

# THE WONDER OF BEING

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[Following on from what was said to introduce James to the audience.

Well, that was a chance for you all to hear something about me. The central question however is, *"When you know something about someone, do you know anything at all?"*

## LIVING IN A WORLD OF STORIES

We live in a world of narrative or stories, very seductive and very powerful stories. All of us can tell the story of our life in different ways, accentuating some aspects and hiding others. Of course we also live in other peoples' minds as stories. When we meet people we build up pictures about them. Sometimes this seems to be illuminating, *"Ah ha! Now I understand what that person is like."* but it is also a filtration, because the more we 'know' about people the more

we perceive them through the template which we've already developed, rather than seeing them directly.

Despite this, we continue to carry the notion that we can see people directly. We think that, *"If I get more information about you, I will see you more accurately and so I can get closer to you."* But can you ever be close to someone? You sit in a little restaurant, gazing into the eyes of the beloved. They are gazing back into your eyes. You seem to be in the same place at the same time. But is that true? You are trying to make sense of your experience and a large part of your experience is interpretation. Interpretation means to put something in the middle, to put something in between. That is to say, our experience of the other is mediated by the methods, the memories, the thoughts and the theoretical constructs that we use as the tools and the vehicle for interpretation.

When we know someone and we think about them, we might feel that we have some insight into how they are. We think that our penetrating knowledge about them is giving us a kind of x-ray, a deeper vision, into them. But perhaps it's just an x-ray of ourselves? What we make of the world is what **WE** make of the world. So if we want to find out who someone else is, first of all we have to find out who **WE** are.

When babies are first discovered to be growing inside a mother's body, already there are stories, hopes and fears, doubts, hesitations, excitements and so on. Before the baby comes out of the mother's body a space, maybe a room or at least a little cot, has been prepared for it. But a whole conceptual system has also been created – different ideas about how to take care of the baby. Maybe you want to do it just the way your mother did it; maybe you want to do it exactly the opposite way from how your mother did it. In any case, thoughts are there. Even before the baby has been wrapped in its little blanket, it's been wrapped in thoughts, expectations, hopes and fears. These thoughts have been communicated to other people as well and thus the basis of a narrative is set in place.

From the buddhist point of view, the reason why we examine our thoughts in this way is to appreciate just how much mental activity we have going on. When we walk down the street, we interpret what we see. We do it through the language that we've learned. We look at things in terms of familiar and unfamiliar. When things are familiar we don't need to pay so much attention to them. When something is unfamiliar, it catches our attention. And some feeling tone goes along with that – maybe fear, maybe excitement, maybe concern – setting off whole chains of signification.

## HOW TO APPEAR NORMAL

Our capacity to generate thoughts harmonious with the patterning of other people's thoughts is how we take our place in the world and become identified as normal. There are a lot of advantages in being perceived as normal. You have a degree of invisibility, which can reduce self-consciousness. We feel okay. We're just bopping around doing our life as it is. We can mobilise our interpretive thoughts and communicate them to other people and the efficiency of the connectivity of that gives us a sense of being valid. We feel a kind of clarity – we can make

sense of what is going on. Moment by moment, events are arising and we string these like beads onto a thread, the thread of time, and the thread of our sense of our self, our basic kind of ethos.

In this way days go by, years go by and then life is over. We look back and think, *"Oh! it hasn't been so bad. I remember I used to do that. Oh, and it was wonderful in those days!"* These are echo stories. Although we no longer have direct access to the things we used to do when we were very young when the memory arises, it reassures us that we are who we are.

For me, I remember climbing trees. I can remember running up hills in Scotland. These are very pleasurable thoughts for an old man! Now I have no desire to climb a tree but the fact that I remember climbing a tree becomes incorporated into my sense of self. It helps me to ignore the fact that not only do I not want to climb trees, but actually I **CAN'T** climb trees any longer. The past is gone; I can't go back into it. By the miracle of storytelling, however, I can wrap these memories around myself.

This is one of the ways that we ignore the fact of our death. We are alive for a while; we are healthy for a while; we don't know if we're going to be very sick before we die. We have plans for the future and maybe they will never be fulfilled but we can inhabit these plans. We inhabit memories of the past, plans for the past and plans for the future.

