

A letter to a Student

A student e-mailed me heart felt questions:

"After speaking with you and contemplating what you were saying about life experiences being like bubbles rising and passing, a question has emerged. The question has to do with clinging vs. detachment. And more specifically to do with detachment vs. emptiness.

Because for me, a dominant function is clinging. And the clinging is a clinging to being, driven strongly by a fear of not being. So in recognising this deep clinging and in aspiring to be free from it and rest in a space of equanimity -in the midst of any situations that arouse emotions and views- it appears that working with detachment is necessary.

You were describing to me one process of working with this was the 'technique' of metta meditation in various forms. You also mentioned the insight meditation of directly experiencing the rising and passing of all phenomena. And as I contemplate this now I am aware of a deep stream of fear around detaching and passing. I see how much power passion and desire have in their potential to attach. But I see how I am afraid that to experience what is, without attaching, is to become empty in a nihilistic sense. I know this is not what you mean when you talk about emptiness; I am just saying that for me this is what still comes up. I have a great fear of the nature of dissolving. The natural dissolving of phenomena seems to indicate to me a state of unlove. ...I guess I'm calling out to clarify once again about the true view of emptiness."

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This person who wrote the letter above has questions and concerns that are common to many people. So, I thought it best to share my response with many beings (with a few edits and additions):

Dear being,

I have written down a few key points to consider. I will answer and ask questions based on my experience and what is classically taught. What you have asked is both simple and extraordinarily vast. These topics are of the essence of the teaching of Vajra Yogini. You recall that she is red, the colour of life, love and vitality. But she also has the symbols (the curved knife, the wet skulls, the skull cup full of blood, the crown of skulls, etc.) of not

being “glued” or attached to stories. Freedom from attachment, not glued to appearances is one of the meanings of Vajra Yogini’s ability to dance “amongst the three-thousand world systems”. As a *Khandro*, a “sky goer” she travels through space and beings’ spaces (world systems). So, we start with loving-kindness. And let’s consider what we mean, experientially, by detachment (*upekkha*), clinging, emptiness and other words. Ah, you ask to clarify your view of emptiness! If emptiness had a view, it would not be empty! Then again, the “View” is the union of emptiness and compassion. We will see that loving kindness and emptiness are of the same nature.

What are the qualities of loving kindness? It has the experience of openness, friendliness, confidence, trust in one’s being and the trust of other’s, stability, movement and spaciousness, relaxed but full of energy, able to have new experiences, non-fear and so on. These qualities give or impart to the play of mind luminosity and spaciousness. There is less “stickiness” to the flow of body and mind, so there is more natural “detaching” from being stuck in one place. The word that is usually translated for transcendence, equivalent to the Path experience of emptiness is the Pali word *Lokuttara*. It means “beyond placement”, “beyond the world (*loka*)”, also “no place to stand”. Here is a key point: Can you really be fully engaged and fully helpful (lovingly compassionate) if you are “standing in one place”, “locked at the knees”, “frozen at the hips”, “poisoned in the heart”, dwelling only in their or your world, “stiff in the mouth”, “slumped with depression”, or hyper with over interest in what they are on about? *Lokuttara* is great movement, *Mahamudra*. So, detachment in a loving way is not getting lost in their or your story, there are so many stories, endless stories, but what story will nurture and bring about the light of freedom, movement from suffering? Clarity, clarity, clarity!

Waking up from the dream (lost into the happening) manifests as more *upekkha*, more loving detachment. If we use the word detachment we must be careful how we use it and see that it has different meanings to us. It is better to use the word *upekkha*, as it does not have the connotation of “split off”, “indifference” or “not caring”. *Upekkha* as one of the 40 classic meditations is traditionally used as an “antidote for indifference”. Quite the opposite of what most beings assume. Occasionally the most compassionate act is to walk on from the story, the dream and move into new and we pray, better stories. However, even more compassionately can you help the being to drop all the story making for spacious awareness of what is – thusness. But do we have the freedom from *needing the other beings affection* to be acting compassionately? The fear that arises will be, “what will happen to me”? This is fear of abandonment and loss of love. And this is felt right through the body (if there is some awareness). Socially or intimately relating (in the common usage) is sometimes a cover for the fear of abandonment. But abandonment of what? It is truly only an abandonment of fixed stories, being locked in one place, and one worldview about who and what you are. *Lokuttara* frees one of this lock, opens a being to experience the *mahamudra*. Vajra Yogini is the *mahamudra*. She is fearless to go anywhere, dance through anything, a sky traveller who is able to explore and love. I have this vision of all these beings having conversations with each other, but in fact they are really sucking at the breast, trying to gain nutriment, trying to gain love, trying to have happiness, but not knowing that the great dance, the *mahamudra* is love. Be at the breast of the great mother – sunyata – the empty nature, moving through possibilities of being, and possibilities of non-being. Both are false positions, places that cannot be held for long.

