
*Wisdom and Compassion:
“I should phone my mother”*

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“... At the heart of wisdom in Buddhism is openness or emptiness. And this openness means that through attending to our own mental process of being with others, we come to recognise the ways in which we construct other people out of our own past experience, our own knowledge and our own fantasy projections. ...”



“...In meditation one can start to be aware that a thought arises, and one is caught up in that thought and there is a feeling or a knowledge “I am angry” or “I am tired” or “I need to do this” or “I need to phone my mother”. So I am sitting in the meditation and the thought arises “Blast!, I haven’t phoned my mother”. Now if my meditation is not very powerful and my mother is very powerful I jump up for the telephone! If my meditation’s a bit stronger I can maybe put that on hold and just have a kind of trace attention to the content of it but let the form of the thought pass through, knowing that, of course I will obsessively think of my mother soon after...”



So what is the relationship between me, the thought and my mother? “Just as in meditation we try to have an attitude of openness and tenderness to our thoughts, so we also need to be open to receive the tenderness of the world. Because it’s the tenderness of the world that supports us. If we have to do it all ourselves, as if we were acting against the world, we will get exhausted. But real strength arises through the world moving through us. We are enworlded, we are part of the world and that is our strength. Our thoughts come, not as our thoughts, but as the thoughts of the world passing through us. And in that moment of non-duality all the strength, all the richness that we need, is there.



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Hello and good evening. Tonight I would like to open up a reflection on the way an understanding of wisdom and compassion can inform us in our ordinary human relationships, both the informal, natural relationships we have with families, friends, colleagues and so on, and professional relationships where we are operating in a role governed by a certain job description or professional categorisation. Of course we can't cover the field, merely open it up.

So we might start with a question. Do human beings, do we as human beings, know how to behave to each other?

Controlling nature, under the direction of experts

Those of you who have had children or who have been involved with children might know that over the last eighty years there have been huge fashion changes in ideas about how mothers particularly should relate to new born babies.

There is a sense in which women are to be educated in childrearing; we can't take it for granted that mothers know what to do with small babies. And the "we" includes the very committed socialist early feminists. For example, Marie Stopes in Britain was one of the early planners of contraceptive devices for women, took up a very scientific procedure. Women have to be educated, on the basis that there is no natural knowledge. Everything has to be developed in culture and transmitted through culture. There is the belief that what makes people happy is a moral education, an education that seeks to develop rationality and the conducting of one's life on proper principles.

So the clear enemy that is marked out by such a position is nature. The chaotic movement of instinct, of drives, of needs of desires, all of this hunger and movement into the environment has to be restricted and controlled because who knows what would happen if it was allowed to go free!

Of course these views were happening at a time when very rapid exploitation of the environment was occurring. So that the desire to control nature, to direct nature to the ends of culture without any real attention to what nature might have to teach us about how she should be used, that same attitude to the wider nature was focused particularly on nature in terms of the raw new-born infant and the mother.

And what was installed was the idea of controlling nature under the direction of experts. Whether this was geologists looking for oil, or hydrologists working out how to build big dams in order to generate electricity, or gynaecologists being involved in very invasive procedures in childbirth, it's in the same kind of movement: nature must be controlled.

And this model or paradigm of control of a small territory of sanity or righteousness against a great myriad host of dangerous forces, is of course not new in our culture, in Western culture. From the Old Testament and the idea of original sin there is the idea that nature is somehow contaminated. What we are born with is inherently off centre, taking us away from the proper task of life.

So what is installed there is that nature is the problem and someone else has the answer. And we can only have the problem of ourselves solved if we firstly recognise that we have a problem and then have no problem in accepting the solution provided by the expert who knows.

So what we have is a basic scenario of primitive or profound contamination. And this contamination comes about outside our control. We are just born into the world somehow sullied. But if we rely on the powerful on or the powerful method then there will be some exorcism and the bad thing that has come into us will be taken out and then we will be pure and taken up into a place where everyone is pure.

And the way this exorcism comes about is through submission to the one who knows how to carry out the exorcism. So that when the person who is identified as having a devil inside them is being exorcised by being beaten and they scream, they are a good person if the scream is to encourage the beating to continue, and they are a bad person if the scream is to say stop it. And if you read accounts of exorcisms carried out like this in the 16th or 17th century, the person who is being beaten is often profoundly grateful for the beatings and the hot irons that are applied, because their mind knows that what is happening to their body, that pain is nothing compared to the death of the soul.

