
The Experience of Self-Liberation

James Low
Public Talk in the Shambhala Meditationszentrum, Vienna
7th June 2012
Transcribed by Kathleen Brady and prepared by Rob Dowling

"We will look at the nature of attachment, how we identify with transient experience as if it were something real and reliable. We will look at ways of releasing phenomena and resting in natural awareness." - from the pre-talk publicity.

Excerpt

Let's say you are going rock climbing. You are looking for where your hand is going, for where your feet are going and as long as the climb is not too difficult for you, you can accomplish that. If halfway up you start to think, "Oh, I am far from the ground below. I have a fragile body with bones that can easily break, I think I'm a little scared", that thought will open the door to many other thoughts! That's when climbing becomes very difficult and dangerous because you have interrupted yourself in the immediacy of being present with this stone surface. It is very similar in meditation. By being completely present with what is occurring, there is a simplicity which protects us against the elaboration of thoughts.

Contents

Stories that we tell ourselves	2
What buddhism means by ignorance	3
Openness and manifestation	5

So we can jump straight in! I'm sorry I'm late, but maybe it gave you some time for you to find your true nature!

Our topic tonight is about the nature of self-liberation. This is a very important theme in dzogchen, and it's particularly useful at times like this when there is a lot of anxiety due to the economic situation and so on. When troubles come strongly, we often feel we should do something, because clearly if there is a problem, probably there is a solution; if we work hard and we get a good solution, then the problem is solved. But of course the problem factory has plenty more in production. Since we were born there have been problems. At first we weren't aware, but our own birth gave our parents plenty of problems.

Generally we have the idea that we need to mobilise ourselves to develop our sense of agency, of individual capacity to engage with, and find a way through, the various obstacles that we encounter. What is an individual agency? After travelling here I am a bit thirsty; I have the capacity to lift the water and put it to my lips and drink it. Who is drinking the water? I am. So I now confirm to myself that I am still capable of lifting a glass of water. The simple act of doing something like that is not so simple, because it's also establishing and confirming my sense of being somebody who acts on the world to achieve things. That is to say, there is a double move here: I exist in the world yet I also act on the world, and it is through my action on the world that I develop my own sense of individual identity.

All day long each of us is making many different choices. We make these choices on the basis of the options that we perceive. Sometimes we can see that other people see options in a situation that did not occur for us at all. In that sense, although we share a world with other people, we each have our own individual take on it which is an expression of our habits, dispositions created by all our life experiences, influences from previous lives, the tendencies of karma and so on. This sense of an individual self is, in the Tibetan tradition, grounded in the sense of consciousness. In Tibetan, consciousness is called *nam-par she-pa*. *Nam-par* gives the sense of a shape or a form and *she-pa* means to know. So consciousness is a capacity to know particular things. We can know what colour the walls are, we can know what day of the week it is, we can know what gender we are.

Stories that we tell ourselves

It's essentially a way of knowing about experience because it's very strongly linked with narrative. We each have many stories we tell ourselves, stories of our origins, our likes and dislikes and so on. These many story lines get woven together into a thread which then moves through the world picking up experiences, like beads on a necklace. Our consciousness is concerned with involvement: we go towards the world, but we also experience the world as coming towards us. Certain things impinge on us, strike us, and have an impact on us so our consciousness is our ordinary way of making sense of the world, and also making sense of ourselves. This storyline tradition is of course handed from generation to generation. When we are small we are exposed very strongly to our parents' stories, stories about what you should eat, how you should eat, stories about grandparents, our great-grandparents who are dead and so on. These create the shaping, the topology of our own individual world.

The important point here is to see that our experience of the world is mediated through stories, through beliefs. But very often because we identify with these stories, they seem natural and real to us, they become invisible to us and are just how the world is. This is why seeing what one is up to is quite difficult. In the western traditions of psychotherapy, we make use of someone else's mind to provide some reflection for us on how we are, and that helps to illuminate the various ways in which we get lost. In the meditative traditions of Tibet, it's much more that we have to learn to observe ourselves. If we were only a consciousness, that would be very difficult; it would be like a dog trying to catch its own tail, because the only way the dog can catch its own tail is to bite itself. If we simply reflect on ourselves, we try to illuminate our existence via thoughts; we are using the illuminating power of a thought to illuminate other thoughts.

