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how to use conceptual and experiential experiences, the progression of using experience as object - from placing awareness to recognizing experience to recognizing nature of mind, holding view that experience is fresh, ways to ease into working with strong experiences

LMC [00:01:57] So, this is our time for clarification. Ideally... to raise questions and things. Clarify issues around the practice, our experiences around it. So, anything that you have on your mind... that you'd like to raise... now is a good time.

Student 1 [00:02:36] This morning's extended practice... at looking at what we're experiencing at the moment, was a perfect continuation of something you had told me recently. So, I welcome the chance to practice that. I don't know if this is a question... rather than asking for help. The practice of just looking at what we're experiencing and then... after that, so *quickly* rushes in the words and the labels... and the story. And then trying to drop... and just experience. And then the words and labels, story rushes in again. Other than practicing over and over and over, do you have some... suggestions for helping stop the flow of concept? The words.

LMC [00:03:43] Well, what comes to mind is the question, why would you want to do that?

Student 1 [00:03:51] Because you told me to. [laughs]

LMC [00:03:53] No. I think there's just a little misunderstanding there. So, when you are applying labels and going through all of that, that has a significant conceptual component to it, almost surely. And that activity is an experience. So, we often find it difficult to parse those two pieces apart between the experiential and the conceptual. And generally speaking, I think it might be... human, but it's definitely a cultural thing for us, that we rely... probably first and foremost, on our conceptual understanding. In fact, I think, sometimes *I* find it difficult to know how I'd have any understanding without a conceptual component. I don't think that that's *true*. But I think it just exemplifies how deep we rely upon a conceptual understanding.

[00:05:06] So, I wouldn't say that you want to get *rid* of the conceptual any more than you would want to get rid of... any other experience. But when you're engaging in the practice, you may find that the conceptual provides a door into the practice. But there *is*... a non-conceptual component. The experience of it... that we sometimes... don't recognize or don't notice... somehow, or we think we're doing something wrong, which could be true. But then there's still a non-conceptual component that could be recognized. So... it's simple, in one sense. It's the implementation that's difficult because... for me the habit is so deep, from so many years in school and all, where virtually *no* emphasis is placed on the experience.

[00:06:16] Even you read a book that's... I mean, I remember taking a literature course once. I really enjoyed the literature course, but... nobody in their reports and all in the classroom, when all was said and done, I had this certain sense of... we didn't do something... here. And it took probably 10 years before I had this sense of what it was. That you'd read... a beautiful passage and have an experience... but it isn't what you would talk about when the teacher called on you. You'd talk about something... this person seemed to have this relationship with that person and all, and that was okay. I think that's what the teacher wanted. But people just didn't talk about... the experience of it. Oh, I liked that passage. I think there's something there... without going into it anymore.

Student 1 [00:07:25] Lama Michael, you used the expression, the concepts can be opening the door.

LMC [00:07:32] Sure.

Student 1 [00:07:34] In a similar way... when I'm present in the moment, a *brief* moment... when the concepts come in, it feels like it closed down the experience. It closed the door.

LMC [00:07:52] Sure. Yeah. What we were trying to get at this morning was, can you place your awareness on the experience? And, I think that I mentioned... maybe in the second session about Kalu Rinpoche saying that the really difficult experiences were the most precious. And... my own sense of that is... that *really* difficult experiences have a lot of power. We want to get away from them. That's very powerful. We want to grapple with them and they have a lot of power. It's kind of like wrestling with a tiger or something. And we're not particularly trained... in paying attention to the experience. Unless we're also codifying the experience in the context of something conceptual, again. Like, you're in the doctor's office and the doctor says, where does it hurt? So, there was a point at which I realized... it hurts, but actually there wasn't much talk about how it hurt or what that experience was. Here what I think what we would benefit greatly from... is the ability... to step both into the conceptual and the experiential. If not simultaneously, then back and forth... a little bit. So, that we actually could see the difference. And *then*, because it's *zhinay*... and in *zhinay*, our principal technique is to... practice resting our awareness... on an object. And the object in this case is that experience.

[00:09:47] So normally we start out by putting a little statue of the Buddha or something in front of us and resting on our awareness on it. And I can say in my own experience that when I left the Buddha or the penny, or whatever else was there... and actually put my awareness on the *experience*... that meant something. And otherwise, i always seemed to me a little bit on the dry side. Like, I'm just resting my awareness on, on the wind blowing by, which... is not that much. But if the wind was hot, and I was sweaty and I put my awareness not on the wind, but on the hot and sweaty, I'd have a totally different experience. Or, if I have an aversion to the hot and sweaty and I put my awareness on the hot and sweaty, it has some power because... maybe I don't *want* to put my awareness there. And so I have the experience of hot and sweaty and not wanting it, also. I think it's an elaboration... on the simple... put your awareness on an object. It's an elaboration on that which is useful in a lot of other practices.... That's my sense.

