

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

11

ZOOM

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12.5.2021

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[11.1]WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF DOING A PADMASAMBHAVA TANTRIC PRACTICE? HOW DOES IT RELATE TO DZOGCHEN?

The origin of suffering is the disregarding of the primordial openness and purity of the mind. When openness and appearance are split and kept apart, then suffering begins. Dzogchen, the great completion, shows the integrity, the connectedness, the non – separation of every aspect of our actuality. So that's a good indication that we shouldn't split the dharma either. All aspects of the Buddha's teaching are helpful.

Making dzogchen high and special is not very helpful for our mind. The reason we do tantric practice is to connect us with the ground of our being through transforming limitations into pathways of freedom.

The Padmasambhava practices which we do are treasure teachings taught by Padmasambhava himself. The purpose of each practice is to open yourself and purify your ordinary sense of self, so that you can merge together with Padmasambhava. The dzogchen view is that from the very beginning the basis of our presence is primordial purity nevertheless we exist in a state of impurity. It is not impure because we do some bad things; it's impure because we believe that we have a real existence, that the people we know have a real existence, that houses, trees, and all phenomena have a real existence. Because this belief in the separate, solid, real existence of phenomena is accepted by beings everywhere in samsara, it seems as natural as breathing. So although we're trying to release ourselves from these deluding concepts and habit formations, because they are habitual and subtle, we often don't recognise them even as they are manifesting. Therefore when we do a Padmasambhava practice, we have him as a manifest symbol of purity and we make use of that purity to recognise our own purity by merging with him.

The purity which you achieve through tantra is called 'the purity which is free of impurities'. That is to say, it has a subtle shading on it, a subtle shadow. For example, if you wash your hands you know that they are clean. You know they are clean because you have just washed them. But the reason you washed them was because they were dirty. So now my hands are clean but they had been dirty and so maybe they'll get dirty again? Therefore the purity which is established by washing, by cleaning, by visualisation and so on stands in relation to impurity.

After having done this kind of practice, it's very important to go directly into a dzogchen view and relax into the primordial purity which has never been contaminated and which is not relative to anything else, clean or dirty, pure or impure.

One feature of doing the tantric practice is that it gives you access to mantras, which are very useful for protecting your mind in difficult situations. As we move in the world, there are many provocations which can easily stimulate whatever old habits we have. We can find ourselves in judgment on other people, irritated by what they do and pulled into dualistic conceptualisation – the formulation of more concepts – and then we're just spinning around in samsara.

Although the structure of tantric practice is more dualistic than dzogchen, as long as we are living in a world where we think we truly exist and that the things around us truly exist, then we are immersed in deep dualism. In this situation case the homeopathic dose of dualism that you have in tantric practice is very useful for curing us of our fever and hallucinations.

[11.2] IF SOME PRACTICES, SUCH AS CHÖD & SEMDZIN, ARE DISRUPTIVE, WHY IS THIS HELPFUL?

Ideally we want to maintain stillness while cutting our enmeshment in dualistic identity, the obscurations and the three root poisons, (stupidity, desire and aversion). The first is the stupidity or the opacity or the mental dullness which gives us a sense of reified entities. From that we have the two directions of desire for certain aspects of the fragmented field and aversion to other aspects of the fragmented field. These two movements of energy permeate all forms of human culture. Broadly speaking, desire links to sex and aversion links to death.

In tantric practice we enter into a merged union with the form of the meditation deity whereby subject and object merge together. This union of opposites brings us to a point of zero – emptiness. We say, *“Padmasambhava, you are wonderful, you are everything. But me, I’m nothing. I’m no good. I’m a bad person. I’m full of confusion.”* We begin by increasing the tension between these polarities and then we bring them together to merge and dissolve into emptiness. That is Eros, the erotic, union.

In terms of Thanatos, of killing and death, we have the desire to kill off all limitations. In the Chöd practice, for example, we imagine that the site of our ego, which is our own body, can be destroyed. We imagine that our awareness leaves our body and enters into the form of Vajrayogini, who then cuts off the top of the head of our dead corpse and chops our body up and then feeds it to various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and demons. Because the body is vanished – it's consumed – there is no return. Your truth now is Vajrayogini although on a relative level you might appear to other people in your usual form. That is a method of disrupting the continuity that our embodied being as the basis of ‘I, me, myself’.

The series of practices called the *semdzin*, or apprehending the mind, involve the intensification of energetic experience so that there is a fundamental contradiction of your usual sense of self. That is to say, we create so much energy that we cannot hang on to our sense of who we are. It's a kind of Dionysian or orgiastic experience through which you can see that your familiar body is in fact a harmonisation of rhythms. For example, our body likes a certain bandwidth of experiences. Not too hot not too cold. If we eat too much, we don't feel well. If we're very hungry we don't feel well. If we get no exercise we don't feel so well. If we get too exhausted physically, we don't feel well. So our body as an energetic system is niched inside this systemic field where there are many systems operating that have to be constantly managed. Of course this maintenance is quite exhausting. Because *"I want to believe that I'm me. I'm just me."* But if the factors around me are not conducive to my happiness and the ease of being me, then I see that the me-ness of me is relative. It is part of a communication with the environment. Think how much effort people put into maintaining some ambient temperature, some easy temperature. We have air conditioning in the hot summer and heaters for the cold winter. This desire to maintain the systemic integrity of our embodied being leads us to be constantly adopting certain factors in the environment and rejecting others.

Therefore when we do a disruptive practice like the *semdzin* we can go beyond our usual comfort zone and that allows us to see the purely conventional nature of this point of reference. We are energy and the more access we have to a wide range of vibrations, the more we are able to respond to diverse situations in the world. In the realm of psychotherapy, people refer to post-traumatic stress disorder. But what is trauma? Trauma is what makes me feel 'not like myself'. To disrupt this fine tuning of myself is very helpful for dharma practice. The familiar, the usual, the reassuring is like a carapace – like a shell around us. Creatures who live in a shell are only safe while they are inside the shell. If they come out of the shell then birds might catch them and eat them very quickly.

Disruptive practices are shell breakers. The shell makes us feel safe but at the cost of being very limited. So by intentionally freeing ourselves from the shell and directly experiencing our presence as energetic, then we have the possibility of being more resilient and pliable and responsive.

[11.3] HOW CAN WE SEE THROUGH OUR DEEP YET FALSE SENSE OF SELF? CAN WE GET A TASTE OF FREEDOM WITHOUT DOING YEARS OF RETREAT?

The quickest way to understand the false nature of your sense of self is to ask your friends what they honestly think of you. They will give you some useful feedback. You are not who you think

you are. But also you are not who they think you are. You are a site of potential which is open to multiple readings or identifications. My falsity is when I over-solidify, over-define my sense of who I am. This has various levels. We might have a misperception about our qualities, thinking we are more generous than we are, for example. If we want to recognise that then we need to observe other people to accurately see how other people are. This gives us a relative frame of reference for thinking where we are in that hierarchy of generosity. Am I more generous or less generous than they are?

Because our qualities manifest in dependent origination they are not stable. Whenever we make a claim to be this kind of person, or to be good at doing that particular activity, this construct is not going to be true all the time. We can be false in our identifications of how we are, as manifestation. We might falsely believe that we are generous even though we are not, relatively speaking. The more profound falsity is believing that we truly exist.

