

Pure Awareness Retreats – Notes *by Tejananda*

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The Basic Practice – Just Sitting

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There are various terms for this practice – just sitting or shikantaza (Zen); formless meditation (Dzogchen, Mahamudra); choiceless awareness (Theravada/vipassana). All refer to same approach.

The basic observation that underlies this practice is that everything we experience arises in awareness, we are never ‘outside’ awareness.

As ‘formless’ implies, there is no fixed form and no fixed object. We are simply aware of whatever happens to be – there is no deliberate attempt to develop or eradicate any quality. The effort that we exert (and this approach does require a lot of effort, at least to begin with) is devoted to continuously 'letting go into the moment'. It seems paradoxical – although we are in reality nothing but awareness, yet it seems we have to work hard to be aware. Eventually it becomes clear that awareness is effortless – but (although it is possible to glimpse this from the beginning) this effortlessness is usually only realised after a lot of hard work on and off the cushion!

Just sitting itself is very simple, in fact it couldn't be simpler. You just sit there. You sit – alert in your meditation posture, just aware of whatever happens to be arising from moment to moment – sensations, feelings thoughts and emotions. You may also become aware of ‘pure awareness’ (but more of this later).

The attitude you have is that whatever arises, that's ok. Compulsive thoughts, ill-will, sloth-and-torpor, absorption (i.e. *dhyana*), metta... whatever – it just arises momentarily in awareness, and is gone.

It's a complete openness to our experience. Openness or spaciousness is a ‘natural’ quality of mind which in some way we're aware of all the time – we know, even if somewhat vaguely, that our experience arises in some kind of mental ‘space’.

At the same time, in this practice, we are just ‘open’ to whatever is there – in a sense you could say we face up to it. We don't balk, whatever it is. We just let it be, there in the space of our awareness. We accept ‘in this moment, this is what is’ – we don't look for our experience to be anything other than what it is (in fact, our experience cannot be other than what it is).

things away. We just let our body and mind ‘do themselves’. Absolutely anything can arise; absolutely nothing is held onto conceptually.

Issues that may arise in the practice

Compulsive thoughts

The question often arises ‘In just sitting, should we use any kind of antidote to quieten the thoughts down?’ I think there are two main ways to approach this. The ‘strict’ answer is that if we just sit in an alert posture with the intention to be in awareness of whatever arises, the awareness itself will eventually have the effect of quietening the thinking. If you have the patience to allow things to take their course in this way, you can learn some important lessons about yourself and the way your mind works.

However, if you decide the thinking is too much for you, I think it’s quite acceptable initially to apply a very subtle ‘antidote’ within the spirit of just sitting, e.g. to gently ‘bring your awareness back’ to the present moment, again and again. This will probably have the effect of breaking up the stream of thoughts. A slightly less subtle approach is to say ‘thinking’ to yourself, whenever you notice thoughts are occurring. The label isn’t used as a blunt instrument to hammer the thoughts away!

Thoughts occur quite naturally and don’t need to be suppressed. Labelling in this way just helps keep you present to what is arising now, but streams of thoughts tend to quieten down and become less intrusive. A more ‘interactive’ approach still is to ‘repeat’ the thought you have just had, e.g. if you notice you were thinking ‘how much longer this meditation is going to go on for?’, you repeat to yourself ‘*thinking* “how much longer this meditation is going to go on for?”’ Doing this for a while (I wouldn’t recommend doing it all the time) can give a very useful ‘feedback’ on exactly what you are thinking about, what is ‘coming up’, as well as tending to quieten the compulsive thoughts down.

‘Vegging out’

Another concern about the formless approach is that you will just enter a vague, vegetative mental state – sort of spacing out. This can happen. The best way of avoiding it is to set up and maintain awareness of your alert posture and body-experience. Have a sense of your centre of gravity in the ‘hara’ area (2 finger widths below navel). Sometimes it helps to have or keep the eyes open, sometimes (if you notice ‘vegging’ happening when the eyes are open) it can help to close the eyes.

What is pure awareness?

‘Pure awareness’ is one of many ways of referring to our true, integral, ultimate nature & It’s ‘here’ already - fully and perfectly, always. It can’t *not* be here. It is what we truly are – the true nature of everything, things as they are.

Pure awareness can't be developed or cultivated, it just 'is' – so, rather than a practice, it would be more accurate to say that pure awareness is a state of insight or awakening. The question of 'how do you get into pure awareness' is exactly like us here on retreat at Vajraloka asking 'how do we get to Vajraloka?' – well, of course, we're already *at* Vajraloka. (But then ... what exactly *is* 'Vajraloka'?...)

So pure awareness is *just* awareness itself. Or mind itself, or consciousness itself. Awareness 'in itself' is completely pure of subject-object and of 'self-view.' In other words, it's inherently self-less (not-self, i.e. *anatman*) and so nondual because there is no self-other dichotomy in it. It is also total interconnectedness, because there is no separation in it between different really-existing 'things' – which also hints at how it's nature is both wisdom and compassion.

We can also call it 'pure' awareness in the sense that that's all it is – it's *just* awareness: everything arises and passes away as empty, spontaneous manifestation, magical display (*maya*), within this awareness or consciousness or nature of mind. And I do mean *this* awareness – not some special different awareness. This awareness is present right now. It is only *ever* right now. This is why in Dzogchen it's often spoken of as 'ordinary awareness' – or in Zen as 'nothing special'. It's essentially not what we're aware *of* – it's that which is aware (though that's inseparable from what we're aware of).

How this fits into Buddhist teaching

There are indications in early Buddhism, e.g. the Buddha's teaching in the Anguttara Nikaya 'this mind (*citta*) – is luminous but covered by extraneous defilements', but essentially this teaching flowered in the Mahayana and tantric Buddhism (as well as in non-Buddhist traditions) the main basis in Mahayana is 'tathagatagarbha'. I.e. 'Buddha Nature' (lit. the 'womb' or embryo' of the Buddha). Probably the earliest expression of this is in the Tathagatagarbha Sutra:

'... all beings, though they find themselves with all sorts of klesas, have a tathagatagarbha that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own. ... the Tathagatagarbhas of all living beings are eternal and unchanging. It is just that they are covered by sentient beings' klesas'.

This teaching became extremely important in Mahayana schools such as Ch'an and Zen, the tantras and particularly Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

So this intrinsic pure awareness (i.e. '*rigpa*' in Dzogchen teaching, also known as Buddha nature, the Great Perfection, Mahamudra, Indestructible Heart Essence, and so on) is the teaching on which we are focussing on this retreat. Only, *we* can't realise it. It's realisation consists in 'our' absence. The practice, you could say, consists in our getting out of the way. In other words, as mentioned above, implicit in the realisation of this 'unborn' or 'radiant' mind – pure awareness for short – is the realisation of not-self (*anatman*). The seeing through of 'self-view'. This means – just to repeat – that pure awareness is insight. Or you could equally say that pure awareness, in itself,

is awakening.

So how to do it? Well, the good news is that this is it already. The ‘bad’ news is – as I’ve already said – that you *can’t* ‘develop’ it. (But this is not actually bad news – quite the opposite!)

What this means is that you will need to have a different view of meditation from the more usual developmental or bhavana model (see ‘Pure awareness and the FWBO System of Meditation’

below for more on different Dharma / practice models). The view of the bhavana model is essentially that we are *developing* or *cultivating* qualities that are not already present, or that we wish to ‘embody’ to a greater degree, by setting up conditions and applying the four right efforts appropriately. In this way we can cultivate metta, mindfulness, samatha (calm) and vipassana (insight).

With entering pure awareness we are not concerned to develop anything at all. Not even awareness. In fact it’s neither necessary nor possible to develop awareness. When I say we’re not concerned to develop anything, I mean this quite literally – we are only concerned to ‘be’ exactly what *we* are and for ‘things’ to be exactly what *they* are. However, we will certainly find it useful to use various expedients to let go of doing and just be, as well as to get ‘pure awareness’ in view.