There is a great deal of emphasis on this in the preparatory practices of buddhism through studying the abhidharma literature and the madhyamika commentaries and so on. One can get

an intellectual understanding that provides some degree of illumination. The difficulty with that is that we are holding onto an idea which we say represents clarity but what is the clarity of a thought? What is the nature of a thought? We all have had many millions of thoughts but somehow it is quite difficult to talk about them. Clearly our thoughts have an impact on us: they strongly influence how we move into the world to be with others, they are largely the means by which we make sense of our own experience and yet they are almost like ghosts. As soon as you see them they slip away.

Thoughts have their main power for us when they come up behind us and grab us and move through us. I'm sure we have all had the experience of being caught up in thoughts. Then it's as if we ourselves as a personality are like an empty glove puppet, and the thought comes inside and activates us so that we behave in different ways. This is quite amazing; that something so temporary, so ephemeral, so ungraspable should have so much power. Thoughts are like the wind, they blow us this way, that way, and somehow we are running after our own thoughts, trying to explain and justify why we did what we did. So if somebody is doing me, and that somebody isn't me, this is very worrying!

In the dzogchen tradition they would try to explain this, or unpack this in terms of the movement of energy and the presence of awareness; that the stream of thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, and our aesthetic experience of the world through the senses, all of this is impermanent movement. Like a river that's flowing, it has the continuity of the flow but no continuity of substance. We also have an awareness that on a good day, when we have more relaxation, we can be more aware of this ceaseless flow of experience. But when we are aware of what's going on, I would suggest to you that that's a very different experience from looking at your own hand. Clearly we can stand in relation to our hand. Although we say that my hand is part of me, it's very easy to have the experience that I am looking at my hand. I have a sense that there is me here inside this skin bag looking at part of myself. That very duality of the subject looking at an object has a kind of boomerang effect because the object is quite easy to see, the object has a definite form. Every time we look at the object, we impute, we imagine that somehow the subject inside has a similar concrete, established identity. That is to say, just as my hand seems to exist out here, so my mind seems to exist somehow in a similar concrete way.

What buddhism means by ignorance

This very usual, very normal experience is what is called ignorance in buddhism. One of the reasons why it's quite dangerous for us is that it condemns us to constantly try to shore up, to consolidate our sense of self. You may have had the experience as a child of going to the seaside and building sand castles. If you build them with very wet sand, then as you try to build them up they just dissolve back down by themselves. Our ego self is very like that. Maybe in the morning you have some good experience and you feel happy and strong, then in the afternoon you get some bad news, or you make a big mistake and instantly the happy person of the morning is gone and some new, self-pitying sad person has arrived. This is often what we are experiencing.

The problem that this kind of attitude of attachment creates is that in our desire to make ourselves strong and real and reliable, it becomes difficult to realise that we are not strong and real and reliable. We have never been strong and real and reliable. Yet somehow we have been able to live our lives, often with the thought oh, if only I was clearer, if only I was

calmer, if only I could control my emotions, then my life would be better. This developmental attitude is also very dangerous because in wanting to be better than we are now, we don't attend to how we are now. What is the actual presenting phenomenology of our existence? Thoughts, feelings, sensations coming together and parting, these create the many patterns, gestures and moments of our lives like a very complex kaleidoscope in which with every turn a new pattern is made. But not only that, the small coloured pieces which are inside the kaleidoscope are also changing.

