

ENTERING PURE AWARENESS RETREAT TALKS – Tejananda, Vajraloka 2003

What is pure awareness?

Pure awareness could be said to be what is ‘there’ when our usual kind of awareness is not. So what characterises our usual kind of awareness? One way of looking at it is that it’s *dualistic* awareness – i.e. we see things in terms of ‘me here’ over against ‘you’ (and everything else) ‘out there’/‘over there’. That means ‘my self’ here (what we regard as ‘me’/‘mine’ etc) over against everything else – or in other words our ‘ego core’ which we constantly uphold and cling onto.

And we hold onto it by (what we believe to be) these two very clever stratagems: craving and aversion. We *know* that if we crave things that we want and like, we’ll actually get them or be able to keep them. And we also know as a fact that if we *hate* things we don’t want, they can’t touch us, they’ll just go away.

Of course (as is obvious) the mind that sees things in this way could only be described as deluded – the dualistic mind is the deluded mind, and this delusion is the underlying cause of all our *duhkha* – suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness. But this deluded mind is not all we are. Not by a very long way!

Here’s some statements about the nature of our mind from some fairly impressive sources:

The Buddha: *This mind, monks, is luminous, but is defiled by taints that come from without. But uninstructed worldlings do not understand this as it really is ... This mind, monks, is luminous, and it is cleansed of taints that come from without. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is ... (Anguttara Nikaya)*

Hui-Neng: *‘Our essence of mind is intrinsically pure, and the reason why we are perturbed is because we allow ourselves to be carried away by the circumstances we are in’. (Platform Sutra)*

Padmasambhava: *‘It is the single (nature of) mind which encompasses all of Samsara and Nirvana. Even though its inherent nature has existed from the very beginning, you have not recognized it. (Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness)*

Note that all these teachings have the same basic form: they first express the *ultimate* or *true* nature of our mind

This mind, monks, is luminous, /‘our essence of mind is intrinsically pure’ / ‘It is the single (nature of) mind which encompasses all of Samsara and Nirvana’

... and second they express why right now we don’t realise it:

‘but is defiled by taints that come from without’ / ‘we allow ourselves to be carried away by the circumstances we are in’ / ‘Even though its inherent nature has existed from the very beginning, you have not recognized it’.

So our mind is essentially luminous and pure – right now. It is only ever essentially luminous and pure. And it’s only ever right now! That is what we mean by ‘pure awareness’.

So, this is all very well and good – but how do we realise it for ourselves? We need to ‘enter’ pure awareness. Pure awareness itself is not a practice – it’s a spontaneous, uncontrived state of insight, a direct realisation of the nature of mind itself. We can’t make this ‘happen’. *Entering* pure awareness, on the other hand, *is* a practice. It involves a degree of cultivation (*bhavana*), which sets up the conditions for pure awareness to arise. (An analogy is a lightning conductor – if we set up a conductor, then lightning is more likely to strike.)

But for this practice, it’s a very particular *kind* of cultivation. The way we look at it is that we’re not so much ‘developing’ our awareness as just *contacting* it ever more deeply, until in the end, we could say, there’s *just* awareness, aware of itself.

So to set up the conditions, essentially we ‘work’ with the 4 satipatthanas – 4 foundations or spheres of awareness. Put very basically, this just means, ‘our experience’ – i.e. whatever arises in our body, emotions and thoughts, together with the pleasant–unpleasant feeling- (hedonic-) tone which is part of all these experiences.

- You just ‘take in’ *whatever* arises in the four satipatthanas without *particularly* emphasising any particular thing
- Just acknowledge your experience – nothing is ‘unacceptable’
- If you note craving or aversion arising (clinging/proliferating or pushing away), just let go *into* what’s here *now* – your immediate experience.

One more thing: it’s not ‘just’ a ‘sitting’ practice. Pure awareness is all the time practice – *whatever* we’re doing, this is our objective on retreat. We do everything with an ‘entering pure awareness’ attitude. That’s our main general mindfulness practice for the retreat.

±raddhṃ

The context of pure awareness practice is our going for refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – we need to be specifically conscious of this, otherwise it’s possible (with such formless practice) to become disorientated, lost, or spaced out.

