

Two Talks on Immanence – Tejananda

Given on the Men's National Order weekend at Padmaloka, 1 May 2004

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Two talks for the price of one! Talk one on immanence:

THIS IS IT!

Well, that's both a joke and not a joke. If you didn't get it (either way), here's Talk Two. Talk two is a commentary on talk One.

What I'm going to do is talk a bit about what might be understood by 'immanence' in the Buddhist context, then, after a bit of historical speculation, I'll finish with something about the 'practice' (or non-practice) of immanence, mainly in terms of pure awareness, and with some reference to Dzogchen, Zen, and maybe a dash of (neo-) Advaita for seasoning.

I was *also* going to say something about how we might regard or approach and teach immanence as practice within the F/WBO, but it would have made the talk too long. (It's included below as an appendix).

1. 'Rectification of terms'

It's a well-established tradition in the F/WBO to start with a dictionary definition. So who am I to change anything? Here's what the dictionary says about immanence:

Indwelling, inherent (in); (of God) permanently pervading and sustaining the universe. (S.O.E.D.)

So obviously, from this, immanence is a Western concept and it doesn't directly relate to any particularly Buddhist concepts. Buddhists of whatever ilk, as far as I'm aware, don't believe that God permanently pervades and sustains the universe. We don't believe in God, we don't believe that there is anything permanent and we certainly don't believe that this non-existent God sustains the universe!

Of course, what we generally mean when we use the term 'immanence' in the *Buddhist* context is the Tathagatagarbha teaching of the Mahayana, as well as everything that later emerged from or relates to that teaching.

Tathagatagarbha is rather in the air at the moment. I know that Subhuti and Dhammarati gave talks on tathagatagarbha-related topics during last year. Subhuti came up with a useful threefold model for approaches to awakening within Buddhism generally – as I remember, these were 'self-development' (= bhavana or developmental models), 'self-

transcendence' (= Buddha-land / 'faith' type models) and 'self-discovery' (= immanence' models). I think that he made the point that most schools of Buddhism contain all three to varying degrees, but tend to give prominence to one in particular. This is arguable, in detail, but I think that as an overview it's quite helpful, even if I'm not too sure about the terminology for the three types.

I've also heard Subhuti say a number of times that he thought that tathagatagarbha is 'philosophically' problematic & that the relatively early mahayana writings on tathagatagarbha are incredibly convoluted and difficult. So far, I have to admit, I've mainly just taken his word for it!

So what is tathagatagarbha? As you will almost certainly know, it's literally translated as 'womb' or 'embryo' of the Buddha (Tathagata) or sometimes as the 'Buddha seed' – but it's most often rendered into English simply as 'Buddha nature'.

The basic notion of tathagatagarbha is set out in a mahayana sutra called, appropriately enough, the Tathagatagarbha Sutra, which describes itself as a 'Maha-vaipulya sutra' which means something like 'great-extended sutra.' This great-extended sutra runs to 12 whole pages in the version that I've got – so I can only imagine that 'great-extended' refers to the tremendous significance of the contents of the sutra – at least as far as the author(s) were concerned – rather than to its actual length!

The central teaching of the sutra, in conceptual terms, is this:

*Good sons, 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. ... Whether or not Buddhas appear in the world, the Tathagatagarbhas of all living beings are eternal and unchanging. It is just that they are covered by sentient beings' klesas.*¹

And the rest of the sutra is mainly a range of similes or images for the teaching just given in conceptual form.

So this is the Buddhist take on immanence (or rather, immanence is the western/Christian take on tathagatagarbha!) Even if you haven't read the Tathagatagarbha Sutra before, I expect it's very likely to have had some resonances for most of us. For a start, it *isn't* only in the mahayana that this sort of teaching is found. It's found in later developments, naturally enough (and we'll come on to those shortly) but – an important point – it's found in the Pali Canon too.

For example, in words that are almost the same as the ones we just heard from the Tathagatagarbha Sutra: '*It is just that they are covered by sentient beings' klesas*', we've got this well-known statement in the Anguttara Nikaya:

This mind, monks, is luminous, but is defiled with taints that come from without.

In fact, luminosity or clarity is a quality which is often related to the tathagatagarbha. So we have this and a few other sayings in the Pali canon which suggest that the notion that ultimately became known as ‘tathagatagarbha’ was not unknown in early Buddhism or indeed to the Buddha himself.

I’m not going to go into this aspect of things in detail, it’s quite possible to follow up if you want. ² What might need doing, is a bit of ‘filling out’ regarding the basic statement from the Tathagatagarbha Sutra that I just read out. Obviously it could be read or understood in various ways. One way in which it has been understood – and this becomes explicit in some mahayana sutras such as the Mahaparinirvana Sutra – is that the teaching of anatman/anatta is being abrogated. The Mahaparinirvana Sutra states unequivocally that there is an atman!

