My mood, my breathing, my posture, my gestures are all relational. When you're having a conversation with a friend you're moving all the time between being pro-active and re-active. You're coming into being, and this being is a becoming because it's already changing. The conversation is going in one direction and you feel quite at ease, and then, suddenly, for some reason, some new topic comes up and you feel different.

This would be the basic general buddhist idea: that what we call I-me-myself, my sense of personal identity, is dynamic and interactive, not internally defined. But, of course, if I'm not clear about that and I maintain an idea that I am something fixed, knowable and definable, then that patterning will have to be maintained. I have to hold myself together, and that is a cause for stress.

[Holding ourselves in provisional identities](#)

Of course, in work situations there's often an obligation that you present yourself as a continuously reliable phenomenon. You get paid for your efficiency, for your competence. That is to say, this fluid, dynamic, ever-changing potential of how you could manifest is being poured like water into a particular mould or shape for a while, and then it changes. You leave your work and you start to shift your shape. You start to relax, because holding yourself in place is a violence. The body moves. We restrict our bodies in a way that animals don't. Nowadays many chickens are raised in factory farming in very tight little cages. They didn't write a job application in order to get into the little cage. But we do that and we're very happy when we get a little cage given to us. After all, who would we be if we didn't have a cage? When people are made redundant and forced to leave their cage their level of mental ill-health increases.

So here we're really talking about rhythm and about our alignment with imposed rhythms in conjunction, but not really in harmony, with the natural pulsatory rhythms of the body (breathing system, endocrine system, blood moving around the body). That is to say, our body operates as tightening and releasing. That's how our heart is operating, our lungs, the sympathetic / parasympathetic nervous system, muscles tightening and relaxing. But in our culture we learn to constrain ourselves, to sit still, to become according to the idea of how we should become.

A major source of stress or non-relaxation is the requirement to hold ourselves in particular positionings. And so on an outer level many kinds of relaxation become popular. It could be yoga, tai chi, dance, massage, Feldenkrais ... many, many methods. Now, the causes of our daily kind of stress are fairly easy to identify: the imposition of being at work at time, deadlines for projects or study programmes. You can relax out of that by swimming or dancing or even by watching TV.

But from a buddhist point of view, especially through meditation, we're more interested in the nature of identity. We're familiar with taking on identities which are not very comfortable for us—for example being in a relationship that doesn't really work, or getting a job that's not quite something you can open to. Such provisional identities may lift the pressure of looking at who I know myself to be.

But what of our basic identity itself? *'I am this.'* We can all say lots of things about ourselves — our age, our gender, where we were born, what we like to eat, what we don't like to eat. There are so many cultural phenomena which we move close to or move away from that help to generate the patterning of our active expression of self. That is to say, our identity is relational. Although these related movements are changing, somehow we have the sense, *'Yes, but I've always been me. I continue to be me. Sometimes I've been happy, sometimes I've been sad, but it's always been me being that person, however it was.'* It's as if the current constituents of this moment of patterning that I take to be I-me-myself seem to be definitive of me, in this moment at least. Yet when I relax a little bit and observe this through a movement in time each of these sites of identification (*'This is me'*) is transient, moving, changing. Not changing because I want it to change, but changing because it does change. In the course of a day we are happy, we are sad, we are amused, we are bored. We are each of these things situationally, but not essentially. Because of the intensity of the lock onto the particular moment it can feel like this is the truth.

This may be revealed through desire (*'I love you and I'll always love you, at least it seems like that now'*) or aversion (*'I hate you. I'll always hate you, until I want to fuck you'*). It's

like that in relationships. When you're saying it — even in the moment of your identification with the feeling tone: *I'm speaking from my heart and that should be reliable, that's the centre of me* — it is telling lies. Maybe not lies in the moment, but lies in time. It did seem to be true at the time. It was situationally true, circumstantially true, but not definitively true. That is to say, whatever I say about 'me' is always relational.