The specific context and vital basis of pure awareness practice is *shraddha* (in fact it’s the basis for *all* meditation and Dharma practice). So it is very important to evoke *shraddha* and inspiration throughout the retreat. Do this individually as much as you like and can. Also, together, we’ll be doing these kinds of devotional activity:

- Morning & evening pujas – special pujas to particular awakened beings.
- Readings and mantra recitations – some evenings we'll do this rather than puja.
- Be *conscious* of what you're doing when saluting and bowing to shrine.
- Adhithana – 'the blessing power of the Buddhas' – an 'imaginative' way in to the practice of pure awareness – we imagine we are surrounded in all directions by countless Buddhas giving us their blessing/compassion in the form of light. Some find imagining this sort of thing can give rise to shradha very effectively.

Big Mind Little Mind

In Dzogchen a vital distinction is made between two aspects of (one) mind:

- *Sems* (= *citta*) 'mind' suggests our ordinary everyday delusion-driven mind.
- *Sems-nyid* (= *cittatj*) is 'mind itself' 'mind-ness', the nature of mind (= buddha nature, the awakened heart essence, etc)

These can also be referred to more colloquially as 'little (or petty or small) mind' and 'big mind'. (As with all language) this is a metaphorical way of speaking – it's not to be taken literally. At the same time, it points to an important truth: what we're letting go of in this practice (ultimately) is our little, petty mind – the ego-controlled mind, that is, the mind of craving, aversion and delusion, which both creates and exists in terms of the dualistic perception of 'me here' over against 'everything else out there'.

Little mind is a blinkered 'petty minded' perception of reality – it 'sees the small picture,' i.e. sees things in terms of 'me', 'I need/don't need' 'I want/don't want' etc. This mind is really very immature, insecure and potentially ruthless – uncontrolled (i.e. without ethical restraint) it will often stop at nothing to get whatever it supposes serves its interests.

What we're letting go *into* – ultimately – is 'big mind' – which sees the big picture – the biggest possible picture. I.e. it sees things as they are – you could say it simply *is* things as they are. Big mind *is* pure awareness.

Big mind is not 'me' or 'you' (as ego-defined entities) – and yet it *is* what we essentially are – much more essentially than the petty mind which we usually identify with and live our lives 'as'.

We can't 'have' Big mind (i.e. own it or 'experience' it as an 'ego possession') – it's not a 'thing' that can be 'possessed'. It *only* 'appears' when 'we/I' 'go away'

Big mind embodies the qualities of egolessness – on the one hand, it sees and knows intrinsically that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent and unsatisfactory and that all things whatever are insubstantial and empty of intrinsic existence, ungraspable. At the same time, it fully embodies – is – 'awakened' qualities such as these (as expounded in the Dzogchen teachings):

- spaciousness, openness, emptiness
- clarity ('true seeing'), wisdom, insight
- pure limitless energy – manifesting as compassion, sensitivity, warmth, concern

So, when the petty mind dissolves Big mind naturally arises – it's like a murky fog clearing to reveal the brilliant sun and infinite blue sky!

But how? Padmasambhava gives the root instruction for entering pure awareness (i.e. 'intrinsic awareness') in Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness:

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.

And when you look into yourself in this way nakedly (without any discursive thoughts), 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.

I'm not going to attempt to cover all of this right now. 'Intrinsic awareness' (*rigpa*) is equivalent to pure awareness. It's another Dzogchen equivalent to *sems-nyid* or 'big mind'. It's also referred to in Dzogchen as 'the ground of primordial perfection', and others. In Ch'an / Zen it's often referred to as 'mind essence' or 'Buddha mind' / Buddha nature.

The main point of this passage from the point of view of practice is:

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, (your mind) remains in its own condition without constructing anything.

Thoughts (including impulses/volitions/emotions) constantly take us away from what's right here and now.

I.e. we're nearly always either dwelling on the past with craving / ill-will / aversion etc, or dwelling on the future (with the same).

But if we can just let go of our ceaseless obsessive thinking – ‘mentalising’ (to coin a term!) – we just come to our present experience – in fact we enter what we could call ‘presence’:

In the present moment, (your mind) remains in its own condition without constructing anything.

I.e. without constructing ego-forming thoughts. Without constructing notions of ‘me here / you there’ or of ‘present, past and future’. Your mind remains ‘in its own condition’ – its ‘natural state’ which is ‘mind itself’ – with all the intrinsic qualities that I just mentioned. *This is not just a theoretical possibility*. We can start working with this in our pure awareness practice right away.