This sort of thing is probably the basis for (some people) asserting that tathagatagarbha is simply not Buddhist – it’s gone beyond the pale, it’s crypto-Hinduism or, if possible, something even ‘worse’ than that! I don’t see it that way. On the other hand, I’ve wondered in the past, and I still do wonder, whether there aren’t actually two (or more) ‘Buddhisms’ advocating two or more different kinds of awakening. Of course this is highly disputable!

But there do seem to be at least two quite different conceptions of awakening, which in my mind at least don’t fit quite perfectly together.

Firstly, there is the awakening centrally represented by the Buddha in the Pali canon (and later sources, especially many mahayana sutras) in which awakening is insight into conditioned arising and involves the complete absence of craving, aversion and delusion and the overcoming of all klesas whatever. In this ‘version’ of awakening, the Buddha-mind never ever again has so much as hint of an echo of a shadow of a klesa arising in it.

The body, speech and mind of such a one would always be ‘perfectly skilful’. I’ll refer to this as the ‘standard’ model.

Then there are tathagatagarbha-based models, as exemplified, for example, by the Mahamudra and people like Milarepa. When I first came across Milarepa, I was already aware of the ‘standard’ model of awakening that I’ve just mentioned, and I was quite perplexed with some of his statements (representing what we might call the ‘developed tathagatagarbha’ view of awakening) as he said (or sung) things which seemed to contradict the understanding the nature of awakening that I’ve just mentioned. e.g. in ‘*A Song of a Yogi’s Joy*’, Milarepa sings ³:

*Oh happy are the myriad manifestations!
The more ups-and-downs, the more joy I feel!
Happy is the body with no sinful karma,
Happy indeed are the countless confusions!
The greater the fear, the greater the happiness I feel. ...
Oh happy is the death of sensations and passions!*

*The greater the distress and passions,
the more one can be blithe and gay! ...*

Well I certainly found it inspiring, but I could say that ‘countless confusions’ (or at least some) also arose for me around this kind of statement, for quite a long time. Of course, it could easily be ‘explained’ away by suggesting that maybe Milarepa was not yet fully awakened at this point – but I don’t actually think that is the case, and anyway it doesn’t address the many other similar references that you’ll find in tantric sources, and in Ch’an & Zen as well. This would appear to be an awakening in which klesas can still arise. And this approach to awakening seems to be associated with the traditions which are influenced by or derived from the tathagatagarbha.

So I’m not attempting to set out and justify a cogent theory here on ‘the two different kinds of awakening’ – that’s way beyond the scope of this talk & anyway I’m not particularly interested in doing so! However, these two apparently different approaches do embody two apparently rather different views of what awakening is.

The ‘Milarepa’ type view seems related to statements 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. ...

So the tathagatagarbha is there and the klesas are there (*here*), *at the same time*. One point of view on this would be that one’s klesas have to be ‘cleared away’ before the tathagatagarbha can become ‘evident’ (to oneself – it’s evidently already evident to a Buddha). This is the view embodied in the quote on this I just gave from the Anguttara Nikaya – the klesas ‘obscure’ the clarity or radiance of mind in the worldling but in the arahant – it goes on to say – the klesas are gone and the radiance of mind is unobscured. But at least some strands of tantric Buddhism (including Mahamudra and Dzogchen), as well as Ch’an and Zen, seem to have taken this differently. Awakening is not – or not necessarily – the complete and final *overcoming* or eradication of the klesas, the klesas can still arise in the awakened mind. It’s just that the awakened mind doesn’t *identify* with the klesas – they don’t *define* the awakened mind. You could put it that it’s infinitely ‘bigger’ than the klesas.

So I’m just going to leave this question of ‘two kinds of awakening’ up in the air – I haven’t resolved it myself & I’m not sure that I have the means to do so right now. Another ‘issue’ relates to this statement in the Tathagatagarbha Sutra:

Whether or not Buddhas appear in the world, the Tathagatagarbhas of all living beings are eternal and unchanging.

This might well appear to be blatant eternalism! (Well ok, it *does* appear to be blatant eternalism!) – But of course it’s subject to more than one possible interpretation. One way of interpreting it would be ‘the essence of every living being is some-thing which is

eternal and unchanging – let’s just call it a ‘soul’ or ‘atman’ for short’. That’s decidedly eternalistic.

But another way of understanding it would be ‘all beings are *always potentially* Buddhas’ i.e. the seed of buddhahood is unchangingly, invariably, by definition, in or of the nature of all living beings. That’s not eternalistic (as far as I can see). It’s just another way of saying ‘awakening is possible’.

