

Tricycle Talks
“Already Free”
Episode #106 with Bruce Tift
July 10, 2024



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Bruce Tift: From a spiritual path point of view, we could look at anxiety as a very intelligent response to an accurate perception that there's no basis for our claiming that we are an actually existent, significant, continuing, objectively important self. Who's not going to feel panic about that? So the more we can tolerate anxiety, we could say that anxiety is an approximation of openness, and so we investigate, “Oh, what is it that I'm clear about right now that I'm trying to escape from?” As we keep going deeper and deeper, we may find, “Oh, what I'm really clear about is this open, groundless, always present awareness that doesn't support any sense of self.”

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Bruce Tift. Bruce is a psychotherapist and longtime practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism. He has been in private practice for 45 years. In his book, *Already Free: Buddhism Meets Psychotherapy on the Path to Liberation*, Bruce lays out why he believes that the approaches of Buddhism and Western psychotherapy are fundamentally irreconcilable—and what we can learn from holding these contradictory energies simultaneously. In my conversation with Bruce, we talk about the differences between what he calls the developmental and fruitional approaches to freedom, why we're so invested in believing that there's something wrong with us, why self-improvement is never going to lead to liberation, and what it means to know that we're already free. So here's my conversation with Bruce Tift.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with therapist Bruce Tift. Hi Bruce. It's great to be with you.

Bruce Tift: Thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: Yeah, so Bruce, we're here to talk about your book, *Already Free: Buddhism Meets Psychotherapy on the Path to Liberation*. You know, what first captured me when I began



reading the book is this notion of not feeling fully alive or fully engaged or fully embodied in one's life, and you talk about being free. What do you mean by free?

Bruce Tift: I think like anything that's really important in our human experience, we're never going to capture it with words or ideas, but it's still helpful to talk, to give approximations, to point in certain directions, to suggest certain practices and certain problems that we might run into. Having said that, there's conditional freedom, which is what we talk about in our culture, Western culture, pretty much, which is roughly, I can do whatever I want to do. We think of that at least unconsciously as freedom, but we're never going to be able to do everything. So there's a certain potential for a certain type of never satisfied quality. In Buddhism, we might say hungry ghosts. We can never experience everything that tastes good or looks good or is fun to do, and we're always going to deal with the fact that we are basically a collection of limitations ourselves. We have our bodies, our senses, we have our own conditioned history, so it's a fantasy that we can do whatever we want to do.

A Buddhist view is almost the opposite, which is a potential that our sense of freedom might arise more from being in alignment with reality than being a self that can do anything regardless of reality. So, unconditional freedom, I think to be very simplistic, could be understood as conscious participation in open awareness. Open awareness has been described as just basic intelligence, our human sensitivity that has no form, this always present alertness. Different people have tried to talk about it in different ways, but the assertion is that there is no bias, there's no agenda, there's no trying to manipulate experience, because almost by definition, openness is without ascribable qualities. It's just open intelligence. So conscious experience of freedom could be understood as bringing more and more moments, at least more and more frequent moments, of conscious participation in that openness that has no agenda, no stake in how things are turning out, we're just as ready to feel aware of feeling sad or happy, where we are always aware, whether we're experiencing being healthy or whether we're dying. So that type of open awareness cannot be grasped with thoughts or with sensations, so it's sort of slippery, and



it actually turns out to be rather disturbing to investigate because that open awareness provides absolutely no support for personal identity or any position.

James Shaheen: So you say that with the experience of freedom, life doesn't become perfect, but we do have a sense that everything is workable and nothing is missing. In other words, I don't need to wait to begin this sort of practice. Can you say more about the sense of completeness? How do you view the difference between completeness and perfection?

Bruce Tift: I think on a relative level we can talk about completeness as a shorthand that we all understand, like, “Oh, I have this task, I've got to write this paper, or I've got to fix the link in the sink, or I've got to pick up my kid at school.” And then when that identified little piece of experience is done, we can say it's complete. Everybody knows what we mean, and that's fine. But from the point of view of impermanence, of immediacy, we might find more and more experiential evidence that all of our experiencing is process. There's no beginning and end. It's just an endless display of relative experiencing at the content level. So then we can use terms like completeness as a practical term, like, “Oh, I'll take on this next project when I complete this,” but we don't take it as a description of reality. We understand more and more that there's no end or fixing of a process. There's just basically whether we participate consciously or unconsciously in being that process ourselves.

