

Explanation, Assumption and Guru Yoga

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*We are constantly 'explaining' things to ourselves and sometimes,
we try to share these explanations with others.
Through this process, we make sense of the world.*

An Embrasive View

Essentially, all explanations are attempts to understand the same thing; this ineffable, continuously cresting wave of spontaneous presence and immediacy, that *is* our life and living. In a sense, this ever-present flowing of experience can never be completely and exhaustively explained. It simply and primordially *is*. Each one of us is effortlessly born into it. Each morning we wake to it. Wherever we look . . . there it is and even the looking itself, is what it is. What is changing, through time and evolving culture, are the structurally determined generative mechanisms that we are willing and able to accept as explanations for this mystery.

Through explanation we birth worlds.

Explanation and understanding go hand in hand with capacity for experience. What I experience, or even better, the experience that I am, reveals, or demonstrates, the nature of my understanding while simultaneously my understanding is a kind of explanation that facilitates and shapes my experience. Our previously lived experience reverberating in the form of memory, is what we draw upon and use in the process of explaining things. This reflexive process is both what we have to work with, and what we need to realize. The expansion of this process through time (*mahāgatā*) facilitates the diversifying of life. And so we discover ourselves to be participants in an evolving universe which pulses between the poles of creativity and conservation; diversification and consolidation. This is the ground of *mahāmudrā* where the practice, and the fruition of the practice, are not two – where all qualities are simultaneously co-emergent (*sahaja*).

Explanation or Assumption

Our moment to moment living is influenced by innumerable assumptions which underpin our search for a sense of meaning. By assumption I mean, largely unconscious paradigms (*un-thought-out confidences about the nature of reality*) through which, and by means of which, we situate all objects (*ourselves included*) in the matrix of this living world of our ongoing flowing experience. We operate with myriad assumptions, covering many levels or domains of experience. For example, most people unquestioningly assume that there is a real world outside themselves that they can correctly or incorrectly perceive. We assume that time is universally meaningful, that money is important, that there is progress in living which can be made or not made, and that there exists a natural hierarchy of values such that we will care for our families before we care for strangers. We assume that we have an inside and an outside and that we can own things and living beings. We assume that the functioning of an object is largely determined by the constitution of its structure. We assume that we experience representations of the world in our brain and that some kind of translation mechanism allows us to link with others. It would take tens of pages to list a small fraction of the unacknowledged assumptions that shape our living and values. If an assumption becomes more conscious, at that point we might begin to call it 'an explanation'.

Our living involves continuously 'making sense' of currently arising experience. It is as if, in the midst of a specific moment of looking, I am asking, what is this density of colour, this blur of line, this particular symphony of sounds and smells associated with these memories of touch and taste? – so many questions: what? why? where? when? and how? Where am I going with this? Where is it leading? What does it imply? How does it work? Why is it this and not that? – and so forth. At a very fundamental level we are all asking; "What on earth is going on here?"

I'm not suggesting that this enquiry is necessarily intentional. Making sense of experience and our role in it is largely a subliminal, non-verbal process, yet it is through this internalized explaining that an impression of a seamlessly integrated world of experience emerges for us. Everything fits – these particular sounds and sights and memories and muscular sensations – arising as an undivided single occurrence. Everything is effortlessly '*wholified*'. There seems to be a natural logic to the situation, even if we don't like it or agree with it. This knowing/feeling of seamless integration underpins our most basic sense of sanity. It's not optional. We need this to be healthy yet few people ever think about it.

There appears to be a cyclical pattern here. With increased familiarity, what were once new explanations begin to etiolate into a mist of unconscious assumption. On the other hand, when illumined with curiosity and interest, assumptions can be revealed, transformed in the 'a-ha' revelation of fresh explanation. Our confidence in the validity of our experience co-emerges with this process of explanation/assumption. Understanding how we understand and then doing this well, is central to the path of liberation.



Over the last twenty years, I have been deeply inspired through studying the work of biologist Humberto Maturana, and integrating it with my understanding of the view and practice of *Mahāmudrā*. Maturana put a lot of energy into distinguishing two "explanatory paths" or basic approaches to explanation. One he called, a path of objectivity, and the other he called a path of objectivity-in-parenthesis. An essential difference between the two is that with the path of objectivity, we situate ourselves outside the thing or process we wish to describe or understand; as if we had a detached God's-eye view. We often call this "being objective". With the path of objectivity-in-parenthesis – sometimes written (objectivity) or "objectivity" – we situate ourselves in the system, or as part of the system, that we are trying to describe. I have found this to be a very useful way of considering things.