Or a little more interpretively, the statement ‘*the Tathagatagarbhas of all living beings are eternal and unchanging*’ could be taken to imply that ‘the nature of things as they really are is the nature of mind (or awareness or consciousness) itself which is always present in all beings’. In this case ‘the nature of mind itself’ is the same as the tathagatagarbha. I’m not really sure whether this is technically eternalistic or not – and in a way, I’m not particularly bothered – this is actually the understanding of immanence or tathagatagarbha that I’m really interested in: the notion – better still, the direct *seeing* or *knowing* – that the Buddha nature is present *as awareness* here and now. That’s to say, that this very awareness *is* the Buddha nature – the unarisen, unconditioned, not-made, the Trikaya, the non-dual, ultimate reality. It’s here, now & it doesn’t have to be – in fact cannot be – developed or cultivated. It can only be woken up to as what we truly are. So this is the area of immanence that pertains to what some of us are now calling ‘pure awareness,’ but which is also called Buddha nature, the nature of mind, intrinsic awareness (i.e. rigpa), mind itself and a lot of other synonyms – and it’s most prominent in the Mahayana as Ch’an / Zen and in the tantric schools as Dzogchen and Mahamudra.

So I’ll say more about the view and approaches of these traditions in just a little while. But first...

2. A speculative bit

Just as I was about to write this part of the talk, I had an e-mail from Sagaramati saying:

“I was asked to give a talk on this coming Order weekend at Padmaloka, but I have a lecture on the Friday, so it was not on. Pity, I’d like to show how all this ‘interconnectedness’, ‘immanence’, ‘tathagatagarbha’ stuff is beginning to infect our Order, and is based on the tradition seeing only the cyclical order of conditionality. Thus, to emphasize the positive, we have to bring in the opposite extreme to nihilism, i.e. tathagatagarbha, etc. I think people like these things as it makes them feel good about themselves. But Reality is Reality regardless of what we think or feel.”

Well, I agree with this last statement (at least)! But I’m not so sure that it applies to what precedes it – which to me looks very much like Sagaramati’s opinion – to which of course he is entirely entitled – rather than Reality! At least you have a succinct exposition of Sagaramati’s talk-that-was-not-to-be in characteristically pithy style! So it’s a shame he’s not here to put his point of view over more fully, but he and I have been having friendly arguments about tathagatagarbha for a very long while – as past and present chapter members of the Vajra chapter will (perhaps a little jadedly) attest!

I disagree with the general tenor of this argument because I don't think that tathagatagarbha and so forth arose for the reasons that Sagaramati speculates – i.e. that it's a form of 'eternalism' that is brought in to balance a one-sidedly 'nihilistic' view of conditionality which doesn't take the 'progressive' order of conditionality into account.

On the contrary, I don't think it *arose* for 'doctrinal' reasons at all. I think that it arose from empirical observation of the nature of awareness and awakening and is related to the nature of the way in which awakening is 'communicated'. (I hasten to emphasise that this and what follows is a speculation on my part and of course I wouldn't dare to say it if Sagaramati was actually here!)

Here's my speculation in a slightly fuller form. Right from the beginning – from the Buddha's own communication of his awakening to others – there was what later became known as a 'sudden' as well as a 'gradual' path. The Buddha – evidently – taught gradual paths with steps and stages – the Noble Eightfold Path and so on. (The gradual path also largely corresponds with what we can call the 'bhavana' or 'developmental' model.)

The Buddha also – evidently – taught in other ways, such as that suggested by the quote from the Anguttara Nikaya I read out at the beginning, and also by the teaching to Bahiya, found in the Udana. The Buddha's essential teaching to Bahiya 'precipitated' Bahiya's *immediate* full awakening. As plenty of people have observed, the nature of that teaching is 'very Zen' (well, the Buddha is regarded as the first Zen patriarch, so that should hardly come as a surprise!).

The implication of 'In the seen there is just what is seen' and so on is that only what is arising in consciousness or awareness *now* exists – in the seen there is *just* what is seen – outside of *these* immediate sense-arising, there is only concept *about* reality – whatever presents itself to our senses now is the only reality that we will ever know. Hence, reality is *this*, just this sense arising with nothing added on, (and 'no-one' added on – no 'experiencer', no 'self', 'I' or 'me' having an experience) – and what we have here implicitly is an 'immanent' view of reality. From the Buddha in the Pali canon.

Now, I'm sure you could read or interpret this sutta other ways – undoubtedly Sagaramati will refute me (or attempt to)! – but this is my talk, so I'm going to speculate as I wish! So, I speculate that this form of 'direct' or 'sudden' immanentist teaching may well have been far more prominent in the Buddha's teaching style than the Pali canon would lead us to believe. Now of course, every good speculation needs a conspiracy theory, so here's mine, involving *careerist monks!*

The Buddha of course 'communicated' awakening to hundreds if not thousands of people, both renunciants and householders, during his lifetime (especially if we include stream entry onwards as 'degrees' of awakening). By 'communicated awakening' I mean that in one way or another, he 'sparked people off' and that awakening arose subsequently – or in a case like Bahiya, immediately.