What do we mean by the experience of attachment? It is “stuck” into one viewing, one experience, one mode of sensing, one mode of perceiving, one mode of acting, one mode of behaviour, conjoined with an emotional surge (like waves crashing on a beach) that hinders movement (sometimes mistaken for over movement, over push or the agitation to move). For example, while sitting in a meeting or talking, instead of the body/mind fighting the views that are given, what else can one do with that energy play? Normally most beings react in a few predictable ways: defensive, aggressive, guilt, anger, depression, affection, jealousy, fear, intellectual, Mr. or Miss fix it, sympathy,..., but what other ways are there to be? What could you become in relationship to them? It is the same as being in a dream. Are you paralysed? Or do you turn yourself into a being of 1000 arms and 11 heads, a being of light and compassion, or an angry headed Medusa. Do you flee? Do you curl up into a ball? Which one? And not always the same way, as our reactions to dreams can change.

For me, real detachment is love. You can't have real detachment until there is a unity and interest in the other being. Otherwise, one is de-tached, un-connected from life; the negative use of the word detached. It is the blissful open awareness of *upekekeha* that allows one to see new possibilities, fully engaged without the “stickiness” of narrowed focus. Really caring for others, be it a friend, fly, cat, computer, plant, rock or fish is to see what they need, what best supports and unfolds their being in relation to many being's and activities. Detachment is total interest that is appropriate to the situation. Another way of saying this is, if we are glued to one way of being, one type of interaction with that being or beings, then we are attached, stuck like a fly to flypaper. This is the experience of *dukekeha*. It is as if the only way to interact or think is like some insects that can only extract nutriment from a rare animal turd. That's it! They know no other way. What happens if the animals die off or move away? The insect may not have time to adapt – it only knows one way to be. With a human, this is akin to rigidity of body and mind. If we take a close and honest look at much of our activities and others, how much is useful? Does it really amount to anything in a day? Does it go anywhere, does it contribute to beings' liberation, does it really add to the quality of human life, did it really nourish beings? Was there any movement, movement to awakeness, participating in liberation and exploration of life?

In union means no-fear. The unitive allows the experience of interconnectedness of you and it, the ever-flowing play that shapes you and it together. Or does one absorb into the wisdom aspect and not act – just be? One can sense that both can be fruitful or imbalanced. That is why classically, skill and means (compassion) is unified with wisdom, as is shown in Vajradhara and the other yidams. As the great Yogi Shabkar said, “Dharma is rotten without compassion”.

Now a key point about breath. The basic life of a human, all organisms in fact, is energy exchange. We produce energy and we discharge energy. This is what we do. Basic. We produce energy through breathing (respiration) and eating and we discharge energy through movements, be they walking, talking, skipping, dancing, sex (most often discharge but it can be energy charging), defecating, peeing and twitching. So, if energy is stuck, the mind is stuck. If energy is open and flowing, the mind is open and flowing. For example if a person gets too depressed then no amount of thinking can get them out of it. It is an energy problem. The energy is stuck, so there is no fluidity of the mind, until energy is released to move. So motility is directly connected to breath. As breath/prana can freely circulate and the body moves with the breath, so too the mind feels alive, fluid and expansive – friendly.

Hummm, perhaps that is why some people like to dance so much, they feel really alive and vibrant.

The body is vibrating all the time, but how is it vibrating? How is the body/mind discharging and charging? Maybe the environment is contributing to the constant discharge. Can we change it? If it is discharging all day, then what do we have left? If it is charging all day, what happens? No matter how good the environment, if there is not good charging, through breath and food, vitality and movement, then all the fixes to the outer environment will not amount to much. So, a key point is; if the breath/*prana*/mind is stuck or frozen, non-movement occurs and the common experience is fear of letting go into new possibilities. Often we practice a movement, a *mudra* to encourage, with the help of awareness, the *pranas* to flow into various areas or channels. Actually it only requires sustained awareness, inner *mudra* to bring about, the entering of *prana*, purification and illumination. If the latter way is hindered, there are many *yogic*, *Qigong* and other movement practices to help restore, liberate energies and bring mobility to the body-mind.

