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*Sameness and difference:  
buddhist and western  
understandings of  
identification.*

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*A public talk given by James Low*

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### **Excerpts:**

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*Rather than seeing our ordinary lives as something stable, secure and reliable, through the practice of meditation we come to experience our mind as this ungraspable experience, open and empty like the mirror which is always the same. Within and through this openness – this absolute naked absence of any furniture – all furniture, all movement, all gesture – reveals itself moment by moment, as this or that, or this or that. In that way our participation in the world is always one of aliveness. We're not operating on an automatic pilot. We are not taking things for granted. Rather, by the freshness of our contact with the living world, we are touched and moved. Subject and object are then ceaselessly dancing and creating infinite patterns.*

## Sameness and difference: a world of categories

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Our topic tonight is about sameness and difference, and using this as a basis for thinking about how identification can be understood from a buddhist point of view. We will be looking at some western notions of identity and some buddhist notions, as well as the function that meditation can have in trying to loosen up some of the knots that make us have a very narrow view of ourselves.

Generally speaking you could say that we group things together on the basis of similarities and difference; that we live in a world of categories. We have the category of ourselves, and in relation to that there is everything else – that which is not self. We have categories of young and old, male and female and so on. When we encounter phenomena in the world we try to locate them inside a category or a matrix of identification, in order to make ourselves feel competent and relaxed in our knowledge. We tend to move around in these categories according to our own temporary condition. When we experience too much going on we tend to feel a bit overwhelmed and so we want to retreat into a place which is familiar and where everything seems to be the same. But then if things become too much the same, too similar, we start to get bored and so we want to go outside and find something new and different in order to have some excitement.

One of the ways in which we can introduce some degree of excitement is to vary the categories of identifications that we use for ourselves. So, on a simple level you might feel hungry. Now the term '*hunger*', because it's an abstract signifier, would indicate that there is a repeated phenomenon called '*hunger*'. Yesterday you probably felt some hunger, and tomorrow you'll probably also feel some hunger, but of course when you are hungry you don't always want to eat the same thing. So although the semantic of the term '*hunger*' would indicate something that is the same, its actual embodied significance for us may be taking us in very different directions.

## How we use language to create an illusion of mastery

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We can use language as a way of going into very precise descriptions of our lived experience, or as a way of going up into our head and floating in a realm of abstraction which allows us *not* to attend to ourselves. If we take these two directions to their extremes they become rather similar. For example, lots of the people here are German so you could say '*You are German*', then you could say '*You are European*', then you could say '*You are a human beings*'. On the level of being a human being, it becomes so abstract, we're not quite sure what it means. It seems to refer to something, but when you try to find out specifically what it's referring to it can't really be defined. You have to go down into more precision. In the same way, if you go into the minutiae and the precise detail of your own experience....say for example with the notion of hunger. We experience hunger sometimes as a movement in our mouth, sometimes a particular kind of taste, sometimes an excess of saliva. We can also experience it in our belly with

grumbings, with tension, with unpleasant feelings. If you stay very closely with the sensation as it arises it becomes something unspeakable. If you can recall the sensation of being hungry in your mouth, you really want to eat something. In that particular moment something is occurring which will never occur again. It has never occurred before, because you stand at this particular moment of your life, in this particular context, with this particular intensity of experience. One has to step back from this naked intensity into one's familiar conceptual categories in order to be able to articulate one's experience.

From a buddhist point of view, one of the central ideas is that on a fundamental level, we are alienated from the fullness of our being. This occurs on the basis of a kind of intoxication, of being mesmerised by the particulars of our existence. That is to say, we find ourselves living in a world which is changing all the time. The sensations in our body are changing all the time. Our thoughts and feelings are changing all the time; clearly the time of day is changing moment by moment, second by second; the seasons, the cycles of the moon and so on. On a very direct and immediate level our world is dynamic, and yet a lot of the time our concepts are static. We make sense of this ceaselessly moving continuum of experience, a revelation which is always unfolding, by applying nouns, adverbs, adjectives which concretise the situation, so that we appear to be in more familiar territory than we actually are. That is to say, on the level of actuality – on our activity as activity which is always moving onwards – the concepts that we try to name it with, are ones which point to things that are repetitive and continuing to be the same through time.

For example, some of the people who are here just now were in this same room a little earlier doing a tai chi class. That's a quite reasonable sentence to make. Since the tai chi class occurred, a bomb hasn't dropped, destroying the building; magic workers have not come in and rebuilt a simulacrum, an ersatz form of it. Clearly it's the same building, the same room. We know that. We know that on the level of the concept, but of course as the sun is going down, the light coming into the room shifts and changes, and so the room, *as an experience*, is changing. As an experience which is encountered through the body, through the senses, it is *not* the same room.