Now, a few generations down the track, there undoubtedly must have been plenty of people around who had been ‘sparked’ by others whose ‘sparking’ ultimately went back to the Buddha. But by this time there had also come into being the hosts of the ‘religious professionals’ – those who always appear when a free lunch is in the offing. These, in case you haven’t guessed, would be the aforementioned *careerist monks*. Now, before anyone objects, I’m not suggesting that all monks were by nature conniving or insincere – this isn’t an anti-monastic diatribe.

Let me drop the semi-jest and make the point – I think that it’s a pretty universal phenomenon that ‘living’ lineages of awakening quickly stultify into religions, complete with hierarchies, officers, religious professionals, dogmas and so on. It should be no surprise that this happens – it’s just human nature. When one’s livelihood depends upon a religious vocation (and I’m treading on rather thin ice here!) there is a strong tendency to make sure that that livelihood is secure.

I realise that I’m dealing with complex historical issues very sweepingly here. But anyway, the general drift of my speculation is that in time the ‘professionals’ soon mainly became settled monastics, living in increasingly large and expensive-to-maintain monasteries, even monastic universities. Consequently there would have been little need for encouragement to (over-) emphasise the ‘gradual’ approach at the expense of the ‘sudden’ or direct approach. So the scenario that I’m imagining, is that while the lineage of ‘sudden’ awakening continued (both in and out of the monastic sangha, naturally) the recorded Dharma – reflecting the outlook of the religious professionals, the settled monastics – would have naturally tended to emphasise the more ‘gradual’ elements of the Buddha’s teaching. In this context, I’d speculate, the Buddha’s ‘gradual’ teachings would not only have been passed on, but also expanded.

Now, it has been observed that the conceptual basis of Dharma is very simple indeed. Sangharakshita has observed that the whole Dharma could be boiled down to ‘impermanence’. In this, everything else that is essential to ‘know’ is implicit: the other *laksanas* – unsatisfactoriness, not-self. Conditioned arising elaborates and systematises the notion of impermanence. Sunyata is essentially another angle on not-self.

Conceptually, you don’t actually need any more than that – maybe just add the *skandhas* – and as the teaching to Bahiya shows, in the hands of the Buddha, or another awakened one, you don’t even need that.

However, from the point of view of Buddhist history, the whole industry of commentary and sub-commentary and sub-sub commentary, and so on got into swing, together with the creation of new projects such as the *abhidharma*. And commentaries to the *abhidharma*, and ‘64,000’ different sorts of *sunyata*, and the monastic institutions to support all this fervent activity. And the administration and maintenance of the monastic institutions ... and so on. This became ‘mainstream Buddhism’ – and in my view, a very great deal of it has little or nothing *directly* to do with awakening.

It’s as if huge numbers of Buddhists throughout history have been fervently involved in

what to me seems to virtually amount to mere displacement activity – that is, putting off, postponing, getting away from the one thing that the Dharma is actually about: awakening.

Actually, the arising of new directions within Buddhism broadly seem to have been of two main sorts: directions which re-assert the essence of the Dharma as awakening NOW (i.e. in this very life – though quite possibly now) and directions which as far as I'm concerned virtually seem to make a cosmological principle out of displacement activity.

By which (latter) I mean, for example, certain tendencies within the mahayana in which awakening is effectively put off *forever* while endless worthy and even magnificent but essentially mundane qualities are developed.

I probably should say more about this to justify what I'm speculating but, as some of you might well be thinking, I could well be accused of indulging in displacement activity myself, as I need to be telling you how the immanence model works out as practice. But I just want to say one more thing in relation to what I've just been saying. I think that the tendencies that I'm talking about are not without relevance to ourselves.

There seems to be a fairly general perception in the Order and movement at the moment that things seem much more fluid and open to new possibilities than before – which as far as I'm concerned is excellent.

In particular, it's great and very encouraging to see far more discussion and practice in the Order recently directly related to insight / awakening – but I do feel we need to keep coming back to one question again and again, in relation to ourselves, our Order, our institutions, whatever, bearing in mind the 'displacement activity' possibility that I've just mentioned. The question is: what has this got to do with Awakening?

I know that it can be argued that it *all* has, ultimately. But to me some of our very prominent collective concerns seem – let's say – rather tangential to this. I could mention several, but one major 'issue' that I personally think we do have a collective over-concern with is ordination, in the sense of the institution of ordination, getting ordained, and getting others ordained, as distinct from the central objective of our going for refuge, which is awakening itself. I wonder sometimes whether we might be tending to go for refuge to ordination rather than to awakening (as embodied by the Three Jewels).