In this practice, we don’t modify anything. We’re not ‘aiming’ for a *particular* ‘state’ (e.g. a concentrated state, a blissful state, a dhyanic state, a non-conceptual state or even an aware state). We’re not *aiming* for anything, in fact – just being with/in *whatever is at this moment*. Above all, as just mentioned, we don’t attempt to ‘develop our awareness’ – again, awareness *can’t* be developed – for the simple reason that *this is it* – it’s fully present all the time. If we’re conscious of something, that *is* awareness.

Awareness itself - non-dual awareness - is completely unaffected by whatever arises in it – Just as with the image of the mirror: pure awareness is just like that – it ‘reflects’ (or ‘sees’ / is aware of) everything but is never caught up in it, whether it’s love or hate, bliss or envy. It’s beyond all dualities. Another way of talking about it is ‘the mirror-like wisdom-awareness (*jnana*)’

So this practice – or non-practice – is simply to ‘be’ – ‘be’ the mirror. Which we already are. So sitting, getting up, going about your business on the retreat ... all in awareness. That’s essentially all there is to it.

How to get pure awareness ... ?

First, we have to strip away all conceptions that pure awareness is something to achieve, somewhere that we have to get to. The point is, we aren’t going anywhere in this practice! We are simply being as we are in the moment, in the instant. (And in the moment, in the instant, there’s no ‘we’ or ‘I’ anyway!)

As I said in the previous talk, this means we realise that we're not developing anything & we don't have any kind of 'meditative agenda' – we're not trying to get concentrated, we're not cultivating any quality. Whatever. And we're certainly not trying to produce or 'get' pure awareness – that would be totally counter-productive. We simply don't need to produce it – just recognise it.

We have this view that we can get what we want. This is our fundamental delusion. We don't just apply this view to desirable 'things' like possessions that we want to possess and people we want to have relationships with and the like – we apply it to 'our spiritual lives' as well.

We can apply it to getting into dhyana, to pure awareness, to insight, to awakening: 'I want that'.

We've read the books, so we actually know in theory that these things involve 'no-I' or 'not-I' i.e. *anatman*, not-self. But when it comes to it, we sit there and *try* to get it. I suppose the practice we're doing on this retreat is – potentially – the best antidote to those kinds of attitudes, which we all have.

What do we do? Essentially, in the end, *we* don't do anything. What this means is that if we're *trying* to 'get' pure awareness, we're actually just 'egoing', to coin a term. As we'll see, though, it is helpful and even indispensable initially to 'do some doing' in order to settle into not-doing. And we certainly should not fall into the trap of thinking that this practice does not require any effort, even though pure awareness itself is often referred to as 'effortless'. Pure awareness is effortless, as it's naturally present, but 'entering' or, better, recognising pure awareness does require effort and application. Nevertheless, the essence as mentioned is to let go of doing, literally to do nothing at all. However, to further avoid misunderstanding, 'non-doing' doesn't mean that nothing is happening. Everything arises to the six senses, just as usual – thoughts and emotions arise as usual – but we just don't 'do' anything in relation to them. We don't develop them, we don't repress them. We just let them be – let them be what they are, and let them naturally pass, as they will.

Another way of talking about the situation is in terms of 'big mind' and 'small mind' – big mind (= pure awareness) is the whole picture, it's all-pervading awareness-openness, or emptiness-clarity – vibrantly alive and responsive *now*. Small mind (= the dualistic, everyday, conceptually-bound 'egoing' mind) cannot grasp big mind. It's like a cloud trying to grasp the infinite clear blue sky – rather than just letting itself dissolve back into it. Or a wave thinking that it can grasp the whole vast ocean (which is it anyway totally one with, always).

Dogen said: *The Way is basically perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?* This is an essential point. The Way – which in the sense Dogen's using it is another term for pure awareness, buddha nature, nature of mind, big mind, intrinsic awareness, mahamudra, dzogchen (the great perfection), etc. etc. – is perfect and all-pervading. *This is what we are* – what we really are. 'We' are not the

limited ego – we’re actually, in reality, the nature of everything ‘perfect and all-pervading’. So, small mind is ‘within’ big mind – our deluded ego nature is not something *different* from the nature of things as they are (big mind) – it’s all of the nature of mind / awareness.

The little mind we identify with just arises from the ongoing belief we have that ‘I’ actually exist as a separate, real ‘person’. We *don’t* actually exist in this way. We exist as the nature of everything, perfect and all-pervading emptiness-awareness.

As ‘little mind’ cannot grasp ‘big mind’, Dogen says ‘*How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?*’ What he’s saying here is like ‘what is a little fluffy cloud to do in order to realise that it’s the big blue sky?!’ – the nature of the cloud and the nature of the sky *are already one*. The wave is already the ocean. Little mind is already big mind. We *are* awareness. And that awareness *is* awakening.

That’s why ultimately with this approach, we don’t do anything – we just rest in self-existent awareness – *How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?*- it already is how things are. Awareness is ‘here’, we are awareness, we are never separate from it.

The rest of the paragraph (this comes from Dogen’s Fukanzazengi) goes:

The Dharma-vehicle is free and untrammelled. What need is there for concentrated effort? Indeed, the whole body is far beyond the world's dust. Who could believe in a means to brush it clean? It is never apart from one, right where one is. What is the use of going off here and there to practice?

One of the vital points that Dogen’s making is that ‘*It is never apart from one, right where one is*’ – that is, awareness is inseparable from everything that we are and everything that we do. It is literally done in awareness. This is what we need to wake up to. The ‘practice’ is whatever enables us to wake up and recognise this essence of mind, or nature of mind.

This has implications for the way we ‘practice’ on this retreat. We’re not *practising* mindfulness, we’re simply *acknowledging* – if you like – our awareness of and in everything that we think, say and do. It’s not ‘my awareness’ – this awareness is not-self, not-I; it’s our heart nature, our indestructible heart-essence – but it’s nothing that we (small mind) can ever possess, understand conceptually or appropriate in any way. So once we begin to ‘recognise’ this intrinsic awareness, *everything* is practice – there is no special ‘spiritual practice situation’ – being on retreat is no more ‘spiritual’ than going down the shops at home to buy some milk. Or watching the TV. Here on retreat, sitting still in meditation posture in the shrine room or saluting the shrine or doing a puja is no more ‘spiritual’ than getting up to go and have a pee, or sweeping the floor or laying on your bed. *And no less*. Awareness is in everything. Everything is in awareness. We don’t need to do anything about it – we just need to keep recognising it. That is the practice. But how do we recognise it in the first place?

All of the Buddhist traditions that teach what we're calling pure awareness offer 'ways in' or 'pointings out' which can help us recognise our essence of mind directly. One such way in is offered as an *upadesa* – direct pointing out – by Padmasambhava in '*Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness*' (this is the core passage):

Now, when you are introduced (to your own intrinsic awareness), the method of entering into it involves three considerations:

Thoughts in the past are clear and empty and leave no traces behind.

Thoughts in the future are fresh and unconditioned by anything.

And in the present moment, when (your mind) remains in its own condition without constructing anything, awareness at that moment in itself is quite ordinary.

So the past is 'gone' – it only exists as memories (mental events, concepts) *in the present*. Likewise, thoughts in the future are 'unconditioned' in the sense that they are simply unarisen – the 'future' is a conceptualisation, not something that actually exists. Both past and future are just concepts, nothing more. And the present moment is *just this* ordinary awareness. The present moment is all there 'ever' is – and yet it can't be fixed or grasped; it has no duration whatever, and no self-essence. Its arising and cessation is totally spontaneous, and perfect just as it is.

So Padmasambhava goes on:

And when you look into yourself in this way nakedly, Since there is only this pure observing, there will be found a lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer; Only a naked manifest awareness is present.

'You' look into 'yourself' – i.e. you look at or from *that which is looking*, 'from' awareness itself, the spaciousness and clarity *HERE*, in and as which everything is arising. This is something that you just have to experience and experiment with – it might be better to say *play* with – in awareness.