Main principles of entering pure awareness:

- Cultivate shraddha – (e.g. you could use the adhisthana ‘method’ and then enter directly)
- Then cultivate a receptive awareness that experiences whatever happens to arise (from the four satipatthanas) without *particularly* emphasising any particular thing
- Whatever happens *is* the practice – ‘this is it!’
- If you note craving/aversion arising, or anything else, just let go *into* what’s here *now* – our immediate experience.

Walking meditation: Ideally carry pure awareness practice from sitting to getting up to leaving the room to walking to returning to sitting. Walking meditation is a good practice for getting into our all-the-time pure awareness.

You can simply continue the pure awareness practice into walking. If that’s difficult, or you want to develop more general mindfulness, be aware of or scan the sensations in your body generally, as you walk. If you want to develop more focus, concentrate on the sensations in the soles of the feet.

Signposts

As already mentioned, there are various ways of ‘setting up’ for entering pure awareness:

- Becoming aware of the four satipatthanas just as they are now, then continuing aware of them just as they happen to arise, from moment to moment.
- Using an imaginative method like the adhisthana method (above) to evoke shraddha and then ‘launching’ into pure awareness.
- Doing a period of mindfulness of breathing as a way of setting up a reasonable degree of one-pointedness, then letting go into pure awareness practice.

All of these are ways of making ourselves ready to face the main challenge of entering pure awareness: the challenge being that it’s so *simple* that we really can’t get our heads round it! It’s the simplest meditation practice that we can possibly do – there’s nothing to it. Really.

To put it another way, as I said before, pure awareness can only be there when ‘we’ aren’t – in other words, whatever willed ego-directed effort we put forth (however subtle it is) we’re never going to enter pure awareness that way.

Pure awareness is not something that we can possibly bring into being – we can’t ‘bhavana’ or develop it – for the simple reason that it’s there already, fully perfect in itself – it’s the very nature of our minds!

The only way to truly enter pure awareness is to stop doing anything – stop expecting anything, stop looking for anything, stop *wanting* anything! Just be. Be what you really are. Now.

So perhaps the main difficulty we’re likely to find with the practice is that we always want to ‘do’ something. – We have a deeply held – implicit, fundamental – belief that nothing will ever happen unless we ‘do’ it (and on the level of everyday life – and most meditation practices – this is completely valid!)

But with entering pure awareness we have to un-learn that belief. We have to do a lot of doing to *get* us to that point – but to enter pure awareness, we have to stop. We have to let go of doing.

Needless to say, this is easier said than ‘not-done’. It’s a subtle matter – and it needs great faith to step off the secure, solid ground of *doing* into this completely new, unexplored territory of non-doing – a territory which is infinite and (at least from our usual perspective) has no recognisable features or signposts! So, to enter pure awareness, we need a lot of shraddha. A lot of faith and confidence.

In the practice itself, we need to approach our experiences in a way that doesn’t pin them down or define them as ‘this’ or ‘that’ – that is a basic ‘doing mode’ thing – we’re constantly putting up signposts so that we at least *think* we know where we are (whether we actually do is quite another question!)

So as I’ve said before, don’t give *anything* any *particular* attention – we’re *not* treating arisings as objects of focus. If we focus on anything, we’re liable to fixate it, i.e. we’re subtly holding on to the arising, prolonging it & perpetuating it – making it into ‘recognisable territory’, complete with signpost. (E.g. “oh, it’s good old sloth and torpor”)

Just allow whatever arises to last as long as it lasts *without any interference* and then note it naturally pass. (This is much easier said than done – but that’s part of the challenge of the practice).

E.g. <a sound> arises and passes – you can't hold onto it, generally we don't try. Whether it's pleasant or unpleasant. But if <an interesting thought/image> arises: we're generally hooked. We can keep this going for as long as we want! Or until get tired of it, or till another more interesting thought/image arises & get into that. So we need to subtly disengage from the thoughts / images that arise.

We do this by simply bringing our awareness 'back' from the thought (about the past or future, usually) to the present moment. We are fully 'here' and 'now'. In this way, if we just patiently keep bringing ourselves back, we'll find that we've entered a 'gap' between thoughts.

When you recognise – directly and non-conceptually – that you're in that 'gap' you can sense what is 'there'. In fact, when conceptual thoughts stop, you're immediately much more strongly aware of what's there, by the very nature of things. It's like a veil has been removed from your perception.

So – really you'll need to explore that for yourself.