I'd personally like to see ordination in itself and everything to do with the 'ordination process' becoming far less prominent in our collective consciousness and activity, and much less distinction being made on the basis of the difference between being an Order member and not being one. I'd like to see us becoming far more clearly a *united* community in which all are orientated towards insight and awakening, in everyday life and practice. [More about this in my thread in May Shabda, which has also appeared in MahaSangha and F/WBO.] It's a matter of redressing the balance. Ultimately, what we all need, I believe, is not large and well-regulated institutions, but a lineage of awakening.

Obviously, I'm making a generalisation here – so please don't anyone take it personally!

3. Back to immanence

So to my mind there is at least a link between immanence 'approaches' and the lineage of living Dharma – awakening – which is directly 'communicated' from teacher (guru) to disciple. But just to make it clear, I'm not trying to make a crude correlation such as 'sudden approach GOOD' - 'gradual / bhavana approach BAD.' Both are orientations towards awakening. All approaches are liable to literalism and even misuse. Nothing in the Dharma-as-teaching is 'failsafe'. If there have been 'careerist monks', there have undoubtedly been 'fake gurus' as well.

But I stick to my point that there is a great deal in Buddhism – even the recorded Dharma – which is only very indirectly related to the issue of awakening, if, indeed, it's related at all. Anyway, I'll leave that for people to argue with me about later and get back to immanence (not that we ever left it)! So as I've said, the main approaches to 'practical immanence' as we might call it are developments such as Ch'an/Zen, Mahamudra and Dzogchen. What I intend to do isn't to outline these systems or schools – there isn't time and you can easily get that from books. What I'm going to do is to outline the approach to pure awareness as an 'immanentist' practice (or non-practice) that I've personally been taking and teaching on 'entering pure awareness' retreats at Vajraloka – mainly with reference to Zen and Dzogchen teachings.

I hope that this will give a brief overview of the territory.

As I've already pointed out, what I'm calling 'pure awareness' is synonymous with terms like Buddha nature, the nature of mind or 'mind itself' (*sems nyid*), intrinsic awareness (*rigpa*), naked awareness, the basic space of phenomena, dharmakaya, mahamudra, and many others. So first, it should already be obvious that pure awareness is not a *practice* – it's not a meditation method and not something that can be developed or cultivated in the way that we develop or cultivate mindfulness and metta, or even insight.

We can't develop pure awareness because it's 'here' already - fully and perfectly. It can't not be here. Pure awareness is what we truly are – it's the true nature of everything. At the same time, pure awareness is *just* awareness – awareness that in itself is 'pure' of subject-object and 'pure' of 'self-view' – and that's all there is: everything arises and passes away as spontaneous manifestation within this awareness.

Now, what I've just said might seem to suggest that pure awareness is some special kind of awareness that only, say, stream entrants or highly developed yogins and Buddhas can 'know' about. It's not – this is the crucial point regarding the immanence approach – it's not in any way different in nature from this awareness here and now. It *is* this awareness/consciousness here and now. This is why it's spoken of in Dzogchen as 'ordinary awareness' or in Zen as 'nothing special'.

To ‘practice’ pure awareness requires a different ‘view’ from that which underlies the ‘developmental model’. The view underlying the bhavana model is of course that we ‘work in meditation’ to cultivate qualities such as mindfulness, metta, *samatha* and *vipassana*.

With the ‘non-practice’ which I usually call ‘entering pure awareness,’ we are not concerned to develop anything. I call this sort of non-practice (‘*abhavana*’) the ‘awareness model’, as distinct from the developmental (or the faith i.e. ‘self-surrender’) model. But it gets a bit tedious to call it a ‘non-practice’ all the time, so I’ll refer to it as a ‘practice,’ but bearing in mind that this doesn’t mean that anything is being cultivated.

So when I say ‘we’re not concerned to develop anything’ in entering pure awareness, I mean this quite literally – we are only concerned for ‘things’ (i.e. whatever arises in or to the six senses) to be exactly what they are. We don’t modify anything. In this practice we’re not ‘aiming’ for a particular ‘state’ such as for example a klesa free state, a concentrated state, a blissful state, a dhyanic state, or a non-conceptual state. We’re not ‘aiming’ for anything at all in fact - other than what actually is in this moment.

Above all, in this practice, we don’t attempt to ‘develop our awareness’ – 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, anything, that is awareness. Awareness itself is completely unaffected by whatever arises ‘in’ it – Just as with the image of the mirror: pure awareness is just like that – it ‘reflects’ (i.e. ‘sees’ / is aware of) everything but is never caught up in what arises, whether it’s love or hate, bliss or envy. It’s beyond all dualities – it’s the mirror-like jnana.