Perfection obviously in a not so accurate way might mean there's no problems. There's nothing lacking. Nothing could be improved upon. And so from a spiritual path point of view, some people use that language. Some people might point out that at any moment there's nothing missing. How could anything be missing in this present moment? And so some people use that term “perfect” meaning that there isn't an alternative reality that we have access to at any moment. There's only our immediate experiencing. And the more precise and immediate and less interpretive we get, we may never find anything missing, no discontinuity in our experience, nothing that should be there that isn't.

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So I find that at a very basic level, when people feel that there's something missing in their life, they feel their life is meaningless, they feel like it's getting boring, I usually speculate that actually there's usually unconscious refusal to fully participate in this endless stream of experiencing because, again, it's disturbing from a fantasy of stability and identity to commit to our experiencing never having any resolution to it.

James Shaheen: Right. In other words, we often think, “If I just take care of these things, then I can get down to what's important.” But we keep inventing things to do to keep ourselves distracted from that more fundamental truth of our freedom that you were just describing. Is that fair to say?

Bruce Tift: Yeah. Being distracted with activities, somebody in your job might have more of that style. Most people distract themselves with relationships and often have a reliable repertoire of conflicts or dramas or feeling misunderstood or hurt to call on as a distraction. We can focus on our health. We can focus on our finances. It's pretty endless. We're very creative at pretending that the location of our disturbance slash well-being is in some specific circumstance or a person, because if we can claim that vulnerability is being caused by a certain circumstance, then we can jump out of our immediate feelings of powerlessness, perhaps panic, things like that, and take on the project of being endlessly distracted trying to solve or fix or avoid this circumstance. So for most of us, it's just that we're doing that off and on all the time. It's not an all-or-nothing thing.

James Shaheen: Right. You work as a therapist and you say that, in your view, the basic assumptions of therapy and the view of Buddhist practice are impossible to fully integrate into one path. Why is this?

Bruce Tift: Well, probably at the heart of it is that a Buddhist view, as I understand it, asserts that upon investigation, we're never going to find a self that's independently existing, that is



objectively real, that's continuous over time, and I find that to be accurate as far as my personal experience.

Psychotherapy as an expression of Western culture, as started probably back with Plato who had the idea that there were sort of actually objectively existing idealized essence of things, and so if you have a coffee cup, that's an impure representation or manifestation of this idealized cup that actually exists on a nonobvious level. Basically, I think Western culture for the last 2,500 years has been organized around an assumption that reality is made up of objectively existing objects, forces, experiences. So, obviously, if we believe that there is a actually existent self, then it makes sense to try to protect and improve that self. That's just very intelligent. If we investigate the view that there always is an appearance of self but that appearance is not, it turns out, evidence of an actually objectively existing self, then the work we do to improve the quality of our experiencing has more to do with trying to bring oneself more and more into alignment with what is most accurate rather than our efforts being to try to improve and protect this self.

James Shaheen: So you use both models, the Western model and the Buddhist model, and you describe the approaches of therapy and the Buddhist path as the developmental view and the fruitional view. So, first of all, what is the developmental view?

Bruce Tift: Well, the developmental view is a very pervasive view in Western therapy that understands a lot of what causes unnecessary suffering, although that's not usually a Western term, but what causes unnecessary suffering as an adult is usually the continuation, the perpetuation of ways in which we very intelligently tried to take care of ourselves when we were very young, when we were powerless, immature, dependent little beings. We can imagine constantly being overwhelmed. We had to bring ourselves into alignment with what our parents or siblings or schools told us we needed to experience or be like. So from that point of view, we could say that our young survival strategies were very healthy adaptations to what pretty much always, to some extent, is going to be a mixture of healthy and dysfunctional dynamics. A healthy response to a dysfunctional, let's say, emotional environment requires a dysfunctional



strategy. We often lose track of the fact that the inspiration was healthy, and now as an adult, I would say the motivation is still healthy, but we're trying to take care of ourselves now in ways that we learned to take care of ourselves when we were six months old, five years old, whatever.