So if I say, *'I love you'*, I love you because of how you look, or I might even love you because of how you cook, or because I feel a bit lonely, or sad, or needy, or this or that. That is to say, when we allow ourselves to observe ourselves there are many motivating factors which come together in the arousal of these words that come out of our mouth. However our linguistic formulation gives it an essentialised quality. *'I love you. I really love you. Don't ask me why. I just love you.'* That's a little bit dangerous, *'I just love you.'*

When we study buddhism we start to study cause and effect. And when we look at cause and effect the romantic flavour of 'I love you' is not quite so shining. All phenomena arise from causes. What are the causes behind this? It could be hormonal. Am I my hormones? My hormones are using me as a vehicle for their enjoyment, for their satisfaction! *'Darling, before I kiss you I have to tell you, my hormones want to say something.'* So this experience gives us a sense that what we take to be I-me-myself is not something we can find.

But yet, in our social existence we proceed as if I am a first person singular: *I am a singular subject, all-of-a-piece*. So there's a cause of a deeper level of tension, or non-relaxation. The fact is I'm living a lie. I might do my best to live in a truthful way, but because I'm operating as if there was a true, definable, internal self that is me, I'm operating inside a false paradigm. From the buddhist point of view there is no identifiable self. What there is presence, and that presence can be connective or disconnective. I can be present to myself away from you, I can be present with you and be self-abandoning and be confluent in you. There are many different permutations. But the content of who I take myself to be is not determined by me. When we observe ourselves in basic meditation we start to see that we are a flow, a flux of ever-changing sensation, thought, mood, feeling.

Repression and sublimation

Here in Vienna this is what Sigmund Freud discovered when he was developing psychoanalysis. He was encouraging the patient to free-associate, to allow what was arising in the mind to flow out of the voice. However he started to see that this is surprisingly difficult to do because of our social inhibitions. We repress many things from arising and sometimes the repression is so great that we are hardly aware of what is churning around. Sometimes the words come up but they're retroflected back and don't come out of our mouth so that we go away from a meeting with a friend with a continuing conversation in our head. Somehow it was impossible to say what we really felt, because they might not like us, or they wouldn't understand... The more we are aware of the potential of the self the more we see that the social world we inhabit has many prohibitions on the free expression of that potential. That leads to a lot of stress, repression and even sublimation — sublimation being the transformation of an expression which, since it can't come out directly, comes out indirectly, for example through art or music or even work.

These activities of repression and sublimation take a lot of energy: I am editing myself in order to fit in. We learned that as we were growing up. We learned you're allowed to do this in the playground but not in the classroom. There are some things you can say to your mum but you can't say them to your granny, and vice versa. This is a situational expression of our self. If we're going to be socially attuned we have to look before we leap. We check out what's around before we speak. And that, of course, brings a kind of tension as well. What is it safe to say? What's the best way to say it in order to get the inclusion or reward that I seek from the situation?

Generally speaking we seek pleasure and not pain. We seek inclusion and not exclusion. We seek advantage, in the sense that we want to grow and develop rather than provoke restrictions from those around us. On this level a lot of tension builds up. *I just want to be myself.* We know that when external constraints are powerful that is an easily identifiable oppression. But if that's not there — *"Now I can just be myself"* — how will I be? What is the authentic me? What do I really want? What will I do with my life? Do I *'have'* a life in the same way that I have some money in the bank? How will I spend my life, how will I use my time? It's all up to me...

Generally in our culture, at this time, we have a fair amount of existential freedom. The state is not very oppressive. The power of the church is lessening. So I can do what I want, but what do I want? Who am I? My mind keeps changing. My sense of who I am keeps changing. This has its own difficulties. If you get too much of that kind of freedom you can end up in a crisis like the Weimar Republic, too much chaotic potential. So you may then have a breakdown, or you can vote for a right-wing party: *Surely someone can tell me what I should do.* That's quite common, people wanting some big daddy somewhere. *"What we need is a strong leader."* Freedom is difficult. The ego self finds freedom very difficult. It longs for freedom, but freedom from what? Freedom from what you do to me. *If you didn't control me I would be free to be me.* But that's a lie because I don't know what to do. How will I employ the freedom to act, to be, to engage?

In meditation

From the buddhist point of view the key thing here is that these questions are starting from the wrong place: we are starting from the conviction that there is a truly reliable, enduring self which needs more of some things and less of other things, as if we could just turn the dial and adjust ourselves.