This we can find through the meditation practice. When we do the Guru Yoga of the White Aa, relaxing and opening, perhaps we may look to see who is the experiencer? What is the mind like? How is my mind? Although we have some sense of the ungraspability of our presence, of our being-here-ness, there is often a hazy, residual something-ness which seems to be me. It might be a sort of hazy sensation in what you take to be your head. It could be a sense of the kind of liveliness or aliveness of your physical presence. Or it could be like the *nyams* – the meditation experiences – where perhaps there is just nothing at all yet the absence of thought is something that you are conscious of somehow and that this is what's happening for me. Or you may have an experience of clarity and be conscious of it as clarity. Even if you are not running a story, a narrative about it, or even thinking about it very much, there is a subtle separation between the experience and the experiencer: *“This is happening and it’s happening to me.”*

It is very difficult to catch the sense of ‘to me’ and this basic falseness is fundamental ignorance. It's fundamental not because it's always there, but because it's the basis of everything which arises in samsara. As some of us have experienced, as soon as the relaxed openness of awareness is not attended to, or we are unaware of it, we have the presence of something. This something is the slight tilt away from integrity.

There is no splitting or separation and so there is no true subsequent fragmentation and yet something-ness seems to continue as a vibration. As we know when we look, our thoughts arise and vanish, sensations arise and vanish, memories arise and vanish and so on. They appear and disappear. So the basic falseness is the seeming continuity of our sense of self. This is called the **rangdu** – the kind of self-thread which seems to be there, linking every moment of our life as ‘my life.’ There is something and there is something because *“I know there is something.”* Something is happening for me.

As I am sitting here now there was a rumbling sound that I just heard and I identify it as *'Oh that's a plane in the sky.'* As soon as I know it's a plane in the sky, I know that 'I' am the one that knows it's a plane in the sky. So this self-reflexive move happens automatically and is constantly reassuring us of our ongoing importance as the central figure in our life's drama.

On an outer level, if you're talking with friends or at work, you can try to see how language creates a sense of importance and validity to the behaviours which are being described. A story has continuity and this continuity gives us – even when it's happening on a crude outer level – this subtle sense of *'I'm always here.'* This is the falseness of turning the great world around ourselves. What we have is the view from here. In the world there are many events – war, disease, selfishness, exploitation... – and we react to these events. We hear some information and we have an opinion.

The outer semantic content of the opinion is not the main problem for meditators. The issue for us is the way in which we inhabit this opinion – as me giving voice to what I know to be true. We know that people have different opinions. We could even try adopting another opinion, perhaps a very right-wing opinion or a communist opinion, Roman Catholic opinion or Buddhist opinion. These are all modes of interpretation and I need a story. The truth of the story is not my main concern. My concern is to have a story. The continuity of the story is the continuity of my sense of self.

We can see the way conflicts arise in the world and a lot of killing occurs because of the energy of the self. It can be a very powerful energy when it gets linked onto some ideas. So the falsity that we inhabit is not just the falsity of our existence, but the falsity of how we perceive other people's existence.

A few days ago a bomb went off in Kabul outside a school where most of the girls were from the Hazara community. It was followed by further bombs. The girls were coming out of the school and over 50 girls were killed. Why would anybody do such a thing? To follow the logic of that particular social community: the Hazara people are a denigrated minority in the middle valleys of Afghanistan; they belong to the Shia group in Islam and this is a provocation for the dominant Sunni population; they are girls and giving girls an education spoils them for the purpose of being wives and mothers. So what I've just described is a series of little story lines about these girls. When we join these concepts together we can arrive at what seems to be a propositional truth: *"If these Hazara people didn't send their daughters to school, we would not have to kill them. These people are acting against our tradition, and they are wrong. We are good. They are so wrong that they make us good people do bad things."*

Now this kind of belief system may sound mad, but if we look into it, it gives continuity to the sense of self for the person who believes it. We can see how such narratives sustain and nourish the

basic falseness of the self. There is a formulation of identity. A formulation is something which is brought together; it's not intrinsically valid but when it's believed in, the power of that belief gives it a false integrity: *"Of course it's true. Of course it's true."*

That is the basis for the wars that exist all over the world, the lying and cheating of politics, the exhortation of workers in factories and in mines and so on. The shell of the ego-self is made of knowledge. Inside this shell of knowledge I can feel safe. If you then behave in a way that might make a hole in my shell, I will want to destroy you. My shell can be composed of any belief whatsoever: white supremacy, male supremacy, capitalist supremacy, the right to revenge and reparation. If I belong to a minority that has been exploited I might believe that *"It's very important that I get justice."*

As meditators we are not so concerned with the structure of the world since it is all arising from ignorance and illusion, which is confusing and bewildering. For example, if I believe that I am Scottish and that the Scottish have been exploited by the English, then in order for me to have dignity I have to fight for Scottish independence. This is a noble cause. It is worth sacrificing time, energy, money and so on. In that logic we can see the dynamic of a false sense of self playing out in samsara.

When you look at your own mind and see how many opinions you have, how many cultural beliefs you have, political beliefs, family beliefs and so on then you can see that to get to basic falseness – the underlying belief in the true existence of 'I/me/myself' – is difficult because it is so covered by all these other beliefs that disturb us and which we spend our time defending.

The second part of the question was *"Can we get a taste of freedom without doing years in retreat?"* If what is required is a deep taste, rather than a profound awakening, then your best way is to get it through nature. For example when the sky is clear you can sit in a relaxed way with the sun behind you and let your gaze dissolve into the sky. Just have a slow, easy, relaxed breathing and the emptiness of the sky will show you the emptiness of your mind.

This is a very useful practice for modern people because we are so used to being energetic and active and making things happen. *"What can I do in order to get this experience?"* In this practice all you do is you sit and you open your eyes and you allow the sky to come to you. You become passive receptive. Nowadays with mobile phones and apps – people are very quick to make things happen. The kind of patience that was developed in Tibet when you had to travel maybe two months to visit some friends or a lama, we don't develop now since we can contact our friends on Zoom instantly. For example. We are used to energy rising and going out into the world. Whenever there is a doing, it enforces the subtle sense that 'I am the doer.'

If you live near the sea it can be helpful to look at the movement of the waves. The waves don't stop – they just keep coming and coming and coming. There and gone. There and gone. Appearance. Ungraspable. Once you have a felt sense of that, you can turn and look at people walking on the beach or birds flying in the sky. You might just catch a moment of *“Oh, appearing and vanishing.”* Some shape and colour is moving in the sky. *“Oh, it's a seagull.”* Now you have the concept: the bird is gone but you hang on to the concept. Keep the felt sense of the waves coming and going, coming and going. There's nothing much to pin a concept on.

With these practices we learn to function in the world with a quiet mind, a silent mind. The more quiet our mind is the less we need to make commentary on what's going on. And the less commentary we give, the more of the world we receive.

[11.4] I EXPERIENCE A SENSE OF PRESENCE IN MY HEART AREA. IS THIS RELATED TO MATERIALITY AND THEREFORE NOT TO BE GIVEN IMPORTANCE OR IS IT RELATED TO THE INTRINSIC SENSE OF AWARENESS?

Awareness has no self-content. It's like with the familiar image of the mirror – the mirror has nothing of itself inside it. Sensations in the body, in the heart, in the knees, in the head – these are movements of energy, which is in the field of instant presence. *“What is it? What does it mean?”* We don't need to know. Something. And if we keep it just as something, we may get close to the fact that it's already gone. Perhaps it was some no-thing. This is our experience.

The world is full of diverse some no-things. When you become more aware of how busy your mind is, how much interpretation and commentary you provide, and you start to see the function of this – which is consolidation, allowing you to give opinions and conclusions about facts, about things that happened – then you are observing the process of the maintenance of your own falsity. Whatever is occurring doesn't need your story.

However if you are prone to having a lot of sensation in your meditation, then it's very useful to do some vipassana body scans whereby you stabilise your focus of attention by concentrating on the breath at the nostrils. You take that focused attention to the top of your head and gradually scan down through your body. Then when you get right down to your feet, you come back up again through the body, very slowly just noting whatever is there. The more you do that, the more you can see that the continuity of the experience from one moment to the next is conceptual. Concepts are receptacles. So if you're scanning through your body you may feel an itch for example. The term 'itch' – which is a word, a sign and it also has a concept mixed with it – can hold many different kinds of

experience in the body. The more you apprehend the itch the more you give it a density which seems to allow it to be recognised again in the future.