So, a developmental view is basically suggesting that the main cause of unnecessary suffering is these out-of-date efforts to take the best care of ourselves possible. But because they are out of date, they actually don't work very well. And so Western therapy in general could be talked about as a variety of techniques to bring people more into alignment as far as experiencing, thinking, behaving with their current adult experience and their current adult capacities and to challenge our identification with our conditioned history. We're not going to get rid of our conditioned history, but we can challenge our identification. So it's a very general intention of bringing ourselves into a realistic experience of being an adult, we could say.

James Shaheen: Yeah, there's a bit of a paradox here. You describe this whole process as neurotic organization and say that we seem to want to resolve our neuroses, as with the Western developmental model, but often we don't understand how invested we are in maintaining them. Can you say more about this? Why are we interested in making ourselves the problem? Why are we interested in maintaining this neurotic organization around childhood strategies to protect the self?

Bruce Tift: That's a good question, and there are a lot of different theories or views. What makes sense to me, again, from a basic preference to understand and work with all of our experiencing as our best effort to take the best care of ourselves possible rather than see it as pathological, I would say that it seems to me that most of us are going to put survival as a higher priority than improving the quality of our experience, especially anytime we feel anxious or threatened or vulnerable. So I think that when we feel disturbed, vulnerable, panicky, anxious, we tend to fall back on our most reliable strategies for self-care. Usually as a child, we have to be aggressive toward aspects of ourselves unconsciously that are not welcome in our environment. All of us have limited parents, limited cultures, limited gender training experiences, limited school



experiences. So, I think as young children, we're constantly doing our best to come up with these strategies that will give us the most love and approval, avoid the most attack and abandonment, be simplistic. And then because those strategies are appropriate to our limited environment and experience as a child, they tend to get internalized because they get repeated over and over over time, and then we could say that those become characterological structure with constant repetition and carried into adulthood. And so now we're an adult and things are going well, we can probably take pretty adequate care of ourselves, most of us, we have appropriate boundaries or we connect with people or we have our voice or something, but whenever we start to feel anxious, vulnerable, when something triggers unresolved issues that we're still carrying, I think we tend to rely on what has kept us safe over many years. And so I don't see it as self-sabotage or something like that. Some people like to think of it that way. I just see it as our best effort to take care of ourselves but in ways that are often decades out of date. The benefit we get from falling back into these familiar survival strategies is basically that we prove to ourselves that our basic strategies, our basic styles of self-care, of understanding things, of relating to other people, are necessary and justified. So I think that what people think of as attacking themselves and being dysfunctional in that way, I prefer the understanding that it's an out-of-date effort to take the best care of ourselves possible.

James Shaheen: Yeah, it's funny. I think of a friend who always used to say, “If you're doing it, you're digging it.” So it's serving some purpose, some defensive purpose. That brings us to the fruitional view. So could you give us a brief overview of this view as opposed to the developmental view?

Bruce Tift: Well, the term fruitional, I just used from the Vajrayana organizing principle of ground, path, fruition. In more relative ways, ground is just where we find ourselves to be, fruition is where we want to be, and path is how we get from here to there. It makes sense. You know, if I want to go down to the grocery store, I get on my Maps app or something like that, what's the path? But a Vajrayana view, as I understand it, is more that the ground is seen as



basically identical with fruition, the only difference being that at the ground level of experience, we're taking our sense of being a separate self with a lot at stake and all these dramas and these questions about our worth as a person, our fear of death, and all that stuff very seriously, and because we take it seriously, we think we have to solve it. A different view and perhaps a more Vajrayana view is that what is most helpful is not improving the quality of our immediate circumstances but a shift in perspective in how we engage, how we experience so that we find that full intimate engagement with immediate experience is workable, first of all. It's already there. We're already feeling what we're feeling. It's scary, often, but it's workable.

