

# Being at ease with yourself

James Low

Transcribed by Lea Pabst

Edited by Barbara Terris

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## Excerpts

*...We live in a world where there is always change. Cultural patterns are changing, economic situations, political situations, always changing. So what should we adapt towards?*

*...What appears to be meaningful can become meaningless. That can be a very terrible thing...*

*...What is it that gives a thought the power to catch you? The power is not in the thought. Thoughts arise and go by. It is our proclivity, our tendency, our susceptibility, that draws us towards that thought at this particular time...*

*...The royal road to happiness and relaxation is not to believe the stories you tell yourself about yourself, but to look at the world; look at your unfolding potential. Don't come to a premature conclusion. Don't mobilise on the basis of assumption and prediction. Just see what is there and feel your response. Allow the full reception of the situation to evoke the widest possible range of responses and you find yourself being there in the moment...*

*...Movement is moving. It doesn't stop. However, the space within which the movement is occurring, is never moving. The space is always still...*

*...To be at ease in ourselves with others, let go of what we know and be available for what is. That is our ongoing work...*

I'm going to talk about being at ease and what gets in the way of our being at ease. Some of it will be from the psychotherapeutic point of view, some of it from the buddhist, point of view. They are not, in fact, so very different in their orientation.

## **Our anxiety**

Anxiety! We have a huge capacity to think about ourselves and the things that happen around us in ways which wind ourselves up.

From the buddhist point of view this is due to the way we conceptualise the world, that we consider ourselves as a thing amongst things. As soon as we're born we are introduced into patterns of identification. Even before we are born our parents have all kinds of fantasies about who is growing inside the mother's womb. Names are thought about, often plans for the future are thought about. So the infant, who is developing, is being wrapped into a whole conceptual matrix. After birth these projections continue more and more. So, the baby is being welcomed into a world which has particular lineaments, with particular shapes and patterns and organisational structures some of which support freedom, but many of which are designed to promote social adaptation.

## **Adapting**

When we look around we can see there are many things we might not agree with in how society is structured and yet we've got to find a way to survive. In order to do that we have to learn to adapt, to develop our plasticity, so that we can make the accommodations that are necessary to fit in. This does not always work out well. Even if the family that we grow up in is very harmonious, even if the school we go to is supportive, there are going to be tensions, because always we are faced with choice.

The human condition is marked by excess and lack. We have an excess of creativity, that is to say, we imagine all sorts of scenarios which are not actual.

We may imagine living a different life. It is very common for small children to have imaginary friends. So too is playing all sorts of 'let's pretend' games in which a simple object gets transformed into many other potential objects. Part of going to school is learning to rein in one's imagination so that what is being presented as the given-ness of our situation is encouraged to take precedence over other ways in which we could imagine it as being. This is often a big problem for children, for example when they move from primary school into secondary school. Becoming a successful student means accepting

that your value in the world will be established by your capacity to fill yourself with other people's ideas. Bringing up too many of your own ideas can result in your being seen as distracted.

That is to say, social alignment involves paying attention to patterns which have already been established by other people. In this way children start to notice a conflict or tension between the family patterns and the patterns established as normal in the school environment. Inside that they try to work out what is right, what is wrong, what they like, what they do not like. Some children are drawn towards identifications which put them at the heart of things. Others are drawn towards identification that can make them marginal. How should we live? Should you encourage a child to be more mainstream? Should you support them in pursuing their own particular trajectory of desire? These are the difficult issues for parents because there is the sense of *'Oh, I'm helping to mould this person and to shape them so that they get the best possible interface with the world.'*

### Adapting to what?

Of course all this would make sense if the world had a definite shape, if it were configured like a giant jigsaw puzzle, and the young person had to fit in by taking up a particular shape. But of course we don't live in a world like that. We live in a world where there is always change. New possibilities are arising. Cultural patterns are changing, the economic situation is changing, the political situation is changing. What then should we be adapting towards? If there is an ongoing tension between being true to myself and paying the price of belonging, to what am I supposed to belong? This is a difficult question to answer, especially in our modern fragmented culture where there seem to be few established patterns of social alignment. When you can pretty much do what you like how do we then decide, *'How will I be?'*

This question, which is a very profound and very helpful question, can be side-stepped by merging with preconceived ideas received from other people. My life is going to be formulated around getting a good job..., making a lot of money..., finding a way to impress other people..., finding a way to sleep with lots of people... There are many solutions that people come up with about what the meaning of their life might be.

### Identity and identifying

Do these solutions remove anxiety, stress, confusion, disease, being ill at ease with oneself? Perhaps not. Why not? Because the tension which arises is between my conceptualisation of myself — of my identity, largely based on what I have identified with — and the notion that there are requirements. Who sets these requirements? Whom should I follow? In whom can I believe? Who can I trust?

Nowadays many people find it difficult to trust in political parties. Many people find it difficult to believe in established religions. Who knows? Does anybody know?

Perhaps then I should I trust myself? As we get older we may, however, look back and think of the many mistakes and confusions we've been caught up in, and we might well think, *"I can't really trust myself but I can't really trust you either!"* That can be pretty scary!

So we can see that there is a pervasive hesitancy which lurks around in the world. So, how can we be decisive if we don't really know how things are going to unfold inside or out? We are changeable creatures. We have fluctuations of mood, fluctuations of intention, fluctuations of interest and taste. Probably in our houses we've got objects, ornaments, bits of clothing, books and records which we collected at some stage in our lives but which are now less and less irrelevant to us. We might look back and wonder, *"Why was I ever into that?"* It seemed a good idea at the time but that time has gone. If that was me — and it really did feel like me — it doesn't feel like me now, and so what is the me-ness of me? If I'm such a fickle creature, if I'm taken over by my fancies, if I'm actually quite whimsical, yet am educated to believe that I am a rational, autonomous agent, somebody who can sit down and think about life and make plans and notice when things get a bit off target and then revise and regroup and move more in the proper trajectory towards my goal — if we've been educated in that vision of ourselves — then the actuality of our whimsicality is very scary.