So ‘entering’ pure awareness means having no conception that we have to *do* something – that there is something to achieve, somewhere that we are going. ‘We’ are simply as we are in this moment, in this instant. To try to produce or ‘get’ pure awareness – even to *try* to ‘enter’ it – would just be counter-productive.

Another way of talking about the situation is to use the metaphor of ‘big mind’ and ‘small mind’ – big mind (i.e. pure awareness) is the whole picture, it’s all-pervading awareness, it’s all there is. Small mind (which is the dualistic mind) cannot grasp big mind. It would be like a cloud trying to grasp the infinite clear blue sky, or a wave thinking that it can grasp the whole vast ocean.

In an important essay, ‘Fukanzazengi’, Dogen wrote:

The Way is basically perfect and all-pervading. How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?

This is the essential point. The Way – which in the sense Dogen’s using it is another term for tathagatagarbha, pure awareness, etc – is *perfect and all-pervading*. Dogen is pointing to 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 the nature of mind or awareness.

Little mind just arises from our ongoing belief that 'I' actually exist as a separate, real 'person'. We *don't* actually exist in this way. 'We' truly exist as perfect and all-pervading awareness.

Because 'little mind' cannot grasp 'big mind', Dogen says '*How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?*' What he's saying here is that 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.

That's why in entering pure awareness 'practice' nothing is 'done' nothing is 'added' to what arises - *How could it be contingent upon practice and realization?*- this already is how things are, this is pure awareness.

Dogen's Fukanzazengi goes on:

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?

The vital point that Dogen's making here 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 all literally done in awareness. Or more accurately: it arises spontaneously in awareness – no-one 'does' it.

In terms of 'entering pure awareness', it means that there is no special 'spiritual practice situation' – being on retreat or meditating by a shrine is no more inherently 'spiritual' than going round the shops, or watching the TV. Doing a puja is no more 'spiritual' than going to the toilet. *And no less*. Awareness is just 'present'. We don't need to *do* anything about it – we just need to realise that *this is it*.

But how?!

Well, all Buddhist traditions that teach 'the awareness model' offer 'ways in' – these ways in are not to be confused with pure awareness itself, but they can help us get the point that *really* we're being asked to do nothing at all.

One such way is the *upadesa* or direct pointing-out instruction from guru to disciple. One recorded upadesa which I find very helpful is in '*Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness*' by (or attributed to) Guru Padmasambhava. This is the key 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, in this awareness, we acknowledge that the past is ‘gone’ – it only exists as memories (i.e. mental events, concepts) *in the present*. Similarly, thoughts in the future are ‘unconditioned’ in the sense that they are simply unarisen – the ‘future’ is a conceptualisation, not something that actually ‘exists’. The present moment is all there ‘ever is’ – and yet it can’t be fixed or grasped; it has no duration and no self-essence, it’s outside space and time.

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.*

So whatever arises ‘in’ awareness, or ‘as’ awareness, ‘you’ are aware of it. But then after a while maybe you begin to question who the ‘you’ is who is aware. And sooner or later maybe there appears to be no ‘you’ there being aware. This is what Padmasambhava means when he 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 cognised there is just the cognised’. There is nothing added, nothing extra – *just* what is sensed by any of the six senses in this moment. No *added* concepts *about* it, including the concept of an ‘experiencer’.

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. *‘Only a naked manifest awareness is present.’* There is just awareness,. That’s all there is. So that’s it – more could be said, but that’s perhaps enough to give a taster of what this approach is about and where it’s taking you. It’s taking you nowhere. Nowhere that you aren’t already, that is.

Finally, I just wanted to say something very briefly about the Advaita approach – I’ve only been looking at this comparatively recently; not so much Advaita Vedanta (as embodied, for example, by Ramana Maharshi) but what’s sometimes referred to as ‘neo-advaita,’ meaning contemporary – often western and decidedly non-Hindu – exponents of the ‘nondual’ approach. My impression is that what is being said by these teachers is – translated back into Buddhist terms – about 90% ‘anÿtman’ and ‘nature of mind’ and ‘total mutual interpenetration of all dharmas’. It’s a radical nondualism – which isn’t in itself so very different from some Buddhist angles on the same ‘issues’. What I’ve found particularly stimulating and refreshing is the central and wholehearted emphasis on awakening in this teaching – on the *real possibility* of awakening.

The basic message is that ‘Awakening is causeless, Enlightenment has no cause.’ And that ‘as awakening is beyond time and space, it can happen now to anyone, anywhere, anytime’ (thanks to Vasumitra who put what I’ve just quoted on the Sadhana and MahaSangha internet groups just as I was writing this bit!). The implications of this, especially as regards the ‘means’ for awakening, are potentially quite far-reaching. I’m not going to go into it any further now but I must say that I’m finding this approach both intriguing and helpful.