The same concept 'this room' is applied to a wide range of experiences. Now we could say *"Oh well, even if we were to stay here right through the night, although the light would be changing it would fundamentally still be the same room."* But again that would be to rely on the fixity of the concept. How do we know it's the same room? Well because we know something about the room. We know it has a lot of windows. It has a wooden floor. It has a little kitchen area. Each of these identifications is a concept. Some of the windows are open, and some are closed. Does that matter? Is the window the same when it is open or when it is closed? When the window is open it becomes a source of a cooling evening breeze. If we are hot then a cooling evening breeze is immediately and directly part of our lived world. In terms of an embodied world, in

terms of an embodied existence which is participating in a shared movement, moment by moment, it matters a great deal whether a window is open or closed.

From this point of view, when we perceive sameness in the phenomenological world, in the world as it is revealed to us through our senses, we are often engaged in a particular kind of violence. It is a violence because it severs the immediacy of the direct link between our existence as something which is alive and sensory, always already living in an environment. It is as if something is slicing down between ourselves and the world around us. And then something is slicing through *us*, separating our head from our body, so that we live in a realm of mastery – the manipulation of concepts to create a reassuring fantasy that we know what's what.

We can hear little birds singing outside just now, but of course we already have a concept of a bird singing. What we actually hear, what we encounter, is something beyond thought, something which announces itself and is always, forever beyond appropriation. In appropriating this sound and pulling the sound into our world – ‘That is a bird singing.’ – we don't catch the song, we catch *ourselves*. *We* trap ourselves in the familiar prison of our concepts, so that the possibility of the naked encounter with that which is arising – which has the possibility of taking ourselves out of ourselves – is lost. We lose this because we stay inside ourselves in a fixed position and we pull the world into our frame of reference. *'I am the same, and my world is roughly the same. Because I know how things are, I don't need to attend to them.'*

Knowledge is then substituted for fresh experience and we gain power; power over this seeming world that we live in, but at the enormous expense of becoming slightly deadened.

### All phenomena are experiences of the mind, from a buddhist viewpoint

From the buddhist point of view, all phenomena are experiences of the mind. ‘Mind’ here means our basic noetic capacity, our capacity to be alive at the centre of our experience, to be present with our experience. Our experience is not ‘me inside myself experiencing *out* to things in the world, separate from myself’. Rather, our experience is the non-dual, the non-separated integration of subject and object, of self and other as they arise together. When you wake up in the morning you wake up into your world. You live in your world. You don't live in yourself and, from time to time, go out into the world in the way that you might live in your flat and go out into the street. We are absolutely part of the world.

So to be present is not to be present as ‘me having an experience of something other’. That is to say, I am not present as ‘myself presenting myself to the world’, but rather presence itself. Our basic aliveness, our openness and receptivity is something which is instantly, immediately, *deliciously* filled with experience which is both subject and object.

Since this morning you have had millions of experiences. If you came here on your bicycle so many things happened: in the traffic, weaving with other bicycles, pedestrians, trees, everything going on. As this experience is flowing with your senses, you have thoughts, feelings and sensations and so on.

### Metaphor of lasagna

Now if we think of all these things you have experienced today, where have they gone to? If you have a cup and pour water into it, it will fill up. Even something as big as a football stadium will fill up with a hundred thousand people. But if you have had all these experiences today, how come *you* are not filled up? Maybe you are not lasagna. You are not built up layer after layer, after layer. Of course sometimes it can feel like that, sometimes we do feel overwhelmed and just want people to back off.

### Metaphor of mirror

From the point of view of buddhism the mind is considered to be not something which can be filled, but something which reveals. The traditional example for this is the image of a mirror. If you have a mirror and you hold it in your hand and you move it around, it will show many, many different impressions. As you turn it, it will be open to whatever is in front of it. It doesn't accumulate images; rather it reveals them and then releases them. Reveals and releases....

Because something has already been shown in the mirror, it doesn't mean something similar can't be shown again. Each time a reflection is revealed, it has the immediacy of its direct showing; it becomes present to us.

### We are always in context: subject and object arise together

Our mind is like a mirror ceaselessly showing what is arising. For example, if you look at your face in the mirror – let's say you are cleaning your teeth – you see your face, you see the toothbrush going up and down, you see the wall behind you, you see the bathroom you're in... That is to say, we are always already in the context. In the same way we are revealed to ourselves with the environment. It's not that I come first, and then the world, but that I always come *with* the world. When I am aware of my experience, it's always experience *in* the world. Now I am sitting here looking at you all. I can see your shapes, the different colours that you are wearing, and while I'm aware of you all, I am also aware of my body, the pressure of my weight on the seat, the tension in my back from holding this posture, the movement of my arms and so on. That is to say, from this point of view, subject and object, myself and yourself arise as the same, as equally phenomena in this open mirror of the mind.