Then you may begin to question who the 'you' is who is aware.

Padmasambhava says '*there is only this pure observing*' – in other words 'in the seen there is just the seen, in the heard there is just the heard, in the sensed there is just the sensed, in the cognised there is just the cognised'. There is nothing added, nothing extra – *just* what is sensed by any of the six senses in this instant. No *added* concepts *about* it. So he continues '*there will be found a lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer*'.

There is a clear cognition of whatever is arising to the sense fields, but no sense of a 'me' who is 'having' this 'experience'. In the seen there is *just* the seen' – not the seen plus *you* seeing it! *Only a naked manifest awareness is present*. There is just awareness, 'naked' (devoid) of any 'egoing'.

That's all there is.

Ways in to formless meditation that I'm going to mention:

- 1) Using posture – importance of being aware of & present 'in' your body experience (i.e. the five 'outer' senses). All the senses 'open' – including eyes.
- 2) Using breath – or just out-breath – as 'anchor'.
- 3) Using imagination to cultivate shraddha (confidence-trust, 'faith') and bodhicitta as a basis.
- 4) Going straight into formless awareness – doing nothing!

Qualities of awareness

In '*Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness*', Padmasambhava says:

It is certain that the nature of the mind is empty and without any foundation whatsoever. Your own mind is insubstantial like the empty sky. You should look at your own mind to see whether it is like that or not.

This is Guru Padmasambhava's pointing out the first of the three inherent 'qualities' of conscious awareness (or mind - that is, the *nature of mind itself* or the Ground of Primordial Perfection or the Indestructible Vajra Heart Essence).

We might think that it's all a bit beyond us (and in the literal sense it is!) – but at the same time, as we've been seeing, or at least hearing, *this* intrinsic awareness – always present, but unnoticed – is exactly the non-dual awareness that has been 'realised' or rather *recognised*, by all awakened beings throughout time and space.

What it comes down to is that this awareness now – literally this awareness now – if we could but recognise it as such, is awakening, replete with all the Buddha qualities (as outlined in the Tathagatagarbha sutra).

Whether we recognise it as such or not isn't something we can directly do a lot about – apart from making ourselves more 'accident prone'. As I said before, there is nothing small mind can do to *make* big mind – pure awareness – arise (other than to get out of the way...)

But according to Dzogchen and Mahamudra teaching, we *can* recognise something of the 'qualities' of the nature of mind in this mindstream now – because, of course, this mindstream is nothing other than the nature of mind anyway.

So these qualities are something which we can 'watch out for' in awareness – in the quality of our awareness itself. These qualities are always there *to some degree*, even when we're overcome by thoughts and emotions, and – as the text says – we can verify this for ourselves.

It's naturally more straightforward to recognise these qualities when our mind already is fairly clear and bright, when we're not completely caught up in thoughts and emotions. So especially when this sort of state arises, when your shamatha is bright and clear, let your awareness 'take in' the presence of these qualities 'in itself'.

So the first quality is what I've already quoted: *'the nature of the mind is empty and without any foundation whatsoever. Your own mind is insubstantial like the empty sky'*. The first statement is a more conceptual way of putting it. It is possible to notice that awareness is insubstantial in the sense that it's not a 'thing' – it can't be pinned down or objectified or grasped. So that is its empty, insubstantial, self-less nature.

But the Dzogchen tradition also points to this empty quality of awareness in a much more 'experiential' way, and this is the sense of 'spaciousness' or 'openness' or 'vastness.' *'The vast expanse'* as Longchenpa often expresses it. This is exactly the same as the familiar image of the clear, infinite blue sky.

So you can look for a sense of this 'vastness' or a sense of openness and expansiveness in awareness. It's there right now.

Even when your mind is constricted, or full of thoughts, there's still a *comparative* spaciousness. If you can 'identify' with that sense of spaciousness – the space in which all the thoughts and emotions are appearing – rather than with the constrictions (i.e. thoughts, emotions themselves), then you may find that the spaciousness comes more to the fore and the constrictions recede.

The next quality is put like this in the text:

It is certain that self-originated primal awareness has been clear (and luminous) from the very beginning, You should look at your own mind to see whether it is like that or not.

So basic awareness is 'clear and luminous' – we often speak of 'clear awareness' in a colloquial way, so it's clear that we know to some degree what's meant here.

It's said in Dzogchen that this clarity or luminosity is the cognizant aspect of mind itself – mind or awareness is 'empty but cognizant' – or 'awareness-emptiness' – there's nothing there (it's not a 'thing' or object in any sense at all) but 'in' that nothing, everything arises as clarity and is clearly cognised.

So *in* awareness – *this* awareness right now! – you can get a sense of the *clarity* of the nature of mind. Again, that clarity is always there – it's even there somehow despite the fact that the 'object' (you!) is feeling unclear or muggy or dull or sleepy. The *awareness* of that dull object is clear. So, look out for this yourself and see whether it's the case. The third quality is put like this in our text:

It is certain that this primal awareness or gnosis, which is one's intrinsic awareness, is unceasing, Like the main channel of a river that flows unceasingly. You should look at your own mind to see whether it is like that or not.

Elsewhere in the text, it's put this way: '*its arising has nowhere been obstructed*' – 'it' being the nature of mind, mind itself, pure awareness. So this is the *energy* of the nature of mind, or the energy of pure awareness. In awareness, everything arises completely without obstruction – nothing obstructs anything else, everything arises in spontaneous complete perfection, just as it is.

In fact, it's totally beyond perfection and imperfection.

Everything – the five skandhas, the eighteen sense-spheres and so on – spontaneously self-arises and self-liberates. Of course, I keep using the word 'thing' but the whole point is, no-thing arises – 'things' don't exist! What 'arises' is the play of emptiness, 'in' the clear cognition which is nothing but emptiness itself.

What we actually *experience* is the energy of phenomenal existence – every-'thing' is nothing but energy (chi, prana) – we here now are energy, energy is coursing through us, between us, manifesting as 'our' bodies and minds – in fact everything that we can see, hear, smell taste, touch, think, feel and imagine.

All this apparent manifestation is nothing but awareness itself. So in 'our' awareness, we can be open to a sense of this incredible energy – and again, this is totally non-dependent on 'how we feel' now – we might have the biggest and hairiest sloth in the world sitting right on top of us, and still that energy is there! The sloth itself is part of the energy!

So this isn't energy in the sense of 'feeling energetic' – it's energy as the very fact of manifestation, of existence (which can sometimes take the form of slothfulness!) The Tibetan word which is rendered 'energy' is actually the same as the Tibetan word for 'compassion' – and another rendering – which gives us another angle on this quality of the vajra heart essence or pure awareness – is 'sensitivity' or 'responsiveness'.

Sensitivity arises from the 'play' between openness-clarity and it can be experienced as bliss or compassion or love. But the 'way in' to it which I find most helpful is described by Rigdzin Shikpo in his book 'Openness, Clarity, Sensitivity' (recommended) as simply the direct sense that awareness in itself is somehow good or 'wholesome'.

So 'be aware' of your awareness in formless meditation and you may well notice this quality.

So these three inherent qualities of awareness – emptiness/openness, clarity/radiant cognisance and unceasing energy or sensitivity – are said in Dzogchen and Mahamudra to be the very essence of what we are – and what everything is.

So, in awareness, just look to see whether this is the case or not.

Losing it?

I hope it's clear by now that this practice is just 'about' awareness! And that is all. Just *recognising* this 'presence' of awareness. If we're just sitting in awareness, just walking in awareness, just working or just having a shower in awareness, that is the practice. It couldn't be simpler!

But in actual experience it doesn't always seem so simple. What makes it not so simple is whatever our ('small') mind is getting up to.