So in this you can see the beginning of the three times: past, present and future. The actual arising – whatever is in the moment – is instantly gone. As you scan through the body you may have the memory “*Oh, last time it was my left shoulder that was itchy.*” You find yourself checking if the itch still there. And will it be there when I scan back up again? This interweaving between the past, the present and the future is part of how we weave the continuity of the sense of self. The continuity is concept based. It is relying on the application of signs. The something-ness of a something relies on its identification of what kind of a something it is.

As soon as the ungraspable appearance is seemingly grasped by a word, you have the beginning. You want to get the appearance but you can't. However as a substitute, as a as a kind of compensation, you get the concept of the something instead. This interplay of concepts and interpretive signs allows us to enter into the human dimension of language in which we endlessly talk *about* something. So if you watch television news or listen to people talking, you can see how the sequence of concepts creates pictures. This is the basis of novels, poetry, drama, films.

We, as ego-selves, are stories. We, as awareness, are silent freshness and brightness. The world doesn't need our stories.

We use the word *dzogpachenpo*, the great completion. We are always already perfect. There is no lack. So if there is no lack, there is no need for our story. The function of the story is to maintain the ego. Now in our busy world, where most of our time is caught up in communication, we have to find the way to hear the silence in the sound. Just as when we read in the Heart Sutra that ‘form is emptiness, emptiness is not other than form.’

Similarly we have sound and silence. Silence is not other than sound. If you set them up as polarities, as a binary opposition, then you will find that sound is always stealing your silence. Because either there is silence or there is sound. But in dharma we want to see the non-contradiction or the unification or the non-division between all the polarities. Sound is simply a note – is gone. Music is a continuity of sounds – to create rhythm and melody and so on. The sound is movement and that movement is a vibration and each moment of the vibration is just this. Just this. Just this. Can you catch sound? We can have concepts about sound. We can study music. We can know how to read the musical notation and write down a musical account of whatever sounds we hear. But what do you catch? Is a sound ever in C major? You learn about C major when you're in school. This is a category. A way of conceptualising the account of what you hear. But we don't find the same system in Chinese

music or Indian music. These are conventional categories. We apply the category on to the emergent experience.

So, as with the vipassana, try to just relax and not apply the interpretation. When you stop telling sound what it is, it will show you its silence.

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[12.1] ARE ART & MUSIC AN OBSTACLE TO THE PRACTICE OF DZOGCHEN OR CAN THEY BE USEFUL?

In our culture art and music are generally in the category of entertainment. They are a way of relaxing, a distraction from some of the burdens and responsibilities of daily life. In the culture, the artist takes on a special status as someone with special gifts. If you don't have the talent, then you're not usually encouraged to pursue any of the arts.

In dzogchen we are not really focused on any product. We are concerned to be present without being carried away by whatever is arising. We're not trying to make something special or valuable. As soon as special value is invested in any object, that object is displaced from the field within which it manifests and this can become an obstacle to seeing and to hearing precisely what is occurring. Art carries the idea that some visual forms and plastic forms (like sculpture) and sound forms (like music) are of more importance than other forms. Such hierarchies are based on commodification and there's a huge international art market where tens of millions of pounds can be paid for one painting. That painting becomes a vehicle for monetary value rather than being the disclosure of aesthetic value.

We have a body, a voice and a mind and each can be involved in artistic activity. Art – the word art is linked to 'artificial' – means the opposite of intrinsic. Something is being created. However, if we are going to survive in life, we have to eat food and since we don't just want to eat raw leaves and grains we usually cook them. Cooking is a form of compounding; we are creating something by bringing different elements together. Talking is also a form of compounding; speech allows the sounds that we make to be comprehensible to other people. So, art is our life. We are artisans creating the specific patternings of our experience, moment by moment.

The question for mediators is not *"What have I created?"* but *"Who is the creator?"* Who is the doer? The doer is our mind itself. The mind moves and our energy manifests into the world. The whole of samsara is the movement of the mind. Everyone is a creator and we can see the creation of our lives: how are the rooms where we live are set out; what kind of clothes do we wear and so on. So on one level we can say, *"I am creating this"* but the problem with this formulation is that it sounds as if I have already been created: that I am existing prior to this moment of manifestation.

But as many of us have examined in the past we don't know how we are going to be in even five minutes time. That is to say, I arise as part of the disclosure, as part of the display which is an ingredient of the creative moment. And indeed, by cooking or gardening or flower arranging or painting, there is a double move that in as much as 'I' create this appearance, I am creating myself.

To take weeds out of the ground, we have to bend. We rock forwards and backwards on our knees and so on. Playing the guitar, gardening, cooking – these are co-creations. According to the guitar, we play it in a particular way. According to the ingredients we are cooking, we boil or fry.

The objects created by those whom in our culture we call artists are simply another aspect of the co-emergence of subject and object. Now if we don't solidify or reify subject and object and imagine that somehow they are pointing to some truly existing essence, then we find that subject and object are simply pointing to the patterns of this moment. The flow of this experience is ceaseless and it doesn't establish anything.

So if we stay present in any activity – whether it's given high cultural status or low cultural status – presence in the moment is the dissolving of the fixed duality of inside and outside. It's very important to have the dignity of respecting our own lives. If you are cleaning the shower or scrubbing the floor – this is the movement of your illusory body in an illusory world. Like a magical apparition your body is responding with the expressions of pressure and circular movements or straight movements according to circumstances.

In our practice, the basis of dignity is not some cultural attribution that everybody agrees is a very important activity. Our dignity is our presence and our presence is possible in every event in every arena of life. With presence everything is pure dharma practice. Without presence even reading dharma books aloud is not dharma. The key thing is always *“What is my motivation?”* If I want to be fully here – open, allowing the field of experience to flow through me because I am part of that field of experience – then everything I touch, everything I hear, everything I smell and taste has the exquisite value of being just this. The central point of our practice is to rest in the openness of the mind.

When we get fascinated by the seeming power of the object we lose touch with the bright, shining, illuminating quality of awareness and we collapse into the fixity of our subject self. Everything has value for awareness, because it is the clarity of awareness, or the showing, or the illumination of awareness. But if we are in a dualistic consciousness we are almost inevitably pulled into judgment and bias and the attribution of differential value. So whatever we do – if we are fully present and aware – then it's part of our dharma path.

[12.2] SINCE RIGPA OR AWARENESS IS UNCOMPOUNDED, DOES IT HAVE SELF-ESSENCE OR OTHER QUALITIES?

The short answer to this is that it doesn't have any qualities of its own which could define it as being something.

But we always come back to these three linked functions. That the mind is open; that it's empty of anything which could be identified and grasped; and that it is the display of images of clarity. If you look for rigpa you can't find it because it's not there as something. But it is there as nothing. This nothing is not a dead nothing – it is the plenum void, the full void, which although being empty of self is full of the display of the images of clarity. And within this display, we are moving and connecting.

These three can be described in terms of *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmanakāya*. The *nirmanakāya* manifests from the pure land of the *sambhogakāya* which becomes available when one awakens to the mind of the Buddha, the *dharmakāya*.

When you look for your mind you can't find it – *“I look and I look and I look but everything I seem to find vanishes.”* – because it was just the idea of something. Then one day we see fully, deeply, completely that *“I am not a thing. I am not a self.”* The brightness of this awareness, which shines in the openness of the mind, illuminates this moment of revelation. Within this this empty appearance, this apparition, this illusion, is moving with the other illusions. As long as I believe that I am a self, I will imagine that I am knowable: *“Because I am like this, there are some things I do and some things I don't do.”* But the more we experience that our mind is open the more we see that there is no fixed reference point which is the truth of I, me, myself. There is no defined, reliable, predictable essence of 'me' which is there prior to this moment.