If this is really the case, if the constituents of what we take ourselves to be are impermanent, then what is reliable? We know that the constituents are not reliable, but we keep trying to make them reliable. Why would that be? It is like somebody who was born on a hill farm where the land is very poor and they are having to plough with an old horse through the soil which is more than half made of stones. They spend all their youth doing this day after day. This is the life of a farmer; this is what the land is like. Then one day he persuades his father to take him down to the market. As they go down the hill they see these other fields: fields without stones, fields where things are growing very richly. We are like that; we are the stupid hill farmer. You won't get much to grow in the pebbly soil of the ego. Struggling and struggling to develop yourself, to get more qualities, things ripen for a while but then you have some setbacks and you become angry again and so on.

The key point is to see the difference between consciousness, the involved movement of the mind, and awareness – in Tibetan what's called *rigpa*, or the mind itself which is called *sem-nyid*. Our mind itself, when we look for it, is not something we can find. It's not a thing, it's not like a hand or the glass; it's something completely different. When we explore the immediacy of our presence, we are here having this experience, this experience is changing moment by moment and yet there is a continuity of the sense that I am having the experience. This I who is the experiencer can be immediately obscured by saying well, I am the experiencer. This feels right but it illuminates nothing. Who is the one I call I? This is not something esoteric; you don't need some elaborate initiation to explore this. In the very moment of being here, what is your being here-ness, this immediacy of being present? If it were filled with content, then moment-by-moment the content would be building up layer after layer. The mind is open and empty, and because of this it can fill itself and empty itself without effort. One moment of experience arises, and then it's gone. If we rest in that open awareness, the leaving of the thought leaves no trace. When we sit in our usual self and think oh, that was good; we grasp the experience and then layer our own interpretation on top of it. By standing in relation to the experience, by having an experience of the experience, you create a duality, which demands more work, whereas the filling and emptying of the mind happens very easily.

For example, let's say you are going rock climbing. You are looking for where your hand is going, for where your feet are going and as long as the climb is not too difficult for you, you can accomplish that. If halfway up you start to think, *"Oh, I am far from the ground below. I have a fragile body with bones that can easily break, I think I'm a little scared."* that thought will open the door to many other thoughts! That's when climbing becomes very difficult and dangerous because you have interrupted yourself in the immediacy of being present with this stone surface.

It is very similar in meditation. By being completely present with what is occurring, there is a simplicity which protects us against the elaboration of thoughts. We start to trust the natural clarity of our mind as being a more easy and efficient illuminator than the dependency on reflective thought. What is this clarity? It's the shimmering surface of the empty mind.

When we look for our mind we can't find a thing, nothing substantial is there, and yet here we are, this immediate presence; a presence which is immediately connected with everything. As you turn your head and look around the room, immediately everything presents itself. A lot of what is in this room doesn't need to be understood, you don't need an explanation or an interpretation if you stay close with your senses.

For example there is a banner on the wall here, with white, red, blue and orange backgrounds. If you look at that, and you go round the four quadrants, you can immediately experience that the impact of the red on you is different from the impact of the white. The blue and the white are not the same at all; not in their object form, but also not in, as it were, their subject experience. That is to say, perhaps we could trust our aesthetic response to the world, the immediacy of the world revealed through the senses, rather than always making our commentary about what's going on. From the point of view of meditation, the commentary obscures rather than reveals. It's not that it's wrong or bad to have explanatory narratives running in your head; it's just that they are very familiar. They are strongly invested with historical associations from your life and so they carry a particular kind of density which draws us towards them. That involvement in the particular thought and the movement of linking thoughts together becomes like a set of blinkers which cuts us off from the wider field of experience.