With this practice, *whatever* is going on with the six senses, that's absolutely fine. Just stay with it, i.e. remain aware of *whatever* is arising, without getting caught up in it and perpetuating it, or rejecting or denying it, i.e. without movement towards or away from it. Just acknowledge it has arisen & let it go (i.e. let it go naturally, of its own accord, as distinct from volitionally letting go of it.)

But we *do* get caught up in our thoughts, feelings and emotions – and seem to 'lose' our awareness, or our awareness seems dulled. And when our awareness (seems to) come back we naturally think 'I was just distracted'.

Sometimes we lose it altogether, and sometimes we're thinking quite compulsively about something & we *know* we are but we can't stop.

What to do?

In the case of losing it altogether, have to accept there is nothing we can do – we've lost it for now & that's it! The mind naturally tends to go through cycles of compulsive thoughts / relative clarity. In itself, 'losing it' is not a problem.

Naturally, we sooner or later 'wake up' to the fact that we've been 'off with the fairies', or whatever.

Don't try to analyse what happened or why you got distracted – and don't engender the unhelpful thought that 'I was doing something wrong' – you're aware *now* so just continue in awareness of THIS – what's now.

In the case of lesser distraction (e.g. persistent compulsive thoughts) there may be a tendency to feel that we *have* to do something about it – we have to *get rid* of the distraction. We know very well that hindrances and distractions are BAD!

But hindrances and distractions don't have any existence in their own right – regarding something as a 'hindrance' or a 'distraction' depends on our underlying 'view' of what we are doing, what we're about. E.g. if you're trying to become one-pointedly concentrated, to enter dhyana, then the traditional 5 hindrances are distractions from that objective. So in that context it makes sense to use 'antidotes' to remove the obstacle.

In formless meditation/entering pure awareness practice, we're *just* being aware of what is arising to the six senses from moment to moment. Which means what we call 'the 5 hindrances' in another context, here simply become things we're aware of. i.e. they *aren't* 'hindrances', because we're not *trying* to become one-pointed. They are just what's happening.

E.g. say irritation or anger is arising. In this practice we are *aware* of the anger but we don't get *caught up* in it. So what might I do?

Scenario one:

- I'm doing mindfulness of breathing and am on the verge of the first dhyana
- Someone makes a sudden loud noise in the shrine room
- It makes me jump
- Irritation arises
- Thought arises 'Idiots, why can't they be more mindful.'
- I dwell on this, become more and more incensed and it spoils my whole day – and needless to say, I don't get into dhyana!

Scenario two:

- I'm sitting in formless meditation / entering pure awareness
- Someone makes a sudden loud noise in the shrine room
- It makes me jump
- Irritation arises
- The thought 'Idi ...' begins to emerge (perhaps), *but* I'm aware in the moment and know that things have already moved on – it's like the sky-like attitude, i.e. just remaining aware of what is NOW.
- And what is now? Just a residual slightly unpleasant feeling in my body from the irritation. That's all – I'm aware of it, but if I don't feed it with thoughts, it just fades away.

So nothing has been repressed – everything has been experienced, but the irritation is in effect let go, or allowed to go, by simply being aware of what is now.

If the thought persists, rather compulsively, you might consider using labelling: e.g. 'thinking they're an idiot'... 'thinking they should be more mindful'... and so on. This can be very useful – not only to 'reflect back' what you're actually thinking, but also as a way of 'letting awareness let go' of the thoughts themselves.

Once the thoughts have gone, the emotional residue just dies away (though not necessarily immediately – it may even take quite a long time.

A kind of 'distraction' which is not a distraction at all in this practice is the kind of thing that we often think of as an 'external distraction' – usually noises. The e.g. I've just used

– someone making a noise in here – is one, but it could be a buzzing fly, a jet plane flying overhead or someone using a chainsaw in the woods.

If we're trying to become one-pointed, these sorts of noises can be very disturbing. In entering pure awareness practice, they're just noises = just what we're aware of. Noise can disturb concentration, even provoke irritation, but it can't disturb awareness – we're just *aware* of the noise. If the noise annoys us, we're just aware of the annoyance.

Ways in

I started with talking about the 'pure' pure awareness practice – i.e. we are just aware, just awareness. That awareness is what we are. It has to be admitted that this is a tall order. It's a tall order to 'do nothing' – and it's also easily misunderstood. For one thing, it can appear to mean that you're being asked to *experience* nothing.

But this isn't what 'do nothing' means – it simply means 'in the seen there is just the seen...'

Actually, it's relatively straightforward 'not to do' in relation to the outer senses. It's the mind – thoughts and emotions – that are difficult to 'not do'. We have more sense of 'I' around 'our' (you see how difficult it is!) thoughts and emotions – this seems to be 'what we are'.

So we *suppose* that we are 'thinking our thoughts' and 'emoting our emotions' – in the privacy of our own head or heart.

What we can do to start getting away from this assumption is just to be aware of how thoughts and emotions arise. A very useful way into this is to use labelling in the way mentioned in the previous talk. When we label, especially with a persistent thought, the thought often stops for a moment.

Then 'in the gap' we can watch for how it arises again. It's especially useful to see whether there is an experience that 'I' give rise to the thought – or whether it *just arises*, irrespective of any 'volition' on the part of 'I' / 'me'.

So this gets us more towards just letting the thoughts and emotions that arise be what they are – they arise, there is awareness of their arising, but we're not getting *so* 'caught up' in them or simply not getting 'caught up' in them at all. Thoughts just arise and 'self-liberate' as soon as they've arisen.

It's quite possible, too, to be in a state of 'in the emotion just the emotion' – what I said yesterday about getting irritated could be an example. If I've got as far as 'idio...!' it's already gone beyond 'in the emotion just the emotion'.

If I'm *just* aware – or there is just awareness, pure awareness – the irritation arises – is there momentarily – and then begins to pass away. All that's left is the residue in the body, which also begins to pass. No ('reactive') thought arises in relation to it at all. It's fine to use other ways-in too – as long as we remember that they are just that – ways in, and that pure awareness itself is just awareness, not a practice or a technique. Most of the time, it's probably a very good thing to set up body awareness at the beginning of a session (sitting or walking – in fact any activity).

The body is very tangible and totally non-conceptual. I find it interesting that Dogen writes in the Fukanzazengi: '*Indeed, the whole body is far beyond the world's dust*'. I take this to mean that the five outer senses are 'pure' by nature – that the (small) mind is the only source of 'the world's dust'.

So if you want, you can start with a 'pure' awareness of the body – the outer senses. The mind will, naturally, be doing its thing, but don't give that any particular attention to begin with – get a good sense of 'presence' in your body – touch / physicality – and then the other outer senses as they happen to arise.

When you are pretty fully present in the body, just let the sixth sense become 'equal' with the other five – i.e. stop any discrimination with regard to what is arising to awareness and just let it be whatever it is.

If you find it useful, use the breath as a 'reference point' or 'anchor' to awareness in the course of your formless pure awareness practice. When you don't need it any more, just return to full formless awareness.

Once again...

Nothing more to say! i.e. no new input. Reiterate.

- Our purpose is to recognise the way things really are. That means recognising this present awareness for what it is – the base, foundation or ground of non-dual 'beingness' or 'presence'.
- The practice is about the reality of *this* immediate experience. Nothing else exists.
- Everything is contained in awareness (pure awareness, the ground of primordial perfection) – samsara and nirvana. We need do nothing except relax into that awareness, which is ever-present.
- Getting the 'point' could occur any moment, in or out of meditation – there's nothing to do, nowhere to go – nothing but this present instant ('presence'), which is outside time – and space (which are *conceptual* constructions).
- If we could simply relax into this (surrender into or give our selves up to this), that would be enough.