But some pointers: I mentioned 'presence' yesterday. In the fullest sense, presence is pure awareness / intrinsic awareness / 'big mind' – but there are degrees of presence, or a sense of moving towards a fuller & fuller presence. When thoughts stop, you're immediately more present to what's there – i.e. your body and emotions (emotions *in* your body).

So what do you do then? Nothing other than what you're doing – you're not 'doing' anything, you're just *being* with your direct experience (without getting caught up in it).

Your (deluded) emotions are not being fuelled / continued by your thoughts – because for the moment you don't have any! As a result, those emotions naturally 'drop away' – in Dzogchen terms, they 'naturally self-liberate'. In effect, this means that you're not engaging with craving aversion & delusion ('little mind') – you're on the 'threshold' of presence – big mind.

'Impure awareness'

People often ask what they should do about the hindrances in this practice. The short answer is that there are no hindrances!

What is a 'hindrance' is relative to what we are trying to achieve. If you're trying to drive a car out of Vajraloka and a tree has fallen across the track, that is a hindrance – but not if you're walking out. Similarly, sense desire will be a hindrance to developing one-pointed awareness using the breath, but it's not a hindrance to entering pure awareness.

This is because, as I said right at the beginning, in this practice we have a different attitude – a different View. We're not concerned with *developing* anything, or *eradicating* anything. We're just aware of what is here in our experience, right now. That means, *whatever* is here. And whatever it is, we simply let it be itself.

If it's a klesha, an unskillful mental state, a 'vexation' we just let it be what it is. So does this mean we're just *indulging* kleshas? No! Because (and note this, because this is the crucial point) 'what it is' *includes* its 'mark' (*lakshana*), i.e. its implicit nature, which is impermanent and empty. If we let it be what it is, with this awareness, it will have no hold on us and will naturally pass – we don't have to do a thing!

So we need to rid ourselves of the idea that, if kleshas or 'hindrances' are there, what we're experiencing now is somehow 'not good enough', or 'not the right thing'.

Strangely enough, we often feel on much more solid ground if we simply *know* we're not up to the task: 'this isn't what it's supposed to be, I'm no good at this, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing, I might as well go home ...' etc. etc.

With entering pure awareness practice, though, we can happily throw all these kinds of views straight out of the window! *Whatever's* happening now – that's the practice. So, if we're irritable, that's ok. If we're sleepy, that's ok. If we're bored, that's ok. If all sorts of endless thoughts are going on, or images playing like our own private movie, that's ok. ... Everything's ok, as long as we are staying with what is now. That is the practice.

The trouble is – we can doubt that we are practising. It seems that we're just lost in endless distractions. An additional problem is that we *can* be not practising! – We *can* be lost in endless distractions.

So what is the difference?

The difference is as to whether or not we are *with* our present experience and whether or not we are making the subtle effort to disengage / let go into the present moment. In effect, we're practising the sky-like attitude all the time. So in entering pure awareness we don't practice discrimination – 'this is good/bad', 'this is skillful/unskillful'. But we do remain aware in our experience *and* in the change that's absolutely implicit to our experience.

Change is really important! If we really 'get the point' about change, it means that we can we can relax into our experience, we can hang loose to it – because we're aware that whether it's good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, nice or nasty, it's going to change – in fact it's changing already.

If my own mind won't stop, I *know* that it will eventually just by staying with my present experience and constantly letting go of the previous moment – patiently, doggedly. (But too often I forget that.)

So if we just stay with our immediate experience in this way, our awareness does eventually deepen, we do eventually become more and more present – ‘little mind’ begins to dissolve ‘big mind’ begins to emerge – like little glimpses of blue sky above a thick swirling mist within which we’re immersed.

And the other major point – as I said before – is that we can’t *do* anything to make this happen. ‘Little mind’ won’t dissolve and ‘big mind’ won’t emerge if we try to manipulate our experience. This is the *problem*, not the solution. We try to manipulate our experience all the time. That’s what *samsara* is all about - why we’re on the wheel of rebirth! We can’t manipulate our way to true happiness, or make a deal with reality!

The goal is not somewhere else – it’s right here, right now. That’s the only ‘place’ it can ever be! So in this practice, all we’re ‘doing’ is being where we are. Being where we are with faith (which will deepen and strengthen) that to be where we are is – actually – where we really need to be.