Student 1 [00:11:07] Thank you.

Student 2 [00:11:54] My mind was grasping this question so tightly that I decided I had to just let it go and not ask the question. But I can't let it go. I think the only way I can is by asking it. [LMC laughs] So, you have... focused... with regard to observing our experience, mainly in the present moment, but you also mentioned past experience in the form of memory. And you mentioned thoughts about the next experience. So, we can segregate experience in these time dimensions and there's some variable degree of porosity between them? And... this question arises because last night... I watched a movie that completely... disturbed what had been an experience all day of equanimity and feeling content. And the movie... reminded me of my past, which, in a conventional sense... was unsuccessful. And... I realize... that that was all like a dream. That past life, the past experience. And that it didn't have to affect... my present experience. So, I just wonder how do we organize our attention among these different time dimensions of experience?

LMC [00:13:37] You mean like alphabetically... [laughs] or what? Organize them how?

Student 2 [00:13:47] Well, you spoke primarily about focusing on your present experience, but... for example, while last night I acknowledged this kind of dreamlike realization of my past. I had very active, disturbing dreams all night that brought the past into the present. And... it's really possible to segregate those dimensions sometimes. Sometimes you *need* to look at them. So, I'm just wondering how... to go about... paying attention when there's these different... parts of ourselves that provide experience... in different time dimensions.

LMC [00:14:54] My intention this morning was to simplify this thing. So, I didn't mean to... kind of joke at your thing by saying... alphabetically. But what I meant instead... actually, it took me a few moments to actually realize what I *meant* by that, is the truth... and that was that... *organizing* those experiences was back in the conceptual. We're back in that place. And sometimes we do that because it's more comfortable... to think of those experiences in a conceptual way. Whereas experientially, often, it doesn't have a clear... resolution or a clear understanding. But if I don't like you, for example, and you say something to me that hurts me, I can easily categorize it as... well, of course, *he* would say that! I could just write it off. And that is a conceptual move. But instantly it also becomes an experience.

[00:16:12] And the idea here is not to organize. So, I'm not saying that organizing it wouldn't be a good idea in another context. But, here in the context of our meditation, the idea is to... be present with the experience. Because, in just pure presence with the experience, we discover something about the mind. If we fall back into the conceptual, then we're gonna discover the conceptual things that we already know how to discover. In essence. I think that's a valid point. And from moving into the experiential, then we're also doing what we're going to *have* to do in order to come up to the place where... we not only *experience* the nature of mind, but we *recognize* that we're experiencing it. So, that's a piece of it. Both of those are non-conceptual. At least... ideally.

Student 2 [00:17:27] Thank you.

Student 3 [00:20:06] So I'm just trying to process some of what you said this morning and understand it. And I have a couple other conceptual categories that I want to know how it fits in. It sounded to me like you were talking to some extent about... turning *inward* as opposed to outward, perhaps, when we're kind of stopping... to be with our experience. A kind of turning inward in a way, rather than outward. And then... I get confused sometimes, if turning inward... there's certain aspects of inward if, I think your wording was we put our awareness on the experience. But I've also heard the instruction to put the focus of our meditation on the *awareness* of the experience. And I'm just a little confused there, wondering if there's a distinction that's important to be made there... or if it's all part of turning inward, as the focus of the meditation?

LMC [00:21:36] There is a stage of practice where one is encouraged to actually put their awareness on the awareness. But that was not the intention this morning, partly because... that's a very... kind of rarefied... approach. Which at some point we have to do. But first, the ability to... just be present with an experience... without trying to hold on to it or, or push it away or modify it or understand it conceptually. There are situations where we do this naturally. If you listen to a certain piece of music... you may utterly shut off the conceptual. And just have the experience. On the other end, if you're maybe a musician and you *know* that piece of music, you

might be... judging the performer or doing some other thing, in which case you've stepped out of that place. But probably most, if not all of us, have had the experience of... hearing a piece of music that... and best maybe also if it does not have a... language component to it... it's just music, it's like an instrument of some kind. And we feel transported... in the moment of listening to it.

[00:23:22] So, I think if we were to make this comparison, we would say... what we're shooting for is... when Kalu Rinpoche said... the really difficult... emotional experiences are the really precious ones. Those are the important ones. I remember for some weeks feeling, maybe longer than that, feeling befuddled by it. Like, why would it be like... there wasn't much explanation. But I think at this point, it seems clear. The idea is, as we mentioned earlier, you receive an experience. And you accept it as a gift. Even if it's painful. Even if it's beautiful and wonderful and exciting... it's accepted as a gift. The idea is, that you have a certain equanimity, by virtue of that *view* that you hold of it, that it's a gift, you have a certain kind of almost automatic equanimity about your own inner experience. Which is *also* helpful in many situations. Like, for example, if you were dying. To have a certain equanimity about your experience would be extremely helpful. So, I don't know if that addresses your....

Student 3 [00:24:47] It does. Thank you.