Here is an illustration of the situation. Imagine that your arm has become stuck in a pile of earth. Yup, you're right up to the armpit in dirt! However, this has been going on for many years and in some ways, even though it is not very functional, you can get by and it kind of feels 'normal'. It's a pain, physically and emotionally, but one finds ways to cope. It's you, it's become part of the persona, the mask worn. It's a pretty inflexible way to move and it drains mental energy, but "hey that's the way we are". One day a person comes by and suggests that if the arm were removed many positive benefits would happen. So you throw up a ton of resistance, procrastinate, worry it and eventually you yank out the arm. Now this process of removing the arm is not comfortable, it is an icky mental and physical feeling. Even the suggestion of removing the arm brings up icky sensations. But after a time, with mobility restored, the breath flows well and then you feel very good, integration and balance occurs, new horizons open up, and new discoveries are made.

The more liberation, the less stickiness when there is physical illness or difficult appearances and situations. *Dukkha* of the body is going to happen, is happening. *Dukkha* of the body does not have to drag down the Mind that is clear of emotional defilements. Why? Because there is a definitive recognition of Mind, not attached to all the various states and appearances that come and go. Attachment to appearances is like constantly following lights dancing off a pond or the head moving back and forth for hours watching the ball during a tennis match. Endlessly fascinated with appearances, inner and outer. But what are these appearances? How do they arise and pass away? What is it that is being experienced? Are we glued to the manifestations of the ever-changing states of consciousness (and thus appearances of mind), or is their on-going awareness of the essential nature of these states and the space in which they appear to arise? How long does one want to be fascinated, entranced by appearances? My god, a lifetime of en-trance-ment! Keeping a calm lid on mental states will not work for long; the lid will eventually (sooner than later!) blow off or crack. We must learn to recognise the states of mind and the sphere (*bindu*) of clear spacious lucidity called Awareness or Mind. This is called recognition of the essence. Confidence is opening more and more to its nature.

Now returning briefly to an earlier theme, listen to the word "abandonment": a-band-on-ment. Here is another interpretation. "Frozen, non-breathing is wearing bands". There are

nine major bands that tighten around the body, constricting, cutting off movement and loving-kindness. How can one experience equanimity if the bands are tight? It becomes the negative form of de-tachment – split off. There is little possibility of “emptying out” into new horizons, quantum jumps to totality when the bands are like a vise around the body and mind. That is why in the Sutta, the Buddha Saykamuni’s teaching on breathing meditation the first tetrad reads, “*experiencing the whole body of breath I shall breath in, thus he trains himself; experiencing the whole body of breath I shall breath out, thus he trains himself*”. Then, “*Calming the bodily formation, I shall breath in...*”. Calm means a body alive, settled, vibrant, relaxed, permeated with prana/mind. The bands are not constricting, so there is movement and thus the ability now to observe the mind. With the experience of the fully settled mind of aware spacious lucidity, then there is the possibility to have insight into its nature and the nature of phenomena - sunyata.

You wrote, “I have a great fear of the nature of dissolving”. This statement could just as easily be re-written to “I have a great fear of the nature of breathing.” This may not sound so obvious, but it is the case and meditatively it is profound. The change in breath, which holds strong emotions, bindings and patterns often, is full of fear. This is quite normal. So, bit-by-bit we approach a more full body of breath, through movement, visualisation, inner yoga and so on. Dissolving is an equal part of life as is coming into being. There is no dissolving without forming. To be born again “you” (miss or mister story maker!) has to die. All great yogis and saints have said this. Instead of using the word dissolving, use the word change. Why are you not fearful of no-change, non-dissolving? Could you imagine what it would be like to not change? What is the fear really about? Are you afraid “you” will disappear or die? Are you afraid that if your view of you makes a dramatic shift, “you” will be changed and beings won’t relate to you or love you? Confidence in dissolving and arising is at the heart of the deity yoga practices and Burmese and Thai insight practices – over and over again – until we gain great recognition and confidence in change and mutability of form and mind. Breath is not static. It does not just arise, but it does cease – passes away. What happens? Can you trust the organism level? Can you trust the universe that has given birth to this most amazing manifestation – you? Meditation is both developing concentration, but also discovering profound trust in the universe. Not specifically all the various appearances and manifestations of this or that being, but trust the universe. In a sense, the universe is constantly prodding and poking our beings to wake up, gifts of awakensness are given all the time. How often do we recognise them? What we consider to be difficult situations in life, situations we want to flee from such as an angry friend or supervisor, a jealous colleague, illness, we just don’t like it, and so on, are great opportunities for unfoldment. So much energy is tied up in reacting to these situations with rejecting, interference, anger or stupidity. Extraordinary energy and clarity of being opens, if we allow the situation to teach and we become involved with awareness, interest and friendliness.