But you’ll find much the same in aspects of Dzogchen and Zen and the other ‘developed’ immanence-based forms of Buddhism. I’ll finish with a quote from 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.*⁴

Appendix - Immanence and the FWBO

(**N.B.** This is a section I cut out to reduce the length of the talk.)

Tathagatagarbha might be prominent in Ch’an / Zen and Dzogchen / Mahamudra, but it has until quite recently been anything but prominent in the F/WBO. Or rather, it has been prominently *not* part of the overt F/WBO approach to Dharma. I think that this has been mainly if not entirely due to Bhante’s ‘reservations’ about teaching tathagatagarbha-based approaches within the movement.

Probably most of you will recall what happened several years ago when Bhante put a letter in Shabda regarding the practice of ‘just sitting’ – and just sitting in its Zen manifestation as shikantaza, is certainly a ‘tathagatagarbha-related’ approach. Well, perhaps you don’t all remember this – and actually, I’ve spoken to people comparatively recently who aren’t aware of what happened and what the outcome was. So I’ll just outline it very briefly.

In 1999, Bhante picked up from a centre programme that there, at least, ‘just sitting’ was apparently being taught as ‘the third practice’ along with mindfulness of breathing and metta bhavana. So Bhante put a letter in Shabda saying that he’d been surprised to hear that just sitting was being taught in a way he hadn’t taught it himself. He’d taught it as ‘assimilation’ after a meditation or sitting quietly to collect oneself before a meditation, and as ‘just sitting on in concentration’ after a session of mindfulness of breathing or metta bhavana. And He said he wanted Order members to confine themselves to using ‘just sitting’ in these ways only in future.

Well this caused a bit of a furore as plenty of people had been doing just sitting as a ‘practice in its own right’ for quite a long time (in fact quite possibly since the early days of the FWBO when Zen sesshins were led by Zengo, aka the Buddha Maitreya). And

Vajraloka had also been running just sitting retreats for a long time, and just sitting was being taught as a practice in its own right there too.

So was Bhante saying we couldn't do the practice?

Well just after the letter was published, there was a meditation teachers' forum at Rivendell that Bhante took part in, but I gather Bhante just re-iterated what he'd said before and it didn't really clarify the issue. People were confused. We wondered at Vajraloka for a while whether we were going to have to cancel a just sitting retreat that was coming up. Anyway, then a few months later in June 2000 there was a Vajraloka/Madhyamaloka 'meditation colloquium' with members of the (then) Preceptors' College Council and the Vajraloka team, and Bhante.

On that meeting, we defined 'just sitting' as a practice in its own right. This is the definition we agreed on at that time:

[Just sitting] is ...not an alternative to bhavana but a practice which involves cultivating awareness of whatever arises in the mind rather than of a stable object. As such, it is essentially a form of mindfulness (satipatthana) meditation in which one simply sits in concentrated awareness of the arising of the four foundations.

And we also noted that as well as Bhante's own approaches to 'just sitting' there were also two other approaches or ways of looking at it:

- 1) Deliberately teaching the approaches to just sitting [as a practice in its own right], in an appropriate context [e.g. a retreat].
- 2) The 'absolute' state or stage ... - here you are not 'doing' anything, it's just a matter of continuing in an insightful samadhi ... which is 'spontaneously present'.

We put this to Bhante, and he just said 'ok' (or it might have been 'all right'!)

However, there was a slight hitch, as Bhante said – to quote from the report that I put in Shabda at this time – that he wasn't sure that we want [these practices] referred to as 'just sitting' as in 'shikantaza' because of the cultural baggage [associated with the term as used in Zen]. ... i.e. people would assume that it meant 'sitting as a Buddha' or the like. So he suggested a new and distinctive term be found for what we had been calling just sitting. That's how, a year later, we came up with 'pure awareness' as an alternative to 'just sitting'.

That reservation that Bhante expressed is probably the main one that he has expressed again and again about the tathagatagarbha or tathagatagarbha-related approaches to the Dharma. I must say that although I can understand his point, the 'dangers' of tathagatagarbha to my mind are no greater than the 'dangers' of any other approach to the Dharma. There's nothing that is fail-safe literalism-proof. The greater 'danger' to my mind would be *not* encountering it when it could be very helpful and productive.

So a lot of water has gone under the bridge since then. A surprising amount. I hardly think that the sort of situation I've just spoken about could happen now. It has been clarified over the last few years that Order members are in effect free to do whatever practices, including insight practices, they wish and that centres are in effect free to teach what they will.

