
The Roots of Happiness

WITH JAMES LOW

Evening Public Talk

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Excerpts

...The Buddha said that suffering arises from attachment. Attachment is to move things from the past into the present and into the future. That is to say, in the moment of our attachment we forget there is no truth to any object, no inherent reality to any object. The seasons change, languages change, national boundaries change, the body changes, thoughts and feelings change. Suffering arises because we resist being with how things are.

... We are like children who spend the morning building a sandcastle on the edge of the sea and then when they come back from lunch are very unhappy because the sea has washed their castle away. Everything we do is only sand castles. It is an absolute fantasy to imagine it is more than that. That doesn't mean we shouldn't build sandcastles but we can understand everything in the manner of a dream, in the manner of an illusion. It is like the reflection of the moon on water...

... The energy of the mind is ceaseless and we can't grasp any moment of our experience. We are like a little mouse in a cage, on one of those wheels going round and round and round. The more the mouse tries to get somewhere, the more it stays in the same place. There is nowhere to get to. " But if I am not making something of my life what will happen to me? It will all fall apart and then where will I be? It is all up to me, if I don't take care of me who is going to do it?"

...the function of meditation is to enter into this ceaseless flow of alive experience. It is not about controlling or improving or getting rid of things but of finding ones balance, like a surfer and staying with the waves of experience as they ride out again and again... In all situations just stay present in the centre of them not losing our balance, allowing whatever arises to arise, confident that it will pass. In that way, one is working with the basic teachings of the Buddha...

... What is asleep is not the nature of the mind but the content of the mind. When a thought arises in the mind and we believe the thought, who is the one who believes the thought? If you observe yourself, you start to see how a thought believes a thought – a thought follows a thought, follows a thought. That is what samsara is: you are caught up in thoughts...

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This evening talk will be a very brief overview of the way in which you might get a sense of meditation both generally in the Tibetan tradition and also with particularity to dzogchen meditation. For those who would like to take this into the practice we meet together tomorrow morning and will continue over the next few days. Thus, tonight we are just talking about it and from tomorrow we will start to experience it more.

The nature of suffering

Clearly, suffering is something that we all experience from time to time. Difficulties arise: either we don't get what we want or we get what we don't want. This would indicate that the basic structure of this suffering is dualistic. That is to say, *I*, as a subject, encounter *objects* in the world but also objects in myself, and as these impact onto me, feelings of pleasure and displeasure arise and pass. I cannot control what happens to me from the outside world and often it is quite difficult to control what is happening from the inside as well.

I think one of the reasons people get drawn to meditation is that they are a little bit bored – maybe life is not so bad. You then start to meditate and realise that your mind is a mess; that you have no control at all over the thoughts and feelings that arise. Then you have something new to worry about. However, as with many things in life it has to get worse before it gets better.

One of the things that Buddha Shakyamuni pointed out is that we live our lives in a kind of dream; we are asleep inside sets of assumptions. We often imagine, for example, that we are going to live forever or that we won't get sick or that life will work out fine. But then these assumptions run into reality. They make contact with how life actually is and we get an upset and disturbed because we can't stay in our dream any longer as it is not allowing us to make sense of what is happening. Thus, one of the very first things that the Buddha taught was about the nature of

suffering; the fact that we experience old age sickness and death. That is to say, no matter how often you go to the gymnasium and do lots of exercise, no matter how healthy the food is you eat, sooner or later you will get sick and die. No matter how much success you have in relationships when you are young, sooner or later you get old and wrinkled and the sexual organs won't work so well – life is like that. That is to say, whatever we put our energy into, whatever kind of structures we create for ourselves they exist just for a while. If we try to create happiness through balancing subject and object, that is to say through creating the perfect environment around us in order to stabilise our state, we will find that no matter how much energy we put into that, it will always fail because everything is changing.