LMC [00:24:48] All right.

Student 4 [00:24:56] I don't know if I'll be able to... be articulate about this at all, but, um, I was thinking, since several weeks ago, when you started to introduce this... idea of just resting with your experience... about working for the ballet company. And when you just said this about music, it completely connected there. Because, you know, you can go and see a ballet performance that tells a story like Swan Lake or Sleeping Beauty. But, far more often now you are likely to encounter contemporary dance. And many people are completely befuddled by this. Because they're always wanting to know what does it mean? What does it mean? And for a choreographer, this is a very challenging question because they don't think... in thoughts. You know, they don't. They think in patterns and movement. And, and I heard a choreographer named Lar Lubovitch once say, "doesn't mean anything." You know, release yourself from the pressure to have it mean something and just experience it.

[00:26:03] And, um, you know, I have felt ever since you started talking about this practice, way more comfortable than following my breath or trying to, you know, see an image or something like that. And I'm beginning now to get... I'm *used* to having to experience art... performance art without concept. I have some muscle from that already that is proving very useful with this way of practicing. And then I was thinking about Jef's paintings. Like I've seen Jef do plein air paintings that you can look at it and you can see that's a landscape. But, more often now, he seems to be making paintings that are... very contemporary and may not have, you know, we might have to say the same thing. Don't look for meaning in this painting. Just experience it. And, uh, I often question whether being so involved in one of the arts has any use... in a Buddhist perspective. So, I'm feeling very happy that, you know... this useful muscle's coming from those experiences. It's more a comment than a question.

LMC [00:27:17] The analogy of a muscle is apropos. I mean, it's not really a *muscle* per se, but it's an ability... that we ordinarily don't pay much attention to. And I do think, from my own experience, and of course, I think everybody's *exactly* like me... I am certain of it. [laughter] that actually... I can see in myself, that the conceptual training rises up without being asked. And it's

sometimes difficult to get it to shut up, you know. And yet, the difficulty and the frustration is a precious experience. So, if we're not *really* working on it, we can miss that. We just throw that out as if that's not relevant. When in fact, the most precious piece of it *is* the railing against the thing that we think that everything would be better if we didn't have a *conceptual* piece. It's clearly... just going back to the conceptual piece. It's just... we've tricked ourselves again. But I think not so difficult to see that. Not so difficult to see it. Anyway... it's a worthy discussion to have and a worthy experiment to have in our meditation practice.

Student 5 [00:29:07] I'm wondering if there's a good definition for what... experience... is. How do you experience experience?

LMC [00:29:16] Now, wait a minute. [laughter] ... I'm having a befuddled experience for saying that. Would you take a shot at... making that same statement of the question in slightly different words?

Student 5 [00:29:57] Like... there's a transition from... thinking about things and having a story in my head... and just kind of... stopping and saying... what is experiencing that story? And is that the experience I'm looking for? Or... like kind of going from... something out there. Like, I'm gathering information to just... being in this space in the present moment and being aware of my thoughts. Rather than *actively* thinking. I don't know. I'm trying to figure it out, obviously. ... To get out of the way of myself, as [she] said [off mic].

LMC [00:31:09] Well, that's easier to say than the other thing. [laughs] Right? I mean... we have our habitual ways of approaching these things. I don't feel like there is any... need... to reject that conceptual piece... that you're talking about. Because the conceptual piece... is often triggered... by the emotional experience. I'm putting emotion on it. Not as a thing that strengthens it, but just as an experience as opposed to a conceptual. And those things also, we've got to recognize... they're not so finally divided, like there's a brick wall between them. So, there's a little bit, maybe a lot more nuanced than that.

[00:32:12] I often go back to this place... of the man in the street approaching the Buddha and saying, what's the difference between you and me? And the Buddha says, "There isn't any. You also are fully in possession of the awakened mind. The only difference between you and I is... I recognize it. You don't." Well, you may not recognize the experience, so I think the use of the word of 'recognize it' was an important piece. The Buddha *recognizes* that awakened mind. And he's just saying to the man in the street... well, you *have* the same awakened mind. It's no better than mine. No different, really. The difference isn't in the *quality* of that awakened mind. The differences in whether or not you recognize it.

[00:33:08] The clear inference there also, if one cares to make it I think it, is that... we all have that awakened mind. And that... befuddles us to some degree, because when we sit down to meditate, or if we go into a long retreat... we can go in with this sense of... the *point* is to recognize the nature of mind. But... it may not be that clear. And whether or not the retreat is successful also, I don't think can be measured by whether or not you *did* recognize it. Or if you did recognize it... that just means you recognize it. But that's kind of like saying, "Hey, there's a cloud." It's kind of so what?

