

Nonduality As Shimmer
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

In our work together in the last year, a few times we have come up against one of Buddhism's sixty-four-dollar words, which is nonduality. It can be an ice cliff of a word, forbidding and a bit abstract. For the next two weeks I'd like to talk about nonduality in a way that perhaps will warm it up and make it a bit more immediate, by talking about it as shimmer and flow. Tonight : shimmer.

When we think of nonduality, usually the first thing that comes to mind is the oneness of all things. One of the implications of that oneness is simultaneity : there's not a here and a there, a cause and an effect, a subject and an object. There's a simultaneity of things, right here in the present moment. One of the largest simultaneousnesses is about the different aspects of everything in the world, and everything in ourselves as well. Everything is of this world — material or energetic — manifest, phenomenal, measurable; and, at the same time, everything is empty, vast, eternal, not changing, not rising and falling like the things of the phenomenal world. Everything is of both those things simultaneously. That is the shimmering quality of everything, the nondual quality : simultaneously eternal and impermanent.

In the beautiful technical language of Chan, everything is both mysterious — made of the vastness — and wondrous — manifest, phenomenal, of the world. You gotta love a tradition whose technical terms are 'mysterious' and 'wondrous'!

There are layers of consciousness in the Mahayana view. The eighth layer of consciousness is called the *alaya vijnana*, the storehouse consciousness. It's the part of our consciousnesses, our awarenesses, that is the repository of everything that happens to us. Everything we experience, everything we know, everything we feel, everything

we encounter falls like leaves into the alaya vijnana and is held there, without comment, without story ... just held.

Mahayana thought is that the storehouse consciousness simultaneously occupies the same space with what is called the *tathagata garbha*. Tathagata garbha is the womb of awakening, the place where our buddha nature resides, if it can be said to reside anywhere, and it is the source of awakening in us. It is simultaneously the repository of all our experiences and the very place where awakening is born, and out of which it grows in us. There's a beautiful shimmer between the manifest nature of all our experiences and the vast nature of buddha nature, and a beautiful shimmer in the fact that those two things are occupying exactly the same place at exactly the same time in each of us.

One of the implications of this for each and all of us is that our awakening is already here. It already exists in us in the tathagata garbha. So we have a nonduality of the path and the goal. Our path is not *to* awakening, it's *through* the awakening that's already here. We're not walking on the Way to somewhere else. We're already walking through it; it's already all around us. If we don't know that, if it's not vividly apparent to us in each moment of our lives, that's simply a problem of perception. We're just not seeing it yet. It's not a problem of what's actually so, it's not a problem of where we are, because there's nowhere else to be. Awakening isn't somewhere else.

The problem isn't that how we're seeing things is wrong, but incomplete. We're not seeing the shimmer of things. We're not seeing the simultaneity of emptiness and manifestation. The solution, from the tradition's viewpoint, is awakening to that shimmer, being awake to steadily see both aspects of reality simultaneously. It's never about choosing one or the other. It's never about, *Oh, there's this messed up, deluded reality that we're all aware of, and then there's this other, truer, shiny thing over there, and we're going to choose that*. It's never about that. It's about seeing both of them simultaneously, seeing how it shimmers, bringing them together into a whole that excludes neither of them. If our challenge is that we tend to exclude the shining, eternal aspect of things in the

present moment, the solution is not to then go there and exclude the manifest, phenomenal nature of things. It's to bring them together.

The Way is not about getting to enlightenment, but seeing that it's already here, already complete and all around us. This is a radical reorientation of our lives. If we hold the 'getting to' view of enlightenment or awakening, it will have a subtle effect on how we view and experience the world. It puts an instrumental cast on our way of relating to the world. What I mean is that, if the goal is to get to enlightenment, whether we're aware of it or not, in some way we're judging everything based on whether it's good for that project or not good for that project. Is this getting me closer, or is this keeping me further away? That's the effect of the 'getting to' view. Do I put this in the 'should do more of' pile, or the 'gotta stop doing this' pile? If we see that awakening is already here — that we're walking not *to it* but *through it* — then everything is the thing itself, everything is awakening itself. That's very different from an instrumental view of things. It becomes wanting to come into relationship with everything, because it already is awakening.

One of the things most people say has changed their practice is taking on not knowing as a way of life. Coming into a situation with *I know* or *I don't know but I should know, I have to know, What am I going to do?*, etc. — is on an axis of my relationship to knowing, not my relationship to the event or the experience I am having. So I'm no longer in an immediate relationship with the experience, I'm now in relationship with whether I know or not what to do in this experience.