The Freudian unconscious is now generally known and understood as explaining that there are aspects of ourselves that we will never clearly know and yet which are operative inside us, that we are strangers to ourselves because we are estranged from ourselves.

Is that established as a definite fault-line? Are we always cut off from the wholeness of our being? Whether one imagines that in terms of some historical sequence — such as that we were once in the garden of Eden where everything was simple and then we were expelled, forever exiled (many cultures have originatory stories of that kind) — or we see it as something internal — that aspects of ourselves are being repressed but there are also streams moving inside us that are beyond our cognisance — we cannot know ourselves.

That is one reason why it's helpful to have friends, because they can let us know when we are getting lost since we ourselves don't see what we're up to.

On one level that is quite terrifying. If I am in charge of myself, but I don't see myself clearly, am I a drunk driver in charge of my life? Can I ever sober up? What would be the method of sobering up? Is there anybody sober? Is there anybody who's got a clear idea about what they're up to? Yes, we can all access theories which explain the meaning of life, eastern religions, western religions, ancient

philosophers, modern philosophers... there are so many interesting thinkers who come up with their own conceptualisations of what we're about.

What all of these do is to offer us narratives, which are more or less coherent and which we may find to be more or less fitting to the particular, current topology of our existence. The contours of our existence, our felt sense of who we are, change through time. At certain periods we're drawn in one direction, and then we're drawn in another. So if we're seeking reassurance that we're okay by searching for parallel patterns in the world, then that would indicate that any alignment, any harmony, is always going to be just for a brief period of time – since the outer and the inner shapes change.

What appears to be meaningful can become meaningless. And that can indeed be a very terrible thing. For example, in Britain fewer and fewer people now attend Church and from the 1920s onwards both religious and lay people have explored the question of loss of faith. How could it be that you are educated in a particular system and which seems to encapsulate you, hold you in its warm and comforting bosom, then it fades away? How come you can no longer believe in what you once believed? This is a very profound question.

People experience this also in love relationships. They meet someone, they feel attracted to them, they feel they fall in love and in that moment they see some profound, even ultimate value in the other person. Things go well for a while and then the problems come: *“If you're behaving this way to me then you are not who I thought you were. I fell in love with you because I thought you were who I thought you were. Well, that means I fell in love with my own projection, with my own idea about you! Now that I have woken up to the fact that you are not like that, that you are not like my fantasy, that you are some other ordinary bugger wandering around in the world, I don't know whether I love you anymore!!”*

That's very difficult, isn't it? Reality is the enemy of fantasy. We all know that. Nevertheless it is still a painful thing to see how so many of the deep feelings that we have are conjured up on the basis of our fantasies, of our mental constructions which we project out onto the world. That we see our fantasies as being actually existing in the world in a self-existing way.

If you fall in love with someone you feel that you have some privileged truth about them. Even if you introduce that person to your friends and they're not quite as certain about them as you are, you still feel: *“Well, that's because they don't really understand my beloved. He really is nice!”* – In your fantasy!!

## Our projection, our narrative

Now, from the buddhist point of view this is just a subset of a very normal structure of misconception. For example, here is a glass of water. It's very obvious that what I'm holding in my hand is a glass of water. The glass-ness of the glass is in the glass. That's obvious. It just is a glass of water. Well, not necessarily. Because if it were a glass of vodka and I had drunk quite a few full glasses of vodka, I might be inclined to smash the glass and stick it in your face! In which case, I would be holding a dangerous weapon. Normally however, because we are very nice polite people, we think of it as a glass for drinking from. Nevertheless people do use glasses as weapons, something which the Accident and Emergency wards in hospitals all over Britain can confirm.

So the glass-ness of the glass is held in place by our concept of what it is. The glass-ness of the glass is the meeting place between the potential of what is in my hand and the particular form of conceptualisation that I have and bring to bear on it. If, for example, this glass were a precious family heirloom and a child of about three grabbed it, you might say, *"Ohho, careful with that! Look here, let me give you this shiny red plastic one instead. No, don't touch the crystal glass. It's a horrible, horrible thing!"* You would try to swap the glasses around, knowing that the child doesn't see the value. *We* see the value. We see the value on the glass because we know, *"This is my great-great-grandmother's glass. It's been in the family for a hundred and fifty years..."* That value is not in the glass. That is in **your head**. That is **your** narrative that you're projecting onto the glass. Therefore the anxiety about whether or not it is going to break is your own production. The glass is not intrinsically valuable. The value is in your projection.

The world is our projection. The world is our interpretation. That's quite a strong idea. What it means is that moment by moment when we encounter situations, these situations are not self-existing. Now, that flies in the face of science, as we learn it in school. We learn about matter, that matter is neither created nor destroyed, that it gets moved around into particular shapes, that when it's in a particular shape it manifests as something which can be known, apprehended and employed in a way which is harmonious or disharmonious with its nature.

Here in this room there are bluey-purple chairs that we're all sitting on. These are plastic moulds sitting on metal legs and are designed to be cheap and cheerful, which is very appropriate for public buildings like this. When we make use of objects like that, we do expect them to support our weight. We have expectations that the world is safe on the basis of our knowledge about it: *'Because I can interpret the world correctly, I know how to behave.'* That is to say, there is an object out there which, once I know about it, I will be able to use properly.

What I have been suggesting earlier is a rather different view. It's saying that we will *never* apprehend whatever is out there, because the movement of our mind towards the objects of the world is the process of the co-creation of the world. It's not that there is a chair there before we see it. But rather that we have been educated to perceive the chair in a certain way. If there was a bunch of five-year-old children in here they would do all sorts of different things with these chairs. Some might make a castle, others a boat, or a den, or a tower, or a tank... These objects would be incorporated into the children's imaginations and be expressive of that imagination; they would become part and parcel of the field of imagination of the child.

