
Calm and Clear

James Low

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Transcribed by Sarah Allen

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Extracts

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...Can we trust our thoughts? Not at all. Thoughts are coming and going. They are movements of energy which create these beautiful patterns that seem to tell a true story. But it is a story which only exists in terms of dynamic movement...

...The purpose of the meditation is to support us in being more and more present as this open experienter, this pure awareness, which is always already there prior to every moment of transient experience...

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This evening we have a little time to look at some of the basic principles of buddhist meditation and I will structure it around these ideas of calm and clear. When things are calm it is easy to disturb them. When things are clear it is easy to dirty them, to make them lose their clarity. On an ordinary level calmness and clarity are very vulnerable states. This is because of the very nature of our existence.

From a traditional buddhist point of view the functioning basis of our existence, of how we operate as human beings, is to be caught up in an experience of duality: looking inside we experience 'ourselves', and looking outside we experience 'things' which are other. But of course, it is not quite as simple as that because sometimes when we look inside we find that we are other than who we feel and think ourselves to be; and sometimes when we look outside we feel that others are like ourselves, inseparable from ourselves as if they are part of ourselves. But even in these situations we have a movement of energy between two points, in which who we experience ourselves as being, in terms of our physical sensations, our concepts, our emotions, our memories, stands in relation to events that we encounter.

Normally we define ourselves in terms of our hopes and fears, our history, things that have happened to us, our likes and dislikes. We might introduce ourselves in terms of where we come from or what language we speak or what job we do or what our family structure is like. And these definitions are all relational; they mark out a movement of subject towards object, and object onto subject. So if you describe yourself as a mother or a daughter or a father or a son or a brother or a sister, they are all relational definitions. If you are a farmer or a teacher or doctor or a woodcarver your work stands in relation to the people who taught you how to do it, to the activity of your body on the materials, or in connection with other people and the economic system which purchases it from you. So actually our being is always a being in the world with others, co-created by the positioning and interests of others. And yet we hold a sense of our autonomy, our separateness, with a felt sense that we go out from 'me' towards the world, out towards the other.

Therefore, what we have is the actuality of an ongoing dynamic interaction of many factors, which is how we come into being, how we manifest moment-by-moment. But at the same time we have a narrative, a story, a felt experience that we exist separate from this, apart, as something which needs to be protected against the turbulence of these interactions. This is the buddhist notion of ignorance. That is to say, this is the actuality, how our lives actually are as this ongoing, dynamic, unstoppable and uncontrollable field of interaction, in which we participate whilst at the same time we make sense of it with a storyline which is actually distorting what is there. When we are in this form of ignorance, when we feel that 'I can define myself', 'I can know how I am', 'I can be self-defining', then I am faced with the task of trying to manipulate my interactions with the world, to hold onto my stability which feels under attack.

We can see this pattern written on a big canvas with the activity of America at the moment. When I was coming over on the plane there was a report that George Bush had been meeting with European leaders and he was confronted with statistics which said that a high percentage of people in Europe see America as the greatest destabilising force in the world. George Bush was very angry and upset and he said: "*We are doing everything possible to bring peace to the world – we are the good guys!*" In his vision there are 'good' people and

'bad' people and if you get the bad people and you lock them up, all that will be left are good people and then they will live happily ever after. This we can understand in traditional buddhist terms: when you take a very solid reading of the things you encounter in the world, when you see people and objects as having an inherent-self nature, as being defined from inside themselves as being truly what they seem to be, then you have a kind of security. Thus in George Bush's mind, as in many people's mind, there are 'truly bad' people who are terrorists and there are 'truly good' people who are not terrorists who need to be protected from the terrorists. That takes us towards an idea that if only we can separate these forces then we will be able to control what is happening.