You get a similar phenomenon if you talk to women who when they had small children in the first half of the twentieth century, were feeding their baby according to the clock, because they had been told by the doctor that if you feed the baby when the baby cries, this is a very bad thing and this will introduce very manipulative and devious habits into the baby. So that when the baby cries and your heart goes and you want to feed the baby, you have to stop, since *No! this is a perversion of nature. You will be perverting your baby if you go with this.* You must listen to the higher message that says *Stop! Listen to the clock because the clock knows better than the breast.*

And a lot of more recent psychotherapy continues the same line of thinking. For example Freud, in his book, *Civilisation and its Discontents* sets out very clearly that our unconscious drives or needs seek an immediate gratification, and if we were to indulge this immediate gratification human culture would break down. We would simply be acting out these impulses which would be unacceptable in the world and result in death and the collapse of culture. And so the development of culture means an attack upon the self, the raw self, the natural self.

Some of this comes together in the English word *spoil*, which is used in the sense of maybe giving children some extra ice cream or something. Someone else will say, oh you are spoiling that child. Spoil has the sense of something going rotten, like a rotten fruit is spoiled. As if too much kindness, too much tenderness, too much indulgence, would be corrupting. Because inside us we have this wild crazy greedy monster, which if the people outside were to be at all generous towards, it would come out and just devour the world, so we can only keep ourselves safe by pushing this monster in.

Buddhism is also not free from these primitive paranoid fantasies. However through many, many centuries of meditation practice and reflection on the nature of the results of the meditation practice there has been a certain softening, a certain gesturing towards what might be at the heart of being human, and I want to take this up now.

What the words 'wisdom' and 'compassion' cover in Buddhism

So I will just say a little about the terrain moved towards with these words 'wisdom' and 'compassion' in Buddhism. And I want in many ways just to gesture towards these ideas from different points of view. In the Buddhist tradition there are many, many definitions of these terms and they can be summed up very tightly, very nicely in many ways. But whenever we feed the intellect by giving clarity in this way, so that we get a handle on something, as soon as we get a handle on it, we start to use it. And that is very dangerous.

So rather than getting a handle on things, what I am concerned to open up is the slippage or the movement between different areas of ideas, because I think this is the only way to approach wisdom, as distinct from knowledge. Because to return to the story of children, it was the expert knowledge of the gynaecologists and the midwives that was mounting an attack on the wisdom of women of generations and generations and passed on in a very subtle and intuitive way - often a wisdom that could not be formulated in a clear cut package of treatment. Because professionals proved treatment, but human beings are human with each other. And these are very different occupations or ways of being.

So wisdom primarily is an attention to questions. It is never the installing of an answer as anything more than a moment among moments. So wisdom then is an experience or a way of experience, and as experience it is always contextualised, it is always located in the precise, finite moment of being with someone else. It cannot be distilled into a body of knowledge that can be generalised and put here and put there and put somewhere else.

And at the heart of wisdom in Buddhism is openness or emptiness. And this openness means that through attending to our own mental process of being with others, we come to recognise the ways in which we construct other people out of our own past experience, our own knowledge and our own fantasy projections. So that as you come into a room like this in the evening you look around and see all these people, and some people look more interesting than other people. Some people look familiar. Other people don't look familiar. Other people you might think I could never talk to that person. Other people you think I'd really like to talk to that person.

And many of these judgements and editing of the total possibility of the situation are happening at a very unconscious level. We are not even aware that we are excluding all sorts of people from our focus of interest. So on the basis of our early experience, maybe our childhood experience and the experiences we have been through since then, we have come to certain deeply held assumptions about who is interesting and who is not interesting, and even that the interesting may be dangerous, so we prefer to say that somebody that really is interesting is not interesting or else we may get into trouble if we got to know them.

