

Abiding in the unshakeable:

An Interview with
Christopher Titmuss

By Eliezer Sobel

Last spring I sat for an eight-day Vipassana meditation retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, conducted by Christopher Titmuss. Although we were in silence, every few days Christopher would invite people to engage in a dialogue with him in the meditation hall, as the rest of us sat and listened. On one such occasion, he was responding to an inquiry about the nature of liberation, and I could barely contain myself. At the next opportunity my hand shot up:

"In listening to you speak of liberation," I began, "I became aware that that is not at all the reason I came here. I gave up believing that liberation, or enlightenment, was possible for us ordinary folks years ago. I decided that liberation was only for the extremely rare individual and I wrote off my quest for enlightenment as mere youthful naivete; and in fact, I consider my new position healthier and more mature."

"And how would you describe your new position?" Christopher asked.

"That I only came here to slow down, get a bit more centered, perhaps feel a little better. And I've watched hundreds of other people over the past twenty years, and what I see is that we're all just trudging along, opening and growing in very small and slow ways. I don't see anybody getting liberated."

"Would you consider for a moment," he replied, "the possibility of completely letting go of all your mind's beliefs and viewpoints about what liberation is and what it isn't, and all your notions and comparisons about where other people are, and simply be receptive to the very ordinary liberation that is always available in the here and now, when you step aside from the voice of 'I'?"

It sounds so simple, yet the power of that moment, coming as it did after some days of silence and sitting, was such that my mind simply stopped, and for the next two hours or so, I found myself in a thoughtless realm of simplicity, calm, and a quiet, surprising joy. It was a potent reminder of my original spiritual impulse, a long-buried passion to awaken that had been unwittingly replaced by a rather grim determination to merely survive.

It is with such passion, laced with humor and a gentle eloquence, that Christopher Titmuss, a former Buddhist monk, travels the world leading retreats and campaigning for global/ecological issues. Based at Gaia House, a retreat center he co-founded in England, he journeys yearly to Jerusalem and Palestine, the United States, Europe, and, every January for over two decades, Bodhi Gaya, India, just minutes from the Bodhi Tree, site of Siddhartha Gautama's enlightenment.

I called Gaia House last fall to make arrangements to hook up with other retreatants travelling to Bodhi Gaya from Delhi. To my surprise and delight, my phone rang one day and it was Christopher himself, saying he had purchased a train ticket for me and that I should meet him at the Delhi YMCA,

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where he would be staying. Which I did, and we wound up sharing a sleeping compartment on the train along with about six others. The retreat hadn't even begun, yet I felt I had already received perhaps Christopher's most significant teaching: perhaps this really shouldn't be a big deal, but in light of my interactions with many teachers over the years, I found myself deeply touched by his willingness to be utterly ordinary, available, and walking his talk with humility and simplicity. We spoke on the last day of two consecutive ten-day retreats, at the Thai Temple in Bodh Gaya, and again by phone several months later.

Eliezer: You mentioned in one of your talks that there is a big relationship between fear and creativity. Could you say more about that?

Christopher: I describe fear as an internal block or mechanism which prevents the opportunity to respond to situations spontaneously, directly, thoughtfully and creatively. And that fear just inhibits people's natural opportunity to express themselves. To the degree that the fear diminishes, creativity can flow.

E: Does the fear need to diminish, or can, say, an artist sort of leap past it, allowing the unknown to flow right through the fear?

Christopher: The artist expresses creativity in a specific time and space--he or she has a creative expression in a particular field. But that would be a narrow view of what I mean by creativity. It's more a creative life, a creative way of being in this world. So therefore it's quite possible, since the mind is vast, deep and immeasurable, that the artist can express tremendous outbursts of incredible creativity, and yet the same mind, when the creativity stops, can be full of fears, anxieties, worries, dependencies, addictions, etc. The same mind can easily contain both. So I'm interested in the creative life, expanding beyond the field of the artist.

E: So there's a correlation between the creative life and the possibility of, to use one of your phrases, "living fearlessly." Is such a thing possible?

Christopher: Yes. But in speaking of fear as that which defines action, and the denial of creativity, it requires a great deal of awareness and observation, to know oneself and to know where the everyday fears are residing. Sometimes there can be habits of mind which prevent action and one is so conditioned in that way one doesn't actually have the fear in the form of a sensation--it's just a pattern of fear, without any feelings.

E: What would be one of those?

Christopher: One just avoids certain people. There's no sensation. one just sees a person and doesn't wish to talk to them. And multiple other examples--just habitualized mind limiting one's capacity to be creative, free, and express oneself. Then there are other fears which arise that have a real sensation to them. Both need attending to. So that's the addressing of the fear; the antidote to it is the creativity, and creativity requires its own quiet, sustainable discipline, and the expressions of that.

