

Openness
May 21, 2014
Dharma talk
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Yesterday Flint introduced Longchenpa's theme of *absence* or emptiness. This morning's theme is *openness*. Here is a taste of Longchenpa, on the theme of openness, deepening our experience of *life as it is*. I will give you just a few verses :

In the moment, all things in the objective field,
in the absence of any substantial aspect, are open to infinity,
and intrinsic *rigpa*, wherein past and future are indivisible,
likewise is open wide to sky-like infinity;
the past closed, the future unbegun,
the present is indeterminate pure mind,
and signless, rootless, without foundation or substance,
it is an unimpeded openness at the boundless center.

The dynamic of *rigpa* lacks any intrusive hope or fear,
so nothing can happen to rupture seamless openness;
in such autonomous, genuine, unrestricted freedom,
we can never be caught in a cage of belief.

With the carefree mind of an idler,
neither tight nor slack, we rest easy;
here *rigpa* is infinitely open, like a crystal-clear sky,
and we linger gratefully in spaciousness without anticipation.

Here is the essential meaning of resolution in openness:
coming from nowhere, abiding nowhere, and going nowhere,
external events, unoriginated visions in empty space, are ineffable;
internal events, arising and releasing simultaneously,
like a bird's flight path in the sky, are inscrutable.

Notice that Longchenpa doesn't say "you should try to be more open." He says openness is the actual nature of reality and of our being. He is simply saying that recognizing this, we can relax "with the carefree mind of an idler!" And I love this line, "we linger gratefully in spaciousness without anticipation."

From our Zen perspective, this vast openness is the heart of our teaching. By relaxing completely in present moment experience we open to this spaciousness not only in our solitary meditation practice (the first wheel), and not only in our compassionate and respectful relationships with each and every thing and everyone (the second wheel), but in the concrete, practical particulars of everyday living: on Mopac, in Central Market, with friends, answering email, and so on (the third wheel).

So there are many ways to explore this quality of openness, but they generally fall into two main groupings: first, discovering signs of openness in your own experience, and second, discovering our resistance or contraction against openness, hindrances to realizing openness. Furthermore, within these broad methods of study we can turn to our internal experience and activity, or we can focus our attention outwardly on external experience and activity, or we can explore the borderlands of internal/external reality. We can study relationality in the same way, both through our internal experiences of relating and through their external expressions. Where do we recognize openness in relating, and where do we see contraction or dis-ease? What happens when we experience the shift of realizing the utter openness in each moment?

Even the prospect of exploring this quality brings up our conditioning and that is very helpful. Many of you have spoken to me of your resistance once you signed up for the intensive, as doubts, fears, anxiety, and uncertainty challenged your intention. Without knowing anything about what might unfold here at something called an "intensive", the radical openness of not knowing evokes all of our protective conditioning.

It is so hard for those of us who feel we have been wounded in the past, abandoned or forsaken, abused, or damaged, to allow ourselves to rest in simple openness. Somehow we must make a decision whether to guard and protect those vulnerable and exiled parts, or throw ourselves open more and more until we lose our fear of openness. In the ongoing stream of positive and negative experiences, we discover our resilience and our power to meet whatever arises.

A tiny mundane example:

When I was in graduate school, I was never able to find time to get to the dentist, what with working, teaching, and all of Ben's activities. So when I finally came to Austin, I dreaded what would happen when I finally made that appointment. And sure enough, the appointment was incredibly painful and prolonged and harrowing. Fortunately, I didn't have any major issues, and the dentist was very kind and encouraging. But I was shaken up quite a bit, and rather traumatized.

Right then I realized that I could take the path of reluctantly going to the dentist only when I absolutely had to, and suffering through every second of each interminable appointment, or I could take another path and go very often, so that I could address my own fear and contraction, so that the experience would become ordinary, and so that there would not be so much work to be done. It's actually become something I look forward to, every three months, and have opened to in gratitude that someone is willing to use her skills to help me have a healthy mouth and keep my teeth well as long as possible. But I had to resist my natural instinct to contract and avoid, and turn toward the experience with some vestige of openness. Even there, in the chair, I have the residual physical impulse to contract and dread what is coming, but I've learned to relax into it and just rest in open awareness and a kind of patient curiosity.

