



Not I, Not Other than I: Introducing Russel Williams

Russel Williams by Steve Taylor

The Indian spiritual teacher Vivekananda once said that the enlightened human beings we are aware of are only a tiny fraction of those who have lived. Most enlightened people have passed by unrecorded, perhaps because they didn't make an effort to proselytise or draw attention to themselves. Some enlightened people may feel an impulse to spread their teachings, to establish themselves as gurus and (in modern times) promote themselves on Facebook and you tube, but others may be content to remain unknown.

Russel Williams is an enlightened human being who has no particular desire to draw attention to himself, and has spent most of his life largely unknown. He has been a spiritual teacher since the late 1950s, after undergoing a sudden spiritual awakening at the age of 29, in 1950. This seems to have brought on by the intense psychological turmoil of his early life. He left school at the age of 11, was orphaned shortly afterwards, and spent the next few years struggling to keep himself alive. During the war, he was at Dunkirk, and lived through the Blitz, and had a classic near-death experience after he was electrocuted. At the end of the war, he felt broken down. As he writes: "I was a wreck, emotionally a mess, weary and fed up. I'd been battered around so much that all I wanted was to get away from myself."

After some wanderings, Russel took a job at a travelling circus, where he looked after horses. He came to feel a powerful sense of connection with the horses, grooming and feeding them, and realised later that this life of service was a spiritual practice for him. As he became more connected to the horses, and observed them more and more closely, his mind became quiet. As he writes:

I noticed that I wasn't thinking anymore. My mind had gone quiet. I realised that knowing and thinking are two different things, and that you could know without thinking. I wasn't forming opinions or jumping to conclusions anymore. I began to do things spontaneously, to live in the moment. I had a strong feeling that I was finally going in the right direction, that this was my path, and I should keep going with this, carry on observing the animals so intently.

It wasn't till much later that I realised that the exercise I'd given myself was mindfulness meditation. In effect, I was meditating about 20 hours a day, 7 days a week for three years, completely absorbed in caring for the horses. It was a life of continual service, with no thought for myself.

This led to his sudden spiritual awakening, which he describes as follows:

I woke up one morning and looked across at the horses, watching the steam rise out of their nostrils the way it does on a cold morning. The next thing I knew I wasn't just observing the horse, from the outside. I was the horse. I was looking inside it. I was it. I could look through its eyes and mind. I was aware of its true nature. I was aware that all things are one. There was a sense of profound peace within me.

It was a revelation. I looked at another horse, and another, and I was inside them as well. I looked at one of the dogs, and saw it in its true nature too. I saw everything in its true nature. I went outside to look at the lions and it was the same with them – looking from the inside out, not the outside in. We were all the same nature, all arising from the same source. My own nature was just as theirs was, in a different form, with one consciousness linking us all together. They were only separate in terms of form and structure. It was the same essence, the same emptiness, in all of them – in all of us. I went outside to look at the trees, and they were the same nature. Then I looked at my own body, and inside myself, and there was nobody there. My normal sense of self had disappeared. At that moment there was no more anger, no frustration, just a sense of peace. There was no desire, no aversion; everything was as it should be.

Russel has remained in this state of wakefulness (or enlightenment) ever since. Over the past 56 years, he has held regular talks at the premises of the Buddhist Society of Manchester. Initially these were held almost every evening, but over the last few decades, they have taken place twice a week. Apart from missing the occasional week due to ill health, the meetings continue from year to year, unbroken. The meetings have never been publicised, and until now, Russel has never published any writings. He has always believed that he can be most effective working with small groups, helping to bring about change by intensively engaging with individuals.

I have attended Russel's meetings since the late 1990s, and first suggested the idea of him writing a book several years ago. He was initially dismissive, saying that his teachings were most effective on a "feeling level", and that this could never be captured in writing. However, a couple of years ago, he finally agreed. He was aware that it might not be too long before he departed this Earth, and felt that it might be helpful to leave a record of his teachings and his life. This led to the new book, *Not I, Not Other Than I: The Life and Teachings of Russel Williams*, just published by O books. (The passages quoted above are taken from the book.) At the age of 94, Russel may be the oldest first-time author ever.

Russel Williams as spiritual teacher

Russel is a simple man. On the surface, you would think of him as a fairly typical man of his generation, although perhaps one who looks unusually young and sprightly for his 94 years. If you visited him at home with his wife Joyce, you wouldn't



find anything unusual there either. Again, it would strike you as a fairly typical house for a couple of their senior years.