A delusion-free space

I think I’ve said it all now (several times!) – that is, all the theory of the pure awareness practice. It’s very simple.

But just to make this point once more, it’s the very simplicity of the practice that makes it difficult – especially as we’re so used to ‘doing’ and ‘developing’ in meditation.

It’s not that there is anything inherently *wrong* with doing and developing – it’s totally necessary if we want to get anything done in the everyday world, our everyday lives. From the perspective of our Dharma practice, doing and developing is fine as long as we *know* what we’re doing and why – i.e. as long as it’s informed by and expressive of Right View.

And as long as we know when it’s time to stop.

But of course, what we’re doing and developing in our lives generally isn’t much to do with Right View at all. Rather the opposite! That’s all the activity of ‘little mind’ – the point of this practice is to get completely outside of those terms of reference.

Zen Master Dogen said of this practice (known as *zazen* / *shikantaza*, in the Soto Zen tradition):

Drop all relationships, set aside all activities. Do not think about what is good or evil, and do not try to judge right from wrong. Do not try to control perceptions or conscious awareness, nor attempt to figure out your feelings, ideas or viewpoints. Let go of the idea of trying to become a Buddha as well.

So what Dogen is pointing to here implicitly – with a view to letting go of it – is the nature of ‘little mind’ – i.e. the dualistic mind that believes that it can get what it wants (security, love, immortality, whatever) by controlling or manipulating its world.

From the point of view of our meditation practice, it’s also the mind that *tries* to be in *dhyana* – or *tries* to get insight, or *tries* to become a Buddha. (‘I don’t want to be *here where I am*, I want *dhyana* / insight / Buddhahood *right now!*’).

But of course, if we’re identified with it, we only ‘have’ – or are – the dualistic mind. So we seem to have this very basic problem – if this grasping, dualistic mind is all we have to work with, how do we ‘get’ from little mind to big mind?

Well, fortunately, that isn’t quite the case – if it was then we might as well forget it and all go home!

In Sangharakshita’s talk ‘Perfect Vision’ (In ‘Vision and Transformation’), he talks about the initial arising of Right View as being a kind of glimpse of ‘Perfect Vision’ – in other words, what gets people started on the Dharma path, very often, is some kind of intimation of Truth, some glimpse of insight. This illustrates the fact that (what we’re calling) ‘little mind’ and ‘big mind’ are not two separate ‘things’ – in fact, the dualistic mind, with all its endless thoughts and schemes and distractions – is nothing *other* than big mind, perceived wrongly. Which should be a very encouraging thought!

So if we just *‘set aside all activities, don’t think about what is good or evil, and do not try to judge right from wrong ... nor attempt to figure out your feelings, ideas or viewpoints.’* then we create a ‘delusion-free space’, so to speak, that allows the bigger picture about what we really are – to ‘emerge’.

Through doing the practice we train ourselves in

- Just relaxing and letting go of expectations,
- Just taking things as they come,
- not giving ourselves a hard time, and
- allowing faith and confidence in this process to emerge.

If in the course of your practice you find yourself thinking ‘This isn’t what ought to be happening, I *ought* to be doing this / cultivating that / having some kind of “spiritual” experience’ – just recognise that it’s just dualistic mind doing its thing. Trying to upset the apple cart – *trick* you out of your practice (in fact it’s ‘trickster’ aspect is also known as Mara - so don’t get annoyed or discouraged, or he’ll have succeeded)! Just ‘come back’ to your present awareness. What is now.

And similarly – if you ‘wake up’ to the fact that you’ve been totally distracted for a while, don’t start recriminating or analysing how it happened. It’s perfectly natural to get distracted – and to become aware again. So just carry on, seamlessly, with your awareness of what is now.

Don't expect 'results', or 'big experiences' – if you just remain in your present experience *whatever* it is, that's quite sufficiently amazing – in fact, that's the whole point.

Entering silence

Zen master Dogen wrote:

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

This really struck me – in particular the line *Indeed, the whole body is far beyond the world's dust*. What this means is that our body is pure – or really, neither pure nor impure – the terms 'pure' and 'impure' don't really apply. In fact, by extension, the whole phenomenal universe (whatever exactly that is!) is pure.

You might be feeling there's something a bit puzzling or contradictory here – after all, isn't this a very different perspective from what we get from a lot of early (and Mahayana) Buddhism? For instance, Shantideva spends page after page in the *Bodhicaryavatara* ranting on about the impurity of the human body. It takes up most of his chapter on meditation!