The aspect of ourselves which merges with experience is itself energy, it is not an entity. There are these two aspects, the openness of the unborn mind, our natural awareness, which immediately reveals what is here just as a mirror illuminates what's placed in front of it. Within this mirror-like clarity, we experience subject and object arising and tumbling and moving together. That is to say, our consciousness, our personal history, our tendencies, our associations, all of these are manifesting moments or points of energy, of coming into being but they don't remain. This is the meaning of the buddhist notion of 'no self'; no self doesn't mean that we don't exist at all, it means rather that we are not some-*thing*. You cannot know yourself in terms of your personality and your qualities because how we manifest in the world with others is situationally evoked. Very often if some strong experience happens, maybe the death of someone close to us, we are surprised at our own reaction, we find ourselves called into being in a way that we hadn't imagined. In your house you have got different kinds of possessions, books, music and so on; you can know very precisely the contents of your house, but you can't know the contents of your mind. The particular patterning of emotions and feelings are not created inside you by you working on your known ingredients, the way a chef in a kitchen can produce the same dish day after day. The bottom of our being is not a bottom; it is open and endless. We are not a container; we don't have a limited capacity. What limits our capacity is the focus of our attention. If you get very involved in one thing it becomes very important for you; life seems to form around that, then some new interest comes into place. In the course of our lives we have been many different people. This is possible because of the infinite potentiality of our own mind.

Openness and manifestation

Here we start to see these two aspects: the ungraspable openness of awareness or presence, and the ceaseless flow of our manifestation, our becoming different forms, different people, and different moods through our engagement in the world with others. Traditionally, understanding the first aspect is called wisdom, and the second aspect is called compassion. The more we relax and open and feel at home in that spaciousness, the less desperate our

lives become; we don't have so much of a territory to protect, so many private agendas. When we see directly that the mind itself is an indestructible presence, we don't have to protect it and we can be more open to how life is.

Since we were born our life has been like this anyway, moving hither and thither. Clearly if somebody is driving a car they should control what they are doing, but they are controlling the car in relation to the movement of the curve of the road, whether there are traffic lights or not, whether there are other cars, what speed they go at, how the other cars are being driven and so on. When we are controlling something, even controlling our bodies if we are walking down the pavement, that controlling is happening in the midst of a conversation as our bodies and the bodies of other people on the pavement are negotiating the space. Our being in the world, or rather our becoming in the world is co-emergent with all the other things which are arising. In seeing that we come into ourselves in relation to what else is going on, and that that can indicate if we look clearly that there is no private essence to ourselves inside, we can start to allow the experience to be what it is.

When I was young I shared a bicycle with my brother. When he was on the bicycle, I would be looking at him with a very sad face, and he would be smiling riding the bicycle. Then it would be my turn, I would be riding the bicycle with a big smile, and he would be looking at me with a sad face. At that age I didn't understand dependent co-origination, and I thought it was better to be happy than to be sad. One of the advantages of the practice of dharma is that you get to be more at home in being sad. Sadness is also interesting. Anger is interesting. Jealousy, pride, frustration, irritation, these are experiences that we have. What are they? Often we can hardly bear to look at them because we find them humiliating or embarrassing and we don't want them. Unfortunately we can't really stop them, so we just ignore them.

One of the aspects of meditation practice is to learn to be at home with however life is; that then brings with it a kind of satisfaction which is the self-contented, or at-ease feeling of awareness itself. Nothing is lacking, therefore we don't need to manipulate and get more of what we like, and less of what we don't like. Recently in the hospital where I work we have had many cuts in the service because of the economic situation and there is a lot of anxiety around. What I noticed was that most people don't want to be anxious. They think they are only anxious because something is wrong; 'If only these managers did their job better then I wouldn't have to be anxious.'

Of course that's very understandable, but what is anxiety? It's a feeling that this is not safe, this is not secure, this is not settled. But life is never secure or settled; it's an illusion to imagine that you are sorted. Friends turn into enemies, enemies turn into friends. Now we see that Russia and China are getting very close; for a long time they didn't like each other. That was one world. Now we have another world which could be very powerful in relation to many things, for example the supply of gas.

What is it that our world is resting on? Nothing at all. It rests on dreams, on ideas and these ideas change and move. If you put too much weight on thin ice, you will fall in. Buddhism would indicate that the whole of life is very thin ice. However, little birds can land on very thin ice. So rather than worrying that the ice is thin, maybe we have to learn to walk a little more lightly.