If we keep investigating, we find no evidence of this solid self that we have to protect or defend. We don't find any evidence that any of our emotions are permanent. We find that we're not in control of our life. We discover a lot of things that are disturbing from an egoic point of view, to use that jargon, but if we are able to stay more and more present without interpretation, we may discover that there's no evidence of a problem. Yes, our stomach's tight, our heart's beating fast when we're thinking about this bill we didn't pay or our partner said something mean to us. But if we stay very present and embodied, open, we may never find any evidence of a problem. We find disturbance, pain, but we don't find a problem. So in very simplistic terms, I mean, there's a lot more layers, of course, but in simplistic terms, a fruition point of view I think is a practice at least of engaging with our experience informed not just by the theory but by actual, personal, effort that there's no reason to relate to ourselves or life as if there's a problem. We show up and we engage and things unfold and then we die. But in our culture, we like a little more drama than that.

James Shaheen: Well, if we look at ground, path, and fruition, in the developmental view, we would say, I want to improve my circumstances and my experience, and there's nothing wrong with that, and that can be very appropriate, and so the developmental model is very helpful there. But likewise, if ground and fruition are the same, the difference between the two seems to be casting the light of awareness on the current situation, so my very unhappy state can be a very



fruitful state if I bring awareness to it. So right now I can take this state and completely shift my perspective by shedding the light of awareness on it. Does that make some sense?

Bruce Tift: Yeah, that's the shorthand version of that shift in perspective, especially from a Vajrayana point of view is basically, we more and more frequently, I mean, anecdotally, some people have a cosmically huge shift, but for most of us, I think what's realistic is that we have more and more frequent moments of bringing open awareness to the content of what's arising, which is never resolvable. A lot of meaning comes from context, and so if you put anything like let's say an emotion, because that's what a lot of times we're having to deal with, if you put sadness or happiness into an environment of open awareness, it is very difficult to make a personal identity drama about that. Personally, it makes more sense to me to start with, what is this experience in awareness? And maybe I don't have to do anything about it. Maybe I can relax into this immediate experience and I don't have to turn it into something productive.

James Shaheen: Right, so the fruitional approach says that any experience of division, which is I think is what you're getting at, is actually created and maintained through a lot of effort moment by moment. This may seem counterintuitive. Why do we put so much effort into remaining divided against ourselves?

Bruce Tift: Well, first of all, it seems to me that we put an effort into the fantasy of being divided against ourselves. I don't think we can be. It's like the right hand pretending to be in a state of struggle with the left hand. Yeah, we can play around with that, but it's not really accurate. So I think that when we pretend to be divided against ourselves, self-aggressive, self-critical, self-doubting, basically, it's a very primitive way to generate self-absorption, and I would say self-absorption could be understood on a relative level as a very fundamental defense against conscious participation in openness so that when we feel threatened or anxious, a lot of times, like almost any animal, except maybe some apex predator, but almost any animal, when they feel threatened, is going to try to contract into some protection. So it's very natural, it's not



pathological, but we should just assume that off and on, many times every day, we're going to feel more self-absorbed as a type of protection.

Unfortunately, as we were talking about with a developmental view, the ways in which we protected ourselves when young, because they are usually intelligent and accurate, useful adaptations to that environment, they do become internalized. And so often we will enter adulthood with this out-of-date effort to take care of ourselves by pretending to be at war with ourselves, pretending that there's something wrong with us, and then we can have this lifelong project of healing old wounds or regaining our feeling worthy of love or somehow dealing with shame and guilt and things like that.

But to me, even things that are very painful like shame and guilt are basically dissociative escapes from open, immediate, embodied experiencing, from that intensity. So people can actually make a project of trying to fix what they pretend is missing or wrong, unworthy about themselves, as I think you referred to earlier, with this unconscious investment in making sure that never gets resolved, because then I'd be in danger of losing the protection of my self-absorption.

James Shaheen: From the Buddhist view, thinking of myself as a self-improvement project is never going to give rise to freedom. Why is this?