That sort of inhabitation is easy. What is more problematic is how to inhabit **THIS** moment. Because what is this moment? *"Oh! Let me consult my memory bank."* I don't know what this is until I tell this what it is.

The world – and ourselves as part of the world – manifest as reflections of our own projection. In that way, we create the world out of our storytelling:

"I have just come to Berlin from London." – This is meaningful and meaningless.

"I live in London." – Actually, I live in a small flat in one small part of London. I have lived in London for many years, but maybe ninety per cent of the streets I've never walked down. I don't know what London is, but I live there.

"Now I come to Berlin." – I know the airport. I know where the toilets are in the airport – that's important. Then I get into a car and we drive along some streets, and now I'm here.

So, I'm in Berlin. Berlin is an idea. You can be in the idea of Berlin. But you can't be in the city of Berlin. You can only be in a street or in a building or sitting on a chair. Where is the street in Berlin? Where is this seat in Berlin? This seat is at the edge of a street in Berlin. And where is Berlin? It is a consensual fantasy. We are all inducted into the hallucination by using the sign 'Berlin' that we have created for ourselves. "Oh, Berlin is fine! Now I know where I am." This

sign, this name Berlin, is very reassuring. I know where I am. And it has a little parallel, on the inside.

“Who am I?”

“I am me. I have always been me.”

“Who are you?”

“I am me. I am in Berlin, and I am me.”

This is a very effective way of being intelligently stupid.

### FIXED CONCEPTS WITH TRANSITORY CONTENT

We use language to rest in a concept and to make use of the concept and it is as if the concept is referring to something very precise.

An everyday example: When we meet people we greet them by asking, “*How are you?*” They reply, “*I’m fine*”, or “*I’m a little bit tired*”, or “*I’ve been a little bit sick*”...

The term ‘*I*’ acts as a container, and like the glass I was holding earlier, it can have many different contents. Over the course of a day, I could say I was tired, energised, hungry, happy, sad and so on.

How can I be all of these things?

I **am** tired, but I'm not actually **being** tired, because it's passing through. I would have to say that my being tired is transitory and yet I have a felt sense that ‘*I*’ continue through time. So I might accept that the content of what I call ‘*I*, me, myself’ is transitory and changing due to circumstances, but ‘*I*’ continue.

So you are you. Who am I? Right now I am somebody who is sitting on a strange seat in Berlin.

In the same way that someone introduced me to you all at the beginning of this talk, so we are used to introducing ourselves. It is as if what we say about ourselves is true and it **is** true, momentarily but it is as if when I make a statement about myself – which is only true due to a particular meeting of causes and circumstances – that by owning that statement, by inhabiting that statement, I have a little tension in my throat. This is saying something about me. Generally speaking, I don't think of myself in terms of my throat. If I apply for a job, I don't refer to it on my CV. But now I am feeling a little something, and so my throat is getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and I can identify with it more and more.

This is only possible if this sign, this signifier of the first person singular, is empty.

Maybe I have a cold. That is possible because there is space for me to have a cold. If ‘*I*’ was completely defined by my saying, “*I am in Berlin*” then there would be no space for me to have a

cold as well since, *"I'm in Berlin. That's me, that's enough, that's who I am."* But I can edit and organise the contents of myself according to a hierarchy.

[Whining voice] *"I don't care where I am, Berlin or wherever. I've got a cold! I'm not well, and because I'm old, my mummy's dead now. But luckily I have Fisherman's Friend cough sweets. No, I'm not a fisherman, but it's my friend."*

The self is like an accordion, expanding and contracting moment by moment. We can have a full identification with something, and then it's gone.

## LOCATION AND FUNCTION ARE RELATIONAL

Our topic tonight is the nature of space and time and how we inhabit that. Being in Berlin gives a sense of location. Berlin is located inside Germany; it's like a subsystem niched inside the wider system of Germany. Niched within the system of Berlin are many different subsystems. These systems can be the regions, the local areas which have their own history, their own kind of culture, the kind of cafes they have in them, the kind of shops they have in them, how people behave in the parks and so on.

