

Openness and Clarity

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"If you want to have freedom to understand the beautiful openness of your nature, and the freedom to relate freely without fear and with love and compassion to others, then all you have to do is recognise the dynamic nature of your existence and see that this is the potential of openness."



"All experience is impermanent. What we call 'I, me, myself' is experience and not essence. Our individual ego consciousness – our sense of self – is experience; it is not essence. Awareness is our noetic capacity to be open to whatever is manifesting. The non-duality of this open awareness and the clarity of ever changing experience is the heart of the path of dzogchen."



Headings

Like writing on water	3
The fantasy of reliability	4
We are patterns of energy	5
Advice for meditators	6
Finding the mood	7

It's a pleasure to be here and we have a little time this evening to look at the relation between openness and clarity. I'd like to show how the understanding of these two aspects from the tradition of dzogchen is helpful in all aspects of our existence. Because they are not aspirational, openness and clarity are not things one is aiming to achieve because they are already in play.

The openness of our situation is revealed to us by the way in which we are moment by moment becoming different. Whenever our situation seems to be closed it is because we are engaged in the activity of closing. This activity of closing is, however, simply creating an illusion of separate spaces.

For example, a farmer puts a fence around a field in order to stop the livestock from wandering. The ground on each side of the fence is the same, but the farmer has ownership of what is inside and not what is outside the fence. According to the law and the conventions of ownership there is a difference between what is in the field and what is not. The farmer has ownership of the field but that ownership is merely conventional. Before the farmer was born the field belonged to someone else, and when the farmer dies or sells up, it will belong to someone else. However when the farmer asserts to his neighbouring farmer who owns the next field, "*Hey, don't let your cow come into my field!*" He is asserting there is an essence to this field and that it is mingled with his essence. That is to say, 'I am somebody. I exist. This is my field and you cannot separate me from my field.'

We have exactly the same relationship with our body. Our body is composed of atoms and molecules that were around long before we were conceived. When our parents had sex and conception occurred our very first activity was theft – because the buddhist tradition doesn't talk about stealing, it talks about taking what is not given. In the process of the foetus developing it's taking a lot of stuff from the environment, making itself out of that which it is not.

Everything that we have belongs to the world; it only conventionally belongs to us for a while. Our bodies will die. We wear out our shoes and throw them away. We wear out our toothbrush and throw it away. In social situations we may find we don't want to hang out with our old friends so much and we make new friends. In this way, our sense of being an individual — somebody who exists in and of oneself — is a concept which disguises our actual relationship with the environment. Therefore, when we seal ourselves into this particular definition of our identity, the basis of it is conceptualisation. We know that we exist in a particular way because of how we think about what is happening. For example, when we have a pain we think this is 'my pain' and I have to do something about it. The pain wasn't there previously but it came due to certain causes and conditions and if we are lucky this pain will go after a while, but while it's here it's my pain.

Into the space of hospitality, which is our own being, momentary events are arising, some of which are being taken up as being 'I, me, myself', and some are regarded as not me. Maybe it belongs to 'you' or is just stuff out there in the world, but what primarily interests me is the fact that it's 'not me'.

Everything around us is made up of the same basic building blocks, whether we see it in terms of a western reading of atoms, molecules or elements and so on, or in terms of the buddhist notion of the five elements. These building blocks are pervasive; they are everywhere, and we are patternings of these building blocks. We are not existing out of some private factory, or some private source, or on some private basis. When we die, and if our body is put into the ground, it gradually decomposes and worms come into it and after some hundred years there's nothing much left to find. So, the ground or the basis of our existence is open and is shared with everything and the point of separation is merely conventional and conceptual.

On this level we are talking about what can be called 'the realm of the object' because although we say, "*This is my body*", my body also exists for me as an object. We look at our toes and decide whether we need to cut our nails or not. Our body is something we have to manage; it is other yet it is also self, and our relationship with this body is changing all the time.

It's the same with our speech: sometimes we are clear about what we want to say – we have an intention and we hear ourselves saying what we intended to say –but a lot of the time we find ourselves saying something, the words come out and through us and we might be surprised or shocked or even sad or ashamed of what has come out of our mouth. Now where does that come from? We might say it's based on childhood experience and on the internalised patterning of our subjectivity, but this still doesn't give us much control over it. We may see it as the unconscious, as described by Freud and in his conceptualisation the unconscious has a life of its own, is forever 'other' and it will never be controlled or owned by the ego self. So, my words are mine because I say them, but I might be surprised by what I'm saying and so my words are both self and other.