So to relax in openness “with the carefree mind of an idler” might actually take quite a bit of courage and determination and effort. But openness does not mean ignorantly or foolishly exposing ourselves to harm. We love nature and want to open to it, but nature is everything that it is: it also includes snakes, chiggers, fire ants, aggressive dogs, and myriad other things that bite, sting, or threaten us in other ways, from simple viruses up to our fellow humans. We are fully responsible for this life we have been given, so openness does not mean to be reckless or naive about *life as it is*. A scorpion will not decline to sting us just because we are enlightened, so pay attention to appropriate conditions for openness. And yet we open our hearts even to scorpions and fire ants, our fellow travelers on this planet, and we do not disrespect them.

The openness to experience is *wise and compassionate* openness that does not refuse intimacy yet also takes good care of this life we are in charge of, its well-being and its needs. Openness is the recognition that there is nothing in my experience that is not part of me, by the very fact of it being part of my experience. I’ve said this before and I will probably keep saying it: Everything that arises is part of our bodhisattva training program, no matter how much we regret that or dislike it, try to avoid or dismiss it. Everything opens us to life itself.

Here is Jane Hershfield, “Rebus”

You work with what you are given,
the red clay of grief,
the black clay of stubbornness going on after.
Clay that tastes of care or carelessness,
clay that smells of the bottoms of rivers or dust.

Each thought is a life you have lived or failed to live,
each word is a dish you have eaten or left on the table.

There are honeys so bitter
no one would willingly choose to take them.
The clay takes them: honey of weariness, honey of vanity,
honey of cruelty, fear.

This rebus—slip and stubbornness,
bottom of river, my own consumed life—
when will I learn to read it
plainly, slowly, uncolored by hope or desire?
Not to understand it, only to see.

As water given sugar sweetens, given salt grows salty,
we become our choices.
Each yes, each no continues,
this one a ladder, that one an anvil or cup.

The ladder leans into its darkness.
The anvil leans into its silence.
The cup sits empty.

How can I enter this question the clay has asked?

Even knowing this, we have lots of ideas and opinions and judgments
about all that arises before us!

But you can't know the mind by paying attention to its projections, any
more than you can know the projectionist by watching a movie. Turn
around, stop watching the movie, and become curious about what it is that
is creating it, the incredibly small library of films it is working with, and their
limited genres; horror films, romances, westerns, comedies, a few

documentaries, all enchanting, captivating, but ultimately only the play of flickering light on a screen, streaming light creating images just like our experience. The great ones seem so real! The plot is so compelling, the performances so entrancing! You have to admire the genius of the mind that put all this together: sets, lighting cast, story and all.

But a fabricated story is not open; it is constructed and often predictable. And some of these same movies we've seen thousands of times—you know, the one where we are humiliated and shamed, the one where we are the hero, the one about the loss of someone we love. In the megaplex of our mind some of these features have been running for twenty years or more, yet we are still paying admission.

Our egoic mind would like us to believe that the story is reality, the way things *really* were, and are: *she was mean to me! You saw it too, didn't you?* We try to get agreement about our story, that it is believable, that it is true, that it is shared by others. But we only have, in case you haven't noticed, very limited success with that. And sometimes it is even hard to get all the pieces of reality to line up so that they support the story. So much energy is bound up in our self-oriented stories! David Loy points out that our identity is based on the stories we believe we are part of.

And that includes the stories we construct about spiritual practice, about this path, about the teachers and the teachings, about myself as “spiritual” or “not so spiritual as other people,” or “failing at the spiritual path,” or “trying hard but just not getting anywhere,” or “the spiritual path is boring,” and on and on. The stories are fine, as long as we don't mind the limits they place on our thoughts, words, and actions, the ways they confine our view, the ways they strain our relationships.