So (you may ask) what on earth's going on? Well, the early Buddhist and Shantideva approach is *pragmatic*: if we're attached to the body (and of course we are!) then we can develop detachment, non-attachment by contemplating its unpleasant and even repulsive aspects.

But what Dogen is saying is that – without denying that those unpleasant, repulsive aspects are there – the body is 'far beyond the world's dust' – in other words, it's unaffected by the defilements, the klesas – the klesas have nothing to do with the body and the body doesn't produce them.

So you might be tempted to retort to this (and in fact not you wouldn't be wrong) 'well, of course, it's the *mind* that's impure – the klesas come from the mind, not the body'.

But Dogen starts the passage I quoted by saying '*The Way is basically perfect and all-pervading.*' The Way is the Dharma – he's using it in a way which is the equivalent of Mind, i.e. the nature of mind itself.

Aha! You might say, but that's the *ultimate* mind, 'big mind' that he's talking about (to paraphrase Bones in Star Trek 'It's mind, Jim, but not as we know it!') – our *real, de facto* mind, the mind we actually experience all the time is *this* – this endless fandango of thoughts, desires, impulses, wishes, wants, moods, dreams, loves, hates ... and so on, forever (so it seems)!

Well – that's true too. But I think that it can be profoundly helpful to take Dogen's perspective seriously. What Dogen is saying (perhaps to over-simplify but let's just go with it for now) is that 'fundamentally we're ok'.

This is a challenging statement. It's challenging because most of us seem to feel that somehow we're *not* really 'ok' – something's wrong with us, at root deep down, we know we're *bad*. Wherever this comes from, it's undoubtedly something many of us have to face up to in our Dharma practice and particularly in our meditation practice, where we come face to face with what we are, in that moment. Or rather, when we come face to face with what we *think* we are – because – as Hui Neng says 'our essence of mind is intrinsically pure'.

Let's just run that past again: 'our essence of mind is intrinsically pure' – what we *fundamentally, really* are, is not klesas, impurities, badness, *sin* – but *pure* of all defilements. So this is bad news if we have poor self-esteem. Bad news for our poor self esteem, that is! It might just have to change and go away!

But – you might ask – what effect does this actually have on us now (apart from giving us a more positive view of our ultimate nature)? Well, I don't think we should underestimate having a more positive view of our ultimate nature. Our fundamental view determines our action and attitude to life – which is why holding views such as 'original sin' can be so undermining.

But in this practice, it does affect our approach from moment to moment. We're opening up to what is *here*. In entering pure awareness we're concerned *only* with what's here and now – *whatever* that is, without engaging in discriminations ... this is what I've been banging on about for the last week nearly!

I mentioned a few days ago that as we come more and more *into* our immediate experience, now, we become more and more *present*. So at first there are lots of concepts and images flying around in our mind – but after a while, (days, weeks...) just by patiently being there *with* our experience, they do settle – the mind stops – and we truly are, for a moment, present.

We're *just present in our body* – there's no 'mind' apart from 'body' – it's just what it is. Neither pure nor impure. Outside those terms of reference altogether. We're putting into practice the Buddha's teaching to Bahiya: 'In the seen, there is just the seen, in the heard, there is just the heard...' etc. This is the Buddha's fundamental teaching on (what we call) pure awareness.

The Ch'an term for this practice – or non-practice – is 'Silent Illumination'. We've been practising 'outer' silence for some days now, but real silence only comes when the mind stops.

When the mind stops, at last there is silence – true silence – and when we enter this silence, we know at once that our mind is illuminated ('*this mind, bhikkhus, is luminous*') – and we know that this illumination is wise, compassionate and true. And it's what we really are.

It's no big deal – it's not a 'big' all singing, all dancing experience – it's just a matter of quietly being what we are, from moment to moment. When our mind is silent and illumination arises – like the sun coming out from behind a cloud – we know our essential goodness, our essential wholesomeness and ok-ness.

This is what we really are, and it's right there – Right *here*. Right now.

Sky-like mind

Given that the nature of mind is often spoken of as 'spacious' and 'clear', it's natural that the infinite pure blue sky has often been used as an image of the nature of mind. So we can contemplate infinite blue sky – imaginatively – as a way of 'tuning into' a sense of 'big mind'. And the traditional image goes further: the ever-changing clouds passing through the sky are just like the thoughts & so on that pass through our mind – the clouds aren't obstructed by the infinite, empty sky, and the sky doesn't obstruct them either. The nature of mind is like that.