Bruce Tift: I mean, it seems sort of obvious, but if I am making myself into some project to be improved, first of all, I have to maintain my fantasy that there's something wrong with me. Most of us have this inaccurate (now as an adult) effort to not have to feel so exposed and anxious and vulnerable all the time, and so a self-improvement project is very helpful, especially at the beginning, or you wouldn't make the effort. I mean, who would do something so stupid as all these spiritual practices unless you wanted things to improve? But there's a difference between improving the quality of our experience and improving oneself. Improving the quality of our experience, we just give it our best shot and appreciate what's helpful and acknowledge what



hasn't changed and work with what unfolds. But if it's a self-improvement project, that could be just perpetuated forever with serving the function of distraction from immediate vulnerability from a Western point of view or immediate openness from a Buddhist point of view.

James Shaheen: It's a little bit ironic: improve myself against what standard? The whole thing is obvious, and yet we catch ourselves doing it again and again. It's not so simple. You also say that experience is self-liberating. What do you mean by this?

Bruce Tift: Well, let's say on a content level, when somebody starts to investigate the view of impermanence, let's say, we may discover that there's this endless stream of experiencing that arises out of, to me, mystery. It's there in our awareness, and then it gradually dissolves. We could say it that way, or we could say that there's this continual arising with a simultaneously dissolving experience of all sorts of different thoughts or emotions. So somebody pays attention, and especially if they're willing to discipline themselves and just stay as present as possible without reacting, without trying to hang on or get rid of this arising dwelling, this wave-like quality of our experience, then we discover that there isn't anything that is permanent, and so there's nothing that we have to fix. It doesn't mean it's not intelligent to try to improve things. We could start with that. But then on a deeper level, we could also potentially have the experience that the deeper we go into our immediacy, our embodiment, our willingness to not add interpretations, we may find that none of our experience seems to have its own essential nature, no essential self, no essential sadness, no essential joy. And so as we actually start to experience this endless stream of relative experiencing as inherently without essential nature, as transparent, as without objective significance, then it just sort of becomes obvious. It's not a project at that point. It becomes obvious that there's nothing here to hang onto. At some point, it just becomes possible to relax on a very deep level, deeper and deeper level with some clarity that we don't have to operate on our experience. It doesn't mean it's not helpful, but we don't have to.



James Shaheen: So you say that the relationship between the developmental and fruitional view is similar to the relationship between gradual and sudden awakening, or between being and becoming. Can you say more about that?

Bruce Tift: Well, it's just another way that a developmental view has to do with acknowledging that there are patterns of experience that continue to arise, and there's a good chance that a lot of them will continue to arise, maybe until we die. So it's not likely that we're going to get rid of our conditioned history. But it is possible to moderate those patterns. And that usually takes some time. So somebody who's found therapy, let's say, helpful usually will be able to look back not day by day but look back six months or a year and say, “Whoa, I’m actually feeling more at ease, I'm feeling less self-aggressive, I feel whatever benefit.” And so we could say that's sort of like a gradual approach, that you're actually working on improving the form of our patterns of experience. A sudden approach is, in more of a Vajrayana view anyway, that our nonrelative, you could say absolute, or our most intimate, most always present type of experiencing is open awareness. And that's always present. You can't have experience without awareness. It's not an ideological issue. It's just that how can you experience anything without awareness that you're experiencing? So from that point of view, we don't have to improve anything to practice investigating the nature of awareness. You know, just basic practices like, well, “Oh, I'm experiencing feeling tight right now,” well, what is it that's aware of feeling tight? And then what is the nature of this awareness? Just very basic awareness practices, which are not about improving the quality of anything. It's about bringing conscious awareness of awareness to whatever is arising, and so that experience of participation in open awareness only happens in the present moment. That's the only location of any of our experiencing. And so it's not something in the future. We're just practicing in the present, which is more analogous to sudden.

James Shaheen: You know, when you talk about the two views, I think, to paraphrase Suzuki Roshi, something like, “You're fine as you are, yet there's work to be done.” I thought of that

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again and again while I was reading the book. But how do we hold the contradictory energies of these two views simultaneously? How can we work with both approaches?