Likewise with our thoughts and feelings. We are sitting quietly in meditation and strange thoughts arise. It is 'my mind' and "*I'm going to direct my mind because I'm in charge.*" I focus my attention on my breath, but

then I find I am doing something else. Why? Because my thoughts are not mine. The thoughts have a life of their own in my mind. What are they doing in there? Let's get rid of them. Actually, that is quite hard to do because a thought, which feels foreign or strange at one moment, can feel exactly me at another moment. The difference is the identification. If I believe that this thought really expresses what I'm about and who I am then by merging with the thought, the thought gives me myself, and that is very strange.

Who is the one who does the merging? The one who does the merging is created by the merging. But that doesn't make sense. How can the result be the cause? We have this endless progression in which something which seems to be the cause is also the effect. Just like *Slinky*, this children's toy that goes down the stairs by itself. On one step one end is the top, and then on the next step it's the bottom...

Sometimes our experience is that a thought is just coming into our head, but at another time a thought seems to be expressing some deep essence of ourselves. By this we can see that thoughts are both self and other; they don't have any particular or essential connection with ourselves. Thoughts are contingently, situationally essential by my act of taking them to be my essence.

I might have a thought about a place I used to go to in Scotland as a child, and think, "*Oh, that's the best place in the whole world.*" I was last there about eight years ago, and before that maybe twenty years ago, so in fact it is '*the best place in the world*' that I seldom go to! It's a concept that brings into it all kinds of emotions, memories of running on the beach and so on. Thinking, "*Yeah, that's a great place...*" doesn't make the body go there. In that way we can see that what seems to be really true and basic about ourselves arises due to causes and conditions. It may or may not impact our behaviour and even if it does, it won't last for long.

All of this is a way of exploring how our body, our voice, our mind – the constituents of our existence – are in fact dynamic. Not only are they dynamic but they are inseparable from the entire field of arising. We walk along the street – something catches our eye – some thoughts and memories start to play around. In that moment I am thinking about this, something came as it were from outside me, and is now creating this movement inside me. The outside and inside are not two separate realms. They arise for us as the experience which pervades the openness of our awareness. This is our life in this moment. And moment by moment as our bodies move and as we see from different positions, the world reveals itself in different ways.

Like writing on water

Normally we rest inside a narrative which tells us that I, from inside myself, am experiencing this stuff which is out there. But this is an interpretation because actually what I have as my life is *you*, at this moment; in as much as you are occurring for me, this is all I have. Our life *is* experience.

Conceptually, my life involves things like having the key to my front door: my keys, my flat, my books, my bed ... mine. But before I was living in the flat someone else was living there. My shoes, books, and bedding I got from a shop, it's only conventionally mine. If I am out and a thief comes into the flat they are not going to be very concerned with the fact that I think it's *my* book, because they are able to see that it is *a* book... it is *a* wallet ... it is *a* laptop. As they put it into their bag it becomes *their* book, *their* wallet, *their* laptop.

Ownership is just on the surface of life, described in the tradition as being like writing on water. With our mental activity we draw lines that mark out our own private existence but this is just a play of the mind. It doesn't establish anything in truth because as we can see all across the world, there are wars. People are living in a house and then suddenly they have to flee as refugees because somebody is shelling their house and they can no longer live there.

All our situations are held in place by the movement of cause and effect. Our actual capacity to keep control over these forces is not great. We imagine we are in charge of ourselves but then we get a pain and we go to the doctor who says:

— *Oh, I have some bad news for you. You have a flat, you have shoes, that's all good, but now you have cancer.*

— *But I don't want to have that.*

— *Well, sorry, you've got it."*

— *It should be up to me to decide what I get. I choose my own shoes and my own shirts. I don't have to wear clothes other people buy me. I didn't choose to have cancer, so why have I got it?'*

Things are not quite the way we think they are. The reason we have shoes and flats is because at this time we are living in the year 2013. In this same place, Berlin, in the year 1944 things were a bit different. That's all history now but at that time many people were very frightened about what was happening. Berlin was a dangerous place. Now Berlin is quite a safe and an increasingly wealthy place. However the wealth and security of Berlin is not guaranteed; there is no essence of Berlin that says everybody in the city will always have food in their mouth.

The fantasy of reliability

Due to causes and conditions we are alive at a time when we have peace, when the economy is not too bad and the government is not too crazy. None of these factors are self-existing; they are all open to change. We look around the world and we see that countries which once were peaceful have now become full of war and misery. This is because you can't draw a circle around a country and protect its borders, nor can we do it around our body or mind because it is open.

