

## **08 Openness of Mind**

In his book “Openness Clarity Sensitivity” Rigdzin Shikpo says this:

“Buddhist practice is not about willpower, control, manipulated calm, stopping thoughts, making the mind blank, and all the other wrong ideas people get about it.

Instead it is about developing stability of mind through appreciating the three qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity, not just in meditation but also in daily life.”

I really like this quote. First, Rigdzin Shikpo identifies so much of what people wrongly believe Buddhist practice, especially meditation, is meant to involve.

Instead of willpower and control, there is still effort involved in Buddhist practice, but it is a balanced effort, there’s nothing forced.

It’s true that one of the benefits of daily life practice is a mind that is calmer, more patient, but it’s not a ‘manipulated’ calm. It’s a calm that comes from accepting and seeing things as they are. It’s a calm that definitely does not come from stopping thoughts and making the mind blank.

Moreover, getting to that state of calmness might involve a degree of discomfort as we observe and accept the true nature and patterns of our mind revealed by watching our thoughts.

And I really like the emphasis from Rigdzin Shikpo that stability of mind is achieved through developing the three qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity, not just in meditation but in everyday life.

In earlier talks I’ve stressed that these qualities of openness, clarity and sensitivity very much support each other, both in meditation and in everyday life.

Clarity of mind or of awareness is as much an emotional matter as a rational one. Unclarity is often linked to negative mental states.

So, to develop clarity we need to develop emotional positivity or sensitivity.

And as emotional positivity develops, then a sense of spaciousness and openness can arise.

In this way the three qualities of clarity, sensitivity and openness help each other.

In this talk we turn to openness, the quality of mind associated with reflecting upon insubstantiality or anatman, the third lakshana or characteristic of conditioned existence, and its related gateway to liberation of emptiness or sunyata.

Rigdzin Shikpo's first main teacher was Chogyam Trungpa, a very famous (and very controversial!) Tibetan teacher who also taught Pema Chodron, Reginald Ray, Rita Gross, and other currently well-known Buddhist teachers in the West. Rigdzin Shikpo wrote this about Trungpa:

“If you asked Trungpa Rinpoche for the essence of the Buddha's teaching, he would say, ‘It is very simple. It is simply the teaching of openness, complete openness.’

Trungpa Rinpoche's approach was simply to be open and to minimize the projections we make on our experience. His great saying was, ‘Turn towards everything.’ Even if we don't know what to do, or how to handle a situation, we just turn toward it. What comes to us might be quite painful, but it is always better to turn toward. It is a very simple choice, although it might be a painful choice sometimes. We can either turn toward or we can turn away, and Trungpa Rinpoche said you should always turn toward, and never turn away.”

And Shikpo went on:

“The word ‘open’ has an immediate meaning for us. We speak of people being open or closed. Being closed is associated with claustrophobia and a narrowed outlook or vision. Being open suggests we are open to many different possibilities and ways of thinking and feeling. We are open to others, allowing them to rub up against or even strike us at times, without immediately blocking them off. Openness is a way of learning about the world that enables us to relate to things properly and to act skilfully.”

I very much like this emphasis on openness in meditation and in everyday life as an instruction to ‘turn towards everything’.

I'm going to explore this emphasis by looking at how openness and ‘turning towards everything’ can first apply to our ourselves, to our own individual experience; secondly to how we view other individuals; and thirdly how we view other groups of people.

First, turning towards ourselves.

Although, as Shikpo emphasises, meditation is not about ‘manipulated calm’, sometimes it is helpful to focus attention and concentrate on the breath to help the mind's restless chatter die down. That's certainly often true for me at the beginning of a meditation.

But meditation is also about being able to relax focus, to move just like a camera lens can move, from narrow focus to a more ‘wide-angled’ breadth of awareness, to see what is happening in the mind and body and in one's surroundings.

When I lead a meditation I always start with establishing this breadth of awareness, with an emphasis on fully seeing and accepting what is there, and not pushing away or suppressing anything in our experience.

This is particularly important with what we might find in our minds during the meditation, even if this can make us feel uncomfortable. We need to be open to our shadow side.

Pushing away or suppressing deeply established patterns of thoughts is not going to work. Such suppressed thoughts will return more powerfully and potentially destructively.

One of my favourite writers on religion is the American academic, (now retired), Elaine Pagels. She's done a great deal to popularise what are known as the gnostic gospels. These are gospels that did not make it into the bible and were discovered in the Egyptian desert in 1945.

One of these gospels collects together a series of sayings allegedly made by Jesus. As Pagels says, the Jesus of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas can speak as cryptically and compellingly as a zen koan.

One of the sayings that leapt out for me from the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas relates, I think, directly to the dangers of suppressing deep-rooted thoughts, and the potential benefit that can arise from turning towards those thoughts.

It's a dramatic, even shocking, statement.