If you think about it, you will realize that any explanation is inevitably an explanation of someone's experience. As such, the explaining takes place in the realm of languaging and observation. A successful explanation will suggest a generative process that if allowed to run would give rise to, or generate, the thing one wishes to explain. Inevitably, the explanation will be based on coherences of ones' prior experiences. What else do we have to work with? The explanation however, is not the same as the generative process. The explanation happens in the realm of languaging – the domain of the observer – but the generative process takes place in or through the dynamic multi-leveled total organism/medium functioning.

Objectivity

Desire for truth; anger against, and frustration with, falsehood; and confusion arising over which is which; each of these three, and combinations thereof, arise in the explanatory path of objectivity. Here, we assume the existence of a fundamental reality or truth – a reality outside or beyond oneself – a reality that transcends any individual's limited experience or opinion.¹ This reality/truth is then seen as an ultimate arbiter, to be realized, if not by the gifted and wise then at least, by someone with their eyes and ears open. For people operating in the path of objectivity, to not see or accept this fact or truth – is often regarded as a sign of stupidity, or perversity, or ignorance. By eliminating falsity, what remains is truth, as if it were patiently sitting there, waiting for us to see or discover it. For many, this attitude/assumption has become an internalized, generally unconscious path, philosophy or paradigm of living. By grasping and holding on to what we are convinced is objective and true – by committing to such truth – falsity appears to be denied. In communities operating with this path of explanation, to not be able to discern truth from falsehood, is a sign of confusion, ineptitude or sheer stubborn mindedness.

Historically, this explanatory path of objectivity without parenthesis, has become a social tool for coercing others. Our view or my view is right. It's objective. It's a fact. Your view is wrong. Upholders of correct view are called authorities: religious authorities, scientific authorities, legal authorities and so forth. And so we threaten others. Evidence based science demands that, if you are not insane, you will agree with me and support me. This approach to living leads to worlds of experience that are dense and hard edged, worlds characterized by limited flexibility, strong expectations and aspirations to control.

Objectivity-in-Parenthesis

The explanatory path of objectivity-in-parenthesis – a transient, continuously morphing sense of objectivity that co-emerges with a shifting sense of self in relationship with others – arises dependent on the multi-domained and multi-dimensional autopoietic activity of living systems-in-process. This way of explaining invites understanding rather than demanding obeisance to a particular view. It invites worlds of mutual responsiveness and potentially, worlds of mutual respect. In this explanatory path there is room for innumerable views or expressions of (objectivity) – in theory, at least equal to the number of sentient beings. In a grand sense we could say that this dynamic process enables the diversity of life. Every situation arises as an invitation to deepen and broaden our understanding; an understanding that is flavoured with a sense of uncontrived attunement (of body, speech and mind) with others. If my 'understanding' of a situation is good, I will feel and act in a flow of intunement. If my 'understanding' is poor, I will feel more conflicted as things just don't seem to connect.

*One's view of things is all embracing.
One's thoughts are in tune with every situation.
All one's actions spring from this.
(from the sadhana of Guru Rinpoché)*

Objectivity-in-parenthesis is not the same as "subjectivity". In our culture, to say someone is being subjective is to dismiss their experience as being merely an opinion or a personal view. 'Everyone is entitled to their own opinion.' To have an opinion, or to accept that the world you perceive arises in or through the functioning that is giving rise to you in this very moment, does not necessarily challenge a simultaneous assumption that there is an objectively real world that lies beyond your limited view. We often denigrate 'subjective experience' to at best a partial reflection of reality and at worst a dysfunctional disconnect from reality. This kind of 'subjectivity' is still part of the explanatory path of objectivity (without parenthesis). They are two sides of the same coin where subjective experience is always in contrast to a supposedly actual objective truth.

In the explanatory path of objectivity-in-parenthesis, each being's experience arises in and through the co-evolving relationship of organism and environment. This could be conceived of as a radical expanse of inter-responsiveness in which we realise that our so called personal experience is seamlessly interrelating and inter-adjusting to the interrelating and inter-adjusting relationships of others. What each of us does matters and together we bring forth the world!