*"Well, we are not children anymore, we have put away childish things and now we see things for what they are!"* This is not true. What we have done is entered into a more prosaic, conservative and tedious diminishment of our imaginative capacity in order to have the prediction not only that we know what a chair is, but that other people will know that we know what a chair is and therefore other people will see that we are 'normal'. Children of five are not very concerned about being normal unless they feel edged out of their little group in school. But *we* are very concerned to be normal. *We* are very concerned that other people won't think we're too weird. Because there's a price for being weird and it's not nice. If you're normal then it's very nice because you can hide. You must have seen these nature programmes on TV and there's a big herd of deer all fleeing together and there's a lion coming "Grrrr". It grabs one on the outside. It doesn't grab the one in the middle. That's the same for us in life. If you're in the middle of the herd you look normal: *"Don't pick on me. I'm just like you. I'm normal. Pick on them! They're weird!"*

So this is a generalised fear and anxiety which is around. And it comes about from our betrayal of our own imagination.

Now, very often we see imagination as a kind of fantasy-construct: that we are going to create something which is untrue. A novelist or a film-maker sets out to construct a storyline which we can believe in but which is not actually true. We cannot go and meet the characters that are in the novel, but by reading the novel, by offering ourselves to the novel, it is as if these characters become real. This is what Aristotle referred to as 'suspending disbelief': that if we're too sceptical, if we're too suspicious, if we're keeping our distance, we will be afforded a particular kind of clarity — because with that separative perspective we'll see things in their proper place — but we'll be a bit lonely and cut off.

We can really enjoy giving ourselves to something, being carried away by a good movie, falling into a wonderful novel and getting so interested in what's going to happen next. 'Suspending disbelief' allows us a fusion into another world. Now, as adults we accept that we have got to hold our lives

together in various ways, that experiences like going to the cinema or reading a novel, are a kind of holiday, a time-out from the grim, fixed realities of ordinary life.

But maybe there *is* no grim, fixed reality. Maybe *everything* is imagination. It's not that the grim, fixed stuff is out there. It's that the grim, fixed stuff is in us! Once we fall into over-fixated thoughts, self-attacking propositions, limited conceptualisations about our identity, the ground that we are standing on becomes narrow, predetermined, over-determined. We are preoccupied by accumulations of past experience which come to be a seemingly substantial basis for our sense of who we are: *'I am who I think I am.'* That is reinforced by *'I am who I think that you think I am.'* I am full of thoughts, memories, hopes, plans and fears which act as a kind of lens through which I look at the world. I believe in these mental constructions as the guarantors of the truth of the situation.

### **We approach the freshness of the world with our stale assumptions**

Life is about managing your life as you find it. We can't just get a new life. We're stuck with what we have. In any case whatever new life we would like is impossible because we're full of old thoughts, old beliefs, old assumptions. *"Assumptions are the mother of fuck-up"*, as the saying goes, but in any case assumptions are a way of making life quick and easy. We can buy a pre-prepared meal. We can store it in the freezer. We can come home one night, tired, and stick it in the microwave and eat it. Easy. It's just food. It probably doesn't taste great but we're cold and hungry and it's alright. That's what most of our mental activity is. Out of the freezer of our memory-bank into the microwave of our current moment of agitation we tuck in to the stuff and with a big or small spoon according to the situation.

Where then is the freshness? The freshness is there in the phenomena themselves, in what is coming in through our eyes, our ears, our nose, tongue, skin. The senses are always of the moment. The senses are not existing in time. Our interpretation of the data which is given in the immediacy of the sensory moment, yes, that is based on the past. We approach the freshness of the world with our old assumptions. That is like whenever we go to the market to buy fresh vegetables, we carry them home and pop them in a pot that's already covered with mould. If we do that then how can our food ever taste fresh?

So how do we shed the past? We are made up of the past. We went to school, maybe we went to college later; we've learned so many things in our lives. Some people experience traumas, suffer brain injuries and experience amnesia. They have to spend a lot of time coming back into a working relationship with the world, slowly building a new memory bank to help them function. Certainly we are our history, in some ways, but what I would suggest is that our history exists like ingredients in a



kitchen. Herbs, spices, salt, pepper, all kinds of things can add flavour. You don't open every little jar and tip them all into a big pot. If you have tomatoes, would you use a lot of sage? Or cinnamon? Perhaps you might use oregano instead, or basil. It might go better with the tomato.

In terms of relating to other people, if I want to connect with you, if I'm wanting to prepare something that you might be able to eat, that will be palatable for you, I need to pay attention to how you are. Therefore *your* tongue is the determinant of *my* spice. But if the spices and herbs are controlled by our assumptions of what is true, by our memory, by our own tongue, we're essentially cooking for ourselves.

And, as we know, sadly a great deal of human communication is simply serial monologue. One person says something, the other person replies but it's like ships passing in the night, because there's no real contact. If you really listen to someone else and you're touched and moved by them, you have to respond to what is there, to how this person is in the moment, not according to your sense of who they really are.

*—Oh, cheer up, you'll feel better tomorrow!*

Why would you say that to somebody who is sad? We don't know how long they will be sad for? It doesn't matter whether they feel better tomorrow. Today they are sad.

*—But I don't know what to say if they're sad.*

*—Why not?*

*—What should I say?*

That will not be answered by any 'should'. If you see their face, if you see the sadness around their eyes and you let that in through your eyes and your heart opens, something will come out.

*—I don't know if it would. I get lost. I don't know what to say!*

*"I don't know what to say."* It's as if every human communication had to pass through central command, a cognitive centre where things get processed according to our template. We all have some idea about what is good and what is bad. Once you have that installed, it's nice, because then you know what to do. The more there is a central command predicting and organising on the basis of reassuring me that I know what I'm doing, I will be doing a violence towards *you*; because I will be delivering you something on the basis of my need to feel competent. Rather, I have to find a response, that is to say, I allow the response to arise through me towards you.