Our ego, our individual personal self, how we define ourselves, this identity, desires to reinforce itself, to reassure itself that it can continue in its own condition for a very long time. This sense that we have of ourselves, our basic identity, who we are, is built up of memories of the past and hopes of the future. We develop a sense of knowing who we are, what we like and what we don't like. We try to stabilise the environment around us so that we get more of what we want and less of what we don't want. However, we don't really have the power to maintain this. Thus, the first understanding from the Buddha is that if you put all your energy outside into the environment in attempt to create a perfect field of operation for yourself this will be a false direction, this is a cul-de-sac. That is not because it would be better if only we tried harder but that something always happens. The more we can see that, instead of imagining that our energy can be focused on stabilising a structure, the more we can attend to the *process* of existence.

[We do not exist apart from the world](#)

Here we are in this environment together and our existence is based on breathing in and out. The breath is very important in meditation for many reasons. One of the key things about it is that we want it to continue – stopping breathing is not a good idea. Breathing is the direct manifestation of our relationship with the world. When we breathe in, the air of the world comes into us and mixes with our blood stream, and when we breathe out into the world aspects of ourselves flow out; molecules that were once part of us flow out into the world. However, when we sit inside our own head, inside our own sense of *this is me* then we can have the sense *I am* breathing in and out. Actually, of course, breathing in and out is what occurs because we are part of the world; we don't have a choice whether we are part of the world. We don't have a separate, private, territory inside ourselves. Even if we were to go to a very cheap domestic shop and buy some cling film for 1 euro and wrap ourselves completely up in it we would start to get pretty sick.

If we were really to try to cut ourselves off from the world we would die. That is to say, this body is part of the world. Our sense organs, operating through this body, are part of the world. And yet, somehow, we create this fantasy that *we* exist *apart* from the world and that we are making *our* important decisions about how we will enter into the world. For example, we think, “*Oh, what will I eat?*” That is a nice thing to think about but we have to eat something otherwise we will die. That is to say, the freedom of choice is hovering on the fact that we live in a culture where there is quite a lot of food. When we feel really hungry we are quite happy to eat most things because the body, the stomach, is saying, “*Take something from the world, put it through the hole in your face and send it down here.*” That is the way in which we are completely part of what is going on. However, one of the aspects of consciousness is that we start to run meta-narratives, higher order narratives, fancy story lines about our relationship with the world and with ourselves. And if we live in these stories we develop a kind of barrier to the immediate vitality of experiencing the process of existence as it unfolds moment-by-moment.

The answer does not lie in trying to remove the object

Some of you will be familiar with the practices of meditation; for example, trying to calm the mind by maintaining a focus on the breath or on some external object. This is a very simple request to make of oneself: just sit very quietly and observe your breath going in and out. But this is *much too* boring for our wonderful minds, because the mind would rather elaborate grand plans and think about the past which has already gone, and the future which hasn't yet come. This rapid elaboration of concepts and ideas, mixed with hopes and fears, seems to be an expression of intelligence and creativity, and yet, we can't just simply focus on our breath. Clearly, our intelligence and creativity, which are an expression of our vitality and our interest in what is going on – which in that sense are very positive – carry with them a shadow side wherein we find it very difficult to be still. And now, modern technology brings us many new methods of being more busy and more frequently interrupted in the course of whatever it is we are doing. Therefore, one of the functions of meditation is to help us just to balance ourselves again by becoming aware of stillness.

In some buddhist traditions this is integrated with the path of renunciation. And from this point of view we can see that the reason we are disturbed is because there are so many disturbing objects in the world. Therefore, if I simplify my life, my mind will also become simple. For example, I might decide to give up my work and become a monk or a nun and then I can live in a protected environment and not have to travel around in the city and see all these disturbing

people. The main exciting thing will be when it is time to have my head shaved again. Clearly, I should not eat things like garlic, ginger and onions because they are all hot foods and will stimulate me so I should eat very bland, boring food.

However, it is very difficult to follow this path fully because if you do a long retreat by yourself in a room and there is very little stimulus going on then you will find some way to create some amusement for yourself. For example, when I lived in India I did a long retreat up in the mountains in a little house by myself, and I couldn't go out of the house. I wasn't even supposed to look out of the windows. Every day I would do some offerings and in order to do these offerings I had bought a bag of boiled sweets. And when I got bored of the meditation I would open up the bag of sweets, lay them in a row and make little patterns with them, and then I would pack them away again. The mind will be able to fascinate itself with anything.