[00:33:57] The *recognition*... has to happen where there's a sense of confidence that the recognition occurred. But, also... the *stability* of that recognition is key. And not just the *fake* stability. Like I can put a name on it. Oh, that's the awakened mind. And keep reminding myself

of the name. I'm not sure you get much for that. Though in the world of concepts, you might get a lot. So, my sense is that, when we talked about this this morning, what we're really trying to do is... slightly artificial, but we often do things that are slightly artificial in order to... discover something that we otherwise wouldn't discover. Or that we would make a point to ourselves that we otherwise wouldn't quite make. And so, I think the issue here is, can we develop the skill... of *just resting our awareness on an experience*?

[00:35:01] And all of the... kind of grand things that we can imagine or the splitting of hairs about the meaning and something else... what happens... when your awareness just settles onto an experience? And I have to go back again to Kalu Rinpoche's thing, which I don't know how many have heard it, but I've heard it *many* times from very qualified teachers. So, it's not just coming out of my own brain, that the most challenging experiences are the most precious... to just rest your awareness on. Like you find yourself in a hot rage, for example. Most of us would say, I can put my awareness on a lot of things, that one kind of doesn't... quite make it for me. But it's not because it wouldn't work. It's because the analogy that I like to use is you're trying to balance a marble on top of another marble. It works... for a split second... at best. And we need to be able to put our awareness on the experience for more than a split second. We need to be able to do it for some time.

[00:36:20] Like we do with our regular meditation. You put your awareness on your breath and we say... if you could... bring in a breath and exhale a breath without losing... your awareness on the breath... that's good. Because as soon as you finish, you can do it again, and again and again. We need to do that kind of practice with this so that we're clear that we're not just saying, I put my awareness on the breath and I say it slow... completely conceptual... so, that it all happens in the length of a breath. In other words, I tricked myself. I didn't really put my awareness on the breath.

[00:37:03] So it's not easy, but it's easy to understand, I think. You know what your experience is. You can feel it in your body. It doesn't have to be a mental experience because when you feel something in your body... that *is* a mental experience. It's also a physical experience, but... it feels good. It doesn't feel good. It feels dangerous. You know, all those feelings are... not conceptual. So, getting to the place where we can just put our awareness there... is a step... towards recognizing... the experience as an experience. Which is a step closer to recognizing the mind from which the experience arises. Which is getting closer to recognizing the nature of mind itself. ... So, it's kind of a conceptual step-by-step, but we can start at just the place of... feeling... physical or mental.

[00:38:11] We've been doing physical for a long time. How often do you sit down and you sit too long and your legs hurt. And you put your awareness on the cramp in your leg or something? That's it. That's an experience. Now, if you sit there and say, oh, I wish I didn't have this pain and this and that.... so, now you're not doing it. But if you just sit with it and let it be and don't talk to yourself about it. Then, a cramp in your leg is as good as anything else... to just have the experience of resting your awareness on an experience.

[00:38:54] Somebody, it was a lama a long time ago, who said... who mentioned something to me, I had said something that seemed to imply... that experiences come and go. And that sometimes there is no experience there. And I remember him laughing and saying, "Really? Did you recognize a time when there was no experience?" And I realized, like, no, I hadn't. I couldn't speak. [laughter] You know, it's like... what can I say to that? No, I don't think so. But how would I know that. And so... it kind of went down that road.

[00:39:45] His remark after that was that... the nature of mind is such... that there is no end... to experiences. They never stop. Which is why in the beginning today we started with... we're not trying to... clear the mind of any thought, any feeling, any experience at all. Because... it looks like, there isn't any such thing as not having any thoughts, any feelings, any experiences. The closest I can think of is... you're dead. And the truth is, is that from a classical perspective, we would have to say, no, that actually doesn't do it either. [laughter] So, that pretty much closes the loop.

[00:40:44] It's like, you can't have a 'no experience' situation. We're not looking for that. We're looking for... in this practice of shamatha, we're looking for the ability to *rest the awareness*... no matter whether there's no thoughts, a lot of thoughts, whatever. We're not concerned with not having anything in the mind. Which is a good thing, since it appears there isn't such a state. We're concerned about not being distracted and carried away and being like we just fell into the waves in the ocean and we're just being tossed about everywhere. When actually all we wanted to do was go for a swim. So, we want to be able to swim... in this case, in the turmoil in the mind. Because when we can do that, we feel settled. Which is a good start. Does that make sense? I suppose I should say I guess... no one said it *had* to make sense, but....

[00:44:55] [following Bill & Zopa] I think that what we're often... the experience is, is too subtle for us. And so we find ourselves a little bit flummoxed. But... what occurs to me is, a couple of days ago... I was at home and I was thinking about today's thing. And there was this guy next door who suddenly was running a chain saw. And I mean, it was like... thirty feet away and... I remember I said to Tara, who's cutting a tree down around here? Like, it sounds like it's right next door! Well, he was cutting something else. But it doesn't matter. The point was, is that... the sound was so close... that afterwards I thought... that would have made... it was too late then, but it would have made a good example of an experience where it would be.... it's not subtle. So, there's nothing to parse. And there is a clear experience. Irritation. You know, pain in the ear. Like, there's these things that are clear experiences. And there's really nothing to have to figure out. It's like... there it is. So, then can you just... kind of rest in it? You don't know whether the guy is going to run the chainsaw for another 30 seconds or another 30 minutes or what. And all those things... not so hard. Just put them aside and just have this experience. And occasionally, you hear yourself saying, "Really irritating." And, you know, you've just kind of stepped out of it and spent some time annotating it and saying what it is.