However, Bhante himself is full of surprises and he did cause some surprise to those of us at the colloquium a couple of years later by saying 'I think that it's time we gave some more emphasis to the tathagatagarbha'. It's important to make it clear that Bhante himself has never denied that tathagatagarbha and its derivatives are 'valid' aspects of the Dharma. I went to see him myself some years ago just to check this out and in effect his response was 'well if that's your experience, that's fine'. And of course, Bhante has led study on tathagatagarbha-based texts such as the sutra of Hui Neng and has been studying them again himself within the last few years.

So in this more 'open' atmosphere, I think some Order members and others have felt much more able to come out of the closet. The tathagatagarbha closet that is (– possibly various other closets too, but that's not my concern here!) I certainly have found that to be the case myself. When I moved to Vajraloka about 9 years ago, just sitting was already more or less my main practice, along with sadhana. My main inspiration for the approach was Dzogchen, so you could say it was an unequivocally 'buddha nature' practice that I was doing. So I found myself leading just sitting retreats – but I was well aware of the strong reservations that Bhante had been expressing about the buddha nature approaches.

So I didn't feel that I could just introduce people to just sitting as I myself did it – in effect, I had to tone it down and present it as a mindfulness technique and 'fill in' the Buddha nature context by using suggestive readings from Milarepa, Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness and so on.

This 'mitigated' approach is actually embodied in the 'definition' of pure awareness from the Madhyamaloka colloquium that I just read out –

[Just sitting] is ...not an alternative to bhavana but a practice which involves cultivating awareness of whatever arises in the mind rather than of a stable object. As such, it is essentially a form of mindfulness (satipatthana) meditation in which one simply sits in concentrated awareness of the arising of the four foundations.

I now find myself disagreeing with more or less every aspect of this definition, even though I believe I worded it myself! Anyway, things have moved on, as I said. Over the last couple of years, I've felt increasingly confident to present just sitting or pure awareness as I see and approach it myself – as an unequivocally Buddha nature approach. It is such a relief to be able to be true to myself in what I present to others rather than trying to present an 'acceptable' compromise. And I hope all of us are finding ourselves increasingly in this situation if that's where we feel we've been (which I happily admit will not necessarily be the case for everyone).

So where are *we* now with this ‘immanence/Buddha nature’ approach – especially as embodied in just sitting? I think that where we are is that we can ‘use’ it – we always could – we can talk about it not just in private with consenting adult friends, but more openly and generally (if we wish!) and potentially we can teach it or present it to others. I do have a few words of caution, though, about how we teach or present this approach to others. I think that – apart from thinking that we’re Buddhas and spending the rest of our lives on a spiritual holiday – possibly one of the reasons for Bhante’s reticence regarding this approach is that, compared with the mindfulness of breathing and metta bhavana, it does need relatively intensive mentorship or guidance. Really, it needs a ‘pointing out’ from someone who has realised the nature of mind. Most of the traditions that take this approach emphasise a strong teacher/pupil, or guru/disciple type of relationship for this reason. I think that if we teach this approach we have to be prepared to ‘mentor’ those we’ve taught – that is, assuming that they take it up as a regular practice – more than we might (or probably generally do) with the ‘standard bhavana’ practices. Of course, with those bhavana practices too, people will definitely benefit and flourish if they’re given mentoring, personal help and guidance. But with the just sitting/pure awareness approach, I think in most cases it’s probably indispensable.

This is partly because of some basic mis-directions people can get into. One is just wandering off, getting lost, spending hours unconsciously in daydreams and thinking that that’s pure awareness. Another is becoming emotionally dry and ‘spacing out’. But apart from being wise to both the ways of approaching the practice and the possible pitfalls, there are another couple of qualities that I think are quite important in someone who’s going to teach it.

One is that he or she needs a good conceptual grasp of the principles of the Dharma and of where and how this kind of practice fits in – what relationship it has to other kinds of Dharma practice, especially the kind that those being taught are already familiar with.

This means the ability to contextualise it.

Secondly, I think it’s generally accepted that we should practice what we teach – I hope this almost goes without saying. With this kind of practice, I think it’s important above all that the ‘teacher’ has a real feeling for it – a lot of experience of the practice, and some degree of experience regarding where it’s going in respect of insight. It is a direct and potentially very strong kind of insight ‘practice’ and it’s no good introducing it to people unless you have some notion of where *they* might be going with it.

Notes:

1. Trans by William H. Grosnick in Donald S. Lopez, Jr. ed., *Buddhism in Practice*, Princeton 1995 p.92f.
2. A good source on this sort of thing in the Pali context is 'Concept and Reality' by Bhikkhu Nananda, BPS
3. Garma C. Chang's translation
4. Dogen, *Fukanzazengi*