Bruce Tift: Yeah, well, practice. We all are coming out of childhood with some degree of black-and-white, all-or-nothing organization, because that's when a lot of templates got put down when we were very immature little beings. If somebody has sort of a curiosity about what could be called a nondual type of view where you're not taking sides, but moving in the direction of holding apparently contradictory experiences simultaneously at all times without any fantasy of resolution, then we practice that, and usually we're going to practice on a more relative level to start with. It moves in the direction of even holding what we call absolute and relative as not the same but not separate, so it's that “not two, not one,” like Suzuki Roshi's book, that we start to practice. And we can do it on all sorts of levels. Any time that we make a comment about what we did that was neurotic or stupid or whatever, we can train ourselves to also say, “Well, I have to come up with an explanation about why that was an expression of my health.” And so we can hold the neurotic explanation and the healthy explanation without choosing sides. Anytime that we find ourselves having a position about anything, we could ask, “Well, what would be the opposite? What am I trying to not feel right now? And what would it be like to go into that experience without thinking that I have to choose sides?” I think on a relative level, it's very helpful to just train ourselves to assume that we're going to have profoundly contradictory feelings about anything that's important in our life and start to learn that we don't have to resolve that. In fact, we may discover that training ourselves to hold contradictory thoughts, feelings, and experiences is a better approximation of complex reality because reality is not divided into yes and no, up and down. That's our minds. Our minds work dualistically. It's not that reality is dualistic. So if we can find a way to hold more contradictory experience, I think we'll find it's a better approximation of the complexity of reality, whatever that is, and by having a better approximation, we'll probably engage with our life more skillfully.

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James Shaheen: So throughout the book, you talk a lot about anxiety, and you say that we have a collective fantasy that we're not supposed to be anxious or feel anxious. So why would we see anxiety as such a big problem?

Bruce Tift: Well, nobody likes to feel anxious that I know of.

James Shaheen: Right, although I have been paying attention to it since I read your book and thought, what's so bad about this?

Bruce Tift: Exactly.

James Shaheen: Without the intent that it go away. It's just there,

Bruce Tift: That's my experience. So, my best guess is that anxiety, fear, panic, probably grief and rage, but certainly anxiety and fear are probably pretty central to our species' nervous system and probably other animals as well because they are a signal that our survival is possibly threatened, and so when we're living a biological life, it serves the species to be better safe than sorry. If we're sitting out on a rock enjoying the sun and there's a noise somewhere, just curiosity might not be enough to keep us from being weeded out of the gene pool and get eaten up. But if it's something really unpleasant and intense, it's going to grab our attention no matter what we're doing, and then we're more likely to assess whether we have to go into fight, flight, freeze, or whether we're threatened. So I think that anxiety and fear are basically very biological mechanisms that have served to keep our species and other species alive for millions of years. I think there was anxiety and fear on the planet before there were humans. I think it's very biological, but let's say more speculation in the last, some people say about 10,000 years or so with the arising of agriculture and then the arising of cities and complex societies, increasingly, most of us have actually been living in more of a social reality than a biological reality. But our biology has not progressed much in 10,000 years as opposed to millions. So anything that triggers our sort of “Oh, I could die. I could be hurt, I'd be powerless to protect myself,” I think



we immediately go into those protective responses. When we get triggered—it could be a noise, a smell, we could trip, we could have a sudden something coming in our peripheral vision—our brain seems to have this sort of negativity bias over millions of years of evolution that says better safe than sorry, better to respond as if my survival is being threatened right now, because if I'm wrong, I'm still alive tomorrow, but if I ignore it and it was a threat, I won't be here. Most of us are still taking our biology seriously, even when it's a sense of threat, which actually upon investigation is not going to harm us. So if somebody, our partner, again, might say something that feels hurtful, that's not going to kill us, but it's possible that our nervous system will respond, “Well, I've got to protect myself,” either attack or run away or placate or something like that.

So there's this tension between social reality and biological reality that we're all living with. And that's actually at the heart of a lot of philosophies, like Freud would talk about libidinal energy, which is the biological energy, or superego energy, which is the cultural energy, about how there was this conflict going on all the time, and so it's a very central issue. But if somebody wants to live a more than biological life, we have to learn to respect, participate in, stay embodied with our biology, but not stop there. And if we want to operate at higher levels of human potential, let's say compassion, mind, creativity, spirit, or something, we have to actually discipline ourselves to stay present long enough in our panic to find out, is there actually a threat? Do I have to do something, or can I let this wave of panic come and go?