[00:46:40] But... I think that's the level that we need. And maybe why Kalu Rinpoche made the point, and he was not the last one to say it, that the most... difficult experiences, the ones that you never wanted... are actually the really good ones. Because... they're so *easy*... to recognize. Like, that's... a clear experience. And yes, it's irritating and all of that, but I can parse that out from the experience... without the label of aggravating or whatever. I can just be present with the experience. Whereas, when I just kind of move this over here [slightly moving the wooden stick] and I keep moving it, it's like too subtle. So, then we get into all sorts of other stuff.

Student 6 [00:48:32] So, if I bring up thoughts, then I bring back the feeling... because I want to mine it. But if I just stay with the bodily felt sensation, it just fritters away. In my understanding, my thought is that it's frittering away because there's a big part of me that *doesn't* want to go there. I don't know if I'm making sense. The experience is very painful, but a part of me *does* want to go there. So, I'm wondering, I guess I'm asking, is it okay... to go... purposefully into the conceptual and bring up thoughts to bring back that emotion, so I've got an experiential feeling to stay with? And as that other part of me that wants to avoid it. Wants to just... slide away from

it. Say no. Let's go back to that feeling. Which means grabbing some thoughts that bring the feeling back.

LMC [00:49:41] Yeah, that's not bad. There's a little problem with it. There's actually two or three. [laughter] Well, it's not really a problem. It's more like... there's a nuance there that I think is important. One is that... whatever it is that makes you not want to have that experience... *is* kind of... like one of those magnets that you put on your refrigerator. And it kind of rips it out of your hand and you can't get it off the refrigerator. The value of this is... that you don't have to try to have that experience that you're trying to see because it's strong enough on its own without you supporting it. And that may be too much... depending upon the particular experience. But if you can *do* that and you can just... like place your awareness there, kind of like putting the marble on top of the marble... you put your awareness on the experience and it rolls off... you just do it again. And each time you do it... you're moving in the direction of being able to stabilize your awareness a little bit on that experience.

[00:51:06] And two things happen. One is... this one is like, I think, key. And I'll say it kind of jokingly, but it actually, I think... is an important point. Practicing the Dharma... *is not safe*. It's not like something is going to run out and get you, but... the things that we don't see... often, are the very things that we need to see. And so, our practice is meant to... uncover those things where the environment is kind of safe, but uncovering them often feels *not safe*. Like, I don't want to look at *this!* So, we have to take those things kind of slow... gradually... and work on them. Because when... we move past the unsafe place into the safe place, we make big discoveries that are really important. And it's safe in the sense that... it's just me working on it. It's not like anybody else even... needs to know, or in many cases ever *should* know... what it is that my experience is. Because there's a certain kind of safety in knowing that I'm the only one who has this piece. Nobody else has it. So, as far as anybody else knows, there's really nothing here to work on. That can feel safe. But when we go to look at it, really, it does not often feel... so good.

[00:53:05] So, I think it is important to acknowledge that, that we're like stepping into something... where, it's not like some tiger is going to jump out and get me, but in another way, that's exactly what I'm looking for. I'll still be alive in the morning, but I might actually find myself shaking. And I'm saying it... right this moment, from a personal experience of working with a friend who lost her daughter to a suicide. And that, and that I was not in the room... at the time, but very close. And the result was... almost a day and a half of tears. And nobody wanted to go there, including myself, I did not want to go there. But it was one of those things where... you take the call; you do the work! Because... there isn't any choice, really. And you have to... in order to come out the other side.

[00:54:11] So, that's a kind of extreme example. But, we all, we all have those things. So, they don't always occur kind of suddenly and shockingly. And the point of the practice of placing our awareness *on* the experience itself is that... we actually... don't get to control the experience. So, the issue isn't... am I going to be able to make this a good experience? There are some experiences that you're going to carry with you your whole life. It's not going to go away. And in the case that I just mentioned, the mother said, "I never want it to go away." So, there's that, too.

[00:54:59] It's still valuable from a Dharma perspective and from our meditation perspective, to be able to place our awareness on that experience. And the memory of the experience... this is the second point... it's good to develop the habit that no experience ever occurs twice. ... I see

you pondering that. Yeah. [in response to her saying, "I don't get that.] That figures. That's where we are. We often say, that anger is back again today or that sadness is back again today.