Again from a traditional buddhist point of view that is absolutely guaranteed to create suffering, because it is a misreading, a misunderstanding of how things actually are. From the buddhist point of view everything arises due to causes and conditions. Things don't have a seal around them. They are not encapsulated in themselves. They are not monadic, existing by themselves. Rather, they come into behaviour; we come into the world due to the causes which have influenced us in the past. If we forget the chain of causes and conditions and we see things as just how they appear to us, in terms of how they impact us, and take that as a definition of them, we have an intense sense of truth which is profoundly blind.

For example when the British took over what they call Australia and in particular Tasmania, and when the white settlers were moving into North America, as they encountered local people, native people who had been there for a long time they had some difficulties. As the white people moved into the land, the fishing territory, the hunting territory of the local people, the local people became angry and would sometimes come out with their spears, bows and arrows in order to defend their territory. But because the white people knew that these native people were racially inferior and they saw that these native people were attacking white people, who were racially superior, this clearly defined these native people as very bad and dangerous. Therefore in order to protect good, hard working white people who were trying very hard under very difficult circumstances to make a good life for themselves in a challenging new environment, it was important to kill these native people. The more we started to kill them the more they started to fight back which was a sign that indeed truly they were dangerous. This then led into the native people being put into reservations, being pushed into the worst environments and killing very many. This wasn't done because these white people were particularly bad, as from a buddhist point of view our real nature, our buddha nature is not white or brown or yellow or green. Due to causes and conditions we are born at particular times in particular cultures and adopt the values that are there.

The logic of this is that when we see other people and other things as separate from ourselves and as having qualities which we take to be inherent in them, although they are defined by us, this becomes the most profound prison that we find ourselves in.

This is called contaminated or defiled relative truth from a buddhist point of view, and most of the time we operate inside this view of the world. Inside this view, when we try to be calm and we try to be clear, we have to remove disturbances, but the things which disturb us manifest again and again. No matter how hard we try they repeat. In not dropping the false belief on the basis of experience, we deny experience by trying to impose again and

again our false belief. We are caught up in the myth, the fantasy of the ego's mastery that claims we can be truly in charge of our own fate, that we can live our life on our own terms, that we can solve all problems.

From a buddhist point of view this is very, very sad. As the Buddha said many times, everywhere beings want to find happiness but the methods that they seek to bring that happiness only cause more trouble. Moreover the root cause of this trouble is believing 'I am real, other people are real, and if I can use my energy onto how other people and lived-situations are, I can make them develop in the way that I want'. That is to say that we can imagine that calmness and clarity will be the fruits of activity. From a traditional buddhist point of view it is actually the other way around. First of all you have to find the calmness and the clarity which is already there, always already there, and from that you can start to understand the nature of activity. That is to say, rather than seeing 'I am a given, I exist, and on the basis of my activity I can make some calmness and clarity for myself', we come to see, by looking into ourselves, which I will describe in some detail, that actually 'I don't exist as any particularly defined entity. All that I think I am is a process of manifestation, and that manifestation never ceases'. We come to see that calmness and clarity are the ground of manifestation rather than an aspect of manifestation. Calmness and clarity are seen as truly given, they are self-existing, there from the very beginning – they are the qualities of our own buddha nature.

The function of meditation is to help us awaken from the dream of fixation on aspects of the stream of manifestation being fixed and being the site of our personal identity. Of course there are many levels to meditation. On an outer level meditation can be a bit like a massage, it is something that we do in order to shift our state, to calm ourselves down. That is quite useful, but it is still 'I am using a tool or a method to shift myself while still believing that I truly exist'. In traditional buddhist language this is called pure relative truth where the realm of subject and object starts to lose some of its heaviness, some of its emotional investment because I start to have a sense that many of the things that I am attached to, many of the ways I present myself, are not good, they don't bring me happiness, they are not ethical and so I want to change that. This will, according to the tradition, generated good karma. That is to say it creates positive intentions and directions in the mind-stream so that after death you can have a good rebirth and a lighter way of being present in the world – but you are still present in the world as 'yourself'.