James Shaheen: In this case, it's a matter of our technology outpacing our biology. But there is another twist here because when you talk about staying with those emotions and eventually simply experiencing them, there's a kind of groundlessness that causes anxiety also and that it's a necessary part of our path. So what can anxiety teach us about the open state of mind?

Bruce Tift: Well, first of all, I don't prefer to think of any of these things as causing anxiety, because if it's a cause, then we feel justified unconsciously in jumping out of our immediate embodied experience to fix the cause, and so I prefer to think of vulnerability as just part of being human that is going to get triggered many times every day if we start paying attention, no

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reason other than being sensitive biological life forms. And so I do tend to invite people to consider committing to having an experience of anxiety off and on every day of their life till they die, because it's just part of being human.

But, like you said, when somebody is willing to stay present, maybe our emotions are saying, “We're going to die. We're going to die. We're going to die. Get us out of here,” We have to decide now, am I willing to just stop and stay present with my immediate experience, no interpretations, and see for myself, OK, where's this harm? Where's this damage? Is it killing me? We may find that there's no evidence 99 percent of the time. There could be, so we should keep checking it out. It's not a belief system. It's an inquiry that we sort of build into our system of staying present when we feel anxious.

So as we may become more confident that we can stay present even when our bodies are freaking out, then it's possible that we will have more frequent experiences of maintaining our awareness through a wider range of emotional intensities, which of course is a support for awareness practice to be able to stay more aware of feeling freaked out. But as far as anxiety from a spiritual path point of view, we could look at anxiety as a very intelligent response to an accurate perception that there's no basis for our claiming that we are an actually existent, significant continuing objectively important self? Who's not going to feel panic about that? Because almost all of us are identified with a sense of self, so the more we can tolerate anxiety, we could say that anxiety is an approximation of openness. The ego's seeing the openness, or we wouldn't get anxious at that level. And so we investigate, “Oh, what is it that I'm clear about right now that I'm trying to escape from?” And as we keep going deeper and deeper, we may find, “Oh, what I'm really clear about is this open, groundless, always present awareness that doesn't support any sense of self.”



James Shaheen: Yeah, you say that when we experience this open state of mind, we can learn that we can hold contradictory experiences at the same time, which makes it difficult to take any version of reality too seriously. Can you say more about this?

Bruce Tift: I think it's very accurate not to take any version of reality too seriously. I don't take anything I say too seriously. I'm making it all up, whatever I say, you know? But again, we want to avoid this either/or. I'm not a scholar, but let's say one aspect of Madhyamaka might be that we don't claim that life is meaningful, but we also don't claim it's meaningless. There's always going to be evidence that we can bring up to either side, and so the more accurate position is to hold both without taking a position. We also have that it's neither this nor that, or it's both this and that, you know, the fourfold logic thing, but basically I think the point is to keep bringing ourselves back into the experience of not having any reference point hold on to.

James Shaheen: How do we avoid the trap of nihilism in that case?

Bruce Tift: Well, the point isn't to avoid it. If you're trying to avoid something, you strengthen it.

James Shaheen: Oh, there we go again.

Bruce Tift: It's fine to avoid it at the beginning when we're operating at that level, but as we get a little more subtle in our experiencing, we might want to instead pay attention so that we realize when we are going into a sort of strategy of nihilism, rather than thinking we're going to avoid it, say, “Of course I will.” You know, there's eternalism, there's nihilism. Both are escapes from open mind. They're both positions that claim that there's something there for us to hang on to. So I think it's more that we think of our practices for quite a while, in my mind, more as recovery practices rather than achievement or prevention practices so that we assume that we will be human. We assume we'll be our self, which is just a collection of limitations on a relative level. We'll assume we'll be confused, messy humans until we die, just as a working assumption. And