[00:55:49] There's a lot of benefit in recognizing, and I'm not saying pretending or holding the view that... I think there's a lot of benefit to recognizing that... *it never happens that way*. We never have the same experience twice. It's always fresh. It may appear like... it has a face and a head and ears and a mouth and all that stuff... in a certain way, or it has a certain kind of intensity. But *it is a brand-new experience*. When we make it the same old experience... we are cementing ourselves into that place. The experience is *not* doing that. We do that with it. So, coming at it from the perspective of... this is a brand-new experience, and even though the person who took their life yesterday, I might want to say... here it is again today. The example is good because no, you wouldn't say, it happened again today. It just happened yesterday. But, the feeling of despair and grief... feels like... it's just continuous from yesterday. But we have to say... that every time that you recognize that experience in any way at all in the moment, it's a brand-new experience. And... even just holding that view... is a relief. Because you realize that... it also is changing... every moment that we have that experience. It's like a breath of air blowing by. It's not the same breath that blew by yesterday, even if it feels similar. We wouldn't say, oh there's that breath of hot air again.

[00:57:38] So, in the same way, all the experiences that we have... developing a kind of ability to see... that all of those experiences are fresh. And the word fresh is in one of our liturgies. It's better than to say... that it's that brand new because that makes it ... *IT* is brand new. Like it is *something* that is brand new. It's just another experience... blowing by. And because of the intensity that we experienced yesterday or last year... something like it arises again. We bring it up again and again. But the *IT* is not the same. The good thing is, as time goes on, we share Kalu Rinpoche's expression that the most difficult, most unwanted experiences are the most precious. Because when we find the gold in *those* places, we feel liberated.

Student 7 [00:58:56] I want to go to [the earlier] question Lama Michael. So, she was talking about her experience and she was saying, well, I want to understand, you know, the experience, right. What does experience mean? So, at least for myself, when Lama Michael, you know, gives an instruction, right... I just, you know, go ahead and I proceed and... I do what my best understanding is. However, when you want to break up... when you want to do the *analysis* of the experience... then you have to get a little bit more... subtle. There are three components, okay, which are taught in the Tibetan system. Buddhist ontology, the epistemology and the psychology, right. These are three components that they teach you, which characterize experience, okay. And so, the ontology is what's out there. And all of the phenomena and the... the various categories of phenomena. Sound, taste, sight, et cetera. And then you come to epistemology, which is actually the experience of things. And there *is* a model. I mean, they're not words. They are very specific terms... which characterize what direct perception is. What valid cognition is. What is thought. And in your case, when you ask the question, you were thinking of something. At least in what I'm studying, it's called *generally characterized phenomena* or GCP's. And it's your self-awareness. There's a component of the mind called *self-awareness*, which allows you to see... the GCP. The GCP is the thought... that is going on. You know you're thinking on something, right. But that's not the *awareness* of the thought. And then there's Buddhist psychology, which is your experience of it in the sense that, you know, you get angry or you are upset. And then, then you move into the realm of the Buddhist psychology, which happened to be fifty-one mental factors. So, this is all comes under pramana. It's called lorik and dudra. Lorik in particular is what I'm talking about here. And they are fundamental courses that are taught in the Tibetan shedra system. Is just that I'm going through

the same program with Nitārtha up in Seattle and I'm learning about these things. So, experience and the components of experience are very clearly demarcated and they come out of the Nalanda system. Vasubandhu and Asanga have written major treatises on this. I can't go through it, as you can well imagine, right. But they're not big terms. I mean, there are lots of people in the courses. They go through the programs and they teach you, you know. Here's the breakup of your experience. What is it that you're experiencing? How you experience it. And it is not that complex.

Student 8 [01:02:41] So, Lama Michael, when you were talking earlier, I forget her name, but her question... it made me think of... so, when people stay away from experiences, I do a lot of work in my practice with people who have trauma. And... it can be very difficult for those people, myself included, to go to those experiences. And sometimes it's not safe... to go to those experiences. Because... they feel so real... and the body acts as if it's happening all over again... that people can get retraumatized because the experience is so... stuck. So, I guess I'm curious, I think you were kind of getting at that a little bit in your answer. Do you have any way, do you have any suggestions for... I guess to kind of start touching those experiences without fully going there, before it's safe to... in terms of practicing with those kinds of difficult experiences? Because I really feel like they are... a gold mine in terms of practice, but... has to be done very carefully.

LMC [01:04:14] Yeah. I think they're definitely gold mines. And, in a conversation with somebody a couple of weeks ago... it's funny, we said that in the context of *feeling safe*... we both came to the conclusion that actually about the most unsafe place there is, is practicing the Dharma. You know, it's not like your friends and Dharma brothers and sisters are gonna come after you with knives or something. [laughter] But it's more just like... often times we find ourselves... inadvertently and even unconsciously, going into places we would not have chosen to go. So, I find that interesting, partly because... I'm not entirely sure that I've ever had that experience.