Location is always relational. We work out where a place is through its relation to other places, just as we work out the meaning of a word through its relation with other words. It's called into function by its juxtaposition with other words. That is to say, the function of place, of time and of language depend on interaction and relationship.

In buddhism this is referred to as dependent co-origination. The basic formulation is that on the basis of *this*, *that* arises. Different circumstances give rise to movements. For example, in England we have a royal family. When babies are born in the royal family, they are given a name. And then you find that many hundreds of thousands of people name their children with the same name as the royal child. They might not be intending to replicate a pattern, but they find that name suddenly has some added value.

So that gives us a sense that function is relational. There's no point to run a bakery if no one buys your bread. Consumer (or commodity) capitalism is the exchange of social relatedness mediated through money and the transfer of goods. These days we are having a problem with deflation. People are not buying enough, not spending enough money. Being anxious about the future, we want to hang on to what we have. This makes sense for the individual, but it's bad news for the general economy.

Our lives are developed through interaction. On one level, this isn't very difficult to see since it's everywhere. Yet somehow we carry this sense that there is an essence to **ME**. We look back on our lives – we see all the many different situations we've been in and all the many different things that we've done – and they're gone. But I'm here. What is this essence of 'I'? Is it really like the glass? Is there some substantial thing deep inside us, some core essence?

In the buddhist tradition this is referred to as *atmagraha* (Sanskrit) or *dagdzin* (Tibetan). It means grasping or holding on to this sense of an essence or an entity or an 'I'. *Atma* and *Dag* can both mean a self or a person. They mean 'I,' but they also refer to the sense of an inherent

self-nature, because when we say 'I,' we're talking about something that seems to have an essence, some true, substantial core.

## THE JOY OF UNPREDICTABILITY

Actually, the joy of my life is when I'm in flow. You meet a friend, and you have an interesting conversation, and all kinds of thoughts, feelings and sensations arise, and it's very lovely. You make yourself available to the as yet unknown of becoming.

When we feel depressed or anxious and we want to cut off from the world, we're experiencing states that are in some ways more predictable. *"I'm not doing very well. It's not getting any better. I'm just the same."* But it's not the same. "But it feels like the same; and it's shit."

Life is better when you don't know who you are. When you have worked out who you are and what you have to do, that's a sign that you have a boring job.

So here is something very slippery: this sense of *I* as a continuing function, as a mode of participation or an essence, a mode of becoming or a mode of being.

In terms of meditation practice this is very important. Because as long as we hold on to a notion that we exist as a substance – that we have a substantial sense of self – we are condemned to two things. The first is stupidity, because we are not substantial, and we're not reliable. Sicknesses occur for many people, suddenly.

I was listening on the radio to a young man being interviewed in Aleppo in Syria. He was describing how he had heard knocking on his door, and ignored it. There was more knocking so he thought he'd better open the door. There were five policemen, and they took him away to the central police station, down to the basement. It was very unpleasant. Some shadow had suddenly run across his life. Nobody saw him being taken and nobody knew where he was just like that, his life is transformed. This happens a lot in the world. What we think we have, vanishes and our existence is redefined according to the new circumstances.

That's why the idea that I have some reliable substance to hold on to – some solid basis, a me-ness of me – is, from the buddhist point of view, a form of stupidity. And the reason it's stupid is because we then have to spend a lot of our life protecting something which is not actually there.

We cannot exist without other people. We participate through culture, which we didn't invent. We wear clothes which we neither designed nor made. We eat food and cook it according to recipes that we didn't invent, and we didn't grow the food either. Everything I have belongs to the world. We take our language from the world. We breathe in the air of the world. If we didn't have the air coming into our lungs, we would die.

So what is the in-dividual, the un-divided one? An illusion. An illusion that there is something permanent which is I, me, myself. This self is constellated around the sign of *I*. I speak to you. I speak to you. I recognise you. This is what happens to a baby. The mother tells the baby lots of things about the baby. *"You're mummy's little darling."* This meaning has been wrapped around the baby and massaged inside it. It comes to believe, "I am me."

We respond to our name if someone calls it. I am James. I don't know why other people are called James; they are all frauds. 'James' is just a convention that was popular for a while. The use of the word 'James' reminds me that I was born at a certain time in Scotland when the name 'James' was popular. 'James' is a social formation, carried for a while by a person. But I can take it and massage it into me to make *James* the sign of myself.