If we try to close what is open we are in bad faith with the actuality of our existence. We live in the fantasy of agency, of being able to make things happen on our terms. Our lives are neither under our control in the palm of our hand, nor are they completely out of our control. The field of experience which is our existence – our becoming ourselves moment by moment with the environment around us – is a dynamic unfolding. The non-duality of self and other bring us into this ever-changing repatterning of ourselves.

As we know, making family or work relationships function is difficult and requires all the people involved to participate since they require care and attention. The more we feel entitled to express our individuality and the more traditional social rules which constrain and direct us decline, the greater our responsibility to attend to what is going on since for self and other to be in the same place at the same time in the same rhythm, requires a lot of awareness.

We do, however, have this sense of living inside ourselves. We have our history, our memories, our hopes and fears, our patterns of responding, some of which we are conscious of but many of which we are not conscious. We think it's okay and normal just to be how we are but then we find we bump into someone else and they are a bit shocked. *"So, what's wrong with me being me?"* Nothing – if you live on a desert island, but if you are going to be close to me please take these sharp spikes off your skin! Hugging a hedgehog is not the most comfortable activity in the world!

We have to adapt ourselves for the other. But why should I? Why can't I be me? Because we are not anything. When we get into a quarrel with people at work about how something should proceed, does it matter? The next day ... the next year ... it doesn't matter at all. But some sense of being under attack has arisen for us. We freeze and go rigid and now feel we have to defend our position. *"I wouldn't be me if I did what you're suggesting."* We all know this feeling. It's as if the other person is asking us to betray ourselves. However, if they are not a total demon they are suggesting something that they can do. They have two arms, two legs, one nose, maybe they are proposing something human beings can do. *"I don't care what other human beings do. I don't do that! And the reason I don't do it is because I am me."*

It's amazing what happens to us when we get into that situation. Our breathing changes and tends to become tight and shallow...our skin tension changes...our pulse changes. Our capacity to think about the

situation is changing because I am under attack by the suggestion that I should do something that other people do. From the buddhist point of view this really points to the heart of all the difficulties we get. We imagine that we are this individual – the one who is undividable, something which can't be cut up. I speak with my voice and I tell you what is true for me but we also have what is called hypocrisy because what we say with full conviction today is not necessarily what we will say or do tomorrow.

In that way we can see that the structure of the self is essentially histrionic; it is just wind. When we are born we have hidden inside of us millions and millions of balloons and each balloon is our potential identity under certain circumstances, and when the hot air goes into a particular balloon we think, *"This is me. I am this and nothing else. Don't speak to me about what I said yesterday. I am telling you now what is true today!"* In that way we recognise that our openness is shown to us through our unreliability, and the reason that unreliability seems like a negative quality is because we have a *fantasy* that we should be reliable.

We have a fantasy that we should know who we are – how we are going to be – and that if we just can make a strong decision then that will be able to carry us through the course of our life. But if we ease ourselves out of this fantasy then the incredible diversity in all the forms of our self-presentation is actually our richness, our creativity and our imagination, our capacity to respond and participate as part of the unfolding field. Therefore, the very labile or changing quality which seems to undermine us and betray any simple definition of us being who we say we are, is actually the truth or the showing of the fact that we are revealed through how we participate in the world. None of the potential patternings of our existence is essentially true or fundamentally definitive, and so when we cleave to something or grasp at it as being an expression of a definitive essence we are telling ourselves a lie.

The root nature of our being or our presence, our awareness, is emptiness. Or, to put it another way, we are not a thing. We are a potential which manifests as part of the unimaginable, unmeasurable complexity of the field of experience, which is why, if we want projects of any kind to be successful, we have to be careful and attuned. All that we have is fragile, so we need to be respectful of our own dignity and the dignity of others given that the fundamental nature is non-dual, is not made of separated entities.

We are patterns of energy

We are patterns of energy arising in a field of energetic manifestation, which is to say, all other beings. If we want to practise wisdom and compassion and have an ethical life, we have to stay attentive to the field as it shows itself rather than imagining that we can go into our own thoughts and work out the ideal solution.

Here we have a crossroads situation. On the one hand, we can try to maintain the patterning of our existence by controlling the factors around us: we take up a position and we attempt to maintain it. This requires a lot of work, and it means that circumstances become our enemy because the world is always washing away at the foundations of our project. This is why what Buddhist calls samsara, or cyclical existence, is permeated by paranoia. Other people seem to be out to get us. We can't trust them. They let us down. Indeed, they do; it's not an illusion, it really happens. People are full of shit. Also, they think we are full of shit, which is slightly more surprising! We are unreliable, therefore, if we want something to go ahead we have to be there to keep making it work and that requires participation, flexibility, and the willingness to accommodate the movement of the situation. This is very different from defending a position.