I emerge according to circumstances. So, for example – at this Zoom moment I am looking at my laptop screen in front of me. I'm stuck with a big picture of myself. I notice that I don't particularly want to look at it. From time to time I tell myself, *“James, your eyes have closed, you're supposed to be talking to people so open your eyes.”* If we were all there in one room my eyes would be looking around at you all but because I'm looking at the screen, the mood of the co-emergence of me being with you is a little bit thin.

We all have such experiences as we move through our day. Different situations bring forth our potential in different modes. This richness of our potential as it moves in relation to the field has no limit to it. But when we lack the remembrance – the presence of our self as part of the field – then we become enclosed in the shell of the remembrance of myself as 'me' And remembering that I am 'me' I immediately restrict the arena of my potential. This is something we can all experience for ourselves.

When you are open, when you are available, you find you have much more scope for responding than when you are anxiously self-preoccupied.

The quality of my open awareness is 'all this.' However I don't know how 'all this' is going to be. So 'all this' is not a personal quality of awareness. It's not a definitional aspect of awareness. It is a revelatory aspect of 'all this.' Just as with the example of the mirror, it always has reflections. The reflection is a quality of the mirror because it is mirrors that can show reflections. Walls don't show reflections, paintings don't show reflections. However the reflection doesn't tell you about any true essence of the mirror.

You can experience this in yourself. In the course of a day you speak with many different people in many different ways, you're close to some people and not so close to others. Many different forms arise and it's undeniable that these are the range of my experiences today. This was how the potential of which I am a part has expressed itself today. But none of these forms is truly definitional of a self. It is a little bit similar to the Greek notion of Pandora's box or Pandora's jar. Once it comes out of the box it's very difficult to put it back in. It's not that our awareness is a fixed box, but the seeming site of the emergence of myself in this moment is revealed – just here, just this, then gone. Now I'm emerging from something else – with something else.

We're always emerging from this ungraspable empty ground. We are uncatchable, ungraspable and yet moment by moment we are exquisitely, precisely 'just this.' So in that sense, the quality of awareness is all that is revealed. It is revelation not definition.

[12.3] I HAVE UNFINISHED TANTRIC COMMITMENTS. NOW I WANT TO DO GURU YOGA & DZOGCHEN? DO I NEED TO FINISH THE NGÖNDRO FIRST?

If you buy a bus ticket and then somebody gives you a plane ticket – you have one body so either you go on the plane or on the bus. You want to arrive quickly so you go on the plane. You don't need to hold your bus ticket in your hand when you're on the plane. We say there are many dharma paths. So if you are following a dharma path and it is a good dharma path you are not insulting the other dharma paths by following this one.

Perhaps before you began doing, for example, the tantric preliminary practice (*Ngondro*) you decided that "This is what I really want to do" and you may have made this commitment before some very important shining lama. Later you may have found that you no longer want to do it. This is probably not the first time in your life you have been unreliable. Something seemed a good idea at

the time but, as the Buddha said, *“Everything is impermanent.”* This is why we have divorce. The Catholic Church is not very fond of divorce, they say that it is better to have an unhappy marriage and keep your marriage vows. Better to keep doing a practice you don't want to do.

From the point of view of dzogchen – divorce is better. You can have a hostile divorce or a friendly divorce. A guilty divorce or a hopeful divorce. What you do need is some kind of humility so that you learn something about why you're having a divorce. *“I will love you forever.” “I will practise to save all sentient beings in this and all my future lives.”* Small people shouldn't use big words. That means you have to stop being a small person. Who is the one who says, *“I will always do this”*? If this is the little ego then it's not going to be able to carry through. The ego self is part of this dyad of subject and object. It is unstable.

So, we do what we can. We should respect our capacity. We should work at our growing edge, the opening edge of our new possibilities. It's much better to promise a little and do a lot than to promise a lot and do a little.

It is possible to give your vows back but the key thing is to use the opportunity to understand that the content of your mind is always changing. Otherwise the danger is that you think, *“No, I will use all my willpower, all my decision power to make a clear statement.”* but that is the energy of the ego. We can remember that the Buddha, when he was Siddhartha, was a divorcee. We Buddhists are very glad that he left his wife and got divorced because then he climbed over the palace wall and went to meditate and through that he became enlightened.

When we take refuge, we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. We take refuge in the guru, in the meditation deity and the dakinis. We take refuge in the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmanakāya*. These are all ideas. But this tenth refuge is, *‘I take refuge in my own mind.’* Not in ideas about my mind but in my mind. I have to open to my mind as it is. This is the one commitment that is truly sad to break. If you rest in open awareness you won't get distracted. As soon as your attention coalesces then you have strayed from the mind itself. The thought is not other than the mind, just as the reflection is not other than the mirror, but because you are fixated on the reflection as something of value, your own enthusiasm for it and commitment to it is functionally alienating you from the unborn openness of the mind itself.

So don't take refuge in ideas. Relax into the unborn mind. And then all the vows will be completed automatically.

[12.4] IS BEING TRANS(GENDER) AN OBSTACLE TO PRACTISING VAJRAYANA? HOW TO DEAL WITH PREJUDICES?

This is a very contested area at the moment. If somebody feels that the gender they had at their birth is no longer fitting for them, and they decide to live in another way, and it feels like an absolute necessity, and they settle into their new identity, then it's not a major problem for practice.

However, reassignment surgery is quite a complicated surgery and damage can happen to the nerves which can affect the energy pathways in the body. The hormone balance usually has to be adjusted by taking altering hormones. Hormones are part of the communicative system of the body so this this will affect how the vital energies circulate in the body. Of course if you're living in a body that you hate, that you think is the wrong body for you, then this kind of self-persecutory mental reflection is very disturbing.

When systems of interpretation are formulated they seem to provide a clarity. For example, many schools of Buddhism once taught that you cannot get enlightened in a female body. Of course the people who came to this conclusion, in general had male bodies. Perhaps this can encourage us not to be too dogmatic about any kind of interpretation of the potential of a situation. Rather than thinking about what the book says or the map says, we should inhabit the territory. We should sit and do the practice and try to integrate our circumstances, however they are, into our practice.

The second part of the question is also important: how to deal with the prejudice you experience from others. Prejudice arises from ignorance. The anxious ego wants to have definite knowledge and so it holds on to fabricated ideas as if they were fundamental truths. So one may have prejudice towards people on the basis of the colour of their skin or their height or whether you consider them to have a disability or a deformity. All of these prejudices and definitions are simply conventional.

In Russia, for example, in 1910 there were very many big, landowning families, people with wonderful titles, big wealthy farmers. These were the successful high-status people but by 1920 their position was becoming very insecure. During the 1917 revolution, the imperial family, the Romanovs, were all shot in a basement. The great landowners were beaten and thrown out of their palaces. The rich farmers were beaten and poor peasants were promoted. In the new Soviet system, the peasant became the person with high status and the lords and ladies became the people with low status. In that way we can see that the basis of prejudice is unstable; it's not resting on some definite truth but on a patterning of interpretation.

However it is very painful when you find yourself experiencing prejudice. Other people are acting as if they know who you truly are – as if your total value as a sentient being can be assessed in terms of your colour, the shape of your body and so on. Prejudice arises from knowability, which is an aspect of ignorance.

The best way to deal with prejudice is to free your own mind from prejudice. Because if somebody hates you because of what you perceive as what they perceive as your characteristics, if you then hate them back because of what you feel are their characteristics, then there is no progress. To hate racists doesn't take us very far. For meditators we have to see in our own mind how we can get trapped and lost in the consolidation of mental energy into fixed positions. When this happens, our open potential is disguised by narrowing our personal potential.

Perhaps the best way for meditators to deal with prejudice is to understand that this is just another flowering of the poisonous weed of ignorance. Use the narrowness of the positioning of other people as a reminder to relax and open your own awareness.

[12.5] HOW CAN YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE ON THE PATH?