Now for a key point about emptiness. I will not use the word emptiness for a while. It is the commonly used translation of the Sanskrit *sunyata*. Mis- understanding how the word is used, is part of the problem. For most beings it automatically conjures up the mental image of nothingness. It is the common translation that to some beings only points to part of the vastness of the word *sunyata*. Why don’t beings use the translation *totality* more often? Yet, it is only by emptying (ha, I used it again!) out the fixed views of “me” and “it”, that totality experience arises and becomes realisation. When one experiences sunyata, there is no you present, but bright awareness is present, the open mind. That is not to say that the “relative”

you is gone, for the organism maintains integrity, but the story of you vanishes for totality seeing. And for totality seeing, “you” have to be prepared (with parami) to let go of the mental and physical bands that prevent totality experiences or realisations. As long as “you” are trying to keep “you” fixed in space and time, there are barriers to interdependence and interconnectivity.

There really is no you! You are the constant play of light that is born every moment from the interplay of inner experiences and outer experiences. Billions of wondrous happenings. Although you do not yet have this confidence, the dissolving of your story making being, the loss of the clinging to having to be, opens to extraordinary richness of being. Sounds contradictory? Not at all. Sunyata, does not, and never has meant nihilism. It means no clinging to the concept of a permanent being. Every activity, every moment of phenomena is transitory, nothing remains the same, like bubbles blown into space, or like reflections in a mirror or dreams. This is fact. It is fact that is clearly known with insight. It is glorious, it is neither beautiful nor not beautiful, but it is freedom. Without these three marks, *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, the universe, as we know it would be radically different. The marks of sunyata are of the nature of liberation, every moment that passes allows for new becomings. *Without anicca, dukkha and anatta* nothing could arise, nothing would pass away. Experience dissolution to be-reborn. It is happening anyway, why not experience it directly? Without impermanence there would not be any possibility of freedom from this or that becoming. Every state eventually frees itself from entanglement. There cannot be a permanent being and permanent states, of anything. Only our stories, our conditioned mind states create an appearance, a fiction of constancy. It is a mental story that gets written into the fabric of our tissues and bones, but it does not last. However, one can work hard to maintain the fiction that it appears to last. That is suffering. The only constancy is impermanence, one of the three marks of *sunyata*.

What are we afraid of losing? What is it that we hold on to so dearly? Vajra Yogini dances into the unknown, she trusts the unknown. She moves through the Great Womb of *Mahamudra*. I look forward to giving up the “crusty bits” of my being, they are such weights. So I change! What lightness of being! What bliss! I have learnt that it makes for a richer, more generous, wise being. But my goodness, are the crusty bits hard to find and let go of! Do we admire the qualities of a being permeated with loving-kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity? Of course we do! Do we admire the qualities of a being that can move and joyfully emerge through all of life’s stories and sufferings, without being crushed under the weight of erroneous views? Yes. This is pointing to *bodhicitta*. Liberation for all beings. What else is there to do? Sound familiar?

For example, perhaps one sits, for many hours, sometimes days, in a long meeting, perhaps a school or board meeting. Do you get crushed under the weight of people’s views? Do you read the newspaper or watch television and get crushed under the weight of the printed word (how many grams does that word weigh!), the image (try measuring the weight of that light!), the stories of suffering then get lifted up a little when one gets to the travel section, the sports page, the fashion section, only to be dropped down again at the obituaries. This is not *upekkha*, not non-clinging awareness. Equanimity means not being pushed around, lifted and raised, thrown about on a sea of views. It is not devoid of feelings or states of mind – it is not an empty listless state. It is not having unnecessary states that hinder freedom, spacious awareness. *Upekkha* is clear seeing, non-intellectually being in the View; knowing

that all phenomena are the play of mind and form and that all perception and concepts of matter and form, both inner and outer are the result of the inconceivable play of movement-lights of the prana/mind. Conjoined with compassion (skill and means) it then allows for involvement to remove patterns of suffering. This can be kind or fierce action. If a house is burning and there are beings in the house, do you stand and watch, cry and slump, have conversations with yourself and others, or do what you have to do to “pull” those beings to safety?