The way of not knowing is a shift away from either the certainty of knowing or the anxiety about not knowing — and we're all on that spectrum somewhere — to the spaciousness of not knowing and being okay with that : I don't know, I can't know, I'm new here, I'm just starting out ...

For years one of the things we did was imitate the Chan monastics who greeted each other with the words *I am not certain*. That's how they started the conversation. That's the shift to not knowing, the willingness to come into a situation saying, *I am not*

certain, and to discover what's going on. When we do that, we can see how much our focus on where we are on the spectrum between certainty of knowing and the anxiety of not knowing shapes how we see reality. It's a strong filter through which we see things, experience things, and tell a story about how things are. With not knowing, all of that drops away and we come naked in some important way to the situation; we come willing in some important way to the situation. Our heart-mind is open and we're not loaded up with lots of preconceptions. When that's true, when our heart-mind is open, not loaded up with a lot of preconceptions, that's when the shimmer of things becomes visible. When we put all of that stuff down, when we step out of knowing into not knowing, suddenly the shimmer is there.

In our practice — whatever forms that takes, from sitting in the morning to going on retreat — we're doing a kind of fasting : less sensory input, less habitual behavior, less sleep, less of all those things we think are so important to us. One of the purposes of that fasting is to work with this openness and this not-loaded-up-ness; it's a way of trying to step away from being loaded with preconceptions. That's important, because if we hang out in fields where things are simpler, where we're not so loaded up, where things are more open, the shimmer does become easier to see. That's why we practice, so that we can see the shimmer.

But it doesn't stop there. It can't stop there, because we have to be able to experience that in all the experiences of our lives, not just at the specially dedicated times where we're doing everything to make it most likely. We have to see it in every kind of condition and circumstance. Having hung out in the field where it's easy to see the shimmer, if we don't make the move into taking that skill into the rest of our lives, eventually what we'll do is mistake a practice for a world view. The practice of fasting, of withdrawing for awhile, of letting things get simple, is so that we can see the shimmer of things; it's not an end in itself. A mistake we can often make is to think, Oh, that's the point, to fast in all these ways we're talking about, to withdraw, to keep things extraordinarily simple. No. The point is to do that until you get good at seeing the shimmer, and then walking out into life, and taking that with you.

When we do that, we see the second aspect of nonduality that I want to talk about. If the first one is the simultaneity of everything, the second one is the dreamlike quality of everything. That's basic Buddhism. The world is a dream, or a mirage. But when we say that, we often add to it the opinion that it's something negative, something we have to wake up from — that we're trapped in the dream or the mirage and we have to see clearly. If we hold the common view that there's something truer above, or below, or behind, or in front of, or somewhere that we just have to get to, that *is* another way of saying that what we see is true but not all that's true — but it's got a lot of negative topspin on it. What if we looked at the dream not as a condition of delusion, or as a description of an illusion we're experiencing that we need to wake up from, but as a way of talking about the incredible quality of the shimmer of everything?

Red Pine, a translator and commentator, said on the *Lankavatara Sutra*, “In the light of the Buddha's wisdom, the world doesn't exist. In the light of the Buddha's compassion, it doesn't *not* exist.” There's that simultaneity : everything simultaneously exists and doesn't exist, depending on whether you're looking through the lens of compassion or the lens of insight. What could be more dreamlike than something that both exists and doesn't exist simultaneously? That's kind of the definition of a dream, isn't it? Again, we're back at the shimmer — exist / doesn't exist, simultaneously — and things are dreamlike, not in the sense that they're false or illusory, but in the sense that they're shimmering, mysterious, that they both exist and don't exist. That's a description, not a judgment. A shift from seeing the dream of the world as a description rather than a judgment is a huge shift. That the world is a dream is a description of a truth, not a description of an illusion.

This way is called the Middle Way. What that can mean is that we bring in the flashes of insight — the moments when we see the part of the shimmer where everything is eternal and radiant and unchanging — and mix that with compassion, our experience of the complexity of the world, the heartbreaking and poignant and tender and unbearably beautiful qualities of the world. We mix those two things together in the Middle Way. In that Middle Way there's nothing about a happy

medium, and there is certainly nothing about compromise. This way encourages us to push the envelope, to go to the far reaches of both sides : to go to the far reaches of insight, to have profound, shattering, life-changing experiences of the radiance and eternity of everything; and also to push the envelope to go as far as we can into our compassionate hearts in the world, and to be willing to have our hearts broken over and over again, without shying away from that. This is a Middle Way that is not about finding the eye in the hurricane, where we can stay safe from all of the chaos swirling around us. It's not about finding a balance that is static. It's about realizing that the center is everywhere : pushing that center, that middle, out to include everything, so that there is nothing that is not middle and nothing that is not center. And that is where we stand, aware of the simultaneity of all things and the dreamlike quality of all things and the shimmer of all things.