Russel is not an intellectual; he hasn't read a great many books, and in his teachings he only rarely refers to texts or other sources. Although he has been the president of the Buddhist Society of Manchester since 1974, and sometimes uses Buddhist terms or talks about the Buddha as an individual, he doesn't consider himself a Buddhist. He certainly doesn't 'teach' Buddhism in any formal sense.

As a result, Russel's spiritual teachings are very 'naked' and pure – that is, they are very free of theories, concepts and categories. This gives his teachings a rare clarity and power. There is no system. There are no rituals or rules to follow, and no ideas to take on board. You don't have to believe anything. You don't have to accept anything. You don't have to become anything. All you have to do is be.

Russel often says that he's not interested in convincing people of anything. He encourages people to play with his teachings, to question them, to find out for themselves whether they are true. He doesn't think of himself as a guru, and has no desire to accumulate followers or disciples. Everything he teaches stems very directly from a particular state of being, one which he experiences as his constant reality, and which he has done for almost 65 years. There are many different terms for this state: stillness, pure consciousness, emptiness of being, the essence of our being, our true nature...

Russel teaches us how to uncover this state – how we can nurture it, and remove some of the obstacles which stop its expression. He makes it clear that this is our natural state,

and that it's only due to confusion that we have lost access to it. He helps us to remove the confusion, to disentangle our minds from the mess of concepts and thinking habits which cloud them, so that we can become who we really are.

In this state, we are naturally one with everything, and with the universe itself. We are part of the Unmanifest. We are part of the pure consciousness that has given rise to the whole universe. That consciousness is our true nature, and when we rest within it, we feel a powerful sense of ease and contentment.

When I first attended Russel's meetings, in about 1998, I appreciated the purity and directness of his teachings straight away. After each visit, I was aware of a powerful sense of well-being inside me – a feeling of lightness and calmness – which lasted for most of the next day and sometimes longer. Nevertheless, it took me a few years to absorb the full power of Russel's teachings and of his being. This was probably because I initially took an intellectual approach to his teachings, analysing and interpreting them in the light of other spiritual traditions and teachings. But gradually I began to switch off to the intellectual aspect, and to shift into more of a 'feeling' mode. I didn't do this consciously; it was just a process that occurred naturally over the first years that I attended Russel's talks.

I began to experience very powerful altered states of consciousness during the meetings, which I still experience nowadays. These are quite difficult to describe, but they usually begin with a feeling of stillness, and a sense of energy slowing down and intensifying inside me. Then there is a sense of light, glowing brighter until it seems to engulf all objects in the room in a golden radiance. All objects seem to lose separateness, to merge into the radiance. I no longer feel any separateness; the notions of inside and outside lose significance. My inside is also outside, and vice versa. There is a tremendous sense of serenity. When I look around the room, there is a feeling of complete unfamiliarity, as if this is the first time I've ever been in it, and as if all the people and the objects around me are completely new to me...

Over the years, Russel's teachings and his being have had a powerful cumulative effect on me. Looking back, I can sense that they have affected me in ways of which I am only barely conscious. They have seeped into my being and become a part of me. They have deepened, expanded and stabilised my spiritual experience. Thousands of people who have encountered Russel directly over the last few decades will vouch for the same. And hopefully many thousands more will have a similar experience through reading this book.

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It's a great privilege to introduce the teachings of this almost unknown figure – one of the most remarkable and powerful spiritual teachers of our time, and possibly of all time – to a wider audience.

Russel Williams in his own words

Consciousness is continually widening its expanse. One becomes more and more conscious, but not as an individual. Ultimately there is no self-consciousness, and no self. The only reality is consciousness itself, with no separation. When a person is meditating deeply they lose awareness of the body and they become part of this expanse of consciousness. They become aware that what they thought was their own consciousness is a part of Consciousness itself.

It's always assumed that thinking is consciousness but if this is true, how do you know when you're thinking thoughts you don't want to think? Are you in control? If you look at the nature of that which is looking, it is quite serene and unconcerned, looking at something which is chaotic. The two natures are different. Consciousness and thought are not the same. In a state of anxiety, consciousness contracts so much that it becomes nothing. In moments of peace and contentment, it expands so much that it becomes everything.

My mind is empty all the time. I think if I need to, otherwise I don't. I just enjoy the beauty of experience. When you think, your senses close down. If you think intently, you stop hearing, stop seeing. When you stop thinking, the world becomes intensely real and beautiful.

There may sometimes be difficulties, but there are no worries. Even difficulties are simple if you look at them clearly. Strangely, it appears that if one is able to clear the mind and have no knowledge whatsoever, the mind can respond immediately without thinking, and it is capable of doing that with no planning or forethought. In my experience, it always responds effectively and appropriately.