However when we sit in meditation, for example observing the breath and focusing our mind on the breath going in and out, we find that we get distracted from this. All sorts of ideas seem more important to follow so we go off with the thought for a while, until it too vanishes, and then, *Oh!* back we come to the breath. The thought was so powerful at the time that it caught our attention without us even noticing but then it vanished — nothing there. So we go back and focus on the breath for a while, and then some plan arises about what we have to do tomorrow morning. We go after that for five seconds, then it too goes away and we come back to the breath.

If we weren't trying to focus on the breath we wouldn't even be aware that we're zigzagging this way and that way. In the summertime when I look at a wasp or a butterfly moving

around I find it really difficult to work out what they're doing and why. They go this way, that way. Then I think, '*Oh! My mind is like that!*' Maybe the wasp and the butterfly have far more intention than my mind has! I'm all over the place, carried this way and that way. There is a sort of sub-stream, a stream flowing just below the surface. On the outside my facade, my social persona, presents me as someone reasonably reliable and continuing, but the actuality of how my mind arises is whimsical. *Oh!*

The more we sit with that the more we see that the constituents of my sense of self are coming and going. They are not bricks that I can build a wall with, or build a house with. I can't make a secure self because, actually, the contents are playful, moving, mercurial. They're moving between heaven and earth. They don't arrive at either; they're just pulsing and changing.

So instead of trying to construct a self perhaps I could work at freeing the inhibition which creates friction with the free movement of this relational capacity? In our meditation we see that there is no fixity to these constituents, and yet they appear; they appear without becoming something. They're vanishing in the moment of their appearance. When we are by the sea or a lake and the wind is blowing, you see the waves rippling on the surface. We are looking, and we see waves. It's undeniable that the waves are there. We may call them 'waves', we may think about 'waves', but the actuality of the wave is water. Nothing has occurred to separate 'water' from 'wave' other than the concept of 'wave'. Wave is a form of water. When we see the wateriness of the wave, the wateriness is the inherence or the validity of the wave, the heart of the wave. The wave is a showing of the water. The wave is the showing of the potential of the water. Generally the water of the lake is still, but due to causes and conditions the water moves and then there are waves. The potential of the water to show waves is inherent to the water.

When we start to take an image like this and observe our thoughts, we see, *Oh, they weren't here before, they are here now, and now they're gone*. While they're here they have impact, they have flavour — *Oh, this is occurring!* There's a somethingness in this emergence which seems to come from nothing and go back to nothing. This somethingness of the thought is our belief in the thought.

So, in the meditation practice we start to observe how we invest different kinds of thoughts as being good or bad. If something arises that we like then we want more of it. If something arises that we don't like we want less of it. But neither good thoughts nor bad thoughts last very long. The more we simply sit with our mind and observe how it is — that is to say, the more we give our mind the space to reveal itself to us without our telling it what it is according to our pre-existing formulations — the more the wave-like pulsatory movement of thoughts, feelings and memories starts to reveal itself. Remember how in the past people sent messages by Morse code? Long and short pulses translated as letters of the alphabet so that you could read the message. S.O.S. (Help!) would come out as *da-da-da dat-dat-dat da-da-da*, a short long short sound sequence. It's only sound. If you haven't learnt the conventional identification of a sequence of long and short sounds you won't be able to make any sense of it. Once you've learnt it, it appears to be inherent because you feel as you hear it that you're recognising what is there. But if what you recognise as 'there' were truly there anyone hearing it would know what it meant.

That is to say, we take a lot of our experience as having inherent meaning when it is only a conventional meaning. You may experience the inherent meaning of what Taisha, out transla-

tor, is saying but I can't do that because I don't know German. So the conventionality of German is revealed through my not knowing German, but if it is your mother tongue the sounds seem to be inherently meaningful, as if the meaning was already there in the sound when it came out of Taisha's mouth. But clearly that's not the case because I don't get it.

So the waves arise and pass. If you're a sailor you can learn to interpret the pattern of the waves. You might have a sense that a storm is coming. If you're a fisherman the waves might indicate where you should go to catch fish. When you see that it seems to be out there: *'That's what the water is telling me. If you look you also will see that; the water will tell you that.'* But the water will never tell me that. It's your own interpretation which is a play with the potential of the water: the potential of the object side (the side of phenomena) and the potential of the subject side (the side of the mind, of mental formation, the imagination, the interpretive linking capacity and so on). These are like two potentials which in meeting together allow a kind of synthesis in the moment. That synthesis is our experience.