[01:05:20] So, from a conceptual side, I can kind of get... the no-safety thing... I mean, there's been things that I've looked at that I didn't want to look at, but... that's not the nature of *my* trauma. My trauma, I'm happy to look at. Because it's not something that is currently threatening. So, I'm not entirely... kind of one with you on it, and able to know what it is that we're talking about. But I do get it that we can go into places and inadvertently trigger memories of things that make us feel like we don't want to be there.

Student 8 [01:06:11] I think the distinction I'm getting at, is that... rather than being just another unpleasant memory and not wanting to be there, it literally feels like the bad thing is happening all over again. Like it's *right* there. And when that happens... there's no space to be able to recognize that it's just an experience and the bad thing isn't happening. The body goes into full fight or flight or freeze. Freeze being dissociation... and flashbacks. Like... it's not a helpful place to go in terms of practice. It's not a helpful place to be. It's not a helpful place to go... without... having some skills.

LMC [01:07:13] Yes. So, what would that look like?

Student 8 [01:07:18] I mean, I know what I do... when I'm working with people in therapy around that. And one is I work with the folks using just very basic mindfulness skills to be able to know... to be able to identify some of the signs they're *starting* to get there. To be able to put their experience like on a one to ten scale where one is dissociated and disconnected. Ten is

panic... fight or flight. And find the area there where they're the most comfortable. Where they can be present with their experience and then start to have their main signs that... okay, my heart's starting to beat fast and I feel like I need to run away. That means that I'm getting closer to the ten and I need to start... grounding. And like naming colors in the room... and having some sensory experiences. That's how I work with people... around that kind of stuff.

LMC [01:08:23] Yeah, well, and I think we have to be honest with this also. That... the meditation on experience... for maybe a lot of people... carries them to a place where they're not able to work on it through their meditation. And it may be that an alternative approach of some kind would either be better or would be a preliminary to the actual meditation. Or some combination of those two. So, I think that's always been there. I've known people from the beginning of starting to practice that some people would come in to the center that I was at and I would see them as relatively... whole, let's say. And in a relatively short time with certain meditation practices, they seem completely deranged. And that was not doing anything like what we're talking about now. This was doing something, an esoteric practice, but something that normally you would say, actually they didn't have any understanding of it, anyway... but they just brought in their own projection around it and manifested it. So, those things, I think, happen. I would not say that putting your awareness on an experience is a cure all for anything. It might, in fact be extremely helpful. But, that's why I said, I think sometimes the Dharma is not safe. Not safe in terms of... the experience that the practitioner feels. Like what you're mentioning, for example, could feel unsafe. And not safe... because someone who is... mentally ill... at a certain point, might very well just get worse... by trying to do certain things. So, I think we all have a responsibility to kind of watch that and look for those things. And... I'm not sure what else to say about that at this point. Do you?

Student 8 [01:10:50] No. Thank you. It's helpful.

LMC [01:13:22] [after Bill & Zopa responses] All right. We'll continue, right, with it? It's like... I think it's a direction that's worthy of our effort to experiment with and work with carefully. And see what we can do in that way. But I think we also know enough that you can't just like... go into it headstrong without ending up damaging people. That's true pretty much of meditation in general, not just this approach. It's like... you can get into subtle things and then people get into certain belief systems also. And they mix those with other belief systems and pretty soon they're... devising their own practices and things. And from that they can, kind of like through the back door, they can end up hurting themselves without... anyone even knowing that it's happened, until it's happened.

LMC [01:15:59] Okay, last one, and then we have to finish our meditation.

Student 9 [01:16:06] Well, if this is the last one, then it better be a good one. Michael, I'm quite confused now. [laughs] Not that that doesn't happen often. The question this woman over here had, I probably misunderstood. But, conjuring up a memory that brings up the anger... is not a good thing to do? I mean, I was sitting there... wanting a really juicy experience so that I could really focus on it and work with it. And a memory came up of something that... made me very angry. And so, I'm confused about... I don't know what I'm confused about.

LMC [01:16:56] Oh, you don't know why you're confused about. That's confusing. [laughter]

Student 9 [01:17:05] I guess how you sit with an experience, if... you're not angry in the moment that you sit down and meditate. Well, okay... I'm going to sit down and meditate. And

I'm observing whatever is going on. But none of it is the juicy stuff. But then I could *think* of something that would really bring up that strong emotion... but my understanding of how you answered her question was that was... not the idea, or something.

LMC [01:17:38] Let's answer your question... separately. So, we don't get... more confused. [laughter]

Student 9 [01:17:48] Well, I guess my question is if I sit to meditate and I'm focusing on... aware of what's going on... and nothing super-duper is going on... is that all I observe then?

LMC [01:18:01] Yeah.

Student 9 [01:18:02] Well, that's boring! [laughs]

LMC [01:18:04] That's boring. And that's *really* disappointing. So, there you go. You got it.

Student 9 [01:18:12] Okay. Great. [laughter]

LMC [01:18:17] I mean, what were you looking for?

