

General Talk

James Low

Frankfurt, Germany, 21st January 1996

Transcribed by Ruth Rickard

With amendments by James Low

This is an incomplete recording

In the mahayana system, there is the idea that the Buddha in his enlightenment has developed a state of awareness which prevents him being locked into limiting difficulties. No matter what anybody does or creates around him, he will not be disturbed yet will still have an intention and an ability to respond that will permit him to be in interaction with others.

When we take refuge in the mahayana way we have the sense that somebody is actually there responding to us. That is to enlightenment is not a state where one goes beyond relationship, although—and this may seem like a paradox—it does go beyond dualism. The Buddha who is responding to us, is not a truly existing entity. The Buddha is able to freely respond to us because he knows that we also are nothing existing in truth, that we do not have a separate and a real self-identity.

The basis for the Buddha's compassion, for the Buddha's ability to be open and to respond to us and to welcome us into the state that *he* is in, is the fact that the state that *he* is in doesn't exist as something that is separate from us. In the fundamental emptiness of all things there are no defining individual essences and therefore no true difference between buddhas and sentient beings.

There is a quality in us which wants to create a sense of fixed, reliable things. This blocks our understanding of the processes which are continuously giving rise to the transient experience of phenomena. We also then tend to reify the phenomena which arise and see them as entities when in fact they are the surface manifestation of these processes.

If we think about someone we know, we are likely to believe that inside them there are a heart and lungs, kidneys, liver and that each of these things is built up of many cells, molecular structures; these molecular structures are based on atoms; these atoms are a description which contains many sub-atomic particles; these sub-atomic particles resolve themselves into a kind of energy; that energy, when it's examined, cannot really be found as something existing as such.

This is similar to the analysis that was developed in the second century BC in buddhist philosophy and became a major part of the Madhyamika school where any phenomena that manifests is analysed into its constituent parts and then these constituent parts are analysed into theirs, and theirs, and theirs, into a process *ad infinitum*, in which one finds that nothing substantial can ever be found on the smallest level. And so you have surface level phenomena which seem to be separate and real, truly existing, but when you trace them down to their origins, you find you can't get any originating substance.

This idea was developed in the Prajnaparamita literature where they take up, famously, the idea: form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Which is to say, we see things, but when we actually look into this form, something that's manifest in front of me, I can't find any real substance inside it. Something is there, clearly something is there, but what is it? Because when you look into it, you don't find anything: nothing and something are existing at the same time.

In western physics there is the proposition that "Matter is neither created nor destroyed" yet in buddhism we have the idea that something comes from nothing. How can you get something out of nothing? Well, it only appears that you get something out of nothing if you think that something is different from nothing. The

buddhist formulation indicates that the form which arises, whether it's sound, or images or sensation, is not a manifestation *apart* from emptiness. It's not that there is one state and suddenly there's a transition to another state. This form is an aspect of emptiness. Emptiness *is* form, the form is not something other than emptiness, it is just a manifestation of the emptiness. Emptiness shows itself as form. Form will reveal itself as empty.

From this abstract or technical analysis of forms and their relationship to emptiness there developed an energetic and *affective* processional understanding of how the Buddha comes to be in the world. This is this idea known as the 'three kayas', or 'three modes'. For example, Buddha Shakyamuni came to be seen as always resting in enlightenment in the Tushita paradise. From that place, he manifested his body—a body of light, an illusory body, which looked real to the people who saw it—and through that body displayed the twelve acts of being a buddha in the world.

But if the Buddha who came into the world was not the real buddha, is the buddha who's in the Tushita paradise the real Buddha? His form that comes into the world is called a *nirmanakaya* or a *nirmitakaya*. This term indicates that the manifest form is an illusory manifestation of the potential of emptiness. This there is nothing 'real' or truly existing in any aspect of the Buddha's existence.

If the body is real and emptiness is real, and they're real and different, then you have a problem of how you go from one to the other. Yet in fact, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Since form is a form of emptiness, then the form that it is an illusion, although our habitual interpretation takes that to be solid and separate and real.

The Buddha in his Pure Land shows us an illusory form and says, "Come with me to this land where things are real, because where you are is illusory." But when we get to the Buddha realm, to the land that is *real*, we find that it is really form and emptiness, in a manifest way. What is illusion is the illusion that things are real, and what is real is the reality that things are an illusion, in the sense of having an absence of self-substance.

Q So who wants to have enlightenment? Who wants to have enlightenment? And if we get enlightened, *who* is getting enlightened? Who is getting the *sambhogakaya*? I mean, if there is nothing there, then I can just stop right here.

James S Then stop! [Laughter]

Q Yes, but there is something that is driving me.

James Who?

Q I don't know. The karma?

James That's one answer, but the question is a very good question. These are the bases for enquiry.

Q And so?

James These are your questions. Your meditation questions can't be asked by anyone else. You have to ask your own question and answer your own question. I don't know if you can remember when you still had your first teeth, and then your tongue starts to feel that it's getting a bit loose and plays about with it. That is very useful because when it comes out then the new tooth can come in. Some of these questions are like that; something's a bit loose here, but you have to keep wobbling it yourself. If somebody takes you to the dentist and they take it out, that's different. It's also OK, but learning to work on it, with your own energy is helpful.

So clearly we can give some structural dharma answers, and I'll do that in a minute, but it's important when you get this formal answer not to use that to cover over the question so that you think, "Ah, now I know the answer, so I don't need to do my own enquiry anymore."