However, the answer does not lie in trying to remove the object. Rather, we have to start to look directly at who is the one who is so full of ideas? What is this mind itself which is always giving rise to so many amazing hopes and fears? When we look at our mind we start to see that the contents of our experience and the one who is experiencing them sometimes look the same and sometimes look different. For example, you might be singing a song and you might be fully in what you are singing so that in that moment you feel yourself to be at one with the sound that is coming out of your mouth. That is to say, you are singing and you are the song that is being sung and there is no difference between these two. However, sometimes we may feel a bit persecuted by negative thoughts; something is arising in our mind and we are giving ourselves a hard time and can't find a way to stop it – we seem to be just grinding and grinding on ourselves. In that way, it appears that the thoughts are coming at us. These are the two main extremes that we experience in mental functioning: one of mental fusion and the other of rapid movement which is either coming towards us or moving away from us.

Very often when people have troubles they try to change themselves; they want to develop themselves, they want to make things better. And the Buddha said that all beings everywhere want to be happy but spend their time doing exactly that which won't make them happy. That is because we try to apply our energy to a situation without understanding the structure of the situation. For example, a nail and a screw are similar in many ways but they are also rather different: a nail you hit with a hammer and a screw you turn with a screwdriver. That is to say, the nature of the object that we are dealing with should determine how we react towards it. Now, clearly, we are really quite good at this in terms of external functions. We learn to change a wheel on a bicycle and to do all sorts of things around the house. However, in terms of the

structure of our mind, we are usually quite hopeless. When we look out through our eyes we see a world of shapes and colours, and the objects we encounter have a precision, a specificity to them that allows us to rapidly think, *"How will I approach this?"* However, thoughts, feelings and sensations are very different; they are insistent and somehow intangible. Thus, all the time we are being moved by thoughts and feelings. For example, we walk down the street and see something we like, we want to stop and look in the window of a shop at something. Maybe you see a nice pair of shoes and think, *"Where can I wear these shoes? They look gorgeous but they would be very painful to wear. Do I really want to suffer just to make my bum look just a little bit bigger?"* Thus, we can think about objects, where they come from, who has made them, what their qualities are, but we don't know where these thoughts themselves are coming from.

Observing the ground of all thoughts

All the time we are connected to objects in the world which are processed through our veil of interpretation, judgement and assumption, but we don't examine where these assumptions come from. And if we do start to think about our assumptions we are probably more likely to do it in terms of a historical frame, which of course has been encouraged very much in our culture by the development of psychotherapy. Thus, we might understand that we have this kind of thought because our mother used to behave in certain manner towards us; so the cause of the thought that we have at this moment was generated ten, twenty, thirty or forty years ago. And very reassuringly it is someone else's fault.

However, the view in meditation is very different. We want to try to see immediately, in the moment, the arising of the thought, the arising of the sensation, so that we can observe simultaneously the ground of the thought and the thought itself. Without interfering with the existence of the thought, the form, we hold it inseparable from its ground which is emptiness. That is to say, instead of trying to step back from our thoughts and put bad thoughts on one side and not go there, and put good thoughts on the other side and try to go there, we want to observe the arising of good thoughts and bad thoughts. And we can see as we practice how the good thought is in itself is not different from how the bad thought is in itself.

For example, if you watch television, every now and then you see something that is good and it holds your attention, and then the adverts come on and you want to switch it off. When you sat down at first you switched on the television but before you did that there was just a piece of glass in front of you. When you switch it on there is a process whereby different patterns of picture and sound are created through messages sent via an electrical patterning. That is to say, the

actual structure of the image arising on the television is the same for the 'terrible' adverts as it is for the 'very good' program. It is we ourselves who put the attribution onto what is in front of us. What we are actually seeing are moving points of light. If we understand that structure then we see that in watching the television we are co-creating our reality. That is to say, our world is participative. We move towards the world just as much as the world is moving towards us. We move towards the world with our prejudices: *"I like this" "I don't like that." "This is good for me." "This is not good for me."* In that way, we are not actually very open. We are not generous in our welcome towards the world. However what is coming towards us is light and sound.