In power-differential structures like counselling and therapy it's very easy for the person who is in the seat of power to keep all their clothes on and get the client or the patient to, figuratively, take their clothes off. Therapists can take up the position of interrogator, pinning the patient in a being of supposed light. *"Because we know best and are the source of light we are here to illuminate the darkness that you wander in."* [ironic]

But of course we are all in dark. And we are all light. The darkness is actually our accumulated knowledge. We are hidden from ourselves by our knowledge about what is going on. 'Knowing' and 'knowing about' are not the same, but they tend to be fused again and again in the ordinary conducting of our life situation. To 'know' is to see and receive, that is to say, it starts from the relationship with the world which is passive-receptive. Not an active agent, not a kind of phallic invasion which is going to do something to the world, but: *"Oh, this is what is there!"*

I can only receive if I have space inside me. It is my openness, or emptiness, or lack of preoccupation, which is actually the basis of my hospitality to you. Maybe you have visited someone's house, they invite you round, and they have a white carpet and a white sofa and then they give you a glass of red wine? There's a kind of anxiety that goes with that, isn't there? You're not going to relax. [laughter] Some environments allow you to be yourself and if you make a mistake, it doesn't really matter. Life goes on. But other environments are more anxiety-provoking: *"Oh, I see that they do things in one particular way."*

That is not hospitality. Hospitality means there is a space for you. That is to say, I am available because you can avail yourself of me. Now what does that mean? If someone avails themselves of me, is that on my terms or on their terms? All of us exist as a huge potential, a potential which is often hidden from ourselves by our own conceptualisation of ourselves, but also by other people's conceptualisation of us.

### **Stories we tell ourselves**

Working in many different clinics, seeing all sorts of different people, couples, families, therapeutic communities, I would say that of most of the — let's call them 'patients' — whom I have met, make twenty percent use of me. Occasionally you meet someone who gets eighty percent of you. I'm trying to say: *'You could have more. Take more!'* But they want to go round and round and round and I want to say, *"Just shut the fuck up!"* [laughter]

*—But it's very important! I'll tell you the same thing again.*

Why? Poking about in your poo is not going to tell you much about your life. It's going to tell you about what you ate. It's going to tell you about your history, about the past.

*—But you'll only understand me if you know about my childhood.*

This is not true. What it means is: 'You will only know about me if I tell you a lot about me.' Now I know your story and you know I know your story and telling it was a hell of a story. All this makes it pretty difficult for me to do anything to help you because we can easily get into a confluence, a flowing together into a trapped agreement that life is hopeless. But actually in the very moment that

somebody is telling the same trapped, repetitive story again and again, there is freedom. Somebody is speaking.

—*Who is the speaker?*

—*Me!*

—*But who are you?*

—*I'm the one that's speaking!*

—*But who is the one that is speaking?*

—*Me!*

This gets very solipsistic, an unbreakable circle. *'I am who I am. And I'm the one that's doing it. I'm just being me. What more do you want?'* It's almost impenetrable; it's like a heavy, thick waterfall, you can't see what's behind it because of the flow of conceptualisation, held in place by the fearful notion that *'I am who I am, I know who I am, and I'm me.'* But everyone in this room can call themselves *'me'*. At least I am called 'James'; maybe there are two or three other people who are also called James here in this room? That's not so bad, I can share my James-ness with a few people. But if everybody here is saying, *'I am me!'* ... Anybody here find that difficult?

—*I am me.*

—*No, I am me, you shut up! I am me! You are you! [laughter]*

If we are all *'me'* and *'I'm just me'*, this is the great drug of forgetfulness. This is the answer which is designed to annihilate the possibility of enquiry. This is the answer which is always popping up so that the question, the deep question, *'What does it mean to be alive? What is this existence?'* is never asked and never answered.

Here we are, breathing in, breathing out, we hear sounds, we see things, there are smells, there's a taste in our mouth... Experience is arising. Who is the experiencer?

If we come up this from the level of narrative, we can tell our story in infinite ways. And of course we all do that. If our parents are alive, we tell them one story about how we're doing; we tell our friends another story; we might tell a partner something different. If we've got kids we tell them a different story from what we tell our boss at work. Our one life, our *'just being me'*, is more like a diamond with many different facets. As we face other people we present different aspects of ourselves. Nobody will ever see the whole of us. Even the people in history that we know as the most evil foul people, they had friends. They had partners, they had kids. Somebody loved them.

Examining in this way we realise that we can never ever catch the whole truth of someone else. Similarly we can never catch the whole truth of ourselves.

One of the things that makes us ill at ease is that we live in relation to ourselves but we live in relation to ourselves in a gesture of getting hold of ourselves, appropriating ourselves, apprehending ourselves, catching bits of ourselves and formulating ourselves in different ways to different situations. *'But if I'm that multiple, there's probably more.'*

### **The centre cannot hold**

Yes, we live as excess. We are creative. There is no end to any of us telling stories about our lives. Giving commentaries on what has happened in the garden, what sorts of birds are there at the moment, what's happening to the price of milk and so on. There's endless things to comment on. As new aspects of the world impinge on us we find ourselves moving into opinions and responses that we had never imagined we would be doing. We are ungraspable. Other beings are ungraspable.

*—But does that mean that I don't know who I am?*

*—It does!*

*—But that's terrible! You have to know who you are! Otherwise you're lost! How would you go on in the world if you didn't know who you were? Oh! I don't like this anymore. Can I go home now, please?*

This is the sort of anxiety that arises when we have what's referred to as a 'mental breakdown'. It's often exactly on that point. The centre cannot hold. This centrifugal force has us dispersing out, fragmenting, and we are all over the place. We are not all of a piece anymore, we can't work out what's going on. Before we were adding and subtracting bits of ourselves. We think, *'I've got bad qualities, I've got to get rid of them.'* And then, *'I'm quite good at this, I'll do more of that.'* Trying to build up a kind of Lego profile of all the little ingredients of ourselves, juxtaposing them into socially acceptable patterns. When that starts to fall apart... [gesture: speechless]

Actually there can be a freedom in that, because the patterns which gave us the reassuring image that we knew who we were, starts to fade away. We don't know who we are. Is that wrong or bad? No, but if we are going to hold ourselves together we do want something to cling to. So why do we have to hold ourselves together? Because we don't want to fall apart.