A path is designed to take you from one place to another. If you are going for a walk in the country you notice that you are passing farmland and walking towards a wood. So first of all you have to find out something about your path. Generally, the Mahayana path is directed by the wisdom of emptiness and by compassion for all sentient beings. So if you are grasping at the phenomena of the world as if they were real entities and if you are always classifying people by how interesting you find them then probably you are not making much progress. If you are doing a tantric practice and the instruction is to see the everything that occurs as part of the mandala of the deity, yet you see things as solidly real, then again you're probably not making much progress.

You have to look at the view of the vehicle, the yana, that you're studying and practising and it will tell you the guidelines for that particular path. Each of these paths or yanās has guidelines. If you become a monk and you're always checking out the shape of women's bodies, then you're not doing very well on that path. You simply have to follow the logic of the view, the meditation and the activity for whichever yana or path you are following. It is completely aligned.

[12.6] AM I ATTUNING WITH THE TEACHINGS IN THE RIGHT WAY?

There are the three stages of listening or studying, reflecting and applying the teaching to our life, and finally meditating and integrating. We need to study in order to help our mind be clear.

Studying might involve copying out a key text by hand. In Tibetan monasteries hundreds of pages of dharma texts were recited every day. These activities help us become familiar with the understanding. Then we can ask, *“How does this fit with my world?”*

All compounded things are impermanent. We can easily find historical pictures of our hometown and then we appreciate that although the town has had the same name for many years, the shape of the town has been changing. Dharma is not magic, it's more like a cream in that you have to massage it into yourself. You have to apply it to yourself so that you can absorb it. Likewise we have to make sure that we absorb and understand the view.

In dzogchen the view is most important because if you look in the right way then you can see whereas if you look in the wrong way you won't see what you want to see. Normally we look at the world through the dark glasses of our assumptions, beliefs and interpretive concepts and then we see what we already know. We adjust what we see to fit in with our habitual interpretive categories. But when we start to see in a naked way then what is seen and the seeing are not two separate functions. We have the immediacy of the revelation as object and the revelation as subject in non-duality.

That is why we study a text again and again. Once you see how we blind ourselves then we can untie the blindfold. We are not actually blind but if we have a blindfold over our eyes, it is as if we are blind. In dzogchen we start to observe ourselves. When I get angry with someone – how do they appear to me? Instead of just being intoxicated by the anger, if we put the light on a little bit and observe how the world looks when we're angry then we see that we are obscuring ourselves through merging in the passion of anger. Looking with anger all your faults become clear to me:

—I know exactly what's wrong with you.

—But everything is illusion!

—But you're a shit and it's not an illusory shit because you actually stink!

Then we see how blind we are. This is the blindness of the imagination because I don't see you, I imagine you. When I see you, you are moving and speaking. Moment by moment you're changing. But when I see you with my imagination – I create an image of you. I now have definite, enduring knowledge of you.

This is how we can know if we are really on a path – because we are engaging with the difficult task of making our obscurations and our beliefs less interesting for ourselves. We start to prefer the fresh to the familiar. The more we go down this path the more we see that the familiar is actually fresh. Pay attention to what is occurring and don't get distracted. Just stay with what is arising. Don't go after past experience, nor wait for future experience. You will read this again and again in the

dharma books but it's only when you really try to engage with this and open to it that you see *"Oh, this is actually more difficult than I expected!"* It's difficult because *"I want to be enlightened and I also want to stay me."*

Most things about ourselves we don't have to change. The one thing that we do have to change is grasping onto what is occurring as if it were inherently real. That is to say, our life can continue. We eat what we eat, we wear what we wear, we talk to whomever we talk to. These are all patterns of phenomena. But when you see that everything is like a dream, is like an illusion, is like a rainbow – then you can keep it light, because it is light. It is we who make the world dark and heavy but you have to see this yourself that this is what you do. To say this is not an insult; it's a friendly reminder to help us to see. We make life very difficult for ourselves by imagining that it's solid and real and that we are burdened and imprisoned by the shape of things.

Although our experience of life seems to show us how things are we need to be aware that what we are perceiving are actually our own constructs and interpretations. When we find it difficult to see what we're doing we can try using other people and their different experiences as a supportive sangha to disrupt our habitual beliefs. For example, the bias inherent in our prejudices is often invisible to us so that we define others as if we knew the truth about their situation. This confirms our belief that we know the truth and it condemns others to always be seen by us through our own filter.

Many people believe that snakes are bad, or spiders are bad, so they want to kill them. Why are they bad? Because they might bite me or poison me. We know many creatures in the world have been destroyed because of fear. Snakes are snakes. Very few snakes are proactively aggressive. If you walk near a snake it might get upset and look to defend itself by attacking you. It helps to be aware. You may know the potential of the snake to be dangerous, but that doesn't make the snake bad. So in this way you can start to see that the content of your own mind – your culturally received beliefs and ideas and interpretations of history and so on – becomes a veil to seeing the immediate actuality of what is here. This is the heart of the meditation.

Thoughts have no substance to them and yet they can appear overwhelmingly powerful when we get caught up in them. That is why we meditate – to observe both the moments of our openness and our calm spaciousness, and also how we get lost. The one who gets caught is a thought. Awareness is not a thought. If we identify with what is arising and revealed in the field of awareness then we lose awareness, even though thought has no substance. Therefore again and again we relax, we release our merging tendency into the thought and this gives us more and more experience of the mind as open, empty and spacious. This is the primordial purity of the mind. Arising within this instantly is 'this'

– the immediate clarity of the field of disclosure. It's here and it's empty; appearance and emptiness are not opposites.

We are then ready to start living the dharma.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

13 ZOOM

JAMES LOW

9.6.2021

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[13.1] EVEN THOUGH I DO MEDITATION PRACTICE, THE SENSE OF MYSELF IS NOT CHANGING. HOW CAN I DISSOLVE THE IDEA OF SELF?

The idea of self is not always in our mind, otherwise we wouldn't be able to operate however when we consider ourselves or other people or trees or flowers, there is a sense that something exists. That initial sense that something is there seems to be just inherent but then we are aware that we have our own opinions about what is there. Although it is not unusual to disagree with a friend about whether a particular film is any good, it's as if you both agree that *"Well, there is a film."* The film-ness of the film seems like a given but what is more open is our interpretation of the film. This is where dharma understanding comes in: examining what is the given-ness of the film, or the tree or the house or any phenomena that we experience.

When we have a habit, such as smoking, it is normal to experience that the value of the cigarette is in the cigarette. You see the packet of cigarettes and you want one. They are important, maybe even necessary for me. Clearly, they're not necessary for everyone but in my experience the cigarette itself is important. This is what it means to have a habit or an addictive turn. One projects a value or an identification into an appearance and then finds it difficult to appreciate that *'Oh, this is only a production.'* What I have produced, that which has arisen due to causes and conditions, seems to have inherent qualities.

To see things as existing in truth is a habit formation. Nevertheless most of the people we meet are going to agree that our perception is accurate. This is called a shared karmic perception whereby moment by moment there is affirmation of the truth that the tree is out there as a tree. When I was young, smoking cigarettes was very normal. People would smoke cigarettes in the cinema, in the bus, while they were eating... It was just part of life. Now over the years, with the understanding of how lung cancer develops, cigarettes have become much less socially valued. They have gone from being normal to being abnormal.

When we read stories about the great yoginis and yogis in Tibet, we learn how they left their small villages and went to live in the mountains. In the villages people believe that it is very important whether your marriage is happy or not, whether you drink too much or not, and all the other worldly concerns. It is accepted to everyone in the village that these are interesting things to gossip about. But when you leave the village and go to live quietly in a cave, it's unlikely that you will have a lot of thoughts about whether your neighbours' marriages were happy or not. That is to say, the factors holding particular thought constructs in shape as being normal start to thin out. Dissolving the idea of

self or inherent existence is not something that is easy to do – because it seems to be valid, it seems to be the case.