To put it another way, I experience myself *and* I experience you. We are all *my* experience. I imagine that you are having your experience, but *I* only have access to *my*

experience. Even if you tell me in great detail about **your** experience, my experience will be you telling me in great detail about your experience. That is how I experience you. In that experience of you, you are in my world; you **are** my world! Just as I am your world just now; just as you are your world. That is to say, you have the immediacy of your sense of me. I might say, *'But hang on a minute, you don't know me. There's so much that I have to tell you about me before you can know me...'* But that would be the 'me' for 'me' and it would be abstract stories. No matter how much detail I gave you, you would still just have your experience of me **telling** you.

So, on this level, self and other are the same. It doesn't mean that we are homogenised like milk, or that since I now realise that you are me, you have to eat the same as me and wear the same clothes as me! But when we relate directly to our own experience we start to see the infinity of the revelation of the integrated movement of subject and object. That is to say, that the root quality of our alive intelligence, our awareness, is something ungraspable. It has no personal nor private content of itself which is always there, but is rather a potential within which infinite forms can be revealed.

### Metaphor of screwing down furniture

This room, for example, is used for many different purposes. The basis for this room being used for these different purposes, is the fact that it is a space which one can open up. If the chairs that you are sitting on were screwed to the floor, then the possibilities of this room would be much more limited. But within five minutes we could take out all the chairs and make a very big space. Or we could make a great sculpture out of all the chairs, because the chairs are not screwed down!

In the same way, when we become fixated on certain definitions of ourselves, certain views about our lives, we screw these into the open space of our potential and we become filled up with this heavy furniture. For example, from a psychological point of view, someone might have repeated negative thoughts. These different thoughts may be generated out of certain core beliefs, such as: 'I am unlovable', 'I am stupid' or 'I am a failure'.

Repeated negative thoughts become like a huge old sofa – very heavy to move, and very tempting to sit in! We can collapse into our neurotic beliefs and feel quite at home; you then see the world from that point of view. Of course a lot of other things are going on simultaneously but you are now seated and facing in this particular way. Doing something new doesn't feel quite as interesting as the repetition of the delicious limitation of this neurosis.

Repeated negative thoughts have to be repeated and the reason they have to be repeated is because they don't last very long. They seem to be enduring and the same because **we** keep cultivating them. However their actual, immediate living quality is to be impermanent. They are arising and passing, arising and passing, just one of the many

little movements of energy in this great flux of our lived world. Yet somehow, because we become fascinated by them, mesmerised by them, we develop a selective attention that says *'My worrying thoughts, my negative thoughts tell me the truth; and now, because I know the truth, I don't need to check things out.'*

If you think you are unlovable then when a friend says *'Hey, why don't you come around for dinner tonight. This other friend of mine is coming, and I think you would get on well together.'* you start to think *'Oh no, I don't want to be rejected again. Why should I expose myself to that when I already know it's not going to work out.'* In that way something new is arising, but it is being presented as something which would be simply the repetition of something old.

### Knowledge precedes experience: buddhist meditation tries to reverse that

In that way knowledge precedes experience and when that occurs, you believe you don't need to attend to what you are experiencing!

The purpose of buddhist meditation is to try to reverse that tendency; to create situations in which we start to privilege the raw, naked freshness of experience and to trust that – so that we can start to relinquish our reliance on assumptions, habits and beliefs. What we take to be 'the same' in this world is actually a whole range of infinite differences. Moment by moment there is a unique specificity to each instant of existence.

Of course, part of that is language itself. If we reintegrate language as experience, and experience it as an embodied gestural system through which we can bring about relatedness with others – rather than as an abstract and abstracted system for making sense of things – then language gets woven into the ceaseless flow of experience. Of course one of the things about speech is that it's moving all the time. It is an aspect of this ongoing revelation that we are all wonderfully alive and present with.

Rather than seeing our ordinary lives as something stable, secure and reliable, through the practice of meditation we come to experience our mind as this ungraspable experience, open and empty like the mirror, which is always the same. Within and through this openness – this absolute naked absence of any furniture – all furniture, all movement, all gesture, reveals itself moment by moment, as this or that, or this or that.

In that way our participation in the world is always one of aliveness. We're not operating on an automatic pilot. We are not taking things for granted. Rather, by the freshness of our contact with the living world, we are touched and moved. Subject and object are then ceaselessly dancing and creating infinite patterns.

### The relation between wisdom and compassion



In more traditional language, Tibetan buddhism would say that the central aspect of our existence is the relation between wisdom and compassion. Here, wisdom is the capacity to examine the familiar building blocks of your life, the knowledge, the information, the habits, the beliefs on which you build your sense of who you are, and to realise that it is without true substance.