And in analytical Freudian psychotherapy this is the sort of issue that is taken up through the transference, in which the therapist tries to get some idea of the nature of these repetitive projections are by experiencing them projected onto herself. And Freud certainly in the early days had the hope that if one had enough analysis and really came to understand the past patterning of experience that made for these projections or these ways of covering up the reality of what is out there, one would actually be free of that; one would be fully analysed and in that way be totally fresh to whatever experience might be arising.

But he soon came to realise that wouldn't be possible. And that all that one could do was try to be in touch when with new feelings and sensations arose when working as an analyst and try to work with them without giving in to them. And one of the important qualities of the Freudian project is that it puts into question the possibility of ever having a perfect knowledge of a

situation. It says knowledge will always be confused, knowledge will always be murky, because we will not know the factors that are informing the way in which we know each other.

At various times different cultures have raised the hope that we could return to this blank slate, the *tabula rasa*, the blank screen. In the enlightenment period Voltaire had the idea that the mind was fresh at the moment of birth. It hadn't been written on by culture, so new children were the hope for the future, because they could be attended to; they were not already inscribed with the demands of the past. And the Freudian idea of the analyst fully analysed was a similar one.

The problem with that is of course that a blank screen is just blank. It doesn't know what is going on. It is just blank. So somebody must be outside the blank screen giving a commentary on the blank screen saying, oh very interesting things are arising on the blank screen, and they remind me of such and such. So there is a educated, very full screen analyst analysing the traces on the blank screen of his split off half.

And we are moving gradually towards the topic of tonight's talk so don't despair! But these last two examples are again a continuation of this idea of exorcism. That if you scrape away the bad things you will reveal the pure. Now in Buddhism this idea of openness or emptiness is a principle which is said to underpin all phenomena, both external and internal. Indeed the notion of external and internal is something hovering inside the space of openness.

We somehow know that we live inside our body, in particular inside our head and we look out into the world, we know things about the world which are not true about what is going on inside. And this ability to deal with knowledge like that is very profound. So that I can maybe, on the basis of reading neurophysiology I can say that I know that I am speaking because of or as a result of or as the embodiment of these movements inside my brain chemistry. So I might then say that I am nothing but the movement of this brain chemistry. The fact that I am looking out and speaking to you is a sign to me of the supreme efficiency of my brain chemistry at this moment. Some people speak in exactly that way.

But it seems to me that such an expression is simply a profound form of alienation. That one reads in a book or sees through a microscope is then installed as the truth, the knowledge which supersedes the experience so that the ordering of knowledge is a defence against the anxiety of not knowing what is going on, of not knowing what it means to be human. So that by telling myself who I am I can escape the terrible question, well what am I?

And it is exactly that question that is taken up in the Buddhist approach to wisdom. A great deal of Buddhist meditation is spent quietly sitting with the arising of thoughts. And through a calming attention say to the breath or focusing the eyes on an external object, one calms the speed of the mind to the point where one is aware of thoughts arising and passing, arising and passing. And one can start to be aware that a thought arises, and one is caught up in that thought and there is a feeling or a knowledge "I am angry" or "I am tired" or "I need to do this" or "I need to phone my mother". So I am sitting in the meditation and the thought arises "Drat, I haven't phoned my mother". Now if my meditation is not very powerful and my mother is very powerful I jump up for the telephone. If my meditation's a bit better I can maybe put that on hold and just have a kind of trace attention to the content of it but let the form of the thought pass through, knowing that of course I will obsessively think of my mother soon after.

So what is the relationship between me, the thought and my mother? Having spent many, many years in analysis I'm not very sure at all! I know it's a very expensive thought to have

anyway! But it's an interesting thing isn't it because here is a thought, just a very simple kind of thought, but it's fraught with all sorts of past associations. It's a thought that's infused with a lot of energy for me. That's me as me, James. Maybe for no one else, but anyway. This thought arises and it disturbs the possibility of simply allowing thoughts to go through. I'm hooked in towards that thought.

Now because I have had a lot of analysis and I have read many books on child development and because I teach therapy I know a lot about relationships with mothers. So there are lots of associated thoughts that I can quickly bring in and pack around this thought, either to reduce the anxiety or to increase the anxiety, depending on the context. And in a sense all these thoughts embody a kind of knowledge. They bring to bear certain different kinds of information on to the central issue of the mother, which is arising, you remember, as a thought "I should phone my mother. I haven't phoned my mother."