Ultimately, life goes on: here is Wislawa Szymborska, the great Polish poet:

A NOTE

Life is the only way
to get covered in leaves,
catch your breath on the sand,
rise on wings;

to be a dog,
or stroke its warm fur;

to tell pain
from everything it's not;

to squeeze inside events,
dawdle in views,
to seek the least of all possible mistakes.

An extraordinary chance
to remember for a moment
a conversation held
with the lamp switched off;

and if only once
to stumble on a stone,
end up soaked in one downpour or another,

mislaid your keys in the grass;
and to follow a spark on the wind with your eyes;

and to keep on not knowing
something important.

—*Wisława Szymborska*
(translated, from the Polish, by *Stanisław Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh*)

You all know I'm kind of a science geek. Contemporary systems scientists provide another perspective on openness:

Ervin Laszlo, philosopher of science and renowned systems theorist, wrote:

We must do away with the subject-object distinction in analyzing experience. This does not mean that we reject the concepts of organism and environment, as handed down to us by natural science. It only means that we conceive of experience as linking organism and environment in a continuous chain of events, from which we cannot, without arbitrariness, abstract an entity called 'organism' and another called 'environment'. The organism is continuous with its environment and its experience refers to a series of transactions constituting the organism-environment continuum.

Joanna Macy writes:

The physical identity of an individual does not consist so much of the matter of which it is made as of the metabolic processes by which food and air become flesh, again to break down and pass out of the body. In similar manner does his psychic activity consist of a flow of mind events, as the cognitive system maps the environment, adapts to changes, extracts information, evolves and projects its interpretive constructs.

And finally, here is Norbert Wiener, mathematician and philosopher who established the science of Cybernetics:

We are but whirlpools in a river of ever flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.

So we might ask, how can we actually *practice* openness; because without practice, it is just a really interesting concept that we hear and think about but never fully taste. So let's play with that experientially a little bit. This is just an exploration, and you can notice whatever arises in it.

Guided awareness exercise [read very slowly, and allow pauses where needed]:

Get completely comfortable and allow yourself to relax. Let your eyes be open and resting without trying to focus on anything, your gaze soft and

easy. Just as we were softly gazing at the sky last night. From this place of ease, your awareness can be wide, clear, and spacious.

Allow this spacious awareness, warm and luminous, to rise to the top of your head, gently bathing the top of your skull.

Now let it float down gently and slowly, like a leaf in a slow-moving stream, just completely open to whatever it encounters as it floats down your forehead to your eyes, and the tiny muscles around them,

your nose and mouth, the fullness of your lips, your chin,

your jaw, your tongue, the neck balancing the whole head with effortless ease, and your throat with its deep, quiet pulse.

Wherever you notice any holding or tension, just allow your awareness to light on it without judging or fixing anything, utterly relaxed attention wafting over the landscape of your body like a quiet breeze.

Continue this open awareness drifting down through your shoulders, upper arms, through your forearms and wrists, down into your hands, noting places that are caught in some way, places that are numb, or warm, tingling, aching, or cool, just attending to what is actually present in the body.

Rising to the chest, feel the lift and fall of your breath and now aware of the heart beating deep inside the rib cage, awareness floating down to the diaphragm and the belly rising and falling with the breath.

Cycle gently back up to the upper back and the shoulder blades, the spine and the rib cage, just bringing awareness to softly notice the whole central core of the body and all that it holds because of that openness and spaciousness inside.

Your veins are open for the flow of blood, your lungs are open for the flow of air, your stomach is open for the food that nourishes you. You don't need to "try" to keep them open: openness is what they already are.

Let that awareness drift down into the pelvic area, the floor of the body, and the bowl that holds and supports our upright sitting and all of our internal organs. This is where we settle awareness in zazen, just a couple of inches below the navel, and area called the tanden. It grounds our whole practice.