When you're with children and you see a rainbow, *Oh, so exciting! A rainbow!* Something is there, something you'll never catch. You can't buy it or eat it — Wow! The wow is not out there, the wow is arising with *the '!*' The rainbow comes to you; you go out to the rainbow. That is to say, our existence moment by moment is co-emergent. Because we are generally somewhat dull and stupid we're not usually in touch with that. Maybe it's a special moment, for example you could be walking in the park and suddenly it starts to rain so you run for cover under a tree, and if you're with a friend you might be laughing. *Oh, something is happening, the rain and me!* But that co-emergence is happening every moment. We are not a fixed thing and in order for this moment to have its fullness the previous moment has to go. And then, in its turn, this moment has to go. Andy Warhol was famous for saying that everyone would have their fifteen minutes of fame. In terms of your experience, every experience has one second of fame: this ... this ... this ... this ... this. The amazement of this-ness. The past is gone, the future hasn't come: There is this.

But we are hazy creatures because we don't open to the freshness of the moment. We interpret, and to interpret involves thinking, and thinking means linking. We think in terms of what we learn from the past, what we imagine for the future, and in that way we weave the semiotic web. We gaze through this veil and of course it's not fresh. Life through a veil is not so good. What the veil does, though, is to privilege the sense of continuity. *Oh, I've been here before. I know what this is like.* That's quite reassuring. When we can't predict anything we feel troubled. When people are in the early stages of dementia having periods of clarity and lostness, they often feel anxious since it's disturbing to know that you get lost. At a later stage when they may have no recall it's often more peaceful because there's no point of reference. In many ways of course that is a tragic state to be in because you can't function in the world.

In meditation we can see that the ground, or the open basis for what manifests in the moment, is not something that can be secured, and yet it is always revealing. Buddhism describes it as unborn and unceasing. That is to say, our mind is unborn because we can't find it as a thing, and yet it's unceasing in that experience is always occurring. Because it's unborn there isn't a stable thing to hold on to. And so we start to see that what I take to be I-me-myself, and which we imagine to be a stable point of reference, is actually part of the flow. 'I am part of the ceaselessness of the mind's display.

If you still have photos from your childhood you can get them out of the drawer and see, *That was me ... and that was me*. Memories arise when we look at the photos. *I was that, I can sort of feel like that, I am the one who can sort of feel that I was that*. You can't go into the past and you can't go into the future, because the space of the present moment is vast. All of the past and the future can be found within it – all the people that I have been have been moments. I do remember being about seven, but I only remember a few things – my bicycle, my favourite tree and so on. So much has gone ... all those moments. I am momentary, but the space of my momentariness can include echoes of past moments and predawn shimmerings of future moments.

When I am busy, preoccupied with doing or making something, because I'm preoccupied there is a foreclosure. I'm already 'closed' on to my project. I have an elective blindness. Many people experience that they enter into that world when they're working on a computer. The room is still here, there's also the kitchen and outside there are people on the street – there are all sorts of things going on – but your world has become this little screen. You have decontextualized yourself, which is a mental phenomenon because your body is still in the room, which is next to the kitchen, which is next to the door and the street and so on. That is to say, if I merge myself into what is currently going on as my experience, this finite moment seems to guarantee my finite self.

But through our practice of meditation, which is not something artificial, which is simply to give time to the experience of being present with what is there, we find *oh!* the content of the mind is ever-changing, and the mind itself, the basic capacity for knowing or being aware or illumination, has no shape or colour, it can't be found in any particular location, it is infinite.

This infinity is the hospitality for each of the seemingly finite moments, but these finite moments actually partake of the infinite because they also are unborn. Just as we see that the wave is always connected with the water and you can't take the wave out of the water, the thought, the feeling, the memory is in the mind and it partakes of the quality of the mind. We are this ungraspable emergence, which is arising and passing, and the basis of it is open and infinite.