So this thought is embedded in a kind of horizontal network, a wave of other thoughts which can be pulled into different patterns or constellations around it, giving rise to different feelings, different intentions. And a great deal of therapy and ordinary human communication is dealing with mitigating or managing some of the tensions which are embedded in particular patternings of the juxtaposition of ideas around an image like the mother. And in therapy and in ordinary conversations we tend to have two dominant styles. One is a sort of problem-solving, sharp-focusing, cognitive approach - "Well what do you want to do about her" - and the other is what we might call a soft kind of thought, or a softening thought which would be around the affect, the feeling-tone - "How do you feel about that?" allowing different patterns of thinking and knowledge, because after all our feelings are a kind of knowledge that we have, because we know how we feel, or we can make ourselves know how we feel and that's the way that we get some sense of control over them.

So that by talking with our friends or in therapy or whatever we get different patterns of thinking coming from someone else mixing with our patterns of thinking and the knowledge that we have about the possibilities of thinking, about juxtaposing thoughts, shifts so that very often in therapy people will come to realise that they hate their mother and before they never thought that because such a thought was unbearable - mother and hatred had to be kept apart. But now these two thoughts, these two bits of knowledge can be brought into connectedness because of the connections that exist in the other person. So you get different patterns of horizontal linking.

And even if we are trying to listen to the other person with an open mind or an open attitude, and some ways as a sort of blank screen, and not give suggestions, somehow even our silence will be filled with the attitudes of the other. So unless we say something, their projection or their transference onto our silence will be as if we are speaking back to them with that voice. Because on this interpersonal, interactive level we are still operating from the assumption that the other person is real. *"I am real My story is real. I'm going to try to listen to the other person without listening to my own story, but nonetheless in my own therapy or with my own friends my story is real for me."* So one's working with an inside-outside dichotomy, self and other dichotomy, past, present and future dichotomy, all sorts of fragmentations are being held together inside a matrix of knowledge by a centralising ego-cogito.

Meditation methods for thoughts

And now we come to the essential point because it's exactly this that meditation is designed to deconstruct or unpack. Because again in the meditation the thought arises "I haven't phoned my mother" There are various approaches one can take to this. And I'll describe just a few of them which are on the sort of movements towards a profound wisdom and they start with a kind of knowledge.

This first is simply "don't think of that, think of this." So when I find my attention being sucked towards the thought "I haven't phoned my mother" I remember "aha what I need to focus on is my breath" so bring my attention back to my breath going in and out of my nostrils. No what's interesting there is that there has to be a linking thought. There has to be a thought of recognition "Hang on I'm getting into another thought here. I don't want to get into thinking about my mother. I need to think about my breath." So there are two linking thoughts. There's an unlinking with the thought of the mother and there's a relinking with the thought of the breath. But these are very simple technical thoughts. I think the important thing though is the attention is returned to the breath. And we don't need to think about breathing. Breathing is just something we do. In a sense breath lives us, we don't breathe.

And so by focusing the attention on the breath there is nothing for thought to hold onto. There's just a simple observation. Of course we have a lot of habits of thinking and so thought immediately starts to spiral into the space again and we find our attention shifting away from the breath onto the thought. Then if we can recognise that in the moment when we are simply concentrating on the breath and relaxed into it sometimes there's the experience of thoughts not arising, there's just a spaciousness in which this breath is occurring, just this gentle movement and the sense of the body shifts away and the sense of the world shifts away and there's just an openness with this movement of subtle sensation.

When we have that moment of recognition then when thoughts arise they're arising inside this space of openness, not onto it as if from the outside, not trying to pull us out of the spaciousness into a tightness, but as the display of the openness itself. Then we can, in this relaxed state, be like a happy, non-neurotic mother, watching the thoughts like our little children, playing and sometimes they are very good and sometimes they're very naughty but we just let them play.

So that in a very subtle way start to practise tenderness, love and generosity towards our own self in the most profound level in which there is no self to either offer the generosity or to receive the generosity. Because we have recognised that these thoughts, through the practice of meditation and through the commitment to openness, these thoughts cannot damage openness, they are not the enemies of openness, but they are the fecundity, the richness of openness. And in that moment one has a profound recognition of one's own existential goodness. Not goodness in the sense of a simple over-indulgence that's devoid of any aesthetic sensibility to difference, but goodness in the sense of revelation or epiphany of the manifestation out of openness, through openness, into openness of that which remains open in every stage of the movement.