One technique is to become more aware of how certain aspects of life are very real for some people and less so for others. That could be a football team, or national independence, or eating only 'healthy' food. For the people who become concerned with these issues there's a lot of energy in them. It is obvious to them that these are meaningful things to uphold. However we see that they are not meaningful to everyone and, as we've looked before, the objects of our human existence are not necessarily very interesting for birds or worms although they are important for us.

This is what is meant by a karmic vision. Having the vision, having the karma, to be born as a human being what unfolds through the human body and its sense organs becomes a given for us. Some birds have a nest in a bush in my neighbour's garden and I see these little birds flying very fast and then when they come to the bush they pull their wings in and dive into the bush. I keep trying to see how they know when to do that? They haven't been to flying school. They just they do what birds do. Strangely impressive for me, but normal for them.

The notion of how things exist is interpretive. We take the factors, the potential, of the world and bring it together in a pattern that suits our particular human composition. The actuality is that moment by moment my construal of what seems given or normal is arising and dissolving. A situation arises that may be accompanied by a lot of feeling. Perhaps we are upset by something a friend has said. A conclusion comes in our mind – *"Well, this is the sort of person they are."*— but after a couple of hours it softens. By observing these pulsations of how the energy of the five poisons merges into the patterns that are arising, we see that the intensity of what we encounter alters. When the feeling is strong – 'they are like this' or 'I have to do this activity' – then it just seems true. And then it's irrelevant! What we don't usually do is go back and think *"Oh, I was very upset before and now I'm not."* If that person's behaviour had been really, really bad then I should never speak to them again but anyway, I like them again now, most of the time, though sometimes they're horrible.

So we can appreciate that 'this is not one person.' This person is a site or a situation showing many different aspects. From the point of view of analysis we can see that my construct 'John is annoying' is not always true. If I say *"John is sometimes annoying"* that becomes a little bit vague. What am I saying? That sometimes he's annoying and I don't understand why he sometimes becomes annoying? Dependent origination: various factors operate to make this the case.

If we are practising tantra we would say everything which arises is Padmasambhava or Vajrayogini, or whatever deity practice we do. That is to say, this is appearance and emptiness.

However this has a subtle double edge to it. Because the appearance is empty of its own existence it may appear quite light and transparent but because it is appearance without inherent definition or self, this allows us the opportunity to fill it with our own meaning. Since everything in the world has no internal definition, I can become the ruler of the world: I am in charge. I propose and I dispose. But on the other hand, I'm also a very busy king. Morning to night working, working, working – making this damned world and if I stop doing this work then the world is not going to stay what I think it is.

Hopefully we then realise that the meaning we perceive is not inherent; it's our habitual projection, it's a delusion. Then we may start to see how the six realms of samsara operate. It is the emptiness of samsara – its lack of true substance – that allows it to act as a multi-dimensional screen on which various kinds of habitual projections can be revealed. There is a country which the English call Spain. All the people who live in Spain we call Spanish but the people in Madrid are not the same as the people in Valencia. And probably the people in the north of Valencia are not the same as the Valencia people who live by the coast. On my street my neighbours are not the same as me. I'm not in the same mood I was in this morning. Our world emerges through our reliance on empty signifiers. We can talk about the Spanish but you can't find a standard-issue Spaniard. The unifying factor for all Spanish people is the idea of Spanish-ness. Within Spanish there are different dialects and different accents. It is said that 'all sound is mantra' but maybe if you're on a train in Spain and hear people talking you may think, *"Oh they're from the Madrid."* Because sound is empty it allows you to put your interpretation on it. If you were from Madrid you might be able to identify whether they had a Andalucían or Castellano accent. You would feel, *"I am simply describing what is there"* but you do that on the basis of having the knowledge to project into what is there.

In dzogchen we keep our mind relaxed and open and we see that patterns are arising and shifting and dissolving – dynamic, interactive, never ceasing. Nothing is established and therefore the richness of life arises through the quality of our availability and participation. There is no self. In my mind many possibilities of interpretation, memory, planning and so on arise. These are like colours on an artist's palette. They are the potential which you use, according to circumstances, to create an image. If you were painting on canvas you have a sense of duration of the marks through time but thoughts, feelings, sensations and sounds are painting *in* time. So stay relaxed and open; the unborn empty mind itself never changes. It has no self you can catch. Everything else is moving and has no fixed self you can grasp. You then see for yourself that the self is not something to get rid of or to actively dissolve – it is the mode of perception that operates in samsara. Samsara arises from this reifying mode of perception. And this is delusion.

We can then feel compassion for all the people who are strongly committed to their interpretations. It causes so much suffering to believe in the truth of things, because the stabilised concept is always straying away from the immediacy of the moment.

When you are aware of feeling a kind of intrinsic sense of self – ‘this is me and this is just how I am’ – don't do anything. If you take it as something happening to you, you'll feel persecuted. *“How can I be Buddhist when I keep believing in myself?”* Such thoughts will just go round and round like a dog chasing its own tail. But if you stay relaxed and open, you will truly find that all outer phenomena and all inner phenomena arise and pass, arise and pass. The self is neither a true entity to be believed in, nor is it a serious problem to be got rid of. It is a delusion. And the delusion arises from ignorance of how it actually is.

[13.2] WHEN AND HOW TO USE PHAT!?

We use the sound Phat! to disrupt the continuity of reassuring thought. To link it to the previous question, if you're caught up in the sense of ‘I exist, I exist’ and you're in a place where you can make the sound of Phat! in a very strong and loud way, then you want to let it arise from your belly and straight out – the sound is coming out of your mouth – but it's as if it's coming out of the top of your head.

Afterwards there's a kind of gap and in that gap you just stay as open as you can.

In a sense it's as if I'm here but my clothes have come off. The thoughts and feelings and memories I'm usually wrapped in have got blown away. We are present as simple presence. We're not present as ourselves. That is to say, the cladding of self has fallen off and we're just here.

If you're meditating and you find that the Guru Yoga of the White Aa is not able to release you from your tension and inner holding, then sounding Phat! is a very useful way to open up a space. It's a double movement. You need the sharpness of the Phat! to cut away, to cut a kind of space in the forest. You then need to bring the clarity into that gap. It's not about being spaced out. We want to see the clarity and emptiness, or the clarity which is not a substance. That's how you can use Phat!

[13.3] DOES DEVOTION TO THE OTHER MERGE SELF AND OTHER IN NON-DUALITY

When you chat with a friend, even if you're very relaxed, at ease and having a good time, there is a subtle affirmation that ‘I exist and you exist.’ When you part you might say, *“Hey, this was such a good evening. Let's meet again soon. I really like spending time with you.”* Most of our social

interactions are like this, whether friendly or not so friendly, and both affirm the existence of self and other. Even if you go into a sexual contact with a person and orgasm, there is maybe a brief gap, but still there is pleasure arising and linked with that perhaps a desire to do this again with the same person.

When we tantric practice we imagine the teacher in the form of a yidam such as Tara or Padmasambhava. We do this because, if we visualise the teacher in their ordinary body then we think of them as an ordinary man or woman, young or old, thin or fat..., and such assumptions allow us to hook many different qualities onto that person, which makes them thick. But if you imagine the teacher as Padmasambhava, whose appearance is described in symbolic detail, then he is appearance and emptiness, like looking at a stained-glass window, or a hologram – something which appears but which you can see through at the same time. He is like an apparition, or as the text say, like a mirage or a rainbow.

You have devotion to this appearance saying or thinking, *“You are important. How you are is how I need to be. You have wisdom. You have compassion. You have power. I am wandering in samsara with confusion and strong emotions. Please save me.”* What do we want Padmasambhava to save us from? From the delusion of our self. In fact we are also empty appearance but with our habitual interpretation we solidify our sense of who we are. So devotion to the deity is a means to be returned to how we already are. The language of tantra speaks of transformation. We turn or transform our ordinary body, voice and mind into the pure form of Padmasambhava’s body, voice and mind.