A reflection on tantric meditation

Everything that we see, somebody will like and somebody else won't. I don't think it would be too difficult to go out on the street and find some good citizen of this town who, if you brought into this room, would say, "What nonsense! What do you need all these funny oriental things for? Don't we have a good German culture?" That is to say, they would be seeing through the lens of their particular assumption. In the same way, if you become a buddhist and you come into a room like this you become very fascinated by the paintings and photographs; they seem to have a lot of meaning. You may look at a photograph and say, *"Oh that is the new Karmapa, he is really good, he is like 'this' and 'that'."* And in that way you think that the information you are revealing is telling you something about the photograph, but in fact you are just giving an ex-ray of yourself. That is to say, you are showing other people what *your* particular likes and dislikes are. Thus, as long as we are caught up in a busy consciousness we will never see the object as it is. And this, of course, is a central idea in european philosophy as well, particularly in Kant's notion of the illusive nature of the *ding-an-sich*. That is to say, whatever is there is only an interpretation; you can never get the thing-in-itself because the interpretation always gets in the way.

This, then, gives rise to two main moves. One, as I was describing before, is trying to simplify the world wherein there is a kind of restraint; the idea of being able to hold yourself in, hold the breath in and stop thought so that the world reveals itself in its simple naked form. The other move is the practice that we have in tantra where we accept the dynamic creative nature of thought and imagination, and direct it in a structured way. Instead of trying to block it we direct and channel it so that instead of saying, *"Hello, I am James,"* we say, *"Hello, I am Chenrezig."* And the more you say, *"Hello, I am Chenrezig,"* the more you start to feel like Chenrezig. You then you go and have a chat with a friend and the way you talk means you start to feel: *"Hello, I am James."*

And then you start to see, *"Oh, I become James by the practice of James-ing."* And then we have to review what the benefits of 'James-ing' are as opposed to the benefits of 'Chenrezig-ing.' If one becomes Padmasambhava or Chenrezig or Tara, one stays with an immediate awareness of form and emptiness and starts to experience oneself as light and luminous. One connects oneself with all the Buddhas through the movement of rays of light going in and out, and with all sentient beings. One experiences the integration of the whole world into the mandala of the deity. This means that when you walk down the street everyone you see is Tara or Chenrezig or Padmasambhava. Therefore, when you meet someone for the first time, although you say *"Hello"*, actually, you know who they are: *"Nothing that you tell me about you will convince me that you are not Tara. You can talk and talk and talk but I will know you are Tara."* That makes life very easy because then you start to hear whatever they are saying is just a flow of mantra. That is to say, you hear it as sound and emptiness (I will say something about emptiness shortly) and this means you are not taking them too seriously. Now, from the point of view of the ego, it is a terrible insult not to be taken seriously. But from the point of view of the possibility of awakening, it is wonderful.

When children are relaxed and happy and playing, they don't take themselves too seriously. The games can change quite quickly: they can be a pirate and when that gets boring they can become superman. That is because these are all imaginable possible identities. However, when they are told that it is time to go to bed it is not so easy because their identity, the freedom and flow of the imagination, is suddenly encountering power; someone is determining of who they are. What is required, then, in tantra is to have the quality of meditation that won't be intimidated by power. That is to say, all the painful, frightening things in the world, the causes of anxiety, depression, fear and dread also have to be understood as empty. If everything is gorgeous when it's nice and easy and we are all smiling and laughing and *"It's 'so nice to be here'"*, but when bad things happen it's, *"Ah, this is terrible, how can this be happening to me,"* then we just have a kind of summertime dharma practice with flowers, happiness and sitting on the beach. When tears come, when winter comes with the cold winds then what shall we do? Then we need to have some wrathful deity practice so that whatever in this world is going to kick our ass, we can kick its ass.