This openness is the essence of what in Buddhism would be wisdom. And the arising of thoughts at that moment is compassion on both levels, both that that open awareness has compassion towards the thoughts, doesn't try to control them, but just in a tender way, enjoys them. But they are also compassion in the sense that they are the richness of openness, the gesture of openness to itself, openness in object mode speaking to openness in subject mode, without creating any differentiation between subject and object. And of course there are lots of

problems in speaking about this because I am not trying to install any dogmatic set-up so that then you know what it's all about and your take away that knowledge, that would be to take away the moment of possibility of opening into something new into something that you already knew, had in your pocket and were relying on.

So in a sense we need to let the words arise and dissolve again. Because the essence of this is a mood. Now clearly this is not just something apart, but with the meditation, by practising this and by becoming more at one just at ease in this moment, then as the meditation opens into the world, or rather, from the point of view of this meditational view, as the world arises from the meditation, because as the thoughts arise, gradually with the there arise images, and then one is in the world. But it isn't as if one has come from one's meditation into the world, the world arises as a manifestation of the meditation itself. And wisdom manifests into the world as an attitude of openness, not installing knowledge and prediction, but the ability to be aware of, to be interested the richness and plenitude of the world, and to respond with a gesture.

Compassion has an absence of fear to whatever is encountered

And compassion is there in the world with an absence of fear of whatever one encounters. Not because one has a kind of higher level knowledge which lets one know what is going to happen, say "It is all good. Everything is good" like a poker game where you put down the high card and wipe out the other, for that would be simply to return us to a dualistic discourse of control.

Rather compassion manifests as the ability to have oneself lost in response to the other. And one is safe to get lost because one knows that getting found is not a big deal. Because the place of finding is not somewhere else. The place of finding is just opening and moving through. Because we lose wisdom when we install knowledge, when we know what's going on. Because something happens, we're not sure what's going on, there's an anxiety, we retreat and then we advance "aha mmm yes"

[Gap as tape is changed]

...the possibility of being open without knowing, but very aware, very attentive to what is going on; fully embodied in the totality, which is not really a totality but an infinity of the becoming that we are all immersed in together, with a tenderness, with an ability to be touched and to touch in the world. And um clearly this is not a technique, this is not something that one can learn in a particular way and then apply. It's a mode of being, or rather a mode of becoming. It's not that one has to learn to do something, but rather one has to unlearn all the things that one knows how to do. And the advantage of meditation in doing this, as opposed to an interpersonal kind of therapy is that meditation itself is the interplay of wisdom and compassion in this sense, in that it deconstructs itself all the time. There is nothing to take away from meditation except meditation. It's simply something to enter into and to continue with as an openness to the world as it reveals itself.

I mean in one self we live our lives as crustaceans with this hard shell of our knowledge and our beliefs, our presentational self, our persona on the surface, and inside the unconscious, the confusion, the uncertainty, the self-hatred. And through meditation we can bring about a healthier interplay between the moments of structure and the moments to respond so that we become truly human with our soft bits on the outside, able to feel and be in touch with the most

sensitive affects of being connected in this mutual production of reality. So that we are also not relying on a fixed skeleton inside because a skeleton is an accretion of particles built up and built up instead of which we are supported by a dynamic movement of the interface with the other, that we are supported not by a skeleton inside ourselves, but by the rippling presence of the world in which we find ourselves.

An important part of wisdom or openness is to be open to the compassion of others to reveal to us who we are in the moment of our becoming someone with them. After all I mean if the Buddha is someone who is complete and perfect then we are always subjected to the Buddha's brilliance. We are always the slaves of the Buddha. If the Buddha didn't even need a cup of tea then how stupid and useless we would be. So part of wisdom is to have place in ourselves for the compassion of others, to be touched by others, to receive, rather than always to be in the defensive position of having to give.

Are any thoughts or questions?