## BELIEVING IN WHAT ISN'T THERE

You exist for me as the images I have about you. And I exist for me as the images and memories and hopes and fears I have about myself. When I say that there are hopes I have about myself this seems to be referring to someone who has hopes, but maybe it's the hopes I have about me that makes the 'me'. Mickey Mouse is real for people who believe in Mickey Mouse. It's real, because we believe in it. Many people, especially young boys, play war games. There is nothing substantial or true inside the X-Box. We switch on, the game starts, and we participate. Through our participation, the rules of the game come to be the rules of our life. If we accumulate enough points we can buy a bigger gun. If we have a bigger gun, we kill more people and we get yet more points. Hey! this is the free market economy.

We believe in something which isn't there. We know this from theatre, from movies and from novels. Someone writes a story, and we believe in the story. While we are reading it, it is as if, for us, the characters are real. They make us happy, sad and so on. This is very interesting. Something which we may say is not real, appears real to us. Moreover, we behave as if it were real.

This is a metaphor for the sense of self. Our individuality is a belief. From the buddhist point of view it is a false belief, which arises from ignorance.

This is not to say that we don't exist at all. The Buddha's teaching is the middle way between extremes. One extreme is to say, '*I really exist, this is me, you should take me seriously,*' and the other is to say, '*Oh! it's all illusion, so it doesn't really matter what happens.*' When you hear people talking in that way, you should offer them the hospitality which is available in Syria: take a pair of pliers and pull out their nails. Ah, something is happening. It doesn't mean that it's real. It is an illusion, but illusion is not a state of homogenisation, like how milk is prepared nowadays. Illusion has many flavours. *We* are the many flavours of illusion. Illusion means like a mirage in the summer. On a hot day, you're driving along, and you see the water shimmering in front of you. You can't say it's really there, because you drive through it and there's no water. Yet you can't say it's not there at all, because you see it. And it has an impact on you, depending on where you are. If you're driving along and you have a bottle of water beside you, the mirage of water may not matter too much, but if you're traveling in the Sahara Desert, the mirage is much more tantalising. That is to say, due to causes and conditions, illusions can seem more or less real.

The power of the object is the power of the mind. Buddhism is not a materialist view. Of course, if I bang my head on the wall I will have pain but that doesn't mean that the wall really exists. We take a brick and we hit it with a hammer. Huh! So who's big and strong now? We take the

brick along to the laboratory. We take out some small pieces and look at them in a microscope. You can see the logic of this: to take it down to its atomic structure, subatomic structure and so on, and we find that there is no solid, substantial reality there. The solidity of the wall is generated out of the patterning of energy and that energy can be released or held condensed for a while, but there is no intrinsic essence in the brick. Due to causes and conditions, it remains here. Due to other causes and conditions, it will not be here.

That is to say, the brick is not internally defined. It has no intrinsic self-nature. The brick is the *showing* of the interaction of many causal phenomena. Then after some time, these factors alter, and it starts to crumble.

So what you have is appearance which is empty of essence or internal definition. The brick is a cultural phenomena. Especially so in a place like this dharma centre which depends on people's interest in buddhism; people give money and buildings develop and so on.

Now, we might say, that the brick is made from earth; that's what it comes from. You find a suitable clay soil, you dig it up, you pack it into shapes and you put it in a kiln. But somebody did that because they had an idea. The mother of the brick is the idea. Without the idea of making bricks, there would be no bricks.

We manifest the mind. We think of different ways of living, different ways of eating food and so on. Therefore, we go to different shops. It's not that a thought arises inside me and takes me out into the world as if there were two domains: myself and the world. Rather, ideas are moving in the field of experience. And the field of experience has no boundary in it. Any boundaries which appear to be in it are generated by our concepts.

As I was indicating with my throat earlier, bits of our body become more or less visible according to the arising of sensation. Due to learning, we can come to know that our body is a sort of continuous basis for our life.