This also might remind us of the 'sky-like attitude' – you might even say that pure awareness is simply the sky-like attitude 'extended' from an 'antidote' into a whole practice – in fact a whole way to awakening. So – you can use (for example) the image of 'body like mountain, mind like the sky' as a way into a practice of pure awareness. Start with a sense of the stability of your body, like a mountain. Then imagine Mind itself ('big mind') as like infinite, unobstructed radiant blue sky. Then be aware of your thoughts and mental/emotional events as like clouds that arise and pass away in the sky spontaneously, without obstructing the sky or being obstructed by it.

Keep this going for as long as you like, until you are 'launched' into the practice, then let go of the images and just continue with the practice.

Appreciating Mind¹

We can get a sense of the qualities of mind itself even right now, because it's the *nature* of mind – even if those qualities are at the moment relatively atrophied, or distorted. I.e:

- We always have *some* sense of spaciousness or openness – inner or outer – (even if it's just a sense of our space being 'blocked').
- There is always a basic clarity to awareness (irrespective of whether we feel physiologically 'bright' or 'dull')
- Perhaps the easiest way 'in' to the third one, which is said to arise from the dynamic between the other two, is to sense how *it feels good and somehow wholesome simply to be aware*.

So as you practice pure awareness, as you're 'with' what is in this moment, just be open to a sense of these qualities. *Allow* them to emerge, or note that they are there (or you may just note one or other of them).

You don't need to go chasing these qualities – let alone trying to develop them. They don't need to be developed – they are *intrinsic* to our very nature, they are what we essentially are.

You may find at first that you tend to 'conceptualise' them. Don't worry! It's natural to have a semi-conceptual experience before you have a direct experience. This just reflects the fact that you're 'between' the conceptual mind (little mind) and non-conceptual mind (big mind).

Just avoid getting into a *fully* conceptual experience of them! I.e. merely *thinking* about them. You'll avoid this if you always keep with your direct experience, *whatever* it is. So you can be 'open' to these qualities to the extent that they are there in your present experience, as you practice pure awareness.

Appendix: other material related to entering pure awareness

Imaging the nature of mind

I've introduced various expedients that can be used as 'ways in' to pure awareness practice – awareness of the four satipatthanas, using the breath as an anchor, adhisthana.

The 'adhisthana' method as described is essentially imaginative. Visual imagination can be very helpful, especially in making an emotional connection with the practice – much more so than just 'thinking it through'. So images can actually help us get into or get a sense of the nature of mind. At a very basic level, 'spaciousness', and 'clarity' and even 'energy' are images – metaphors. They aren't to be taken literally. They point us towards something in the nature of our experience that is – in itself – ineffable.

Regarding the adhisthana approach – I was struck by something written by Nagapriya in Dharma Life magazine, reviewing a book about Shin Buddhism. A number of times, I've come across authors saying that Zen and Shin Buddhism represent quite 'opposite' approaches

¹ These observations are based on 'Openness, Clarity, Sensitivity' by Rigdzin Shikpo

- Zen is supposedly all about ‘self-power’, i.e. one’s own efforts.
- And Shin is all about ‘other-power’, i.e. complete dependence on the compassion of Amida (Amitabha) Buddha.

Then writers usually express surprise that many practitioners of Zen also practice Shin. How can such contradictory approaches be practiced by the same person, they wonder?

Well actually, at heart, they are not different approaches at all – they’re essentially doing the same thing, one in a non-conceptual way that doesn’t (particularly) use images, the other in a non-conceptual way which is essentially imaginative.²

Nagapriya explains: ‘At the heart of Shin is the experience of *shinjin*, which is often translated as ‘faith’ ... It is certainly not faith in some unknown or unseen power, but an inner spiritual revolution. The arising of *shinjin* is a profound experience in which we realise simultaneously that we are both a foolish being and that our mind is non-different from (i.e. the same as!) the mind of Amida Buddha.’

Does this ring a bell for anyone? The other day we had a reading entitled ‘Faith in Mind’. (It was quite a long reading & I know some of you found it completely incomprehensible!) But never mind the text – it’s all there in the title, really. We can only really ‘do’ this practice – pure awareness – to the extent that we develop faith in Mind (mind itself, essence of mind, ‘big’ mind) – faith that our ultimate nature (right now!) is mind itself, big mind, not this blinkered, repetitive, painful and unsatisfactory ‘little mind’.