This is the best way to relax because the ground of being has no tension, and forms which are arising go free by themselves. Tensions, stress, tightening, the thickening of our dead sense of self, arise due to not recognizing the infinite or unborn nature of our mind.

The important thing about this is that it's not something that you do. In fact it is very difficult to make yourself relax. Many people who do yoga find this; in the class they do many different asanas and so on, and at the end they do savasana (lying like a corpse). People often find this the most difficult asana to do because it's not something that you 'do'. For most of the yoga class you're doing something but now you have to do non-doing – it's a little bit difficult to learn that. You have to release yourself into it, *that it is there*. Patanjali said this about all yoga, that the basic state which is required is already there. Yoga is intrinsic and so the practice of yoga is not about doing something, but about relaxing into patterns. When the word 'yoga' was translated into Tibetan they translated it as 'naljor'. 'Nal-wa' means intrinsic, at ease, without effort. 'Jor-wa' means to join with that. It doesn't mean that you join with it by actively doing it but you join with it by not holding yourself apart.

In all the different schools of buddhism they say the cause of suffering and difficulty, which includes tension, is ignorance and grasping. Ignorance means not being aware of how we actually are. And grasping means holding on to an erroneous idea about how we are. If we simply release our identification with the false notion of who we are then we awaken to how we actually are.

How therapy can help

In the work in psychotherapy one of the very sad things to see is how many people are living false identities. As children we may have been told we are stupid or unlovable, or that we are just trouble. Then we develop a core belief that there is something wrong with us. This can sometimes lead to an endless struggle to improve ourselves, but because we're not quite sure how we should be that work never comes to an end. Alternatively it may lead to self-abandonment. One can have a life lost in alcohol or stupid relationships, because "*I'm not worth anything.*"

When we look at ourselves we see that we have many ideas about who we are, and they appear to be the truth of who we are because we believe the semantic content of the thought. If I have a belief that 'I am unlovable' and that 'people don't like me' it seems to be the reverberation of an eternal truth and then, of course, you collapse. The breath goes out of you, the spirit goes out of you — dispirited, hopeless. From that position it's difficult to engage happily with the world. The playfulness that we were looking at earlier is unavailable. You are exiled from the potential of your own existence by a belief. Of course if you have been nurturing this belief for a long time and you're convinced that it's true, you don't want to tell other people about it because you don't want them to laugh at you. So you have a secret prison inside of you.

These thoughts which are limiting your existence only have meaning because you believe them. The function of therapy is to spend enough time in a room with somebody who doesn't believe them so that gradually your capacity to hold your isolated, omnipotent belief starts to soften.

It is so important to be aware that: *I tell myself who I am* and that *I have some self knowledge*. Some people keep a diary and they write down things that have happened during the day and their reflections on themselves. This may sometimes be useful but it tends to be almost like an accountant's ledger book, with positive column and negative column. All you are doing is adjusting your narrative: *This time I'm really going to stop smoking. I'm going to prepare by doing this, and then if I stop smoking I'll be somebody who doesn't smoke*. You could go and ask anyone in the street, 'Excuse me, you don't smoke, do you?' 'No.' 'Do you have a perfect life?' 'No!' So, your solution to this problem — which may be a very good thing to do — is not going to open the door to infinite paradise. There's always something more to be done, and then you die. Busy, busy person!

How dharma can help

Whereas from the dharma point of view, the wave needs the water, the thought needs the mind. There's more water in the lake than in the waves. But if I'm always seduced by the beautiful light glinting on the waves I forget the water. In the same way thoughts, feelings, sensations are arising and moving in the mind. We don't have to block them or change them or edit

them. But we just remember, *Oh! Without the mind there would be no thoughts!* I am the experiencer. Who is this experiencer? I can reply with another thought such as, *I am the thinker of my thoughts*, but then that thought too is gone. So who is the thinker of the thoughts? *I am the thinker of the thoughts*. So I keep repeating the same answer, *I am the thinker of the thoughts*, giving myself a concept. But this brief, ungraspable, ephemeral concept is transient and unreliable.