That would indicate that the basic hypothesis that we have of ourselves is that we are some kind of entity, that we are a thing, a thing operating in a world of things. Things need to hold together, otherwise they don't work. All the bits have to be in the right place functioning together. This involves planning and control and the effort of maintenance. This mechanical model of the human condition is increasingly common now as we move into an android culture, where people are programming the telephones and not really acknowledging that they are being programmed as they program — that

we come into a reciprocal relationship with the binary oppositional structure of the mathematical programmes that derive these incredible apps and so on that we make use of. We're caught into a binary world of yes/no, right/wrong, good/bad. Either this or that. If it's this, it's not that. If it's that, it's not this. Then you supposedly know where you are. Are you a boy or a girl? Are you young or are you old? Are you happy or are you sad?

But we are not like that. We are complicated. That's why when we try to tell a story about ourself, we meet someone new and we want to introduce ourself, we are caught up in the beginning of an endless story, because there is always something more to say. Whatever we say about ourself...

*"Well, I was thinking about what I told you yesterday. Was it really like that in my family? Yeah, my dad was a bit difficult and so on, but actually we had some quite good times. I used to play golf with him and so on..."*

It just endlessly mushrooms out, because this is our life. In a single second this whole world is revealed to us. We come into a room—everything is here! We walk out the door, there is the church and there is the sky and the trees. It's all already there! We get the whole shebang, just like that, in a second. We don't have to sit and work it out bit by bit, painting by numbers. We always get excess. There is so much, and yet we feel a lack. *"Something is missing in me. I'm not quite right. If only I was more like you. You seem to be able to do everything. You're so confident. Why am I not like everybody else? Oh god, the years are going by and this is as good as it gets."*

### **Identity belongs in the house of communication**

What is the lack? The lack is the self-abandonment of our being, which comes through grasping at our notion of identity, which is always a betrayal. Whatever you say about yourself may be situationally true, but it cannot be intrinsically true. It is a momentary construct. That is to say, self-knowledge belongs in the house of communication, or the house of compassion. It is relational. Our identity is relational. We come into being with other people. We present ourselves according to how we feel towards the other person, warm/cold, attracted/not attracted, looking up/looking down and so on. There is expansion and contraction and this is dynamic and changing. It is not fixed. Identity is a world phenomena or a field phenomena.

Our identity is exactly the site that marks our participating in the world with others. It is being in the world with others, but what is this being itself? What is the ground or the basis out of which I reveal myself to myself and to the other in the moment of coming into being with them? Where does this come from?

This is being. We are here as a presence, a presence which is there prior to any gesture that we make of communication. Say, for example, you go to a party. You meet some people and you find that you can talk easily to them and have a nice chat. Then you turn and you look at someone else and you wonder what on earth you can find to say to that person.

That is not a sign that you are not a nice person. It's a sign that our connectivity with others is energetic, it comes from the belly. It's an embodied phenomenon. It's not about having social skills, because if you apply your social skills, you are just going through the motions; you may be having a pleasant enough conversation, but there's no juice in it. The juice is the gift of life, and shows that we connect with some people more than with others. That is to say, it's not a conscious egoic decision; it's not a sign of our agency as social participants. Rather, it is showing that the world is revealed to us in the given-ness of what happens when we are in proximity. We open or we contract. We don't decide which to do. It just happens like that. Of course, we can learn to manage it if it's a bit extreme, but...

### Identity is based on editing

So we have two main roads that we take at this point. I will describe them in terms of the traditional buddhist categorisation of the five elements. These five elements are earth, water, fire, wind and space. Water, fire and wind are moving elements. Earth and space are stable. Space is ungraspable, but it's very stable. It doesn't change. It is the infinite space within which phenomena are occurring.

What tends to happen in our upbringing is that space, because it is so subtle, is discounted. We turn our mind more towards what is manifest: the earth, the water, the fire and the wind. The three moving elements are the turbulence of our life; sometimes exciting, sometimes anxiety-provoking. When the turbulence gets a bit much, we seek something to cling on to. That's the earth element: *'I want to secure the territory. I want to know where I am. I want to know something definite about myself. I am this!'*

When I was a child I learned that I was Scottish. That became very important. *"I'm Scottish, I'm not English!"* I didn't know what that meant, but anyway I would say, *"I don't like the English!"* I grew up in Glasgow so, *"I don't like the people from Edinburgh!"* I had never been to Edinburgh but, *"I don't like the people from Edinburgh!"* Moreover I grew up in the West End of Glasgow so, *"I don't like the people from the South and the East!"* I grew up in one street and I didn't like the people in the other street! In fact, I didn't like my brother either! [laughter] So, *"I am me and all the rest is shit!"* That's a very common way of establishing identity.

Freud described this process as 'the narcissism of small differences'. Since it is so difficult to define yourself it is much easier to say what you are not. By excluding all these other factors in the field, that

are almost but not quite like us, the residue is myself. However you never quite finish excluding all the others so you never have to actually give a true vertical account of who you are. Which is just as well, because we are not. We are 'being' and 'becoming'...

When 'being' and 'becoming' are aligned, then we have 'belonging'. Belonging is the feeling of participating in the shared field of activity. However, if we ignore 'being' (and I'll say a bit more about what I mean by that term shortly) we just have 'becoming'. So moment, by moment, by moment we are becoming this or that. And then we are having to hang on to these fragments, these moments of experience, extrapolating them from their context, and trying to build up a picture of who we are, what we like, what we don't like, what our plans are... There is a solidity in that. So we cleave to the earth element: The world is full of 'things'. There are some people I like; these are my friends. There are some people I don't like; these are my enemies. There are foods that I like, there are foods that I don't like. There are some kinds of clothes that I wear, some that I don't. We push away what we don't like and we try to bring towards ourselves what we do like.