- However, the (small) mind wants to do and have things. We (small mind) deeply believe that it just can't be that simple.
- Small mind wants to go places and get things (accumulate 'experiences' to store in its memory banks!).
- Small mind *knows* awakening is somewhere else, some other time. Not here. It isn't satisfied to just simply rest in THIS – the blue sky of mind's inherent nature – openness, clarity and sensitivity.
- So we have to take this into account - make concessions to our small mind (it's where we're at, after all) .
- This is where practices come in. Ideally in formless meditation we'd just sit and witness the six senses – 'in the seen, just the seen' / heard / sensed / cognised – arising in awareness.
- Our 'doing' in this practice is kept very simple and minimal – everything is oriented not so much to the arisings in awareness, but to recognising the all-pervading awareness *in which* they arise.
- 'Doing' things that I've recommended (ways in to the formless meditation) include:
 - Cultivating shraddha (adhithana) – pujas, songs(!) etc.
 - Samatha practice (e.g. mindfulness of breathing, metta bhavana) as preparation
 - Breath as anchor / sense of openness on outbreath
 - Using 'labelling' of thoughts
 - Recognising the qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity/energy *whatever our state.*
- These means are meant to be quite minimalistic – use them to the extent you need to, but bear in mind always to let go and enter 'fully' formless meditation as often as you can (i.e. don't get 'fixed' on these as methods / props – they are just expedients).

My own practice

Apart from various ways of cultivating shraddha, which I enjoy, I rarely use any

of these expedients at present. In sitting, I just sit there & let whatever arises arise. I don't take on any ideas (which do tend to arise) that some things are 'appropriate' to be happening and some things aren't.

I'm just aware of what comes to awareness – naturally. This applies whatever I'm doing. Sitting helps by simplifying things. I find that simplification in sitting extremely useful for just being aware of what is.

I don't *try* to stop thinking or to stop emoting. Nor do I make any effort *to* think or emote. I don't even try to stop the tune that's almost always playing in my head (it's hopeless anyway – at one time this could drive me nuts!). However, sometimes thoughts and tunes just stop of their own accord.

Sometimes I feel subjectively groggy (e.g. first thing in the morning!) or emotionally awful so I'm just aware of that, of the unpleasant feeling-tone to my experience. Sometimes pleasant feelings arise, or shamatha arises, so I'm just aware of that – arising and passing without holding on or pushing away. Most of the time I feel somewhere in between. The important thing is 'noticing' the awareness, not how I feel or what happens to be arising at this moment.

Sometimes my thoughts take over & I get into a fantasy – often about sex, but it could be anything.

Sometimes I note an 'interesting experience' and then start thinking about how I could put it into a talk! Sometimes I get quite lost in this thinking for a while and then 'wake up'.

But I don't tell myself that these are 'unawarenesses' or 'bad' – they're just part of what is going on.

If awareness becomes obsessively channelled like that, there's nothing I can actually do about it, at the time, so I don't give myself a hard time about it. Similarly, there's nothing I can do about it if I become aware again!

Usually periods of 'losing it' are relatively short – the general tendency over time is that more time is spent 'in awareness' – it seems to be true that awareness fosters awareness.

When awareness *is* there, I – or rather *it* – is just aware of what is arising 'in' it. To put it more simply, there's just awareness of a chair, wall, sound or whatever it happens to be. There can be a sense that awareness is the 'medium' in and as which everything arises.

And there can be a sense that things are arising in awareness 'spontaneously', 'of their own accord' – that 'I' have nothing to do with it. In fact, the sense of 'I' can disappear, along with the sense of 'other' (it comes back, however!) I'd say that this is getting fairly close to pure awareness – when there's less or no sense that 'I am' what is arising in the

awareness, or that I am ‘doing’ the awareness. I’m not ‘being aware,’ there is just awareness.

So that’s it – as I say, I don’t worry about *what* is arising – it can be anything, pleasant or unpleasant, skilful or unskilful. The ‘concern,’ if you like, is the nature of the awareness-emptiness in and as which the whole realm of experience arises and recognising that awareness-emptiness as ‘my’ essential nature – the essential nature of everything. That’s the point.

Looking for the nature of mind

- It’s everywhere and everything, but you’re unlikely to find it (at first) by ‘looking outside’.
- We can’t really make any true separation between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ experience.
- However, the spaciousness, clarity and sensitivity of mind’s true nature – the indestructible heart essence – is right *here* [pointing to heart centre].
- Right this moment! (‘look’ to the *heart*, not the head/brain, for your first inkling of it – though ultimately it cannot be said to reside in a particular location).
- All sense-appearances arise within this space which is empty but clear and cognizant
- (knowing). You could say it’s ‘empty but full,’ as everything arises within it.
- Try: instead of just taking in what’s ‘out there’ with your eyes (or hearing) ‘look’ at that which is doing the ‘seeing’ (or hearing). Look ‘backwards’ so to speak, at the ‘seer’ or ‘witness’. What Dogen calls ‘taking the backward step’ (See *Fukanzazengi*)
- What is there/here – right now – is a sense of open space, open empty space which in itself is clear and bright & taking in the sense arisings effortlessly (or: in which the senses arise effortlessly).
- This ‘space’ is totally devoid of ‘I, I’ and ‘me, me’ – it’s not personal, not possessed – just like the infinite blue sky can’t be possessed.
- It has always been with us – its inseparable qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity are our true nature – they are constant, unarising and unceasing (as well as normally unrecognised).
- By contrast, as I said, what we regard as ‘myself’ is just a story we tell ourselves: ‘I was born here, went to school there, did this work, loved these people...’ And ‘I’m going to do this, go there, get that’...

- This story only exists in our thoughts. If our memory went, our personal story (identity) would go too. We literally wouldn't know who we were. But: openness, clarity and sensitivity would still be there.
- Even thinking about this can feel a bit (or very!) scary at first – it kind of turns everything upside-down.
- However, we're very unlikely to have to take it all on at once (though this does very
- occasionally happen to some people). What we can do is familiarise ourselves with the
- qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity bit by bit in our own direct experience.
- The thing is, these three qualities of what we truly are, are qualities that everyone wants or would regard as desirable (but not everyone realises that they have them already)!
- We all want a sense of openness and spaciousness in our lives – people often complain of a sense of constriction, or of 'being too full' or 'not having enough space' in their lives (stress).
- We also want clarity and brightness or light – or wisdom/understanding. Dullness and muzziness/mugginess get us down.
- We also want sensitivity and flowing, never-ceasing energy – these are the qualities that make us feel most alive. They are also the essence of metta and compassion.
- If we feel 'dry' in the formless practice, we can practice 'accepting our experience with metta' – recalling that *whatever* arises, that is fine. Full acceptance is true love.
- So we only have to consider these qualities – tune into them in our state now, whatever it is – and delight in them.
- In this way, we can gradually relax more and more into the spaciousness – vastness of our being in which (quoting Longchenpa) everything, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant, is 'positive'.
- 'Within this ultimate womb of basic space, timelessly and spontaneously present, samsara is wholly positive, nirvana is positive. Within the wholly positive expanse, samsara and nirvana have never existed.'
- (As this indicates) the nature of mind is 'before' all manifestation. Just rest in that.

Dogen:

You should therefore cease from practice based on intellectual understanding, pursuing words and following after speech, and learn the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate your self. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will be manifest. If you want to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay.

Adhithana – Faith (and Doubt...)

A sense of wonder / joy / gratitude is very helpful to this practice / approach. That sense of ‘Wow! How incredibly amazing!’

- How extraordinary that the Dharma exists!
- How extraordinary that all these realised beings, from the Buddha on, have communicated it!
- How extraordinary that the nature of mind, the all-pervading original citta, is by its very nature pure and free – in fact totally beyond purity/impurity, bondage/liberation! Eh ma!

It’s thoughts like this that inspire me, increase faith and dispel doubt (the ‘so what?’ attitude). Whether doubt’s there or not, we all need to contact / be in contact with our sources of inspiration, joy and delight in the Dharma.