Student 9 [01:18:18] I want that juicy stuff that really will help me get along on the path. The, you know, the gifts, the big gifts that really... are going to push me along. ... I want progress.

LMC [01:18:39] Well, you want progress. That, that could end up being your juicy thing. You know, I've never had trouble *finding* that juicy stuff. I always slip on it and fall down. So, I'm not sure that we need to look up things. But, if you have a memory that's strong, that usually means... that you've been re-empowering it on a regular basis. Otherwise, it loses all its power. Right? And so, if you've been re-empowering something and feeding it more, then you don't need to... I mean, recalling it... will at least bring some representation back, if you want to work on it that way. So I have to say... what I heard from Kalu Rinpoche never included... you should regurgitate this stuff and really try and get it wound up. I think his assumption may have been... like, why would you do that? You're not wound up, so, why are you winding yourself up? I think might have been his statement.

[01:20:03] But he was talking primarily about... a situation occurs... and you're a Dharma practitioner and... you have the *tools* to work with it. That is still not enough. You have to be *willing* to actually work with it. Which in the case that he was using then was... putting awareness directly on the experience. So, if you're really angry, instead of getting into all of the judgments and the things that often go with big conflicts... that you would just put your awareness on the experience that's occurring. And the experience was utterly non-conceptual. So, he was talking about just the feelings, primarily the kleshas at the time, and... you just put your awareness there. Sort of like you would do with shamatha, except it's red hot. ... I mean, have you done that?

Student 9 [01:21:07] Yes. I put my awareness and experienced... intense things.

LMC [01:21:16] And... do you want to say anymore?

Student 9 [01:21:20] Well, on one retreat I felt tremendous shame. This was on a retreat, so, my mind was pretty settled. And I sat with that for 45 minutes and felt all the waves going

through my body. The experience. And then at the end it was like... I didn't feel ashamed anymore. It was kind of gone.

LMC [01:21:44] And?

Student 9 [01:21:46] And I don't know what. [laughs]

LMC [01:21:50] So, maybe that's good. I mean... so far, you've listed at least two things that are a benefit from that. And there could be more. Two things are... you lost shame. I mean, how good is that?! That's pretty good.

Student 9 [01:22:09] Yeah. Yes, that was a big one.

LMC [01:22:11] Yeah. And, and secondly, what was the second one? You named the second one.

Student 9 [01:22:17] No, I just talked about the shame. I watched it. I watched the whole process for.. the time we sat.

LMC [01:22:27] How long did that take?

Student 9 [01:22:29] It was a 45-minute sit.

LMC [01:22:31] Yeah, well... I mean, it's a good example... of the value of being able to... rest your awareness... on an experience, which is a troubling experience. And again, I think it's clear that the point was made... the troubling experiences are the ones that bear big fruit. You know, you would hope that they would be slightly cooler than today and it was warmer and slightly uncomfortable. You can put your awareness on that experience, but it doesn't bear much fruit. So, we naturally... if we discover a way to work with difficult situations, we want to implement it. I mean, most people would want to, like *get on it* and do something with it. But of course, in the midst of... putting your awareness on those difficult situations, it often dredges up other difficult situations. So, you find yourself, sometimes, in a loop that just doesn't want to go away.

[01:23:47] The good thing is, is that if you found it an inspiration... to put your awareness on... the sensation of shame and the shame disappeared, you would feel inspired the next time. You might not just say, oh, this damn thing again. Now I've got to do this. You might have been more willing... to understand that it's not the same thing. That it's something new. And furthermore, there was insight... garnered by virtue of working with it in this way. So, you might feel inspired to work on it again. You might even feel like... cool, here it is again! Or here is something like that again. So, I'll apply it again. So, there's an opportunity to work there. And I think what we would normally say, a fairly high level... of working with your Dharma practice. I'm not sure what else there is there at this point, though... there's lots of practices.

[01:24:50] We've just been working today on putting one's awareness on an experience. And it's interesting, I think a number of people then have raised the issue of... of fairly strong experiences and maybe experiences that have been... difficult to work through. So, putting one's awareness on it is, almost like a prerequisite... to going really deep into it. But it sounds like maybe you did that. So, in that case, sometimes you can reinvigorate that negative thing and, basically like, kind of inject those experiences into your body... I think, for want of a better phrase... that you have the experiences again. Maybe not so strong... and you can once again

put your awareness on the experience. I don't know. I think... because... you're *close* here... there's an opportunity to explore it... over and over in more depth. Talk through it. Talk through it with anyone you know in the community that you feel like doing that with, also may be helpful.

Student 9 [01:26:21] Thank you.

LMC [01:26:23] I think where we're coming to the end of our... discussion. And so, we're gonna do some practice... and bring ourselves to a close for the day. We're going to a break first? Yeah, I think so. I think that's a good idea.

sangha [01:27:03] *dedicating the merit*