In the realm of psychotherapy people talk about *embodying* one's experience, but from the buddhist point of view, what we want to do is *en-mind* your body. So, generally we might think that the mind is in the body, but from the buddhist point of view, the body is in the mind. We sit here in our bodies, looking out of our eyes. We experience the walls, people's heads and clothes and so on. We also experience our body. Now, looking at your body and feeling my body is not the same. That is to say, I don't have direct access to the sensation arising in your body. I can take that as a basis for thinking that we are truly separate: you have your life, your luck, your experience, and I have mine.

But who are you? You are my experience. Whoever you are for you, I have no access to. All I have access to is 'you for me'. 'You for you' is mystery.

'You for me' is what I relate to. When I'm talking with you, I'm talking to the 'you for me'. That's not the same as saying that I'm just talking to myself. That is to say, I can't just project some whole new identity on to you – although lovers often like to do this, to transform their partner into



the one who they could really love – but it doesn't work. The 'you for me' is not me alone. It is a quality of experience which arises through our interaction.

What about the 'I for me'? What status does this have? I exist; it's true, but what do I exist as? Experience. We are alive; we are here. We know we are here because we are experiencing being here. That is to say, the proof of *my* experience is the experience of 'you and me'. If I close my eyes and try to go inside, I'm just in me. But it's not possible, because part of being *me* is to have a bum, and my bum is sitting on a mat, and it has some pressure. So I have sensation from the interaction of my body on the environment. We are always somewhere. That is to say, our experience is interactive. I can move the glass around on the table, because the glass has to be somewhere. It's the same glass wherever it goes – at least in theory. If you want to live in theory, that is true, but if I put the glass inside the cup, this alters the way in which the light is moving through the glass and through the water and so it looks different.

### CAN'T PIN [IT] DOWN

This is the central point for buddhist meditation and is very, very important.

*"Listen, we all know it's the same glass wherever it is."* Knowing this will help you function in the world, since you're not stupid, but it will make meditation impossible.

When the glass is put into the cup, it looks different. I *see* it differently. Is that primary or secondary? If it's secondary, the glass is the glass; it just looks different. That's one view of life and in buddhism it's called the view of samsara, of holding on to an essence. With that view I have definite knowledge: the glass is the glass, Berlin is Berlin, I am me. No problem.

But! Now it looks different. *It* looks different. Let's, as the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl would say, put a bracket around 'it'. So instead of us saying, *"It looks different,"* we have, *"Looks different."* We look, we see. *"Oh! Looks different."* This is now perception with less interpretation. That is to say, I'm relaxing my imputation that there is a real phenomenon, as a substantial entity present in front of me which is continuing through time but displaying variable qualities according to circumstances.

'Looks different' means 'keep looking'. What's it going to do now? We don't know. Because if there isn't an 'it' that's going to do different – if there's just different-ing, just situationality – then we have an unfolding display of the complex field of experience.

All the buddhist texts speak to this. From the simplicity of the *Dhammapada* where it says that mind is chief, through analytic examination in abhidharma, through teachings on emptiness in *The Heart Sutra*, through madhyamika philosophy, through tantra, and through dzogchen, it's always on this point. ]

### CONTINUOUS, UNDIVIDED SHIMMERING FIELD OF EXPERIENCE

By being present in experience with minimal mediation through the accumulated conceptual elaborations we've built up from school, from reading, from life interactions and so on – by doing

this, we give the world a chance to show itself. Also, we give ourselves a chance to show ourselves. Instead of telling the world what it is, telling ourselves who we are, we relax our infatuation, our mobilisation. We become available. We can receive. What are we receiving? The continuous, undivided shimmering field of experience.

—Where is this? It's always here.

—When is this? It's always now.

Within this, when we have this clarity established, many different concepts can arise. We can still go to work, we still know how to make a cup of tea. But we're not having to make sense of the world, to work out what is going on.

In the mahayana tradition this is referred to as moving from relative truth to absolute truth. That is to say, we start to experience intrinsic meaning, the meaning which is always present in every moment. This natural clarity of the mind allows the energy of the mind – which creates all of human culture and so on – it allows all of that energy to move without being blocked, but to move in the service of connectivity.

That is to say, we're not speaking and studying and inquiring in order to establish truth. Truth is already here.