Emptiness: the ground of *all* phenomena is insubstantial

Where does this power arise from? It arises from emptiness. Emptiness is the experience that the ground of all phenomena is insubstantial. The objects of our perception, our own bodies;

everything that we experience is not existing in itself as a separate object. Rather, vectors or movements of energy come together to create particular moments which are revealed to us through our participation with them. For example, in front of me there are some flowers. Now, these flowers are already on the way to death because somebody has cut their neck. However, the room is quite warm so hopefully they will open. If you were to put the flowers in the freezer they wouldn't open but if you keep them in a warm room like this they are likely to open. We think that the flower is just opening, but it is not opening by itself out of itself. The opening of the flower is inseparable from the warmth of the room, the vase which has water in it and also the fact that we are able to see the flower. Without our seeing it, would the flower be blooming? We will never know. If you are not there you don't get it. Thus, in this way we can see that subject and object come together.

What is object? Object is a process. What is subject? Subject is a process. This is impermanence. Impermanence means that everything one perceives inside, outside, what looks like me, what looks like not me, is unfolding through time. That is to say, there is no inherent, deeply embedded, true self-defining nature to any phenomena. However, you might say, "Well, here is a bowl and this bowl is made of metal and it doesn't look like it is changing. And if we come back tomorrow the bowl will be pretty much the same bowl." That is to say, it seems to be just a bowl. And on the level of abstraction it is *just a bowl*. Bowl is a word, it is a concept. We can say bowl on Monday and say bowl on Friday. That is to say, we apply this constant word, concept, to an object and, lo and behold, we magically have a constant object – "This is a bowl." It is not a frog. It is not the top of the Buddha's head. It is a bowl. But is it?

If we look at it just now it shows itself; we see something. What do we see? We see colour and shape. What determines the colour? Is the colour of the bowl inherent in the bowl? No, it depends on the light. The bowl, as it reveals itself is always changing because the light in the room changes. Even when you have electric light people move about and there are slight shadows that come and go. Thus, the only stable thing about the bowl is its name. However, the name is not in the bowl but is something that *we* stick onto the bowl. This is the same for everything. You maybe have friends or family or children and you read them with their name. Generally speaking, if someone is John on Monday they are John on Friday. But how they are will be different. The immediacy of existence, what we get moment-by-moment is ungraspable. It reveals itself as a rainbow does in the sky; something is there and yet you can't catch it.

However, when we spend a lot of time in our heads, in the domain of conceptual thought, we construct a sense of real, true and enduring objects. For example, we may have done something

in our life that we regret and every time something happens that reminds us of that we think, "*Oh god, how could I have done that?*" The memory arises, we fuse into it and it becomes filled up with emotion and seems to be almost the same as the original moment. What is creating this? It is a flow of thoughts; although, each thought is arising and passing. As soon as soon as we sit, not necessarily meditating, but even just sitting on a chair at home, thoughts are coming and coming. And these thoughts are saying, "*We tell the truth. Things are real and you are real. Trust me.*" And then they are gone. And then the next one comes and says, "*Trust me.*" Thoughts are very unreliable. This is a very important thing to observe for ourselves: how is it that all the seriousness, all the heaviness, the depressed and anxious feelings we have, the hopes and fears, which seem so necessary, so powerful, so determining, our in fact impermanent?

The Buddha said that suffering arises from attachment. Attachment is to move things from the past into the present and into the future. That is to say, in the moment of our attachment we forget there is no truth to any object, no inherent reality to any object. That is to say, as the Buddha explained, all phenomena are impermanent, nothing is stable. The seasons change, languages change, national boundaries change, the body changes, thoughts and feelings change. Suffering arises because we resist being with how things are. We are like children who spend the morning building a sandcastle on the edge of the sea and then when they come back from lunch are very unhappy because the sea has washed their castle away. Everything we do is only sand castles. It is an absolute fantasy to imagine it is more than that. That doesn't mean we shouldn't build sandcastles but we *can* understand everything in the manner of a dream, in the manner of an illusion. It is like the reflection of the moon on water.