We exist, but not as an existent – that is to say we are present, but present as luminosity. So when we pray, we forget everything else in our world and we focus just on the deity. Maybe we recite the mantra or some familiar prayer like the Seven-line Prayer. These are ways of hollowing or thinning ourselves out. It’s like when we were a teenager and fell in love for the first time – we couldn’t think of anything else. All the familiar ingredients of ourself get dispersed because we are just obsessed by this one person. Bring this into the spiritual domain: *“You are the one and only.”*

Two things are happening. One, I’m gathering myself together in my focused attention on you which gives me protection against the dispersal which comes in our reactive ordinary mind function. Two, with my devotion to you I’m being filled by my sense of you.

After you have done this for some time you stop the recitation and light comes from the form of the deity. White light from the OM, red light from the Aa and blue light from the HUNG in the heart. This represents their body, speech and mind which is also the *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmanakāya*. This light then streams into us. Firstly all white – so we are full of white light. Then red

light – we're full of red light. Then blue light... You can read about the symbolism of this in many places including in the book *BEING GURU RINPOCHE*. Then the three lights come together and now you're full of light, white, red and blue. This process of these four aspects of the light represents the four initiations, which are the basis of tantric practice. Now my body is full of light. It's not even as if it had a skin (thick or thin) on the outside – it's not a skin bag full of light. It's more like glass or crystal. It's just a very fine presence.

Then the teacher comes to the top of your head, dissolves into a ball of light which dissolves into your heart and your body dissolves in. In that moment, subject and object, or self and other, are now merged together in non-duality. This unified ball becomes smaller and smaller until it goes into space. And then there is only space. Gradually, after some time, experience starts to arise – as sounds, sights, sensations – and you find yourself moving in this world.

What world is this? This is a world emerging out of emptiness. Something cannot come from nothing. What arises is nothing – nothing showing as something . This is appearance which is empty of self.

Unless this basic binary opposition of self and other, subject and object, can be dissolved we remain inside a dualistic structure. That is why we do this practice again and again. When we live in our ordinary sense of self, even though we know that we have parents, it is normal to feel that *“Well, the basis of me is me. I am the source of me – inside me – coming out of me.”* This is a belief. A delusion. But as long as we operate from it, we find ourselves in this fragmented world of many different things.

But when through our practice, repeated again and again – and for many people it takes a long, long time – we gradually see that *“Oh, self and other are arising together from the same ground.”* Self and other are pulsations of the energy of the ground. Neither exists in itself. Then as you go through the day, talking with other people, walking and sitting and so on, there's no interruption in your participation as an aspect of the emergent field.

When you get a wobble and you kind of retract into yourself, it's not that you actually retract into yourself but that the retraction *is* yourself. There *is* no self but it's like a concentration of sound. Sometimes you may be out in the countryside and you hear these military planes flying overhead . They go very fast and when they hit the speed of sound and you get this 'Boom!' The force of the plane has caused a pressure to build up in front of them. It's similar to that when we have a retraction into ourselves. When I'm loose and part of the field, there is no self. There is presence – presence in this moment as 'this' and in the next moment present as something different. Presence is, if you like, continuous yet always different. However, the sense of self is discontinuous because it's constructed

again and again whilst pretending to be continuous. It's not that you will go psychotic if you dissolve the sense of self, or you won't know who you are – but you're just here, in a very open, immediate and bright way.

[13.4] USE THE ENERGY OF THE EGO TO DISSOLVE THE EGO. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

That's what I was just describing. Devotion is very much like longing. The words of devotion could be applied in a neurotic way or in a spiritual way. *"I miss you. I need you. Don't leave me. I can't live without you. If you forget me I'll be lost."* Lovers often feel this. We take the egoic energy which idealises another human being and which often ends in disappointment – we take it to Arya Tara or Vajrayogini or Padmasambhava and we say, *"You are the centre of my life."* The texts say we should always keep the deity on the top of our head or in our heart. *"I need you. I need you. I need you. You are all I need."* This is how you take the energy of the ego and apply it to the deconstruction of the ego.

[13.5] ARE THERE NATURAL LAWS SPONTANEOUSLY ARISING FROM THE PRIMORDIAL GROUND?

No. Law is a human construct. We have laws against incest, for example. Some people might believe that is a natural prohibition but in our legal system we have formalised rules of punishment of people who commit incest. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, it seemed as if these were the natural laws of God. Not to kill – we know we shouldn't kill people but there's a lot of killing happening in the world. We need more missionaries to tell people not to kill however if you need missionaries then it's not a natural law. It's not inherent, it's not intrinsic.

In dzogchen we talk about potential. How potential manifests depends on participation in the emergent situation. It describes the inseparability of three aspects: the openness of the mind itself; the ungraspable clarity of immediate experience; and how we participate in that. In relation to what I said about the dissolving meditation and seeing that everything emerges from emptiness, that is a practice that you have to do in order to realign yourself with the intrinsic integrity of these three aspects. We're not artificially constructing these three, but we can't open to them unless we start to remove our false beliefs and practise.

When we really enter into the practice, the clarity of the inseparability of these three arises without dependence on concepts. To visualise Padmasambhava you have to remember what he looks like. Because although we say that Padmasambhava is the unity of all the deities or all the refuges,

Tara and Padmasambhava are not identical therefore when you're doing a Padmasambhava practice you don't visualise Tara. In tantra you create your visualisation of Padmasambhava, either in a gradual or in a sudden way but in dzogchen we want to have minimal effort, minimal construction, so that the intrinsic can show itself. It doesn't show itself through concepts.

Of course, if we never encountered the dharma this would probably never occur to us so we need the lineage to get some instruction. Somebody explains it to us, points out that what we take to be normal is not the truth and so on. The teachings say that instructions are a finger pointing at the moon. The moon and the finger are not the same. Whatever the teachings say about the mind and clarity and so on is still a veil, even if only a thin veil. The thick veil is our busyness in our world with our ordinary concerns, knowing who we are, fulfilling our social roles as if they are the truth of our existence.

Our Nyingmapa system has nine different vehicles or styles of practice. The beginning ones start with our ordinary assumptions: *"I exist and the world is quite dangerous so I have to take care."* But as we move up these different vehicles, we have a dissolving or thinning of the opacity of our beliefs. Some of it is direct and some of it is indirect.

The Bodhisattva vows, for example, are to work in this life and in all my future lives for the liberation of all sentient beings. Who could say such a thing? James Low from Scotland should not be saying such things. Summer is coming and he would like a little bit of free time. If he's going to save all sentient beings then that means no more holidays for him. Day and night, forever and ever, he's got to be available. So the one who is saying the Bodhisattva vow is a kind of placeholder installed in that place for the one who will be able to do it. It means, *"I want to be able to do it and hopefully I will be able to do it."* In that sense the aspiration is so big that it's softening our self-protective notion of what's important. It allows a more spacious and welcoming possibility of relating to other living beings.

As we go up through these different levels of practice, the veil or the thickness of our self-focusing starts to thin more and more and more and so the kind of practice that we do has less and less to do with laws and rules. If you become a monk or a nun there are many, many vows that you have to keep and in tantra there are also certain commitments, samaya vows and so on. But in dzogchen the only issue essentially is to stay present.

Of course this is strange because I can be like a schoolteacher and tell you to 'be present' and to 'pay attention' But presence in dzogchen is not something you can do. It's not a way of managing yourself to be in a particular orientation. It's that you allow yourself to relax into the presence, which is intrinsic. I'm not trying to cut through some veil of ignorance to get to the light but rather I'm trying

to relax out of my tensions and preoccupations which cause me not to be present. They cause me not to be present although awareness is always present.