I will say a bit now about what is calm and clear according to the view of dzogchen. This view is not in the relative truth domain, it is in what we call the absolute truth domain or in the realm of non-duality, in which subject and object are not strongly separated. The first aspect of this is to start to recognise that we are full of assumptions. We can do this by starting to observe our mind and seeing how propositional many of our thoughts are. That is to say, we find ourselves telling other people how things are and we tell ourselves how things are. If we can start to catch ourselves in the process of doing that we can see, "*Oh, my mind is actively building the house which it inhabits.*" And in this house there is the floor, there are walls, a ceiling, doors, not many windows but a lot of interesting furniture. So mainly we are looking at what is inside ourselves.

Once we start to observe the process of ourselves through just sitting quietly we will see the mind is moving. Once we accept my mind never stops moving, that movement is what this mind is, then we can start to see that our thoughts come to us as if they are telling us something about something. But they don't establish anything. They create an impression, and with that impression I am tilted and turned in a way that I have a take on the world. That is to say a proposition calls to mind other associated propositions, beliefs and counter-beliefs and together they create a felt sense that something is there.

For example, here we are in a buddhist centre. It is an old German building with some Tibetan things in it. When the building was built it wasn't built as a Tibetan buddhist centre. The architecture doesn't speak of a Tibetan buddhist centre. This buddhist centre is squatting inside a traditional bourgeois town house in Freiburg. But if we believe it is a buddhist centre then that thought brings our attention to the buddhist things that we see; they become figural, they become the object of our attention, and the other things recede into the background. That is to say, our selective attention, what our mind is drawn towards, starts to construct images and identities. That is to say the movement of the mind creates our world. And the more we sit quietly and attend to the process of our existence we can start to see that every aspect of our existence is indeed mental.

The Buddha said many, many times mind is the chief, mind is the source of all things. When we observe our body in meditation we can experience that our body is a flow of sensation. We also of course have the body of our memory, the body of our history, the body of our representations; the stories about our body through which we understand or make sense of the immediacy of the direct experience of the body. Thus, if my attention is tilted toward the narrative I can experience: 'This *is* my body, I have this body, maybe even *I* am this body.' But if I attend just to the moment-by-moment experience of the body I encounter a stream of sensation, emotion, thought, perception, a jumble of moments which I am trying to organise together into gestalt via my organising narrative.

Therefore we can experience that we have at least two bodies. One is a body of dynamic changing experience, a flow that never ceases, and the other is a body of assumption, narrative, of history and prediction, which seems to have stability and continuity. But if we now attend to this narrative, which is proposing fixed identity, ownership, continuity, what do we find? We might think, 'This is my body. I know this body. This is irreducible – there is real lived experience and this is my body'. In this way there is a strong assertion that feels true – and where is it? It has gone. 'I better say it again: this is my body, I know this is my body, it is always here!' But then I find that I am looking at this painting on the wall and the more I look at the painting and become interested in the detail I have lost my legs. Now I come back to my legs, 'thank god they are still here – they must have been here all the time'. We can see that actually we have physiological experience, perception, proprioception, tumbling and moving all the time, and, we have a narrative which we have to keep weaving, we have to keep kneading it in like a baker kneading bread to get the yeast through all of it, we have to knead that into the experience to maintain the felt sense of the continuity of the narrative.

So now we have two things; we have the direct experience of the stream of experience which manifests as 'my body', and the narrative that tells us that our body is a stable

phenomena – but this narrative is itself dynamic and unstable. The thought that arises and passes is saying, *“James don’t worry your body is quite stable it is here.”* It is quite easy for the thought to say that because it has gone – it is just passing through, it doesn’t have any responsibilities at all. If the neighbour’s cat comes into your garden and shits it doesn’t mind because it is just passing through, but you mind because it is your garden and now it has stinking cat shit in it.