What is my mind? My mind is this place where these concepts are revealed. I can think about my mind. I can imagine all sorts of things about my mind, how it could be or couldn't be. These are concepts, patternings of conventional, linguistic and semantic functions. But the mind itself, how will I find that? I have to stop telling myself. That is to say, the waves in the water don't stop, but the water is always there, the lake is there. The mind is not something other than the thoughts, but it is not totally identical with the thoughts either. By not identifying with the thought and using the thought to tell me about my mind I release my habitual, fusional identification with the content of the mind. And then we see that the mind is there. However it is not what we think it is, which means that if we think about it we will not find it.

It's like, how do you listen to silence? We know what it's like to listen to sound — to music, or the wind in the trees, or talk — but if you experience a profound silence such as in a recording studio, where there's no incidental background noise, it's a very strange feeling. It hollows you out. You yourself become ethereal because sound is a reference point, the hearing of sound, the interpretation of sound: *I hear this*. The object reassures the subject that the subject knows the object. With deep silence there is no object for the ear-consciousness to hold on to. There's space ... and nothing.

In fact it is not nothing. It's a kind of predawn shimmering, before the sun has come up, even before it's low on the other side of the hill, when you look at the morning star ...space. Indistinct ... you can't make out shapes. With the rising of the light more and more detail comes in. We function in the world of detail, but the detail is grounded in non-detail. Space, silence The unborn gives birth to the illusory play of the unborn. This probably sounds very strange. It really only makes sense if you give yourself some time to be present in your own existence.

If we return to where I started, stress and tension and the absence of relaxation rise from the task of holding ourselves together, which is to say, of holding *the idea* of ourself together. By simply sitting with your mind and allowing ideas to show themselves for what they are, there is appearance with no essence, no self-existence — like an echo, a rainbow, a mirage. You see, you experience, but there is nothing solid or substantial, that you experience. Solidity and substance are only ideas.

The truth of our life is light and sound.

Unfortunately, this is not what they tell you at school otherwise life might have been easier. We are told that thoughts tell you about the world and explain it; that the world exists before we were born, that we can merely observe and participate in a very small way because we are an insignificant person on a big planet rotating in space; that we are an accident of evolution, that there is no intrinsic purpose to our existence and that there are so many of us that we are going to destroy the planet. Well, with that inspirational thought let's all go forth and enjoy our lives!

Don't smother experience by concept

Material is an interesting word. Linguistically it's linked to 'mater, mother', because it is what's acted on that gives birth. It is a potential; it's not a thing. The potential comes into formation through our engagement with it.

This is a very large topic and we're just taking a little flavour of it. We can start by being present with ourselves, looking and allowing ourselves to see. This means looking without an agenda, and listening but not listening *for* something. Once we hear sound as sound and see light as light, then we can become aware of thought as thought.

The problem arises when we mix everything together. You can see I have something in my hand. It looks like a watch because you have learned to call this a watch. You think it is a watch and because you think it's a watch you delude yourself into thinking that you see a watch. What you actually see is a potential which you interpret as 'watch'. This is the eternal union of subject and object. From the meeting of male and female you have conception, and conception leads to birthing, to manifesting. Subject and object in their intercourse, without waiting nine months, give birth to this experience, ceaselessly.

We are coming to the end of this evening talk. We get up, we go out, we go down the stairs into the street. You can imagine, *I'm walking down the stairs, I'm going down this road I know*. This is how we have a familiar, stupid evening because we're telling ourself what we're experiencing. Our thought is arriving before we do.

So we just relax into the out-breath. We open our eyes and the light comes in. We are being filled with the world. And we respond and that response gives the conception of this moment, this moment — fresh! As we open the door and go along the passage there are so many shapes, so many shadows. We go down the stairs and each swivel of our hips opens a new vista — moment ... moment ... moment! This is the actuality of being alive.

Sadly however it is often veiled by conceptual interpretation. When we smother experience with concept, subject and object are held apart. Then I pay more attention to what I like and less attention to what I don't like. Next thing I am calculating, *Now, how do I get more of this since it is so very good and of course I want to avoid that, since it is not very nice at all!* I am pre-disposing myself: hopes and fears, expansion and contraction. This is the tension which governs our daily life.

The exit is not far away. The exit was there before we were born. It's not that we have to find the exit, it's simply that we have to stop covering the exit.

So, the end! Thank you for being here. I don't know about you, but I've had a good time. I hope you have too!