Or rather – *almost* using Nagapriya’s words – that we are both the little mind (‘a foolish being’), and that our mind is non-different from mind itself, the essence of mind (‘Amida Buddha’).

So, far from being essentially different, I think that these two approaches are essentially the same. So we can use either or both of them to ‘get at’ the way things really are.

So if you’re using the ‘adhithana approach’, to entering pure awareness, be aware that the Buddha or Buddhas that are blessing you are – in reality – nothing but the true nature of your mind. This *is* the blessing! – and it’s always there; we’re never separate from it.

Maps of the territory

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 & one-pointed 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. Or we could well go through all of those stages using just one practice – e.g. any of those I’ve just mentioned.

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.

So how does this relate to entering pure awareness?

As I said in a previous talk, *entering* pure awareness is itself to some degree a kind of bhavana practice – it involves some cultivation. What we are cultivating is not a *particular* quality (e.g. one-pointed absorption or metta) but simply awareness of *whatever* is arising now. In this way, we are cultivating the conditions that can allow pure awareness itself to arise.

Pure awareness that arises in this way is not different from the state of ‘neither effort nor non-effort’ that Sangharakshita’s talking about in ‘just sitting’. The difference is that we’re not developing it on the basis of making the effort to *cultivate* a particular quality, but on the basis of ‘letting go’ into awareness of this moment.

² As Subhuti has more recently pointed out, and as noted below in ‘Maps of the Territory’, another way of distinguishing between these approaches is that the Zen one (the ‘self-discovery’ approach in his terms) is orientated to reality as being ‘within’ and the Shin one (the ‘self-surrender’ approach in his terms) is orientated to reality as being ‘without’. Of course ‘reality itself’ transcends this dichotomy!

But there's more to it still. In a talk on the WBO convention in 2003, Subhuti made a useful distinction between three 'views' or models of meditation which shows how pure awareness relates to other kinds of meditation practice.

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. 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 'our essence of mind is essentially pure'. I.e. the view is that our mind is *really* of the nature of awakening, but the defilements – craving, aversion and delusion – prevent us from realising this fact. Hence our 'task' is to let go of craving, aversion and delusion, allowing the pure, limitless, luminous essence of mind to shine through. Subhuti calls this the model / view of 'self-discovery' – we let go of our deluded ego and 'discover' the nature of mind (perceived as) 'within'. It's really another form of surrender – but the view is of this as being 'within' rather than 'without'.

Now the point 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 emphasise one or other of these different models, e.g. Theravada – 'self development'; Pure Land/Shin – 'self-surrender'; Dzogchen – 'self-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, we're also engaging in the 'self-development' approach, cultivating qualities (awareness of the four satipatthanas, *metta bhavana* 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, those each of three views/models could be seen to embody the four stages – i.e. all of them take us through the stages of integration, positive emotion, spiritual death and spiritual rebirth.

So naturally, pure awareness practice can do this too:

1. By just letting go into what is now, the qualities of integration will *tend* to arise – we develop something similar to 'khanika samadhi' or momentary concentration (i.e. concentration on *changing* objects rather than on a single fixed object).
2. By 'staying in the gap' we develop skilful states (in terms of the 12 *nidanas*, by not 'reacting' from *vedana* to *trсна*) – these 'tend' to arise, again, from the practice of letting go itself.
3. We 'let go' of ego-activity and attachment – this gives rise to 'spiritual death'.
4. We 'let go' into the qualities of the nature of mind itself – openness, spaciousness, clarity and limitless energy/compassion – spiritual rebirth.

Pure awareness – Further Reading...

Dzogchen Perspective:

John Myrdhin Reynolds – Self-Liberation Through Seeing With Naked Awareness

Rigdzin Shikpo – Openness, Clarity, Sensitivity

Tsoknyi Rinpoche – Carefree Dignity

Just about anything by Namkhai Norbu

Zen/Ch'an Perspective:

Shunryu Suzuki – Zen Mind, Beginners' Mind

John Daido Looi – The Art of Just Sitting

Jiyu Kennett *et al* – Serene Reflection Meditation

Charlotte Joko Beck – Everyday Zen

Charlotte Joko Beck – Nothing Special

Just about anything by Sheng Yen