From this particular buddhist point of view, flexibility is much more important than definition, that is to say, definition is always definition of transient patterns. But when we believe in our definition it seems to identify a truly existing essence or fundamental basis for continuity of something which is in the world or in ourselves. I think we know from our own lives how this can lead to a lot of conflict and unhappiness because once we take up our position something is at stake: our dignity. I have to protect what I have said because it's an expression of 'me'.

We are coming up to the one-hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. Life was very different in Europe before that war. It was the beginning of large scale industrial slaughter, and it came

about because people took up positions. Groups were telling each other what they could or could not do. There is, however, a limit to diplomacy since forcing other people to do things is very hard nor is it a very successful strategy.

But if I conceptualise the other as truly other, and organise all the factors of the world on a hierarchical axis, be it winning and losing, why would I want you to win? Because if *you* win, *I* lose. It feels much better if *I* win and *you* lose. Who wants to lose? Nobody. So trying to get the other person to lose makes sense and anyway I am right. I am entitled. My mother loved me, so fuck you! This is how it operates.

Once you freeze and take up a fixed position there are very few moves to make. All the different schools of buddhism address this in slightly different ways, but they are all essentially saying the same thing. If you want to have freedom to understand the beautiful openness of your nature — freedom to relate freely without fear and with love and compassion to others — then all you have to do is to recognise the dynamic nature of your existence and see that this is the potential of openness. When, however, you construct yourself as a fixed entity seeing yourself as a thing in a world of things, then it's very difficult to escape from the fear of losing and the hope of winning.

In the buddhist tradition this is described as being the function of the three root poisons. The first is the mental dullness or heaviness of reification, whereby, *'This is me - I am this thing – and because things have shapes I can measure and know myself and I can also tell you who I am. Because I am like this, when I encounter the environment with my particular shaping some things in the world are revealed as things I like and so I have attachment and desire, and some of the things in the world are revealed to me as things I don't like and therefore I feel aversion, anger, hatred, or disgust.'* As soon as we are a thing in a world of things this is inevitable.

We enter into judgment and evaluation pulling our friends close and pushing our enemies away, seeing that our friends are really wonderful and that our enemies are really horrible. In the buddhist tradition they would say that this is the basis of all the distress we experience.

Advice for meditators

The advice for meditators is not to enter into judgment on whatever is arising as your experience. Don't say this is good or this is bad and don't try to push away the things you don't like nor hang on to the things that you do like. Rather, we relax and open and offer hospitality to whatever arises. This brings two particular experiences or awakenings. The less we enter into reactivity, the more we experience that we are calm, spacious and open. The more open we are, the less we have to defend and the less needy hunger we have to be searching for the good object. This opens up the sphere of the spacious nature of our being.

The second aspect of this is that the more we see the naturally dynamic nature of our experience the more we see them just as forms arising and passing, forms of energy with a rich potential which can be actualised if need be. Thoughts, feelings and sensations are always arising and passing, so instead of appropriating them and taking them as the constituents of our identity, simply offer them the hospitality to arising and passing.

When we are in the world with other people, having true contact with them, then this contact is a shimmering edge of co-emergence, and on that edge what is required will be revealed. We don't need to analyse in order to work that out. It comes to us, not as an impulse, not as a reactivated neurotic formation, but rather as the natural formation which is part of the field. This represents or manifests the inherent ethical nature of non-dual awareness because subject and object, or subject and subject, are arising together as shared aspects of experience. You arise as *my* experience and I arise as *my* experience in the field of *my* awareness. In the field of *your* awareness, I arise and *you* arise as experience.

Just as we can see in all the fields of improvisation of art, body movement or whatever, the big obstacle is thoughtfulness. If you are not preoccupied — if you are there present — it will be fine. There is no need to

prepare since if you prepare you've now got something and you want to find out the right place to bring in what you've got.

Therefore, all the experience that we have inside and outside meditation is the showing of our potential. In the dzogchen tradition this is called clarity. It's not a clarity based on analysis or cognitive activity but is the immediacy of the showing of the non-dual field of experience: it is clear what to do or not do. It's not a clarity which is held by an agent who is deciding how to intervene, because we are not coming from outside to inside; we are always already within. How we are within this shared field of experience is determined by whether we are preoccupied or are available.