There are various ways to do this:

- the best way, (which we can’t actually ‘do’ but which may arise) is insight – a direct, immediate, indisputable glimpse (or more) of truth of our own nature, the way things really are. Insight leads to faith (confidence-trust) like nothing else.
- Something you *can* do – reflect on the essential Dharma-truths/ teachings that you respond to most strongly, can see most clearly – whether sunyata, impermanence, not-self or whatever.
- If doubt arises, ask “who is doubting?” “where is the doubter?” – doubt is just a thought, an empty arising, like everything else. If we see its empty essence, doubt itself becomes insight.
- We can increase faith by reflecting on / invoking the great awakened teachers who have fully realised this truth: Padmasambhava, Hakuin, Milarepa, Dogen, Yeshe Tsogyal, etc. etc. – and above all the Buddha. All the Buddhas.

Another way in which appeals to some people (and not others!) is what I call the *Adhithana* method. Adhithana is ‘blessing’ or even ‘grace’. ‘The blessing power’ or

inspirational energy of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Gurus – of all the awakened ones. It's an imaginative way to cultivate confidence and inspiration (i.e. shraddha), based on the principle of Guru Yoga.

Ultimately Adhithana is 'in' everything – there's a saying 'everything that lives is holy' – well this is just 'everything is holy' i.e. 'whole' – everything is of the nature of awakening.

Hence, everything 'contains' implicit blessing – *everything* is potentially 'the gateless gate' that 'opens' to awakening. That might be enough for some – just to contemplate this or get a feeling for this.

Others might find it useful to use their imagination to get a feel for it. It's the blessing power of the Buddhas (i.e. of awakening) so you can actually imagine Buddhas everywhere – in every direction, in every atom of everything, beaming light into every direction including your own heart.

This can be done with:

- 'Billions of Buddhas' – in all directions of space. 'Felt' rather than literally visualised!
- The Buddha
- One archetypal figure that you respond to (such as Vajrasattva, Vajrayogini, etc.)
- An awakened human figure that you respond to (Milarepa, Dogen...)

Any or all of the above! You can do this as often as you find it useful (or not at all!) It's like an imaginative way of seeing that the universe is 'supporting' our awakening – an image of the tathagatagarbha teaching. This is largely what visualisation practices are about too, so if you do one you may find it helpful to emphasise this 'Adhithana' element.

Whichever way you approach it, remember it's just a way in to awareness of what is here/now – so having evoked it, drop the evoking and let it continue (of its own accord, if it will) in your pure awareness of whatever is arising in the here and now.

The Main Point

27th July 2004

The point is not to cajole, force, convince, persuade, discipline or bribe the 'small mind' to 'do nothing'.

Small mind will happily do nothing (for a while) – as long as it doesn't feel its existence is threatened!

The point is simply to recognise our true nature 'big mind' right here & now – empty, self-less, bright as a diamond, unobstructed and ever-responsive.

All we 'do' is orientated to that.

Once we've recognised it (i.e. it has recognised itself), the only practice is to continue recognising it – just 'rest' in the infinite expanse of emptiness-awareness.

All that's needed is to see (hear, smell, taste...) that what we're looking for and yearning for – the truth, the meaning of life, the end of suffering – is here and always has been; we've never been separate from it for one moment.

If we could see that all that's needed is to *stop doing* – *stop seeking*, because we've never been apart from reality, then our self-grasping would let-go of its own accord: "like a snake uncurling, samsara frees itself" (Naropa) Don't let go – just relax! Rest in, be, what you are!

Increasing Faith Through Insight

29th July 2004

The main difficulty in seeing/accepting THIS here/now for what it is (i.e. the nondual ultimate nature) is our *concepts* (ideas, views, opinions) getting in the way.

E.g. the notion that there's a really existing world 'out there' (and a corresponding really-existing me 'in here' looking out at it). The two are inseparable. But this is just how things appear to be! Surely someone who was totally crazy would think otherwise (!)

So this is what we're about. We've got to get mad just like nutty old Milarepa, bonkers old Hakuin and totally crazy Padmasambhava (not to mention completely round the bend Shakyamuni)!

This is why we recite the Heart Sutra – what it says is clearly crazy ("form does not exist", etc.) so it's the first step to Dharma-craziness.

We can begin to understand this with our 'sane' (dualistic) mind- i.e. we can first get a *conceptual* understanding that things aren't what they appear to be – e.g. a conceptual understanding of 'emptiness'. And even this conceptual understanding can lead to confidence & faith – which opens us up to seeing it a bit more directly & experientially.

I don't want us to get our intellects working in overdrive here – intellects just *love* emptiness. Let's just take in the essential point: the five skandhas (= everything) are emptiness/sunyata.

Emptiness is not a *thing* – it's a concept. It's *pointing* to the way things are, i.e. the way things are is that there aren't any things!

No-thing exists independently, in its own right. Seeing a 'thing' (person, tree, house) is just an *idea* we have, that we put onto (impute to) what arises to the senses. There are no things because – for example:

a) whatever it is, we can always divide it into ever-smaller 'things' ad infinitum;

b) it arises dependently, therefore nothing exists as a 'thing' in its own right.

So all 'things' are empty of their own essence (svabhava). I'm empty of my own essence, you're empty of your own essence, ditto that cushion – everything. They have no real/true/inherent existence whatsoever.

So *if you find it useful* you can just apply these simple reflections *directly* to what's arising. Or you could just be aware 'empty, empty'.

If you already have a sense or glimpse of the empty/open – clear/aware 'space' of mind itself, just relax into / rest in that.

Pure Awareness and Compassion

1st August 2004

A question that often comes up: 'Where does compassion come into this approach?'

First, it's primarily a wisdom practice (like satipatthana, anapanasati, etc). I.e. it's 'about' direct insight into reality, the way things really are: buddha nature fully present as the nature of mind, *cittata*.

This already gives a strong clue as to where compassion comes in.

Second, the 'realisation' of pure awareness as our true nature is completely beyond any self/other duality. That is, it's 'self-less' – to realise pure awareness is to realise there is no self – and 'sees' the totally interconnected, interrelated, interpenetrating nature of all things. So in the one who has 'realised (they are) it' there's always an awareness of the *unnecessary suffering* of those beings who haven't realised their true nature. And as there's no self-interest whatsoever, compassionate actions well up spontaneously and endlessly.

This reflects the fact that ‘pure awareness’ and ‘absolute bodhicitta’ are one and the same.

Third, you could put it that ‘in’ the awakened heart/mind, the indestructible heart essence, there isn’t a ‘thing’ called ‘compassion’, but that sensitivity/responsiveness naturally manifests as what appears to be compassion whenever the occasion arises. (It also arises as endless other Buddha qualities)

There’s also the question or point: if this practice is about ‘doing nothing’ would we just stand there and watch if someone fell down in front of us right now?

This is a serious misunderstanding (a confusion of ‘meditation’ and ‘action’ in Mahamudra and Dzogchen terms). I think it’s clear from the above that this is just the opposite of what would happen – there would be no self-interest or confusion to get in the way of appropriate action.

However, we’re ‘in training’. We aren’t necessarily (or necessarily not) in the position of recognising our own true nature. I hope there are glimpses of this, though.

Another thing is that this formless/just sitting/pure awareness approach is never done in isolation.

In all the Buddhist traditions that emphasise this approach or view, there is a lot of emphasis on cultivating bodhicitta.

- I would recommend doing this quite specifically in the context of this practice: bearing in mind the intention to awaken for the benefit of all; reciting verses or to this effect (e.g. ‘may the supreme and precious bodhicitta take root where it has not yet done so; where it has been born, may it not decrease; where it has not decreased may it abundantly grow’)
- If it seems appropriate, cultivate and apply / practice / express maitri and the other brahmaviharas.
- Cultivate sraddha: through pujas, the ‘adhisthana’ approach, mantras, devotion and gratitude.
- Make pranidhanas (aspirational wishes) like ‘sentient beings are as limitless as the whole of space...’ + the bodhicitta one above + spontaneous ones.
- Dedicate merits to the benefit of all.

All of these ‘sensitise’ us to the *inherent* sensitivity of the awakened heart essence.

Having a Wrong Experience?