### AVAILABLE FOR CONNECTION

So, speech is about connectivity or, if you prefer, compassion. When we relate to other people, the quality of contact that we have establishes something – for a moment. When we feel that somebody really sees us and opens to us, we also open a little bit. The gaze of the other, if it reaches our heart, is like having a good plumber who opens up a blocked pipe so that connectivity can flow without impediment.

Because we are wary, a little tentative, a little anxious. In London, when you walk down the street or sit in the underground, nobody gives you eye contact. Sometimes, in the supermarket, you might see an old person exchanging a few sentences of conversation with the person on the check-out desk; you can see how they come alive for a moment because someone is giving them attention. Then they walk off with their shopping trolley, and a lighter step. As a culture we can easily forget how to be available.

The heart is a space and when we respond from the heart, when we connect with someone else, we meet the space of their heart. The dzogchen tradition talks about 'meditating sky to sky'. It means that the centre of our being is not a *thing*; it is a space, a space which is fecund, which gives rise to its infinite potential, to whatever is required. There is no end to this generosity of the heart.

### RELAXING THE EGO

The bit of us that gets tired is our ego. The ego is condemned to work out gain and loss, like and not-like. The ego is pulsating to the polarities of experience. Because of its lack of own-ground and its forgetfulness of its actual ground, the forgetfulness which is the basis of its sense of

individuality and isolation, the ego is always trying to work out what is going on: "*Where am I? Is this good? Am I getting enough advantage out of it?*" But of course the ego is very unstable since it actually has no core or centre or essence.

That is why the function of meditation practice is not to destroy the ego, but rather to allow it to relax and take its place as part of the function of connectivity. In order to function in the world, we need to have discernment. Discernment means we can tell the difference between whether a tomato is ripe or not. Discernment is attention to the details of the world and an evaluation of the relative, situational importance of these qualities.

When the ego gets narrow, it means it has a small recipe book, and so it can't do very much. If the tomato is green, you make chutney. If the tomato is very ripe and squishy, you can put it in soup or make a sauce. "*But I only know tomato salad.*" This is the problem of ego.

### MOVING WITH THE FLOW OF BECOMING

Buddhism, with its many methods and teachings, is about getting a bigger recipe book. The essential point, however, is that we are not cooking to make *something* – cooking is how we participate in the ceaseless flow of becoming.

The paradox is that the more we relax our sense of self, the more we can become many different kinds of people, which allows us to respond to different people at different times in different ways. Our relating is then connected with the actuality of what is in front of us, with as little mediation as possible through the constructs that we have developed in our own mind. According to the particularity of the person at this particular time, some ingredient, some knowledge that we have or some skill can come through us because the ingredients are *called forth* by the shaping of the moment. We're not manifesting some pre-figured agenda or game-plan.

Again, this highlights the way of dharma, particularly of dzogchen, which is to move cognition from its central position as the guarantor of the validity of the ego into a side-position, whence it may be called upon if necessary.

If we lead with the knowledge that we have built up, a solidification takes place. It is by not-knowing, by being in the place of the servant, by being available, that the space of the heart allows the energy of awareness to flow through this body as part of the unfolding field of experience.

### A SIMPLE DESCRIPTION OF ORDINARY DAILY LIFE

In this way we come to experience that each of us is truly the centre of the world, not in a narcissistic, self-referential way, but in terms of the actuality of experience. We (our mind, our awareness, our presence) are space and time inseparable and the past and the future move around us.

In tantra, Padmasambhava, this great yogi who brought tantric dharma into Tibet, symbolises or manifests awareness, open, spacious awareness without substantial essence. He sits, peaceful, and around him many dakinis, energetic goddess figures, are moving around in the sky. They effortlessly carry out whatever work is required. This is our thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations. All that we have becomes available to move according to need. Rather than establishing a private castle of security we live in the non-duality that shows the inseparability of space and awareness.

The terms that you can read about in buddhist books then start to make sense: awareness and emptiness, clarity and emptiness, sound and emptiness, appearance and emptiness. We begin to see that this is just a simple description of ordinary, daily life.

So, now it is time to end. A thought arose in my mind, and out of the basis of that, I am now going. Being here has been a pleasure. Thank you and goodnight.