Can we trust our thoughts? Not at all. Thoughts are coming and going. They are movements of energy which create these beautiful patterns which seem to tell a true story. But it is a story which only exists in terms of dynamic movement. The thought is something which is in itself always dynamic and changing although it presents itself as defining something which is stable. This defining of stability or inherent-self nature (you will find a lot of writing about this in buddhism and it is sometimes called attachment and sometimes called the imputation of inherent-self nature) is the basis of attachment, for you can only be attached to a ‘thing’. If you go down to the river and you try to catch it, will that be possible? The water is always moving. If you catch a handful of the water and you hold it, it is no longer the river. The river itself is always moving; you cannot catch it. As Heraclites has said, you can never step into the same river twice. The river will have a name and so we might say, *“Oh, I really like that river, let’s go and be there tomorrow.”* When you look at the water tomorrow it is not the same water that was going there today. Something is there that you put the same name onto and then you can tell yourself that this is the same thing but there is no ‘thing’ in the river, it is just movement. It is the same if you go to the cinema: the film starts and it is a whole series of movements, and then it ends. The film is nothing but movement. If you are watching it at home with a television, you can press the pause button and can look at one frame of the film, but that is like taking a handful of water from the river. The film works because it stimulates us on all sorts of levels. There is sound, there is dialogue, there is dramatic tension, colour and so on. When the film works for us we participate with the film, we enter into a relationship with the film, we are touched and moved by what is going on in the film.

This is how life is: we exist through our participation in a process which is always changing, and our participation is also always a movement which is changing. That is to say, that which we normally take to be stable: I, me, myself, this room, this city, these trees, the birds – all of these things are moving. This whole universe is nothing but movement. Just in the time that we have been sitting here the sky has been getting a little bit darker and so the colouration of this room has changed. We can say, *“Oh, that is because the quality of light shines on the wall in a different way – it is the same wall but it just looks different because the light is different.”* But that is to cover over the direct perception with a concept. What we actually experience is a transforming lived environment in which we are participating, and the shift in the light brings a shift in our emotional being.

If then, my thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, ‘my’ body, ‘my’ possessions, if all of this is just a great stream of movement, interacting and pulsating what is the possibility of calm and clear? In the midst of this movement someone is having the experience. Each of us in this room, if we are not yet asleep, is somehow having some sort of experience. Who is the one having that experience? Who is the experiencer of your experience of being yourself? I am sitting here, it is ok – that is an experience – if I attach myself to it, if I fall into it on the

level of its semantic expression, then I think *"This is what is happening, I am here and it is okay."* But if I can catch that this is a thought, this is a construct, and instead of putting my identity into the construct, the thought which is transient and which is passing by, if I just relax into the presence of the one who is having the experience, my mind itself, what is the quality of that mind which is like a mirror showing an endless stream of experience?

The purpose of the meditation is to support us in being more and more present as this open experienter, this pure awareness, which is always already there prior to every moment of transient experience. It doesn't exist in the manner of someone sitting on the bank of a river looking at the river as it flows by. It is not that 'I am aware of what is happening to me' because awareness itself, when we start to look for it doesn't have any shape, it doesn't have any colour, it doesn't rest any place, it doesn't come from any place and it is not going any place. It is not constituted apart from the flow of experience, it is absolutely inseparable from every experience as it arises, and yet it is not the same as that experience. The more we come to experience that, we find that are not who we think we are. Of course we are who we think we are in the sense that we carry on going to work, eating, talking with friends and so on – we don't become psychotic. But we can see that who I am on the relative, interactive level doesn't define my real nature.

That is to say, the mind itself, this open awareness, is like a mirror which shows the movement of manifestation. But manifestation is not a mirror of the awareness of the mind; it doesn't show the awareness of the mind because awareness is without form or shape, it is ungraspable. Our awareness is the ground of all our experience because we wouldn't experience anything if we weren't aware. Within this awareness, which is ungraspable, our own consciousness arises as the consciousness of 'I am sitting here talking to you'. In order for me to talk to you, you have to be present for me. That is to say, on the level of manifestation, you arise in mind and I arise in my mind. It is not that I am in my mind and I am looking out at you who are outside my mind. Subject and object arise together; we are aware of ourselves and we are aware of each other in the same moment inseparably.