In that way we live by maintaining an identity which is based on editing. We bring our prejudice, our predilection, into the emergent field of experience, moment by moment, on the basis of our selective attention. Strangely, the curious thing is that other people choose something different! Why do they do that? *"It's because they're daft! If I was you, I wouldn't do that, but there again, I'm just me. So you do you. Bad luck! I'm better off being me."* [laughter] Thinking that way, what you do doesn't need to bother me. Going to a restaurant you look at the menu and you choose something. Other people eat other things, but this is what you like. This is what we are doing all the time. Moment by moment this infinite menu of the world is in front of us, but, *'Waiter, you know what I like. Just give me my usual.'*

No wonder we are ill at ease and alienated from ourselves. If—as I am suggesting—our self is a potential which is called into being in its richness through the widest possible participation, when I narrow my gaze about how the world is and exclude a great deal of what is here in front of me, then I'm also excluding a great deal of myself. Many potential aspects of how I could be remain dormant because I am always in this repetition compulsion of the reinstalling of my imagined notion of who I am.

In that sense I'm making a differentiation between identity as a construct—just as we have passports or identity cards which show officialdom who we are. When we go through passport control, this little booklet lets us come back into the country. If we don't have it, if we have lost it, then we have to get through a lot of hassle. But if we say, *'Look at this photo and now look at me; we are the same.'* then the important document confirms and blesses us as being a proper citizen of the country.

That is to say, our identity is outside ourselves. Our identity is part of communication with the world. It is not an X-ray of our soul. It's not a true definition of who we are. It's merely a set of conventions, which we move around and shift according to the different environments that we encounter in our lives.

Prior to that there is being. What is being? Being is what is here. It is just being here. Indoors or outdoors, you sit and you just allow life to happen. Thoughts are coming ... sensations in the body... the senses are open ... you hear sounds, smells and so on... And they are passing... and they are passing... and they are passing...

Experiences are occurring, many different experiences, some you would take to be pleasurable, some you would take to be unpleasurable; but the whole gamut of experience is occurring. Usually you are being the busy manager trying to protect yourself from the things you don't like, trying to hang on to what you do like, but if you just relax that for a moment then you are the experiencer. It's all going on and you are just experiencing it.

### **Meditation is about not maintaining**

Who is that experiencer? In the tradition, this is the basis for meditation. Meditation is about gradually dissolving the glue that binds subject and object together.

Because as subject and object are turbulently turning and we sit in our subjectivity—which is our sense of a personal self, me being me, me being who I am, who I know myself to be, taking us into the domain of our narrative about ourselves—when that is glued onto the unfolding patterning of the arising object, then I'm endlessly busy. Twenty-four hours a day I'm adjusting and maintaining and because of that arousal, that busyness, there's no sense of the space within which it is occurring.

For example, you entered this room the chairs were already laid out so you might think, *'Right, this is where we will be sitting. There is a seat in the front, so James is probably going to sit there facing the rows of other chairs. Okay, I'll sit near the front so I can hear easily, or shall I sit near the back where I can hide more...'* Whatever is your fancy. However the room has quite an interesting shape and a lot of the potential of the space is hidden by the way the chairs are laid out. If you came in early before the chairs were arranged you would become more aware of the potential of the space. The chairs could be done in a spiral, in a circle, in a square, in an oblong, in an ellipsis... You could set them up any way. Lining them up in these serried rows creates a particular mood. The room is set up for a talk and we are going to get a talk so that was jolly sensible. But we didn't see the space!



It's just the same in your mind when the furniture in your mind is installed, you don't see the space, because you are following thought, feeling, sensation, round and round and round... without ceasing.

Theatre is only possible on the basis of an empty stage. It's the empty space which allows the elaboration of the drama of life. Once the drama starts you see the actors moving around the stage furniture. You are captivated by the activity and the space is invisible. Even if you go to the ballet there is all this gorgeous movement in space. Without space they wouldn't be moving, but what we see is bodies and movement. We see shapes.

It's the same with paintings. Unless we learn to look at art we are captivated by what is figural. We are aware of there being background but actually, without the background you wouldn't have the foreground. If you're looking at Rembrandt's paintings, his backgrounds tend to be very, very dark indeed. And you have these faces or bodies looming out of that with their intensity—out of the dark. Without the dark you wouldn't have the intensity of the figure. The figure and the background go together. The ground here is always the space.

Likewise for our mental life. Space is the basis. Thoughts move through time and space. Feelings arise in time and space. Sensations in the body occur because there is a space to receive them. When you can release the fixation of attention on the ever-occurring movement of life, you start to see the space within which the movement is occurring. The fact is that movement is ceaseless. Since you wake up in the morning until you go to sleep at night, there is always something happening. Meditators change their sitting postures, you find yourself scratching, fidgeting, you get some little pain in your back, you suddenly remember something important you need to do tomorrow... We are like some market square with all sorts of messages passing across. That doesn't stop.

### **Movement is always moving: you can't stop it**

Therefore, on that level of your existence, you will not find peace. You will not find peace. Movement is moving. It doesn't stop. However, the space within which the movement is occurring, is *never* moving. The space is always still.

One of the big problems in mental health is that people try to stop the movement. *'I've got these negative thoughts and I want them to stop!'* You can spend a lot of time trying to do that and you can learn all sorts of tricky methods of doing it but such techniques tend to lose their potency after a time. The key thing is: *'Who is it who is caught by the thought?'*

What is it that gives a thought the power to catch you? The power is not in the thought. Thoughts arise and go by. It is our proclivity, our tendency, our susceptibility that makes us drawn towards that thought at this particular time. Just as if you go shopping in a big store and there are many kind of

shoes, many kinds of T-shirts. Your gaze is drawn towards one of them. Other people are drawn to something else.