4th August 2004

Shenpen Hookham says in some notes I've got '*you can't be having a wrong experience*'.

Whatever arises, in its ultimate nature, is perfectly pure. This includes craving, hatred and delusion.

Why is it perfectly pure?

Because it is empty and unarisen.

The Heart Sutra says: *sarva-dharmah sunyata-laksana* - 'All phenomena (dharmas) are marked/characterised by emptiness' (this is the line which the 'FWBO version' has as 'all things are the primal void', which as you can see is *not* what it says!). It goes on: 'They are not arisen, not ceased; not stained, not stainless...'

That's to say, no phenomenon ever arises (as a truly-existing 'thing'), so there's nothing to cease. If nothing arises, there is nothing to cease.

Likewise, there's no-thing to be 'stained' or 'stainless' (or 'pure' – *vimala-avimala*). But didn't I just say that things in their ultimate nature are perfectly pure? Well, this brings out an important point about 'pure awareness': it's beyond *all* dualities – pure/impure, stained/stainless are just relative, conceptual judgments.

Nothing can be called 'truly stained', even craving, hatred and delusion, BECAUSE they're empty.

And it's because craving, hatred and delusion are empty & don't ultimately or truly exist that awakening is possible (think if the opposite were the case).

So the poisons are perfectly pure because they are unarisen; samsara is perfectly pure because it's unarisen ("This very place the Lotus Paradise"); nirvana is perfectly pure because it's unarisen ("In the vast expanse – openness, clarity, sensitivity – samsara and nirvana have never existed").

So we don't call it 'pure awareness' in the sense of being pure as opposed to impure – it's 'pure' of all dualities, all concepts; it's absolutely empty, 'un arisen and unceasing'; it can't be grasped (conceptually/dualistically) because it's completely outside & beyond subject & object.

And yet, it can be known directly. It is what we are (truly) – we are the waves, but the waves *are* the ocean; we are the clouds, but the clouds *are* the infinite clear blue sky. *Whatever* is arising now *is* openness, clarity and sensitivity.

This is why we can't be 'having a wrong experience'. If it's happening it's happening – THIS IS IT!

In our dualistic terms of reference, this means we accept whatever arises, internally or externally.

Accept means we receive it as 'just what it is' without grasping or aversion & without judgments such as 'this is what should/shouldn't be happening' or 'this is right/wrong' – "in the seen there is just that which is seen".

So this acceptance is the seed of both wisdom and compassion because in accepting things just exactly as they are – and nothing else – its response is always, exactly, the appropriate one: it lets it go (naturally).

You *can't* be having a wrong experience.

Some Questions & Answers –

from a Retreat at Vimaladhātu Retreat Centre, Germany

Q: What are the dangers of the practice?

A: – Getting into a dull or spaced-out state and thinking that this is pure awareness.

– Similarly, just letting the mind drift – forever! This would be a misunderstanding of 'no effort'.

– Subtle – but definite – effort is required until pure awareness is 'recognised'. If pure awareness is recognised, thoughts and so forth will naturally 'self-liberate' and openness, clarity and sensitivity will be very self-evident.

– Directing awareness towards a particular aspect of your experience. This is a misdirection rather than a danger. It means that you are doing satipatthana – which is fine in itself, it's just that the distinction needs to be understood.

– 'Thinking you are a Buddha already and therefore giving up any effort in the spiritual life'. Sangharakshita has often referred to this possibility. I've never come across anyone falling foul of it. However, it suggests a reason why generally it's regarded as very important to have a teacher – s/he can clarify any misunderstanding and also clarify in what sense it *can* be said that you are a Buddha already!

– One misunderstanding of the approach is that it involves 'quietism' i.e. the notion that because the nature of mind/ awareness is in itself totally effortless, you therefore don't need to do anything about anything. This misunderstanding is addressed above in the section on pure awareness and compassion.

Q: Why is it necessary to have a teacher?

A: I wouldn't say it's absolutely necessary to have a teacher – a few do probably manage to awaken to their true nature without (the Buddha for one!) – but to gain a clear understanding of the nature of mind as straightforwardly and expeditiously as possible, and to avoid possible mistakes/misapprehensions (as above), having a teacher (or teachers) is virtually indispensable for most people.

Q: When I practice the anapanasati meditation, I can come in a very intensive state of openness, stillness, awareness of subtle thoughts and emotions, etc; all qualities of (entering) pure awareness. Isn't practising anapanasati the quicker and easier way to pure awareness?

A: It depends... it might be for some. All those qualities can be there in shamatha & vipashyana and it can be difficult to distinguish: 'are these the qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity – the nature of mind itself – or qualities of shamatha or vipashyana?' In one way, *everything* we experience is an expression of openness, clarity and sensitivity, so the qualities that arise when we cultivate shamatha-vipashyana are not different to this – in fact they are by their very nature going to be closer to it than the more 'constricted' states of relative/little mind. An actual arising of vipashyana (an 'insight experience') is by its very nature nothing other than pure awareness – a just resting in what is – that's it!

Is there any way to distinguish between non-insightful states of openness, stillness etc and pure awareness? One way would be to note whether these qualities are *arising* or not – i.e. are they *objects* that come into awareness; or is it *un arising* (undeveloped, natural) emptiness-clarity which is not an object (or subject) but which is just 'there/here' by its very nature?

Q: When pure awareness arises – is that comparable with full enlightenment or stream entrance? Or can it be a 'short-time-state'? Can it come and go?

A: Recognising pure awareness is like / equivalent to an arising of insight. In this sense, it can come and go, or recognition of it comes and goes. I suppose there comes a point where it's difficult or impossible to 'un-recognise' it, and that would be something like irreversibility. When it's completely inseparable, I guess that would be awakening or buddhahood.

Q: How can I find the right balance between effort and relaxation?

A: First, if possible, give up all effort and rest in the total effortlessness of *this* awareness now. If not – use the *minimum* of effort necessary to recollect awareness of what is now. Harsh, willed effort will never 'get it'. Relax your body, let awareness rest in what is this moment – just accept it.

Leaving / Taking the Practice Home

4th August 2004

‘Leave the retreat behind; take what you’ve learned with you’.

Generally, it’s quite possible to ‘connect’ with awareness anywhere and whatever you’re doing. Just be aware that you’re aware: “this is awareness”. It doesn’t have to be any ‘special’ sort of awareness (e.g. some kind of applied mindfulness) – it’s simply a question of recollecting that awareness is ‘here’ all the time, it doesn’t have to be developed, it just is.

In your sitting meditation practice:

- You can bring pure awareness into any other practices that you do. All involve awareness.
- The sense of clarity/spaciousness is helpful in all meditations.
- If you have a sense of the sensitivity/responsiveness which is an inseparable quality of the nature of mind, this can greatly enhance your metta/maitri – ‘tune in’ to the sense that that quality is there already.
- Similarly, *shamatha-vipashyana* are inherently there in the nature of mind itself – in pure awareness – so you can regard them as being ‘uncovered’ or ‘discovered’ rather than
- ‘developed’
- It may well be that you relate to the above in a semi-conceptualised, reflective or imaginative way, but this can still be helpful to your practice.
- Pure awareness practice should help you have less sense of ‘I have to do this’; more sense of letting go of “I” into just what is ... which is already all the qualities we want to develop or have.
- If you do formless meditation a lot, it’s good to have someone to talk to (or e-mail) about your practice.
- It’s very important and helpful generally to have plenty of bodhicitta and sraddha ‘around’ the pure awareness practice.

Entering/Recognising the Basic Space of Awareness

from a Retreat at Vimaladhatu Retreat Centre, Germany

The crucial thing with this approach is to *recognise* the basic space of awareness (*dharmadhatu, dharmata, cittata*). The main obstruction to recognising it, is that it's too obvious, omnipresent and ordinary. As with the analogy of the fish looking for the water. The conceptual mind cannot believe that it could be anything so simple – so it resists 'looking' at it. It prefers it to be complicated and unattainable. And it's easy to ignore as we've been used to ignoring it all our lives.