Thank you.

Q1 : When you include darkness and suffering, when things don't work, things make you mad, the planet is being destroyed, etc. — if you get caught up in that, I think that it's too small. We make it small, so it's partial. What you're talking about is, if we open that to its fullest, with darkness being as overwhelming as much as enlightenment is overwhelming, then what you have is a simultaneous thing. Would that be nonduality? I'm trying not to put darkness in a corner because it's not matching up with enlightenment, but it *should*, so I think if you completely let suffering be as big as it can be, those two things would be simultaneous. So, when you're caught up in the more negative stuff, am I making it too small?

JIS : Yes, you're making it too small because you're not seeing the shimmer. Right? You're only seeing one aspect of it, you're seeing the manifest aspect that's manifesting in a way that is difficult and painful, but you're not seeing the eternal and radiant aspect that's simultaneously true. It's a big thing to be able to see both of those things simultaneously. But that is the Way. So yes, you're right, but you are making it small, which we do all the time, because you're leaving out something gigantic. Sometimes, as

in the example you're talking about, the uncomfortable thing is saying, *This, too, is radiant*. The uncomfortable thing isn't saying that this is painful; it's saying that this is radiant at the same time.

Q2 : When you say even the darker currents are radiant, is that another way of understanding that every day is a good day?

JIS : Yes, but not only radiant, also painful. They aren't mutually exclusive, and that's the move. There's so much of spiritual life that's about dividing up between painful and radiant, and then going for the radiant. This is asking a much harder thing of us, which is to hold both at the same time, in the cases where it is painful in its manifest form.

Q3 : I really like the idea that it all radiates, that it's not something to work towards. We're not on the way *to*; it all is, already. I'm getting that message from different places in my life.

Q4 : Reactions to the little annoying things in life, like losing keys, can be smoothed out by this understanding.

JIS : So if we say, *Losing the keys shimmers, too*, what happens?

Q4 : There's a totally different insight. It's not a reaction, it's just ... *This is it*.

JIS : Yes. We'll keep talking next time about how we do this in the world, with 'flow'. The activity of shimmer is flow.

Q5 : Often there's a discussion of how we have a shadow side and a light side. For me, there was no register of shadow. There was simply shimmer, and I thought what a relief, what a release, just knowing that shimmer is without shadow, that it's in its own brilliance.

JIS : Thank you.

Q6 : About the don't-know place. You seem to be saying that we know that we're already awake. How does it work to be in a don't-know place but to also know things?

JIS : That's the ancient paradox of trying to talk about stuff that's almost impossible to talk about, and I suppose I could say nothing. I guess the question would be, would that be an improvement? Maybe it would.

An argument could be made that it would be better if we just came and sat in silence, but we're doing something else, at least for the moment. We are trying to talk about things that are very difficult to talk about. But I would say that there is a kind of experience one can have that allows you to get as close as you can to a pretty sure bet, but it's never an absolute knowing. I'm talking about my best guess. My best guess is that we're already awake, and luckily I didn't make that up last Tuesday. That's what this tradition has been saying for over a thousand years. So I have something to back that up. But you're right. It is nothing more than a best guess.

Q6 : It seems like this unlimited expansion of including and including and including whatever is arising, would be rather destabilizing.

JIS : With any luck, yes.

Q6 : Is there any refuge in that?

JIS : Well, that's the ultimate thing that one is practicing toward, which is to find complete refuge in that. That you don't have to take refuge *away* from it, but that you can take refuge *in* it, that you can absolutely rest on groundlessness, so that nothing is conditional, or dependent on circumstances. Circumstances have to be a certain way for me to feel comfortable. That's a conditioned comfort, a comfort based on conditions. What is it like to have comfort or a refuge that is not conditioned, not dependent on any circumstances whatsoever? And, therefore, infinitely available, always available in whatever's going on?

Q7 : Can you tell about how you found the word *shimmer*?

JIS : I was reading a text from the Ox Head School, which was a school that lasted for a shimmering moment in early Chinese Buddhism. It was about something else

entirely, and suddenly the world *shimmer* just came to me. I put the book down and started writing and I just wrote it out. And so that's as much as I can say about how it came. It was a transmission from the ancestors of the Ox Head School.

Thank you all.