*—Oh, these shoes! Fabulous! Exactly what I've been looking for! I must have them!*

Other people were not looking for these shoes.

*—Why not? They're fabulous!*

For you, maybe! That is to say, they are not intrinsically fabulous. They are fabulous for you according to your interpretive matrix. In fact, they may not always be fabulous for you either. The glue, the potency, the power is not in the shoes; it's in your incorporation of the shoe into the patterning of what is desirable. The other shoes are organised into the patterning of what is undesirable. This is a mental activity.

*—Oh no, but look how well the shoes are made!*

Nobody else is running to get them. It is like this for you! Each of us lives a life of unique sensibility. Each of us is shining, radiant, uniqueness. This is vital, this is alive, this is shining forth moment by moment, unrepeatable.

Why then are we so dull? [laughter] It's remarkable. Life is vibrant, sparkling, alive. There ain't nothing but this. You, alive, having experiences. There never was anything other than this. What kind of experiences you get is determined not by what is out there—because most of what is out there you've never seen, you've never tasted—it's determined by the furniture in this little box of yourself.

Why do we hang onto that furniture?

*—Because it's me!*

What I'm suggesting is that if we want to be at ease with ourselves we have to realise that what we take ourselves to be is better seen as a range of ingredients. Why? Because if you appropriate your narrative about yourself as something fixed and determined, it will be very difficult to change.

On the telly you can see programmes like 'The strongest man in the world.' They have a big parked bus and the strong man has to pull it with his teeth. The most difficult bit is to get the bus moving. Once the bus is moving, it's easier. So, if you want to change something, change something that's already in motion.

*—But I've had these thoughts for a long time. I wake up in the middle of the night and they are always there.*

*—Are they there just now?*

*—No.*

*—They weren't there, they're here, then they go.*

*—They were there, they are not here, they'll come back... They are moving. If they're moving, you can move them. They are not fixed like a bus or a building.*

*—But they feel like it. And I tell you how bad they are! It's been so difficult, my life. You don't understand. So hard.*

*—Mmm, I think I'll refer you to a colleague.*

We stick ourselves, we jellify ourselves. We are the solid, glutinous mass. We cover our world in aspic. Why? Because we want something. We want to know something definite. This is how we cheat ourselves.

We are a potential which unfolds in a situation, and the basis for that unfolding potential is open spaciousness, the unborn mind itself as it would be described in buddhism. Or the dharmakaya, the mind of the buddha.

That doesn't mean that it's completely random and unstructured. Of course we have patterns, but patterns are dynamic formations. We recognise patterns, but the recognition is not the thing itself. If you are in the countryside and you see a beautiful bush or beautiful wild roses you might think, *'Oh, how lovely the wild roses are!'* That knowledge may allow you to look at them for two seconds and then it travels on. But if you open yourself and look and you go forward and you see the incredible pink and the white and the delicate, delicate formation, you receive it. And it's not just a wild rose. You are transformed in that moment of looking. William Blake would call it 'clearing the doors of perception.' The 'doors of perception' are not covered by the muck of the world. They are covered by our knowledge, our assumptions, our sense that we are powerful agents who know what is what. Freeing ourselves is to allow ourselves not to know, what the poet John Keats called 'negative capability'. To be able to stay open and at ease and allow the unfolding of the world.

No need to worry, because—to use the image of jars of herbs and spices that I offered you earlier—we have a lot of knowledge. You are not going to lose that knowledge. The question is whether you use it in a way that fits the situation. Because if you use the knowledge as a lens to see through, it will restrict your vision, giving you more of the same. If you use it defensively to define and fix in an attempt to exert power over the situation then you get a kind of drying that goes with that. We become sclerotic because we become rigid. The more rigid we become, the more fearful we become, because we're frightened that something will hit us and we will fragment.

Actually, our being in the world—when we allow it to be—is very flexible, very soft, very dynamic. We are like seaweed in the ocean, moved around by events. *"But I don't want to be moved around. Why is it that everything gets to me?"* Many people come and they tell me, *"I suffer from oversensitivity."* How lucky! Every graveyard is full of people who are no longer sensitive at all! [laughter]

How to deal with this? Well, you could enjoy it! Turn your sensitivity towards things which are beautiful. Avoid situations which are difficult. In the summertime, take off your shoes and socks and

walk barefoot. You may have to practise at first, perhaps on soft sand. After a month of doing that you can start to walk on pebbly beaches and it's not so sore, because the skin has thickened. In that way we need to shift our interface. It is not, of course, about accumulating thicker skin. It's more like a camera lens, which shifts the speed of the shutter according to the amount of light. As a system, as a living system, we have a huge, immediate movement towards and away from things. If I run towards you and try to stick my finger in your eye, you turn away. Just like that. We can trust our quickness. We don't need to build up a big defence if we can move. And we are always moving. What traps us is our sense that we are not moving, that we are fixed, that we are entities, that we are things, that we are our own possession.

*'I have to take care of myself.'* Now that's a strange grammatical construct. *'Well, I am myself, and I have to take care of myself. So in order to take care of myself I can't be myself. So I am myself but I'm not myself, because if I was just myself I couldn't take care of myself!'*

On one way, of course, that's true. A baby is itself, pissing and shitting whenever it wants and crying in the middle of the night. They can't take care of themselves. As the baby starts to get bigger they learn to know that they need to have a pee before they go to bed. They learn to wipe their bum and so on. They learn to manage themselves. All this we have done. We are used to the notion of the dualistic construct. There is 'me' as a thing and there is 'I' as a subject. *'I am going to look after myself.'* I look in the mirror and what do I see? *"Oh my God, have I really put on all that weight? Right!! Health! In the spring I will definitely change my diet, get more exercise. Take better care of myself. I am in charge of myself. I am managing myself."*

Now, on one level of course, this is true but it's not the whole story. It sets up a huge amount of anxiety, because, *"If I'm going to take care of myself, why did I eat that extra biscuit? I didn't need the biscuit, I didn't even really want the biscuit. I ate the biscuit. Who ate the biscuit? I ate the biscuit, but it wasn't really me because I had already decided I wouldn't eat the biscuit. I said, 'They're looking at the biscuit but I don't need it so I'll leave it on the plate.' and then somehow there I was eating it!"*

So how am I going to taking care of myself when I don't know what I'm doing? This is the problem of the egoic fixation on *'I am in charge'*. We are working with circumstances; there are external circumstances and there are internal circumstances. Some of our internal circumstances we might call 'impulses' and the impulse arises and moves through us and we find ourselves pouring another glass of wine.