In the world of sitting/walking/standing meditation, one can and will cut through a great deal of fear, and it's invaluable and important to recognize what the sense, awareness, and experience is of not having fear, and the way that that demonstrates, so at least deeper down we get some inkling of being without fear. Acknowledging there might be lots of fears in the mind, but also periods and moments of non-fear.

And also, sometimes, acting in spite of fear can matter a great deal, because it only becomes fear when it stops action. So even if the body generates a lot of painful sensations and anxiety, the sensations

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in the body, unpleasant as they are, do not make it fear. Fear is when one can't respond. Buddha is walking down the road and a huge rottweiler jumps out at him, or her: guaranteed, there will be loads of unpleasant sensations in the body, in the stomach--that doesn't make it fear. Fear is when panic and worry set in, fear is when it's paralyzing, when one is wavering about what to do. Buddhas have unpleasant sensations.

E: Another word I've heard you use that seems to relate to this notion of living fearlessly, is the "unshakeable."

Christopher: Living fearlessly is the realizing of the unshakeable. It's realizing a freedom in life, a freedom which is unshakeable, and that takes the fear out of existence. And from that, wise, clear action can take place. Quite often there's a view that fear is somehow necessary, vital, absolutely legitimate for human existence. Conventional mind, secular mind, even religious mind might say that--fear of God, fear of doing things wrong, or whatever. But that's not what is meant in dharma language. If someone was going to jump out of a fifth floor window, someone might say they're not jumping because fear is stopping them from hurting themselves. But it doesn't have to be fear, it can be just normal, everyday human intelligence that stops one from doing things which are stupid. So in that respect, we must not confuse intelligence and wisdom with fear. If we've got wisdom, we'll act appropriately, skillfully, clearly, and fearlessly. But to do that one has to know an unshakeable freedom.

E: I recently had dinner with a priest and we were discussing the Buddhist notion of non-self. He asked me a question I couldn't answer: knowing of my interest in Jewish practice, he asked, "How does that experience of non-self jive with the Covenant?" Meaning, how can one have a dualistic, I-Thou relationship with God if there is no "I"?

Christopher: These questions come up a lot on our retreats in Israel, and for those who have a "Bu-ish" approach. It depends where the person generates the priority. If the priority is the small in covenant and in relationship to the great, then it will be a problem, because the small has to have a sense of I and self and the great has to have the Self in a bigger sense. But whether or not the sustaining of that gap, and therefore the covenant, is the highest priority, remains questionable. So I prefer to take the Psalm of David: "Be still, and know that I am God." Not "Be I", "Be still"! And in being still, one knows.

E.: For a Dharma teacher, you use the word God more than others might. How do you use it?

Christopher: I use it simultaneously as the suchness of things, as the emptiness which makes everything possible, as the truth which reveals, as liberation, as nirvana, as that which is incomprehensible yet makes all things clear. I use it in that context and therefore I feel quite compatible with all deep spiritual teachings. And partly I use it in the Buddhist world because I want those Buddhists who have a knee-jerk reaction to the word to look at it.

E: I actually heard the Dalai Lama say once, in the presence of his monks who seemed astonished, "I think there's room for God in Buddhism, as long as you don't make it a separate, independent entity."

Christopher: Exactly.

E: In one of your talks you were referring to someone you respected a great deal, and you said that "he put his time in on the cushion." Does such a statement imply that there is a measurable time frame in terms of dues to pay in all this? And if the immediacy of freedom is seen clearly, is even another moment on the cushion necessary?

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Christopher: The cushion is both actual and metaphorical. On the actual side is that among the people that I have much love and respect for, a characteristic feature of them is that they are pretty sustained, hard-core meditators. Something about the world of silence, stillness, non-activity of the brain cells, and depth of inner awareness is beautiful and illuminating and therefore genuinely significant. And all the kind of people I have in mind love meditation, not for any goal, purpose, not to contrive something out of it--enlightenment or religious experience--but just for what it is.

In its metaphorical sense, it may not be sitting cross-legged visualizing deities or doing the mantra or engaged in zazen, vipassana, or whatever. But there is again, a love of silence, solitude, aloneness, and all of that in which the world of words and things are minimized and something else is revealing and actualizing. So for some, the purpose may be towards something, which I think is a preliminary understanding of what meditation is, but when it's properly understood, it's actualizing, it's revealing, there's no goal, no direction, no purpose.

E: So it's not as if there's something to be revealed, after which there's no need to go back to the cushion?

Christopher: No, no, no. If one takes any of the saints and sages, past and present, they were never far away from the cushion: doing retreats, going to the desert, going into solitude, time away from the world of communication, language and interaction--there's a sustained track record. And it's not coincidental that all have loved it deeply. It's in that kind of respect that one puts one's time in on the cushion, and continues to do so.