All the practices, even your daily work and interactions with people places and things, all the yogas, inner and outer, no matter at what level are building strength and *parami*, allowing *bodhicitta* to emerge. That will result in *upekkha* and the other *Brahma Viharas*; the basis for realisation of *sunyata*. If every day, outside of a formal retreat one truly sees daily activities as an ongoing retreat, then every day is an opportunity to practice skills we learn in meditation, in dharma classes or times with one’s Lama, then many avenues of skill and means will open.

Our major hindrance becomes our biggest liberator! If it is massive clinging, then Dorje Phagmo is perfect for you. The energy stored in the defilement is huge, so it is our path – this is Tantra. Learning to turn the apparent defilement into positive energy is wondrous – it has to be done. Desire and greed are transmuted into generosity, anger and hatred into love and ignorance and dullness into wisdom. If you are clinging, so cling! But cling better, cling skilfully, cling so that positives arise. Bit-by-bit cling with more intelligence, cling to wisdom and compassion, cling to *bodhicitta*, cling to more moments of light and spaciousness, cling to giving and ethics, cling to good energy and patience, cling to upholding concentrated states and opportunities for insight. Then with enough strength, clinging is not necessary, it will drop away. The *bodhicitta* will act appropriately and effortlessly.

There are ancient Indian stories of young men visiting the *Gurus*, asking to become rich, wealthy beyond imagination. Typically the story goes like this: The Guru says he can fulfil the desire. So, for a few years the student sweeps floors, washes dishes, waters the garden and pounds rice. He asks the Guru, when will he receive the practices to make him rich. Ah, says the Guru, “wait a little longer”. Eventually the Guru gives the student some meditation practices, like Foundation Work to prepare the being for richness. Then after a couple years, more meditations. After many years the student has become so alive, so vibrant, healthy, free of defilements he has forgotten why he came to the Guru. He is rich.

I suggest you use the method that makes sense at that moment. Or work with themes for a time. Not to engage with split off detachment, but fully engagement with life without being lost or stuck to its stories. Because the stories are infinite, how many do you want to collect! It is like being a dream collector! What ever for? Perhaps, today you see bubbles of activity, transience, and at other times you sit as *Chenresig* and see all the other beings as luminous *Chenresigs*. All sounds coming from their mouths are the compassionate mantra of *Chenresig*. We hear them as seed syllables. The building is *Chenresig*’s crystal palace, the sounds are celestial. At times we practice a *Metta* meditation from the *suttas*: First establishing friendliness throughout one’s entire being, then to all the beings in the room without favouring some; beings we like, beings who we dislike and those that hold anger towards us. Then we permeate the city and country with loving-kindness.

And sometimes you naturally dwell in pervasive openness of Mind where no effort is made, as no effort is required – non-clinging awareness. Contemplate the interconnectivity of these beings, seeing how they create worlds, how they bring into being creations and how other creations shape them. Or how they could not be, could not manifest without billions of different beings and things, including us, at that moment supporting their appearance. Perhaps, it is a time when you contemplate that all we experience is appearance, shaped by our minds, as insubstantial as one's face in a mirror. Or, on another occasion you meditate on how history has and is shaping the words of all of us, how in 1, 5, 20 or 50 years it will look different. How are we interacting with them, what are we sending, what are we receiving, moving and checking all the sense mandalas? You check the posture, the breathing, feeling of mind, states of mind and experience the fading of attachment through meditating on the three *animittas* (signless characteristics) of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*.

While meditating on the thousands of supportive conditions that give rise to what beings appear to be, right now, how they might transmute in the future and contemplate where did they come from? Or you watch a being talk and see the wonders of the universe unfold; seeing the universe talk, perhaps many universes; seeing them as star light, like the Milky Way countless in number of stars and planets, or trillions of microbes and cells. Perhaps on another day you contact them as an organism, flesh and bones, organs and blood, snot and bile, sinew and brain. On another day you engage with them, effortless you are the *yidam* and skilfully remove the daggers of greed, hatred and delusion through peaceful and fierce means. You observe closely while in the busi-ness of the day; is there any real difference between the experience of dreaming and what is occurring now? Then, observing cause and effect, noting the action and its resultant, with fine awareness you experience the volitional mind create a vast web of a world. Or, you see them and hear them for what they and we are, striving to comprehend this mystery of existence, wanting to be in a state of love and happiness. Thus you contemplate *sunyata* in many ways, conjoining compassion and emptiness; each day, and footstep by footstep, breath by breath, detached but deeply involved with life, supporting the unfoldment of liberty, and totality. It is a great mystery.

I offer up these words. May they help bring about more determination, clarity and liberation for all.

From Kinmount, Ontario, completed during a sunny hailstorm in September 2003.

Metta,

Mark Webber