then our practice is to recover, to come back to immediacy, to openness, to kindness, to noninterpretive presence, vulnerability, whatever our reference point is, and return as a path issue by going through our disturbance: What is it that I'm trying to not feel right now? I'm going to do a 180 and go exactly into it so I can go through it. Whereas if we go around something, if we avoid something, we actually strengthen its apparent significance, or from a Vajrayana point of view, I don't think it's even that we recover by going through our disturbance. It's a very valuable practice. But I think from a Vajrayana point of view, we recover by returning immediately into open awareness. There's no processing involved. We just return to openness, and then, you know, we're probably going to be gone in a couple of seconds. I don't just rest in open awareness. I think that the more frequently we come back into openness as a recovery practice, let's say, not thinking it's an achievement, it would be a little bit like imagining that we're all walking around, immersed in these thick filters of interpretations and fears and drama and conditioned history, and it's sort of like one of these new virtual reality things where we take that as if it's reality, but at any moment we can return to openness, return to immediacy, embodiment, whatever our reference point is, as our practice. It could be understood as poking a little hole in that thick filter, and even one little hole can suggest there's something else. But the more frequently we have these moments, we can imagine that we keep poking little holes in this apparent solidity, and at some point we actually just see through that drama without having to get rid of it. This just has become nonsolid in its nature. So at that point the practice is not to resolve our neuroses. The practice is not to become enlightened in the future. The practice is full, vulnerable, intimate, open participation, intermediate experiencing, which is all we ever have anyway.

James Shaheen: Bruce, we're running out of time, and I wanted to ask about embodiment because you've mentioned it a few times, and you say that disembodiment is a requirement for neurosis. So can you say something about that?

Bruce Tift: There's a lot of different versions of how people understand neurosis. I understand it basically as an avoidant strategy where we're trying to get out of something that's actually true



about our immediate experience that is scary, overwhelming, we don't like, whatever. And so I feel panicked, I haven't trained myself just to stay present with that, so I want to escape. And I think that the basic form of escape in our culture, I don't know about other cultures, is of disembodiment, because if I can leave my body, I leave the immediate evidence that I'm in a state of panic right now, and I can go off, and what I go off into is what feels familiar because what's familiar feels safe, and it doesn't matter even if it has a lot of familiar pain or confusion or whatever. I'm going for safety at that point because I feel threatened. And so I think that these avoidant strategies require us to be out of touch with our immediate embodied experience, or they work because we're trying to avoid immediate experience.

James Shaheen: Well, you know, we're running out of time, but there are a few chapters in the book about intimate relationship as path, and I really wanted to get to that, but we're not going to get to that, so maybe you'll have to come back and talk to us about that. But just to close, and this may be a difficult question to answer simply, but what do you mean already free? Why are we already free?

Bruce Tift: I think it's making an assertion on an intellectual level that ground and fruition are synonymous. Experientially, which is more the point, I think it's an assertion to be investigated, it's not a belief system, but an assertion that when somebody commits to stay present and embodied and unconditionally kind with everything that's arising, we tend to start going through a number of increasingly vulnerable, open types of experience, and that at some point we might start to have first maybe just little flashes that might just be, “Oh, that was really special.” But at some point we might start to have a frequency of conscious participation in an experience of unconditional freedom, unconditional openness, no limitations. It doesn't mean there aren't any limitations objectively. Buddhism is phenomenological. It's not claiming about the nature of reality. So it's the experience of openness. Who knows what the basis of the brain is and everything? But experience of reference point, there's nothing to say, nothing to do. I don't have to do anything. I can relax here in this panic. And what we find, I think with practice, it's not

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going to be likely to happen just spontaneously for most of us, but with practice, I think we find that sense of open, free awareness is always present, and it's more about training ourselves to pay attention and look for it and to relax into it and then do all these practices that support it. But I think we find more and more experiential evidence that what is always true is this open, free awareness, and there's nothing we need to do to create it or discover it or manufacture it or earn it with good merit or anything like that.

James Shaheen: Bruce Tift, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Already Free*. Thanks again, Bruce.

Bruce Tift: Well, thank you for inviting me.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Bruce Tift. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!