E: Near the end of our retreat you encouraged us to stay in Asia as long as possible, and to do as much dharma practice as possible, and then half-jokingly, you said, "Forget about your little love lives and careers for a bit." In the Western psychological establishment, the ability to successfully function in love and work are usually the two areas that are used to measure a person's mental health. But you seemed to trivialize them, and made them seem unimportant in the big picture.

Christopher: Love vis-a-vis personal relationships, and how well they go, is often regarded by many people, as you point out, as the measure of their lives: it might be a partner, parents, children, or loved ones nearby. In the bigger picture, the heart has got to include and expand significantly beyond that. As far as work goes, there are some people who are genuinely in accord with right livelihood. It is a privilege in this world to be engaged in a work, an activity, which one really loves and enjoys doing. It brings its own happiness and sweetness, even if it's hard and challenging. And for that to flower well we will have to take some risks. Conventional work for money, or work for status or prestige, as well as love in a limited circle of friends--it's too defined and too restrictive. So I'm encouraging people to embrace all of that, but also to burst out of it.

E: What role does grace have in the awakening process?

Christopher: When I hear the word "grace," I always think of a very lovely woman I knew named Grace, and she's certainly had an influence in the interconnectedness of things...but I tend to think of grace in theistic, religious language. In other words, in the Judeo-Christian tradition especially, when there are experiences that can't be explained, which are impactful and touching, one might say, "Well, something's happened to me and I can't explain it--it seems like it's grace." Sometimes a name will be added to it: "through the Grace of the Guru, or the Grace of God" or whatever. It's a way for people to feel comfortable with the inexplicable, and mystical experiences fall into that category. And fundamentally, life is inexplicable, and it's just that sometimes we engage in a little measurement which says, "well this one is more so than this other one"--therefore we add grace to one and not to the other. So in that respect, I'm not enthusiastic about the duality of what's grace and what isn't, and put the focus instead on "Let's experience our freedom in the here and now."

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E: You could say then that the dharma practice reveals the graceful existence that's omnipresent.

Christopher: Yes, if you like the word grace. I prefer the association with a beautiful woman, and to leave it at that.

E: Can you speak about what happens to people following major openings, awakenings or realizations, in the sense that the realization in and of itself is often not what's important but what follows?

Christopher: In the period of several months after the retreats in Bodh Gaya, for example, letters will come, and some of them are just breathtaking to read. There's such a depth of experience and insight there, and the immediacy of the experience, the quality of it, the feeling of it, the insights and reflections on it, can seem to be for the person quite life transforming. But one has got to allow almost a maturing in time--the significance of something bears its own fruit. It may be days, weeks, months or longer. So when they say "God, this has been absolutely incredible" and use tremendous language to describe what has happened to them, in fact it might not be that significant, and something else that seemed quite mellow--nothing dramatic--may have greater significance. So at the time, in the drama of a beautiful and profound experience, I trust, and my experience has been with people over the years, that sometimes the seasoning of it comes a bit later.

E: Weren't you also speaking to what one does in terms of action, in response to such an experience, being more important almost than the experience itself?

Christopher: It's as though, if we use very Buddhist language for a moment, one says "Okay, I've got to look at every aspect of the Eightfold Path. That's my responsibility as a human being. I've got to address all these areas." The last two invite a lot of meditation: right awareness, right samadhi. Then, out of all that, maybe, or just in a moment, unexpectedly, there is a breakthrough, and it's freeing and opening and marvelous. Following on from that, there's a renewal--hopefully rather effortlessly--with the nobility of each factor of the Eightfold Way. And sometimes there is a breakthrough experience and one knows after that there's no place to go, there's nothing to be done, there's nothing to get, and one is living a life which is free. One of the features of it, in terms of action, is what I usually call a kind of unstoppable friendship towards life--a very free spirit. Committed, focused, and dedicated, with natural human responses of heart and mind, but no sense of there being any seeking, pursuing, or gaining, spiritually or otherwise. And so for some, there can be that kind of shift, and when that happens, without using too bold a language, I speak of it as living an enlightened life, living a free life. So for some it's a dramatic night and day shift. For others it's quiet, almost low-key, almost imperceptible, yet he or she knows in the depths of their being that they've completed the journey.

E: What do you make of people who have those kind of night and day shifts, but they end up being temporary?

Christopher: At least it shows good receptivity, and one might say, in mystical language, that "grace is hovering around them." So even though for some there's a dramatic shift, there can be a feeling afterwards of loss of, separation from, distance from, and sometimes it can be a little bit hard to bear for some people. They've sensed and touched on something and then have to experience the old mundane mind at work again. But if they don't lose faith, and keep their way of exploration alive and nourished, then it will all bear its fruit again.

E: That seems like a nice place to stop. Thank you Christopher.

Christopher Titmuss's teaching schedule may be obtained from Gaia House, West Ogwell, Newton Abbot, Devon TQ12 6EN, England. Tel: 44 - 01626 - 333613.