Moving on,

then, allow that light of awareness to come to rest on your thighs, your knees and lower legs, stable and still, and then your feet and toes, down even to the soles of your feet.

From this more focused awareness, expand the awareness softly outward to simply attune to the body as a whole and the quality of its experience right in this moment.

As awareness rests on the whole body, you may also become aware of sensations and leaning toward them, away from them, or just numbing them out.

The peacock's cry of "help!" the light streaming through the windows, the flowers on the altar, the pain in a knee, the sound of a bell...where do we experience some *leaning*. Where do we feel something as positive or preferred, negative or resisted, or irrelevant and ignored?

We are becoming lighter through our embodied sense of just this soft, luminous awareness that casts its light over everything without, as Hongzhi says, any objects to be illuminated.

Then as we settle into this spacious awareness of our whole body and its tendencies we notice the thoughts and emotions that stream through us without ceasing for a moment, like a stream of photons hitting a screen and vividly showing images that we take as real. What *are* those images, those reality shows that we seem to be immersed in, *exactly* as if they were really happening?

Our upsets, our hopes and fears, our bright ideas, our projects, plans, and dreams, our likes and dislikes, and our opinions about almost everything reflect all of our conditioning, our interpretations of our experience. What *is* all that? Can we simply allow ourselves to be aware of it now, without commentary, judgment, or analysis? Just illuminate the whole stream of it and rest in your present moment ease and stillness.

So now let that spacious, luminous awareness expand a bit more, to just the person sitting closest to you. Can you simply experience the quality of “sitting with” them, right here in this moment? As you breathe in and out you are literally breathing each other. Allow your awareness to expand to the human vulnerability, impermanence, and inevitability of suffering in the person near you.

Let your awareness expand to realize, as well, their moments of happiness, freedom, and clarity, their capacity for delight and joy.

But certainly our awareness is larger than this, and you can let it expand to fill this whole room, and all of the beings in it, the flickering green of leaves, the subtle aroma of incense, the candle flame, the punctuated altar stone and the blue image of Samantabhadra embracing wisdom.

It includes all of the beings who are here with you, sitting in stillness and silence in support of your sincere practice, who have worked together for the wellbeing of the whole sangha. As that awareness continues to expand

in the space around you, let it float out to this whole ranch, with its warm and intimate spaces, its lush lawns, wildflowers and meadows, its birds, forests, wildlife, and all of those who are working to support and maintain it in all of its beauty.

Even then there is no limit to how far your awareness can reach, beyond this place to loved ones in faraway cities, to nations struggling with wars and disasters,

even to the beautiful images of this planet and out into the cosmos, because we are aware even of distant galaxies and nebulae, the Milky Way, the solar system with all of its planets and moons. We have gazed into this vastness and we saw the first evening stars winking.

Our technologies have vastly expanded our awareness to worlds that are extraordinarily tiny or incredibly vast, extremely close or immensely distant. This has opened whole new universes to our awareness and our consciousness is truly boundless.

We can completely relax in that enormous, utterly open, skylike mind. This belongs to you, and you can recall it whenever you need to. It is nothing to achieve, it is the ground of your very being. You, sitting here right now, together with all beings, in the middle of the entire cosmos.

So as we gradually return to our bodies and feel ourselves here, in this room, sitting quietly at ease together, I'll offer a little poem I wrote a few years ago, that reflects the three turnings that Flint spoke about yesterday.

To study the Buddha way is to study the self

Look behind you
the path has disappeared
there is no way to return
before you, only mist and fog
a road? a bridge? a cliff?
below your feet
the rustle of golden leaves
that speak of fall
and chances lost
and spring still to come

To study the self is to forget the self

Boundless heart-mind is
what manifests
through this body as
acting,
speaking,
thinking, and
experiencing
when "I" steps out of the way.

To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things

Tender shiver
of a monarch's wing
an eyelash of your sleeping child
these words
unshakeable dharma gate
unbreakable
path