Guru Yoga and Mahāmudrā

As human beings, we are a communion of responsive subjects, not merely a functional arrangement of inanimate objects. The world of your experience is not just your own business. It's not 'merely subjective'. Everything we do reverberates through the world of doings which are the inter-being, inter-knowing worlds of everyone. With this perspective, I imagine a dynamic matrix; a continuously cresting wave of now. This is the living that we are. Beginningless and endless, it is our only experience and it is all we have to work with. As students of life it is simultaneously what we study, the activity of studying and, it is what teaches us. In Tibetan Buddhism, to realise the union of what we are with what teaches us (with what 'gurus' us) and to live in harmony with every situation, is to realise 'Guru Yoga'. To be this realisation in the continuous flow of ongoing living is to 'practice' Mahāmudrā.

*Since the totality of awareness
structuring this cresting wave of nowness
is the real Buddha,*

In openness and contentment

I find the Lama in my heart.

When we realize this unending expanse of multi realmed knowing

is the very nature of what teaches us,

Then there is no need for dysfunctional assumptions

such as attached grasping (greed),

or weeping prayers (confusion),

or artificial complaints (anger),

By simply relaxing in this uncontrived open natural state,

We obtain the blessing of spontaneous self-liberation of whatever arises.

(paraphrased from "Calling the Lama from Afar", a prayer by Dudjom Rinpoche)

A human life could be characterized as a continuous apprenticeship with a timeless master, the vast expanse of collaborative creation-in-action. This is *biocracy* manifest; a pattern of organizing in which every being is both a legitimate voice, and a responsive ear. Democracy is sometimes described as governance by the people, for the people. Even when it is practiced effectively it leaves out too much of the living world to be a health supporting way of organizing our affairs. Biocracy is governance by the inter-responding matrix of innumerable living systems which together are the evolving flowering of life that we are. Recognizing that the continuous process of making sense of our experience in relationship with others who are simultaneously making sense of their own experiences, is the ocean of inter-subjectivity in which we live; the need to do this well coalesces at the very centre of our being. Then, smiling, breathing and present, we can radiate in all dimensions and directions, illumining the world.

Endnotes and Concluding Remarks:

1. " Reality – that which we connote in our Western patriarchal culture when we speak of *reality* – is an explanatory assumption, an imagined domain of independent entities that we use in order to give universal validity to our explanations of our experiences." *H. Maturana, "Biology of Love" p154*

In the process of writing this short essay, I made a number of notes that I didn't use. I'm adding them here with the hope that they might enhance your further contemplations.

An explanation is an answer to the question, how do things come about? There are other types of question: what, where, when, and so forth. In these types of question, there is always an implication that is sometimes clear but often isn't. For example, the question, "What is such and such?" implies the existence of something that you wish to identify and categorize. Where is something, assumes a thing and a location. When did such and such happen assumes a reliable measure of time. If we were deeply interested in a particular subject, we might first ask how does it come about that I identify this thing and that I can ask, what is it? This is a valuable question because it makes us realize that the phenomena we are interested in must have arisen in someone's experience (in this case our own) or else it wouldn't exist. From here we might broaden our search for an explanation/understanding of *how* it manifests.

We live the explanatory stance of an individual observer (*personal*) while at the same time we are embedded in or part of the explanatory stance of an observer community (*collective*). There are myriad observer communities. For example: communities of scientists, of biologists, physicists, chemists, and mathematicians; of religious and spiritual beings; of musicians, democrats, fascists, capitalists, socialists, male chauvinists, feminists, agnostics, family lineages, nation states and races. Each has its values and ways of seeing the world and each, its own jargons and metaphors. As such, we can find ourselves – dependent on situation and circumstance – juggling an intersecting web of explanatory pathways. Much confusion and miscommunication can come from muddling very different ways of explanation. Is it a wonder that there is so much conflict and confusion?

An explanation is primarily an interpersonal interaction that takes place with a clear or unconscious or covert motivation. Is it an act of communing through understanding or primarily an act of divisiveness through establishing dominance, rightness, demonstrating one's acumen and so forth. There can be innumerable motivations. An explanation can take place within one's mind (for example, me explaining my thoughts or feelings to myself) with the same overt or hidden motivations we have when trying to explain something to another.