This is the essence of the understanding of dzogchen, that the mind itself is completely pure. In Tibetan this is called kadag, which means pure from the beginning, it means it has never been restricted or contaminated or compromised or set in relation to anything else – it is infinite. And here in this moment everything is happening: we are arising with each other, with the room, with Freiburg, everything is here just by itself. This is the radiance of the natural purity of the mind and in Tibetan is called lhundrup, which means coming all of a piece, coming at once, spontaneous, 'here it is'. The purity of the mind is calm because nothing can disturb it, it is not touched, it is not sullied, it is not dirtied by anything that happens.

For example, say a thought arises in my mind, a thought that I am not happy with, a negative thought, and I think, *"Oh James, you shouldn't have this kind of thought."* I have a repugnance to the thought that is arising in my mind. The reason I am disturbed is because it is happening in 'my mind'. This cat is shitting in 'my garden'. I think it is 'my mind' but who is this 'my'? It is a thought arising in the mind. The thought arises from the mind and claims to be the owner of the mind. This is like saying that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Nobody was there before? Nobody knew there was any America – Mr

Christopher Columbus arrived and we had America. This is the tail wagging the dog. My mind is a thought arising, which, if the energy of awareness collapses onto it as an identification, as an attachment, as an investment, I have the experience of becoming small. It is like having a garden which I have to keep safe, where I want to pull good thoughts into it and push bad thoughts out of it.

However, when we relax from that level of identification, the mind is calm and clear, the mind, not 'my' mind, but the mind, or awareness itself, the natural condition, within which 'my mind', 'my consciousness', 'my history', 'my likes and dislikes' arise within in a field of complex objects, some of which I am drawn towards and some of which I hurry away from. This is why in the traditional texts of dzogchen you will read again and again don't try to make your mind calm, don't try to make your mind clear. Because if you are busy trying to calm your mind, this is a work that will never cease, because the very action of calming your mind is itself an identification with, and a participation in activity. The mind itself never moves and yet the mind itself is the ground of all movement. Movement is always turbulent, it will not be calm, it will not be clear.

Therefore from the point of view of dzogchen the most important thing is to recognise the nature of your own mind, to directly experience the unborn nature of awareness itself, so that you can stop confusing it with participative consciousness which is always moving in relation to the object field, and therefore cannot be calm and clear. If we recognise this then we can be tolerant to ourselves. We can be more accepting of how we are. By not trying to change yourself you will find that you change effortlessly. By not trying to manipulate and control other people you will find that their intention flows easily with yours. By not splitting the world into subject and object, by not acting on the world as if it was the enemy or something to be stolen from, we find that collaboration effortlessly brings us what we need. And because the nature of the mind is infinite it is always already present, it doesn't exist anywhere else. It is always here but we cannot catch it.

This is a central point of the meditation and what we seek to do when we practice. If we don't understand this then many, many years and lifetimes can be wasted trying to calm something which doesn't have a calm nature. I grew up in 1950's and 60's and it was very common then, and still is now, for people to talk about man conquering nature. When Edmond Hillary climbed to Mount Everest for the first time he 'conquered' Everest, and people are conquering the desert, and conquering everything, but now we start to see that 'we' are being conquered by our own efforts to conquer.

There are not so many fish in the sea, in many countries the land had got tired and exhausted, oil and coal supplies get all used up. How we relate to this outer world and how we relate to our mind is the same because it is exactly the same. The world is not a thing out there; the world is a manifestation of the stream of experiential energy inseparable from the pure ground. And our personal suffering, due to our internal splitting, is echoed in the suffering that comes into the environment because of how we are.

So I hope you can think about all this and your world, inner and outer, may be calm and clear. Thank you for coming tonight. It has been a pleasure for me to be here with you and I wish you all well.