This is something we can do; start to see the power of the hopes, fears, expectations, and assumptions that we bring to situations. If we do that, then as experiences are arising and

passing, by being less afraid of them, we allow them to be themselves. They are what they are for a while, and then they are gone. If they were good, they go. If they were bad, they go. This is a basic principle of self-liberation. It means that all experience, whether it's the experience of what we take to be ourselves, or the experience that we take to be the environment around us, including other people, all of this is coming and going, coming and going. The fact that you know someone's name, the fact that you know what kind of coffee they like to drink, doesn't let you know how they are going to be the next time you see them.

Knowing about other people, accumulating knowledge is a way of settling our own anxiety; it doesn't give us access to the other person's immediate situation. If we want to know how someone is, we have to attend to them; we have to be present with them, and in order to do that, having too many assumptions and predictions of how they are going to be will not be helpful. Being open is not a way to be stupid. The immediate kind of knowing, of directly getting what's there, carries a richness of lived experience which is lacking from the mere moving around of bits of information about a situation. Self-liberation is always occurring; all phenomena whether we call it subject or object are arising and passing. This is obscured for us by the effort we make to try and secure the territory. So rather than trying harder, or trying to develop ourselves, the main task is simply to hang out with ourselves, to be present with ourselves as we are whatever we are. First we do that while sitting in meditation and we become aware of how powerful the tendency to control, to direct, to construct an acceptable sense of a personal self is. Gradually that effort can relax and we can see that the energy of correction of ourselves arises from a fundamental split or duality.

For example, we might say 'I don't like myself'. Such an interesting thing to be able to say: I have a 'myself' that is not very nice, and 'I' am stuck with 'myself'. At least with a partner you can divorce them! Some people imagine that they can divorce themselves by committing suicide; that is a very bleak and sad place to be. 'I' and 'myself', this is one movement: the 'myself' is the kind of debris or the accumulation of all the moments of becoming as manifestation, and the 'I', when we rest present with it, is the natural unborn presence of rigpa or awareness. When we look into the nature of the mind we see that it has no substance and no limit, it's not a thing; everything that arises is the radiance of the mind. The mind as the ground or open awareness and the mind as manifestation are inseparable, just like the sun and its rays. When we say 'I don't like myself', this is the expression of not understanding who we are, of trying to make manifestation occur according to some private template or map in our own head.

But these maps are always very limited; they are full of an inherent bias: I like this, I don't like that. The main thing that cures the troubled heart is to offer infinite hospitality to ourselves; but it's difficult to offer hospitality to somebody that you don't like. When you say to yourself I don't like to be anxious, I hate being jealous, I really don't want anybody to know that bit of me and so on, we have a whole checklist of aspects of ourselves that we would like to vanish. This is the real function of meditation: to offer us the opportunity to stay present with ourselves however we are, to relax the energy of reification and judgement, and just be present with whatever is there. Then what looks like something terrible: the five poisons – stupidity, jealousy, anger, pride and all the other afflictions - are revealed as the five wisdoms. Our openness to the world becomes a great protection which gives us a fearlessness to encounter whatever occurs. Self-liberation is not something that you have to do, it's rather something that we trust; we trust that by observing it is in fact the actual condition of our existence. What we take to be our personal individual self is not a thing, not something apart, but it's like a little current moving inside a big river.

Gathered here together, passing a short period of time together, our lives flow alongside each other, inside the big river of experience. Then shortly it will end and we start to move out of the door and the little sub-stream of your life will flow down other rivers. Sometimes we are aware that what constitutes the particular current that we are, is made of the same water as the river. In the mahamudra tradition, this is called the experience that everything has one taste. Sometimes we are aware more of the particular vibratory quality of our own current, our own little swishing movement, but this is a movement of water. Movement and stillness are inseparable, energy and the open ground are inseparable, the wave and the ocean are inseparable; the wave arises and goes back into the ocean. So moment-by-moment the radiance of existence manifests as the room, as each of us, and then vanishes. Then the next moment, and the next moment. In this way we can live with freshness all the time; there is nothing to be bored about because we are living exactly at the heart of time. In that way, everything is self-arising and self-liberating.