Jesus says:

“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

(Elaine Pagels on the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas from p.15 *The Gnostic Gospels*)

When bringing forth what is within, it must be emphasised, we need to be kind and compassionate towards ourselves. As well as clarity and openness, we need sensitivity to ourselves.

One of my friends in the Triratna Buddhist Order, Vidyamala, has recently written about applying openness and compassionate sensitivity to ourselves when we are experiencing pain. She teaches a practice called Mindfulness-based Pain Management (MBPM). She writes this:

“A core practice within MBPM is the Compassionate Acceptance meditation. In this practice ***we learn to open to whatever is present and to cultivate a middle way between practicing denial and avoidance on the one hand***

***and allowing oneself to be overwhelmed on the other.*** (My emphasis). And crucially, we learn to respond to whatever is arising with kindness, tenderness, and love, and to feel into the fluid and changing nature of all experience.

This practice also shows us how letting go of resistance and resentment is not the same as passive resignation. It requires a quality of awareness that is an exquisite balance of being receptive to whatever arises, just as it is, while one also cultivates a creative response. I always say that the behavioral outcome of mindfulness and compassion is choice. Rather than feeling like a victim of circumstances, we can choose a wise and kind response in every moment.”

“Being receptive to whatever arises”. Openness. Even with pain.

Moving now to the second aspect of openness, turning towards other individuals.

What does it mean to be turn towards another individual, to be fully open to them?

It means to try and get beyond any habitual tendencies in how we relate to them. But often in everyday life we don't do this.

To counter this tendency Rick Hanson, in his book “Just One Thing” asks us to open our view and see ‘beings’ rather than ‘bodies’.

He points out that when we meet someone, usually our mind automatically slots the person into a category: let's say, man, woman, a friend, the child from next door, etc.

He asks us to watch this happen in our own mind as we meet or talk with a fellow worker or fellow student, a shop assistant, a family member, or whomever.

In effect, he says, the mind summarizes and simplifies tons of details into a single *thing* - a human thing to be sure, but one with an umbrella label that makes it easy to know how to act. This can cause problems.

It can, for example, fix attention on surface features of the person's body, such as age, gender, attractiveness, or role.

It can lead to objectifying others (e.g., "pretty woman," "handsome man", "authority figure") rather than respecting their humanity.

This habitually labelling people, giving them a *sign*, makes it difficult to see beyond appearances to the complex reality that makes up a person.

Moreover, it closes our mind down. We are not open. We see the other person purely from a narrow, even negative, perspective. We can lose compassion and sensitivity. We miss the suffering that might be there below the surface.

This poem by Miller Williams captures that process well.

## Compassion

Have compassion for everyone you meet  
even if they don't want it. What seems conceit,  
bad manners, or cynicism is always a sign  
of things no ears have heard, no eyes have seen.  
You do not know what wars are going on  
down there where the spirit meets the bone.

Moving now to the third aspect of openness, turning towards other groups.

All of us hold views about the world around us. Often our views reflect those of a group we belong to. Consciously or unconsciously, we belong to different groups, or you could say, we belong to different 'tribes'.

These group or tribal views can be defined by different factors, maybe nationality, or class, or race, or political ideology.

These tribal affinities can predispose us to view people who belong to different or opposing groups through a simplistic and narrow lens.

When we simply label people as belonging to a different tribe from us, when we give them a *sign*, we can dismiss them in our mind. We lack sensitivity.

And when we do this, we can fail to see beneath the surface. We fail to ask why they hold the views they do. Or, having labelled them as belonging to a particular tribe, we unthinkingly and automatically ascribe to them negative or derogatory views and attitudes. We fail to see them as individuals.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

In the American presidential elections of 2016 and 2020, the Brexit vote in the UK in 2016, and in other recent changes in the Western social and political world — not least in Europe — we have seen a great deal of public discontent, political division, and increased tribalism.

If we take, for example, the significant electoral support for Donald Trump in the American elections of 2016 and 2020, and the response to that support from parties opposed to Donald Trump.

What we see is a strong tendency to label and to dismiss all those who voted for Donald Trump as racist or stupid. Hilary Clinton, the Democratic candidate for President in 2016, went so far as to label Trump supporters as 'deplorables'.

This is the opposite of 'turning towards'. It shows a lack of openness and sensitivity, caused by categorising and labelling, using a sign to dismiss whole groups of people.

And, in this case, it failed to ask what had caused people to think and vote in the way they did. It missed the very real suffering of loss of jobs, of increasing addiction to prescribed drugs to relieve physical and mental pain, of the break-up of families, of a fear of change, and much more, affecting large numbers of people, who were not being heard because others were not open to them.

This is not to argue for or against particular tribes or ideological views or groups, but it is to ask each of us to remain open, and to enquire as to what might lie behind group identities. It is to see those who belong to other groups as individuals.