[She say her husband has the problem that from time to time he open himself and he is very open but he cannot stand it very long because all the hatred what is then just confronting him overcoming him from the world around him from the world to which he opens when he is open. Because usually one will protect against it. It's just too much overwhelming him so from time to time he has to close again. And how one can help or say responsibility deal with this.]

These are two very different sense of open. I think you mean open in the sense of the crustacean when the oyster opens you can stab it very easily. So if we open with a little soft bit inside that's dangerous in the world. That's why we have to practise opening when there is nobody around with fresh lemon juice and some black pepper.! Clearly this is a very dangerous world we live in. People can behave badly and one needs to have an openness that is quite strong, but strong and soft at the same time. I mean as long as we are frightened of people we should be careful of people.

But to really not be frightened of people is really quite difficult. Often in manic depression when people go into a manic phase they become very open to everyone, they have no fear at all about people but everything burns up very quickly. I mean the main thing that nobody gives us is space. Everybody gives us their own ideas or their help. Everybody's throwing something into the pot all the time. And we're trying to get our pot empty and they're saying "No no have some of this it's really useful."

[She say how I can get strong when I have this openness but what kind of good practice there is to get strong also.]

I think in meditation there is a paradox really, that the mind gets stronger by dissolving. Because the mind is not like a muscle. The more you do your exercises the more the muscle builds up because the muscle is working with the dualism - stretch tight stretch tight... and that makes the muscle stronger. Now we can say "I have a body and I want to make my body stronger and so I go to the gym." And you can say "I have a mind. My mind is very weak. I'll go to assertion training or psychotherapy or study philosophy or study mathematics and give my mind lots of problems to do and then it will get stronger in some way."

But from the point of view that I've been setting out this evening this would be a false move because the Buddha said very clearly "all things are impermanent" and I think if we investigate we find that this is true. We build something up and it vanishes after a while. Because it's being

set really inside the language, or inside the notion of dualism and appropriation - "My mind. I want my mind to be stronger. I have a mind that's weak and I want to get some strength and to put it into my mind or to make it stronger." But what this principle from the Buddha's trying to say is that we don't have a mind, we don't have thoughts in the sense of a possession that I can say "This is my watch". I mean clearly we do have a mind in our ordinary sense and we can make our mind stronger or weaker by doing different things, but that kind of cause and effect construction which would generally be called a karmic movement creates an effect which exists in time for a while but it's a construct and after a while the basis, energy that went into the construct gets exhausted and the construct falls apart - it's impermanent.

Being in meditation and getting caught up in thoughts and relaxing and letting go of them, even thoughts that if we were to hold to them might make us powerful. For example if somebody has low self-esteem they might with therapy be able to change their negative self-belief into a positive one. "I am a worthwhile human being. I am entitled to have a fulfilling life" and with this new self-belief they could then go get a job, have a good relationship and things would go better. Clearly that's not a bad thing to do. Clearly that's a very creative movement for someone to make in their life.

However the focus of the Buddha's thinking is not on just one life, but on the infinity of time which is the background in which we take many lives, life after life after life. And it's because of the nature of this infinity of the mind that whatever we try to construct or bring together falls apart. So although there's nothing wrong with doing that it's simply putting a patch on a coat that's going to fall into pieces. Instead of trying to do things to oneself to build oneself up which would be to have a conversation with oneself in the dualistic mode, as if one was speaking to oneself to encourage oneself "No, I know I am not useless. My mother always put me down but I realise that was her stuff and now from my therapy I realise I'm okay and I do have some friends and I've got a job so I'm not so..." you know pushing it up - pulling it down - that kind of movement we can do that but it's very exhausting. After a while we get tired and then another negative belief comes up and we lose the whole thing.

"Just as in meditation we try to have an attitude of openness and tenderness to our thoughts, so we also need to be open to receive the tenderness of the world. Because it's the tenderness of the world that supports us. If we have to do it all ourselves, as if we were acting against the world, we will get exhausted. But real strength arises through the world moving through us. We are enworlded, we are part of the world and that is our strength. Our thoughts come, not as our thoughts, but as the thoughts of the world passing through us. And in that moment of non-duality all the strength, all the richness that we need, is there.

I think maybe we should have some tenderness on ourselves and go outside now and enjoy a little bit of fresh air. Thank you all for coming, and that's it.

End.