It is there of course, we can communicate; we can talk about places, *'Have you ever been to Berlin?' 'Oh yes. It's like this... or like that.'* To use the traditional image, this is like the reflection of the moon on water. On a full moon night, if you are in a quiet country place and you see the reflection of the moon on a still pond it looks so present, so exactly there, that you feel you could grasp it. **Something** is there but it is nothing graspable. All that we build our lives from is, in that way, like an illusion.

If you become a parent, and you have children, for a period they are a baby, then they are an infant, then they are an adolescent, and then they are adult, but what were they ever really? A process, moving and changing. We say *'I have a child'* in the same way that we say *'I have a motor car'*, but even a motor car is always changing. We say *'I have a body'* but the body also is changing. That is to say, everything is impermanent; everything is a process, part of this infinite, universal flow which is beyond our conceptualization.

Through wisdom we can see that the stabilising, static concepts we use to create a world of familiar things is just an illusory play. Through that we can come to see that because everything is moving –because all our experience, always is just flowing through –there is something other than that, something which we always are, which is this open presence; but we can't catch it and we can't find it.

The most reliable part about me, the thing which is always the same, is something which is not a thing. It is a potential which is never exhausted.

Compassion is then to recognise that all the movements that arise out of and within this openness of potential, is gestural interaction, is compassion itself. So compassion from the Buddhist view is not about doing something for someone else. It's not about providing others with something they lack, but rather it is to help them –and we can mutually help each other in this – to awaken, and to stay awake to the fact that our experience is always with others.

Others are ourselves and we are the selves of others. This is why we cannot claim to be a unique little island, a separate, stable existence because there is nothing stable nor separate about it. We are always becoming different because we are connected with others. Somebody tells us that a mutual friend is sick and we immediately feel sad. We see a beautiful sunset and we feel a sense of awe and a kind of tingling sensation. There is no border post around us where information comes in from the world and then we decide whether we will pick it up or not. The sun is setting in *me*. I can feel the sun

setting; *you* can feel the cooling of the air, the different quality of the light. This is *our experience*; it is not some abstract bit of knowledge.

### Relaxing and participating, rather than mastering and controlling

Because the world is always changing, because of the infinite difference inside it, which cannot be simplified into simple samenesses, our task is participation not control. In Buddhism the central notion of ignorance and attachment is that it substitutes an anxious control and a will to power in the place of relaxation, opening and participation.

Fundamentally, the only thing which is reliable is not a thing; it is emptiness itself. And the forms that occur in this world are due to certain conditions of our perception.

Now, science might claim that the triangle will always be there whether people know about it or not; it's a truth. As Plato described, in the realm of pure ideas there are the perfect forms, and here we see them but through a glass darkly. However these forms don't have a function in terms of helping people see the immediacy of their existence. So in that sense Buddhism would be closer to the philosophers who preceded Socrates, like Heraclitus who said '*You can never step in the same river twice.*' That, from a Buddhist point of view, has much greater ethical, ontological and metaphysical significance than the structures of geometry for example, or the perfect forms of Plato.

Buddhist mathematics is not well known in the world, and that's because it doesn't exist! In Tibet people did their counting on their fingers; they didn't have any integral calculus or anything like that. This relates to an important issue, one which Heidegger was concerned with – the whole issue of technique and the dangers of technique. A technical relationship with the world is concerned with a relationship of power.

We could say Tibet had a mediaeval kind of culture. The only wheels the people really used were prayer wheels, because the tilt of the culture was not about power. It was not about individual agency over the environment but rather about a sensitivity regarding how to inhabit the environment, leaving as few traces on the environment as possible. In that way the western and eastern traditions of philosophy went in very different directions.

**Translator:** So, this question concerns the issue of making a choice, of making a decision. In our daily life we always have to decide something. Are we going to spend our holidays at the seashore or the mountains? Are we going to sit in front of the TV set or read a book? What are we going to do? From what you have been saying one could conclude that it just doesn't matter; it's equally good to sit in front of the TV set as read a book. What would you say about this?

**James:** Okay. It's a very interesting question. Of course the essential point there would be who is the one who is performing the action? As long as we have slipped out

of the natural integration with the world and we have become 'I, me, myself, with my life, my likes, my dislikes,.... wanting to get the best for myself and avoid danger', then my choices are going to be made in terms of my felt sense of who I am.

That is to say, the potential of the room will be determined by the furniture that's inside it. Now, if through our practice of meditation we become to have a new more immediate sense of the potential, the openness, of the room itself; and then we are able to move the furniture to make the room more hospitable for other people; and we can do that without forgetting the potential of the room itself; then it doesn't matter what you do! But if you're nailed to your chair.. and your chair doesn't move... then it matters a hell of a lot what you do!

**James:** So that's the end of our time together. I hope it's been of interest in some way. Thank you very much and good luck