Sandcastles collapse back into sand. There is no difference between the sand and the sand castle. Due to the momentary shaping something *appears* to be there, a wonderful palace, a rock, a person. And yet, factors come and change: the sea comes in or nasty children come and jump on your sandcastle and it is just sand again. And in this we can see how easy it is to get disheartened: we fall in love with our sandcastle, it becomes very important for us and we want it to survive. However, it does not have the basis for survival. This is not a punishment; it is just how things are. So how to build sandcastles, know they are sandcastles and allow them to dissolve back into the sand?

Traditionally, in mahayana buddhism, this is understood as the integration of wisdom and compassion. For the sake of being in the world with others we build sandcastles. Understanding that the sandcastle is only sand is wisdom. And through that we can help other beings to recognise that it is only sandcastles. In that way there is a universal awakening to the immediacy,

the glowing presence of form and emptiness. There is form which is the realm of compassion, and there is emptiness which is the realm of wisdom. And these two are inseparable. And in that way, you can participate in an ordinary life, carrying on your work, being with friends and family, with each gesture that you make of your body, speech, and what arises in your mind, being the ceaseless flow of compassion arising from a source that is never tired or drained.

Entering into the ceaseless flow of alive experience

It is through the practice of tantra that we come to see that the *flow* of existence is itself powerful in the immediacy of its presentation. That is to say, the intensity of experience is created by just the presencing of the thoughts and feelings as they arise; there is no need for any extra solidity inside. It is like the power of the sea: the waves are moving and that is their power. The power is in the movement not in the solidity. For example, in this painting here of the Buddha we can see he is surrounded by whirling balls of light and rays of light are streaming out of him. This is a way of showing the vibrancy moment-by-moment, the revelation of what is here. In this very moment everything you see is alive: the walls are alive, the ceiling is alive. It is not alive as a person but is vibrant and radiant and part of an ongoing field of participation.

Thus, the function of meditation is to enter into this ceaseless flow of alive experience. It is not about controlling or improving or getting rid of things but of finding ones balance like a surfer and staying with the waves of experience as they ride out again and again. This is the practice of the higher tantras but also the practice of mahamudra and dzogchen. That is to say, we are not collapsing into the object nor holding back somehow inside ourselves, apart from things, but just keeping our pulse, keeping our line moment-by-moment in the endless swaying of expanding and contracting. That is to say, sometimes we feel light and exuberant and want to be chatting and very social, sometimes we want to be quieter and just in ourselves, sometimes we feel warm, happy and radiant or sometimes we might feel depressed and hopeless. In all these situations we just stay present in the centre of them not losing our balance, allowing whatever arises to arise, confident that it will pass. In that way, one is working with the basic teachings of the Buddha.

We are better off naked

Here the function of meditation is not to achieve something new and different. Rather, it is to drop the illusion which operates as a veil, a screen, to what is actually there and which has always been there. The buddha nature, the ground nature of the dharmadhatu is unchanging. It is the constant stream of our own intoxicated self-referential fantasy which acts as a veil to the one who

is generating the veil. It is like a child who believes they are Spiderman and forgets they are *playing* at being Spiderman and starts to imagine that they really have these powers. If they don't remember that they also have to eat all their food then there is a problem; maybe Spiderman eats only chocolate but little Jonnie has to eat everything on the plate. That is to say, it is our own creativity which is the root of nirvana and the root of samsara.

Sometimes it is presented that we have to improve ourselves in order to get into nirvana because nirvana is like *us plus something else* – the bits we don't have. But actually nirvana is samsara-minus. That is to say, you have to subtract not add. That is what makes this kind of practice different: the task is to drop, to let go and to trust that you are better off naked. The founding Buddha in the lineage of dzogchen is Kuntu Zangpo with his consort Kuntu Zangmo, and he is completely naked. He has no ornaments and he has everything. And it is important in the practice to have the direct experience of the nakedness of one's own existence and then you can wear whatever clothes you like on top as gestures of compassion.