*—Why am I drinking? Look at the time! It's already so late. I have to work early tomorrow. Mmm, but that's nice.*

I am divided against myself. That would be the normal interpretation. But that presupposes that I am the first person singular. If I am the first person singular, if I am a whole circle, surely I should know myself by now. Surely if I make a decision I should be able to carry it through. Otherwise, come on!

But we can't. And people berate themselves and torture themselves and even kill themselves on the basis that *'I can't bring myself under control. I can't bring my eating under control...'* Health services spend lots of money on gastric bands because people can't control themselves.

### **Welcome the richness of our existence**

What I am suggesting tonight is that that's because the whole paradigm of control is unhelpful, that actually we need to make friends with the complexity of our existence. We need to collaborate with the richness of the potential that we can move in all sorts of different directions. In order to do that we need to relax and open and trust that the spaciousness of our being is infinite enough to contain all these many tendencies. And that by allowing them to be there they take their proper place. It's when we put on the blinkers and we make a firm decision that we assign a lot into the shadowland. But then suddenly it surprises us from left field and we are taken over by our impulse!

If, however, you open yourself to yourself and you know: *'I have many voices, I have many sub-personalities, I have many aspects or many facets. Yes, they are not always in harmony; sometimes they are in conflict but if I give them a place at the table, if they all know that they'll get something to eat, then they calm down.'*

Remember the story of Sleeping Beauty? The father and mother are so proud of the birth of their beautiful daughter that host a big party and invite everyone to celebrate. Everyone apart from a spiteful fairy whom no-one liked. No-one wants someone like that at a party. But she turns up anyway she puts a curse on the baby. Then the story unfolds.

It's always dangerous to exclude. You have the return of the repressed. Whatever we don't want to know about ourselves doesn't just fade away. It's moves under the carpet. It's moves behind the walls. It will manifest sooner or later.

So in order to be at ease with oneself, one actually turns and welcomes the richness of our existence as an unfolding, dynamic participant in a world which is beyond control but not out of control. It's not in my control but neither is it chaotic. It is patterns in which, if I'm present, I can find the balance. I find the fulcrum point and by my own flexibility and dynamic nature I take my place; sometimes expanding, sometimes contracting; sometimes full of happiness, sometimes full of sadness. Each of these is valid. Why should we not be sad? Why should we not be lonely sometimes? Loneliness is a

flavour. It's a colour on a pallet. What does it taste like? It's not poisonous. If you believe it's poisonous you can start to feel persecuted. Actually, what is this sadness? *'I am alone.'* *'I am unloved.'* What is that feeling? I am. It's all present, the being is here. The current flavour is 'unloved'. What is that? There's a place for it. If you give it its place it will vanish, because 'being unloved' is a movement of the mind, a movement of sensation and feeling.

Offering hospitality to whatever is arising actually and paradoxically allows it to go.

If you sit in meditation you will find your thoughts are always changing. Feelings are always changing. Sensation in the body is always changing. It's only when we are immersed in our narrative, which is clunky and solidifying, that we stabilise notions about ourselves. *'I'm hopeless.'* *'I can't do that.'* *'I don't know how you do it, I couldn't do that.'* We sit inside that narrowing definition and because we know this about ourselves we avoid the situation that give us a chance to try. *'Oh, I wouldn't be as good as you. I'm not going to do it, because you will laugh at me.'* How much of our life have we diminished out of this fruitless anxiety, endlessly comparing and contrasting. It doesn't matter what other people can do. If we block our own life force, if we hide the richness of ourself from ourself, we are also hiding it from other people. And we do it out of embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride ... because we are not sure if we will get it right. So the evaluatory, judgemental approach, which, in a sense, can only be applied to real entities, becomes our imprisoning directive.

Where *are* these real entities? *'I'm like this.'* How do you know? Again and again in the practice of psychotherapy we see people imprisoned in core negative beliefs. Out of the family matrix or events that have happened in life, people come to believe that they are useless or stupid or unlovable and so on. That brief transient thought, repeated, rises with its semantic glue and appears to tell the whole truth about someone. *'I can't.'* The libido or the prana or the chi, the life energy, collapses on the basis of such a transient thought.

The key point, in our mediation or in our therapy, is starting to trust that we can be more present in the moment: that the accumulations of knowledge and information that we have from the past can be re-framed or re-identified as potentials or tools or resources that we can call upon if necessary. We will only know if it's necessary, however, if we see what's there.

Imagine owning a toolbox with different kinds of spanners and screwdrivers. You look at a screw and you decide if it has a star head, a slot head or a Phillips head and then you select the appropriate screw driver to fit. The screw comes first, not that you especially like using a particular screwdriver. *"My father used to use it all the time and then when he was old he gave it to me. It's the best gift he ever gave me so I always have to use this one!"* No, you don't. Look at the screw. If it doesn't fit then use one of the many other tools you have in your toolbox.

So the royal road to happiness and relaxation is not to believe the stories you tell yourself about yourself, but to look at the world, to look at your unfolding potential. Don't come to a premature conclusion. Don't mobilise on the basis of assumption and prediction. Just see what is there and feel your response. Allow the full reception of the situation to evoke the widest possible range of responses in yourself and — you find yourself being right there in the moment!

It's that easy, yet it's difficult to do. Why? Because we won't let go of what we know.

To be at ease in ourselves with others, let go of what we know and be available for what is. That is our ongoing work.