This might sound very simple, and it is. What makes it difficult is our thought that it *should* be difficult. We might imagine that I have to purify myself before I can do this. What do we have to purify ourselves of? *“Well, when I was younger I did many bad things.”* If you continue to import your memories into your sense of identity you will always have purification to do, but if you stop playing with ghosts — if you let the dead be dead — then it's gone. Yesterday has gone. The things you did when you were ten, or twenty, or thirty, have gone, and whatever structures were installed at that time have also gone, unless they are reinstalled. Freud called this repetition compulsion: our need to repeat or to reiterate. What is this? It is our desperate attempt to maintain the continuity of our identity as someone.

One of the saddest things is that many people, perhaps most people, build this continuity of their sense of self around anxiety, self-doubt, self-hatred, lack of belief and so on.

“I've been hurt before. I have to protect myself and so I'm careful. I am not sure if I can trust you, and because I can't quite trust you I have to test you, and when I test you, you get upset. That may be a sign that you are not really trustworthy, because if you were really safe nothing I say or do would upset you. I was quite willing to love you but you kept backing away and then you tell me I am too much! All I was trying to do was to find out who you are, and now that you have shown me I am going back into my castle and I'll pull up the drawbridge!”

This is very normal behaviour and has to do with the sense of being under attack.

In the buddhist tradition this arises from the ongoing positioning or activity of ignoring the unfixable nature of our manifestation in the world. It is not that there is an opposition here between order and chaos, that if we stop imposing our control and our sense of our proper shape on how the world should be then everything will just fall apart. Rather, pattern formation is intrinsic to the structure of our existence. These patterns are dynamic, and by participating with awareness, with sensitivity, with tenderness, patterns can be maintained. They, however, have no essence; they are always a work in progress. But when we get lazy or tired, we want to take things for granted. We want them just to be as they are, to be reliable, but then we get betrayed because we can't sit apart from the world and expect it to keep its shape.

Finding the mood

The shaping of experience is shared and participative, and is generated by mood, so we have to find the mood which allows us to give of ourselves. That mood is the mood of emptiness or openness. We could call it trust, or faith, or love. Basically it is the trust that it's okay, that there is no need to take it too seriously. In life bad things happen, and not just to other people! Sometimes we are happy and sometimes we are sad. When we are sad, we can be sad. When we are lonely, we can be lonely. But if we think we shouldn't be lonely, or that we are going to do something to stop being lonely, then this means that we have lost contact with openness.

Open is big — it's open to everything. If you feel sad, lonely, or unloved, then that is just what you feel. However if you think, *“I don't like it.”* and then go back to the three poisons (of ‘I am real; my loneliness is real, and my feeling about my loneliness is real’) then even if the action you make to remove the loneliness is effective for a while, it falls apart eventually. There is no final solution. Life goes on. When we have these experiences we call ‘negative’, we remember other experiences which were positive. We are not stupid; we know positive is better than negative, so we try to get the positive and get rid of the negative. We would be stupid to do otherwise.

But not if you are buddhist! From the buddhist point of view it's very stupid to try to chase the positive and get rid of the negative, because they both become very strongly real as if they have a true essence. In the case of the bad or negative thing it is an unbearable essence. This is not to say that you have to put up with terrible situations, but buddhism encourages us just to taste the bitterness or the sour flavour: *"This is an experience, I don't have to drink a litre of it, but I don't have to be afraid of it; it won't kill me."*

Depression, sadness, anxiety, hopes and fears, confusion, betrayal — these are all flavours. Clarity is being open to seeing their nature and then our anxiety goes down and the actual quality of the experience can reveal itself as it is without this additional interpretive judgment. Openness and clarity are not mystical ideas but there is a position of fearlessness. It's not a heroic positioning, because it's non-oppositional, but the it's fearlessness of knowing that whatever comes is just what it is. If someone hurts me, I become upset. I have a capacity to be upset, so I cry and I feel lonely and misunderstood for a while, and I can be aware of my experience. I don't need to think, *"Hey, I'm a man, I shouldn't have this kind of shit!"* It's just how it is: I'm upset — and then I'm not upset. When I'm upset it's not like a total definition of myself; it is simply the flow of experience. All experience is impermanent. What we call 'I, me, myself' is experience and not essence. Our individual ego consciousness — our sense of self — this is experience; it is not essence.

Awareness is our noetic capacity to be open to whatever is manifesting. The non-duality of this open awareness and the clarity of ever changing experience is the heart of the path of dzogchen.

For those of you who are interested we will be looking at this in more detail over the weekend, but for now we come to the end. Thank you.