The silence is at the heart of everything. In mechanical terms, it's like a spinning wheel, as it moves up and down and around – there's the point in the middle which doesn't move.

There will be no next life for me. I don't want to come back; I want to go forward. That sounds suicidal in a sense, losing all aspects of a separate entity, to become a part of something far greater, but I'm quite prepared to let that happen. It's already happening, in fact. What you see as a separate person is already dissolving, like sugar into tea. So how could I come back?

The quality which was me will be available to all – not as an entity, but as a quality. I will still be there to help. It will come through other people, just as the influence of other people comes through me. Where else would it go?

In a sense I'm looking forward to it – not that I'm going to bring it forward. I've glimpsed the process between death and birth, even though I've never seen it wholly, just in the sense of reincarnation. I'm beginning to realise that this time around my being will quietly dissolve itself into the whole atmosphere. In a sense, it's already happening.

What I'm doing is helping a group of people to see in this fashion, to realise that there is something of a different nature beneath the surface, something unseen which is helping to prepare for the human race's next step in evolution. It's a matter of influence, helping to bring about a shift in human consciousness. In the future people will become much more aware of the spiritual part of their nature. It could take a hundred years, possibly a few centuries, but eventually a shift will take place. I am convinced that it will only take a small number of enlightened people to shift the human race to a higher level – perhaps only 20 or 30 fully realised people.

There will be many who go deeper down while others go upwards; those who go down will be lost; those who rise up will transform and flourish. It will happen – there's nothing to worry about.

This is only a small part of what is going on. I'm not just working in the physical area, but in a dimension which has not yet come to be. But it will come to be. It will become manifest in the physical world. To some degree it's happening already, because here and there around people are beginning to undergo this shift. They're looking beyond the teachings, looking for a way out. There's an urge inside them which is not yet fully manifest.

It may well be that before we reach this stage, an awful phenomenon will wreak havoc on the human race. But there has to be some sort of chaos before a shift occurs. There has to be a degree of death before rebirth. Death shouldn't be seen as final; it's part of a process of change. Its purpose is to bring about a great shift. Within everyone's body, their physical body, death is taking place every moment of the day. And this constant death allows repair and regeneration. Every cell is completely changed – blood being the quickest, and the nails, hair, skin. Death is a part of the living condition; it's not a frightening phenomenon. Even thoughts – they arise, they come to be, and then they die again. The same with emotions. We have to face death before we have a renewal. Chaos isn't necessarily a state of despair, but one of hope.

This process will involve a shift in the human psyche, whereby people will much more readily see the spiritual nature within them, rather than being immersed in the physical. What we normally see is only shadow of the real. So we'll expand our consciousness and see beyond the shadows, into the light.

It isn't just me. There are many people around the world working in the same way.

There are things which seem ordinary to me, but which appear extraordinary to others. In my presence, people become very attentive. I'm not entirely sure what they see or experience. They simply sit quietly, and seem to absorb an atmosphere like a gas. Everyone becomes immersed in it, and the room is filled with a powerful stillness and peace. It's as if I'm a catalyst. I become quiet, and the quietness spreads to everyone. Enlightenment is ordinary, even if it might seem extraordinary to the onlooker.

I'm 94 now, and it's 65 years since I underwent that shift. But it hasn't been static. Over the years, new things have emerged, and I've begun to see in greater depth. One begins to look into more profound areas, to reach realms which one never knew were there, or to see the same thing but with more clarity. There's always something beyond. I'm beginning to wonder if there ever will be an end.

When I look at my life, until the age of 29, there was utter desperation. There was some contentment in my early years, when we lived in poverty but had the richness of family life. I couldn't have wished for better parents, and it was a shame they couldn't stay around.

But since I underwent the shift, there has been peace. My purpose has been fulfilled – I am one with the nameless. I know the process I've been a part of won't be completed while I'm on this earth, but it's heading in the right direction, and I assume it will happen. My role in the process is almost finished. My influence will remain, as a wider consciousness which will enter into everybody, not as a personal consciousness. I won't be coming back, but I'll still be here.

Russel Williams was born in London in 1921. He lives in lives in Atherton, near Manchester, with his wife Joyce. Since 1974, he has been the president of The Buddhist Society of Manchester. **Not I, Not Other than I** is his first book.

Steve Taylor - who worked with Russel on **Not I, Not Other than I** - is a senior lecturer in psychology at Leeds Metropolitan University. He the author of several best-selling books including *Waking From Sleep* and *The Calm Center*. www.stevenmtaylor.co.uk

See David Lorimer's review in the book section.