So one thing we need to do is to find a way of letting go of disbelief / doubt that 'just this sparkling awareness' is the nonarising, nondual nature of mind itself, the buddha nature ... that *that* is just 'ordinary awareness'.

Some ways we (may) recognise it:

- with sight, getting a sense of the 'seer' – 'space/openness'
- with hearing, getting a sense of the 'hearer' – 'silence'
- with touch, getting a sense of the 'sensor' – 'stillness'

'space/openness', 'silence' and 'stillness' all point towards the same 'non-experience'. It's never an object of awareness, but it's not the 'subject' (i.e. supposed self or 'I') either.

Empty – vast – lucid: openness, silence, stillness.

- Although anything – concepts, thoughts, emotions, sense-impressions – may be arising, you may have a sense of this 'watcher' or 'witness' – like a mirror in which it all arises, without in any way affecting the mirror.
- It may seem at first to be itself a 'quasi-object' – but it can't be directly perceived or grasped.
- It might be useful to ask: 'Who is the experiencer?' 'Where is the experiencer?'
- Letting go of the three times:
 - Thoughts in / of the past are empty – the past is gone; it only exists as concept (memory).
 - Thoughts in / of the future are unarisen – the future does not exist, except as a conceptualisation.

- Thoughts in the present moment are pure suchness – i.e. nothing can be found; the moment's arising and passing away is simultaneous.

So there is just a 'pure observing,' a 'lucid clarity without anyone being there who is the observer.' And 'awareness in itself a that moment is quite ordinary' ('*Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness*')

So: a spacious clarity/lucidity or an aware space – in which everything arises and passes naturally/spontaneously (i.e. without 'someone doing it').

Appendix: Pure Awareness and the FWBO System of Meditation

People who've learned to meditate in the FWBO may wonder how entering pure awareness fits in with other meditation practices done in the FWBO and WBO – mindfulness of breathing, metta bhavana, puja and (for members of the WBO) visualisation sadhana. According to Sangharakshita's 'system of meditation,' we have four stages that we naturally go through in our spiritual / meditative development:

- Integration – cultivation of mindfulness & absorption. Being mindful.
- Positive emotion – cultivation of skilful emotions/ positive mental events. Being emotionally positive.

These together comprise the area of *shamatha* – 'calming'.

- Spiritual death – 'seeing through' our illusions/delusion
- Spiritual rebirth – developing 'awakened' qualities

Both of these are aspects of cultivation and development of *vipashyana* or insight.

We can engage in these stages through different appropriate practices – e.g. Sangharakshita recommends mindfulness of breathing, metta bhavana, six element practice and visualisation sadhana. Other practices could potentially be used for each stage. Or we could well go through all of those stages using just one practice – e.g. any of those just mentioned.

So the practices which we currently initially introduce people to in the FWBO – i.e. mindfulness of breathing and metta bhavana – are means of cultivating shamatha, which has the characteristics of absorption/integration, and positive emotion. Then on this basis, these or other practices can be used to cultivate vipashyana, which has the aspects of spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. (There are various ways of talking about 'spiritual death' and 'spiritual rebirth' – one way of thinking of them is that spiritual death is cultivation aimed at 'seeing through' delusions, especially the ego-delusion or self-view,

while ‘spiritual rebirth’ is the realisation of how things actually are, after the ego-delusion has been seen through. Hence, spiritual death is mainly about what we call vipashyana-bhavana, the cultivation aspect, while spiritual rebirth is about the actual arising of genuine insight. Incidentally, pure awareness essentially comes into the category of ‘spiritual rebirth’ in this sense.)

In Sangharakshita’s lecture on this system, he also mentions ‘just sitting’ as integral to every stage. Mindfulness of breathing – just sitting, metta bhavana – just sitting, and so on. Effort – relax; cultivate, let go. ‘Just sitting’ in Sangharakshita’s system is simply a matter of continuing in the state of absorption / positivity / insight that you’ve developed without the need for effort (*or* non- effort). It’s a kind of ‘fruit’ of the practice. You could say that if you just sit on in a shamatha state, it’s a formless shamatha. If you just sit on in a vipashyana state, it’s a formless vipashyana.

However, this kind of just sitting is also the basis of ‘entering pure awareness’ as a practice, which naturally develops from it, so to speak.

A further perspective on the relationship between entering pure awareness and the other aspects of the FWBO / WBO system of meditation and practice is touched upon in a talk that Subhuti gave on the WBO convention in 2003. He made a useful distinction between three ‘views’ or models of meditation which shows how pure awareness relates to other kinds of meditation practice.

As already suggested, every kind of practice we do has an implicit ‘view’ underlying it.

1. The first model/ view is the one we’re most familiar with: Subhuti calls it the ‘self-development’ model. I prefer just ‘development’ or ‘bhavana model’. The view here is that we are developing or cultivating a quality or qualities which we don’t already ‘have’ – we bring it into being. So maybe what we ‘have’ is irritation, and we need to work to bring into being ksanti (patience, tolerance); or what we ‘have’ is grumpy ill-will and what we need to develop is metta. Or what we ‘have’ is ignorance, and we need to develop wisdom. So this is the development view or model. *We* do the developing of whatever quality it is we need to bring into being.

2. The second model / view is sort of the opposite of this. It involves realising that actually ‘we’ (the deluded ego) can’t ‘do’ anything – if the ego tries to take the ‘citadel’ of ‘egolessness’ by storm, it can’t but fail. So we have to accept that there is nothing we can do – we have to depend on (to use a word which sounds a bit strange in a Buddhist context) the ‘grace’ of the awakened ones – the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, e.g. the vow of Amitabha. So the model or view is one of, in Subhuti’s terms, ‘self-surrender’ – we surrender, give up our ego, to ‘the Buddha’ which/who is greater than ourselves and (perceived as) ‘external’ to ourselves.

3. The third model or view is sometimes referred to as an ‘immanence’ model – the basic view is that the nature of our mind is *really* of the nature of awakening, but the defilements – craving, aversion and delusion – prevent us from realising or knowing our

true nature. Hence our ‘task’ is to realise that the nature of everything, including craving, aversion and delusion, is the empty, pure, limitless, luminous essence of mind itself – Buddha nature.

Subhuti calls this the model / view of ‘self-discovery’. I’d prefer just ‘discovery’ or else ‘the awareness model’. In this approach the deluded ego ‘lets go’ or otherwise ‘subsides’ and the nature of mind itself is thus ‘discovered’. This is of course the view behind entering pure awareness – that the nature of mind is not something to be developed or cultivated. We are, in fact, never ‘outside’ it (so there is in reality no question of ‘entering’ it) – it is simply to be recognised for what it is.

Now the point Subhuti makes is that these three views or models are *all* indispensable. We may *emphasise* one or other of them (at particular times in our spiritual life) – but all are necessary to a balanced spiritual development. (Also, different traditions of Buddhism tend to emphasise one or other of these different models, e.g. Theravada – ‘development’; Pure Land/Shin – ‘self-surrender’; Dzogchen – ‘discovery’ – but all of them nonetheless necessarily feature the other two models as well.) So clearly, with entering pure awareness as a practice, we’re emphasising the third view or model.

Nevertheless, in the overall context of our practice we’re also engaging in the ‘self-development’ approach, cultivating qualities (as appropriate and needful, mindfulness, metta, shraddha etc), and (in puja or sadhana) we’re bringing in at least elements of the ‘self-surrender’ approach.

Also – in terms of Sangharakshita’s system of meditation, each of those three views/models *could* be seen to embody the four stages– i.e. *all* of them could potentially take us through the stages of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death and spiritual rebirth.

In the case of pure awareness itself (i.e. Buddha nature), all of the qualities of shamatha and vipashyana – integration, positive mental states (shamatha), insight and all the Buddha-qualities, corresponding to ‘spiritual rebirth,’ (vipashyana) are naturally present in the nature of mind/awareness itself.