Now, what is the route of our involvement with these things that arise? We could take the hinayana path of just observing them arising and giving them space, both as they arise outside and inside, but that's difficult if you've got a kid to look after and you've got work to do, so your actual social situation would direct you towards looking for a path or an inquiry that would let you be in the world, in the midst of things, appearing as they appear without involvement, without attachment, so that you are there, and you are involved and not involved at the same time. Which is very difficult because if you're not involved but pretending to be involved, you're hypocritical and other people will sniff you out as false.

The 'nothing' in buddhism is not the nihilistic nothing of nothing at all. Essentially what it means is non-essence: that things don't have a stable secure essence, and when we understand that then what we have is manifestation, and the manifestation is a dynamic process of display but it is not underpinned by anything else. It's not grounded, it's not established in anything, it is simply displayed. When we recognize that, we are freed inside from having to edit this flow, and the flow itself will just move on.

Q [translator] This is maybe OK for the spiritual teacher but what about real parents. We need the emotions of fear, of anxiety, of desire for their happiness, to be really good parents for our children. I think it's OK for the spiritual teacher to be thinking that everything is empty but real parents have to have real feelings, I think.

James Well, I think you can have real feelings. It links with the question about the origin of things, where things come from. If I am angry with someone—say I'm really angry with you—there's a feeling there. Anger is quite *solid*, so you make aggressive noises like Grrr... and the anger is coming out of some tight spot in your chest or wherever, so this feels like the source. But you know that actually it is not the real source; it is, if you like, a staging post, the first step of how the anger arises.

The key thing would be whether we believe there is something *behind* what appears to be the actual, originating sensation. If you have that awareness, that will not falsify the movement out, but will allow that movement out to occur with a bit more space around it, because you won't be so locked in, so pissed off. Then we get these two things banging together, until maybe we have to have a third person in to calm it down!

Q Idealistically I was thinking this feeling will only last for a second, if we recognise it really quickly .

James Well, well that would depend. I have seen C.R. Lama angry for weeks on end, furious, storming around, smashing things, shouting at everyone, people crying, children frightened. You know, that's not one second of anger, that's a *lot* of anger, and he spent his life being angry, if you like, because he spent a lot of his life visualizing himself as very angry gods. You could say it was his home, and if you live in an angry home, well, the people around are going to have a hard time!

Whatever you think of it, in the longer run of things, that is a practice. The confusion is when people imagine that the practice is the solution. It's not—it was part of him transforming *his* own poison. The fantasy that somebody is *free* of poison is the illusion. Teachers also have poisons, they also get trapped in pride, in stupidity. I've never met a Tibetan lama who wasn't caught up in something like that. I think it's *impossible*. We are all on the path.

We can be helped by those who are a bit further on, but also, it may be that the children need anger to tell them what to do. Just as you might do with a child; you see them playing around with the electric switch and you really give them anger. Some of that is because you're frightened they'll kill themselves, but some of it is that you know you have to put some gap in their mind so that its echo will be somatically established, stopping them from doing it again.

Now that, we would say, is compassion. And I think the more you do the meditation, the more you can have the space and you have the compassion to stay with the emotion long enough to have that effect on someone else. The question is: is it used creatively? Someone was telling me in the tea-break about a jealous teacher who got angry with the students when the students went away to be with someone else, saying, "If you're my students you must stay with me, and I know what's right for you." What this is really saying is "If you go out with anyone else, then we're finished!" That's maybe not very helpful. However it *could* be helpful if the student thinks, "The tradition holds the truth; either you're in the tradition or you're out of the tradition. The tradition holds the truth; you can't mess about with it. If you're coming in, then fully immerse yourself in it. That way you'll get the benefit, but if you're going to mess around, have a bit of this and a bit of that—then it's better you go away!"

If it's said from that motive, it might have compassion, but if it's that the teacher feels under attack, or wants the money, or you know, whatever the deal is, then it wouldn't be. It's always difficult to know, how much is held back for oneself and how much is generous out to the other.

I'll finish this off with one last thing. Existentialism is not so popular nowadays, but one of the key ideas in existentialism is that we have no essence, that there is no essence directing our life, there is no purpose already given to us. We have to find our purpose through an engagement with our moment-by-moment existence as it reveals itself. The task, or this decision that we have to make and we have to make it second-by-second, is about authenticity. An inauthentic being is a being which lives without the burden of the existential reality. That is to say, when we shelter ourselves, when we hide ourselves in the illusion that there is an essence, that we know who we are, that this is what we have to do, "I'm a man, therefore I have to...", "I'm an old person, I am entitled to..." When we take up the statement of a state and say that that state

gives us a basis for being, that's inauthentic. Whereas existentialism says that in the moment, you are called upon by your existence *as it arises*, to respond and be present. That is the only kind of authenticity there is, and you can never predict how you are going to be, authentic or otherwise.

To conclude my response to this question, if as a parent, you have in your mind a syllabus of how your children should be or what you should be doing, then you're trying to pull them into your system. But if you try to be open to them, you can actually have quite a degree of freshness.

Buddhism, in a sense, is more in the existential direction where it says wisdom and compassion meet together, but they have to meet in each point. These are not states, these are not places where you arrive and feel safe. These are burdens—or pleasures—of being unprotected, ungrounded and just *here*.

The recording is incomplete and ended here