The ego is a pattern of the energy of the mind. If you fixate on the patterning of energy – you live in samsara. If you relax into the basic openness of the mind itself then these patterns come and go without constructing a separate self. The self which is constructed is like a mirage. There is actually no substance in the mirage. The ego, or the self-formation or pattern, is here – it functions through us. To say that it doesn't exist at all would be manifestly ridiculous. We have our bodies, the way our life functions, in terms of how we earn money, who we relate to and so on. But when we observe how this is emerging – we see that this is empty patterning.

This doesn't mean that the world has simply one flavour of tedium. Everything has the flavour of emptiness but emptiness has many, many flavours of appearance. When you see a rainbow in the sky, even as an adult, you tend to look twice. 'Wow!' It has an impact. The impact of an empty appearance. It's the same with everything we experience –empty sound, empty appearance – it all has impact. We are empty patterning. We are not fixed. We know that when we meet different people we emerge, we manifest, differently with different people: I am co-emergent with you. *"Oh, I am empty appearance impacted by how you are appearing"* – these empty forms are in a ceaseless process of mutual influence. This is not organised by the imposition of rules and regulations.

[13.6] IT SEEMS EASIER ME TO LET GO OF UNPLEASANT MEMORIES, PAST TRAUMATIC EVENTS AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS. WHY IS IT HARDER TO LET GO OF PLEASANT MEMORIES, JOY AND BLISS?

That question interests me partly because it is not my experience. I think what it means is that however our memory registers good or bad events is not derived from some organising principle. But it is the interface between the balancing of our constitutional factors and what is around us.

The body has a balance of the five elements. Some people have a lot of wind and fire and they are very light and quickly respond to situations. Some people have a lot of earth element and little access to space. This can arise as a kind of stuckness, a lack of interest in the world, a lack of enthusiasm. Or it can link with the wind element as a will to power and a need to enforce one's idea of the proper shape of things. Then the five skandhas, our shape and form and the kinds of shapes and forms that we link with in the world – and how we organise these. The second skandha, feeling, organises things in terms of pleasurable, unpleasurable or neutral. These attributions tend to change through our life cycle and are affected by culture. For example, nowadays people are very weary of the COVID lockdown. We long to be out and to have freedom, something more unpredictable, more

spontaneous. In other countries that are more unstable than Britain people would like to have lockdown and security and nothing unpredictable happening.

What we should try to do is to see how the patterns that we take to be some kind of eternal truth are in fact not very eternal. Observe the dynamic unfolding of experience. If you find it harder to let go of positive experiences, that might be very warming for you. Or the fact that they have actually gone and all you have is the memory might be saddening for you. If you have hope, unrealistic hope, then that too can be a problem.

The dharma texts often say that we should be free of hopes and fears, hopes and doubts. Hope is usually a projection into the future: *"It'll work out fine. We'll all be okay. No worries."* But we're going to die. We could have a happy human life but then we die and then the wind of karma will take us somewhere – we know not where. You might not care. You might think, *"Oh, let's wait and see."* For me, as I look around the world there are many places I would not like to be born. Even to be born as a human being there are many frightening places.

In that respect, happy experiences that become a kind of belief that life will be okay, are not very useful. On the other hand, to be always going over bad things that have happened, predisposes you to become fearful about what may happen and risk averse. In dharma we want to find the middle way between these two polarities.

If your tendency is to fixate on happy memories, try to see the causal conditions that gave rise to them. Merely thinking, *"Oh I'm a lucky person, my life's always been good."* is not examining deeply the causes which might have given rise to this situation. *"Well I'm happy. Some people are sad. I don't know why they're sad. I'm just happy. Life's just like that."* There is no dharma in thinking this way since we are not seeing some of the patterns and structures which give rise to the different kinds of experience. Good times come and go. Bad times come and go. To align with the notion of being sad and a loser and that things never work out for me is clearly quite limiting. But also from the dharma point of view to have the sense, *"Ah, I'm a happy-go-lucky kind of guy. Things work out okay for me. Life's good."* is also a little shallow. That is why the Mahayana tradition tells us that all sentient beings have been our mother.

—*"I'm healthy and happy – that's good. They're not so happy. Well, that's their luck."*

—*"Oh, but they were once my mother. I am actually connected with them and they are suffering. Maybe I shouldn't just live in my little happy bubble. Maybe I could open myself to be useful."*

The central point is not to define yourself into a fixed position but always to see how potential arises out of the uncaused openness of our basic potential.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

14

ZOOM

JAMES LOW

23.6.2021

[14.1] I SOMETIMES THINK I AM NOT DOING ENOUGH DHARMA STUDY OR PRACTICE. HOW CAN I DEAL WITH BEING SO SELF-CRITICAL?

On an outer level, you can try to frighten yourself by thinking that you will die soon however that probably won't help you very much. From the dzogchen view, study will not take you where you want to go. Better to become close to yourself and for this we use the Guru Yoga, gathering yourself into alignment with the openness which is your own ground.

When you have a thought that you're not making progress or that you are not trying hard enough, don't enter into the semantic content of what you're saying to yourself. Try to take the criticism as telling you that *"I'm deeply in duality."* You can't struggle your way out of duality. You have to relax out of it. If you're struggling, you're struggling *against* something and this increases subject/object division.

It may sound paradoxical, but when you are feeling that you're not doing well and that you're a failure then that is exactly the time to be most kind to yourself. Subject and object arise as separate vectors in the absence of clarity regarding the open ground. So we want to gather together both parts, both subject and object, and allow them to settle into their own spacious origin.

With ignorance we fall into the belief that *'I am real and the world is real.'* We receive confirmation of this belief from parents, schools, friends and so on, but it's a delusion. Therefore strengthening the sense of a fundamental split, a separation between subject and object, will not help us relax into intrinsic wholeness. The best remedy is the Guru Yoga.

[14.2] IS IT VALID NOWADAYS TO DO PRACTICE LINKED TO THE MAMOS? HOW CAN WE INTEGRATE VAJRAYANA RITUALS WITH CONTEMPORARY LIFE?

Mamos are various kinds of mother spirits or forces who move the energies of the world. Vajrayana rituals are generally concerned with power. They are activities which are designed to bring about a shift, not just in the practitioner but in the environment around them. The forces of destruction in the environment are very intense nowadays. The forces of destruction running around in the minds of sentient beings are very intense. You can devote a lot of energy to rituals which are designed to shift the patterning of the emergent movement of the five elements – that is to say, to turn the five poisons into the five wisdoms – but this kind of practice is not likely to have much power behind it unless you have built up a huge amount of focus to your meditation power because you're

trying to overcome the negative forces in the world. It's a conflictual structure. Unless your understanding of emptiness as the ground and field of both aspects of the conflictual structure is strong, then you can get sucked into trying to dominate something which seems to be attacking you. Therefore the more provocations increase, the more important it is to be aware of your starting point in the practice.

There are many, many people concerned with power in the human dimension at the moment. The amount of money spent every year on the production of weapons and armaments is shocking and disgraceful. To use tantra as an antidote to dualistic hostility is a great and worthy task but it requires both a lot of meditation power and effective skill.

There are very many different tantric rituals that can be done but until now war has not stopped. The exploitation of children has not stopped. The expelling of refugees from war zones has not stopped. The destruction of natural resources has not stopped. Perhaps it's better for us to turn our attention towards the main task of understanding our mind. When your mind is clear, you don't get caught by signs and names and identities.

[14.3] PLEASE EXPLAIN THE MEANING OF THE THREE ROOTS: GURU, YIDAM & DAKINI.

Yidam or deva is a meditation deity. In order to access the deity for meditation you need to have initiation. The initiation is the work of the guru. The guru opens the way to liberation and in the tantric method this is done by linking you in the first instance to your personal meditation deity. The more practice you do, the more you can start to feel *"I am this deity."* Then you realise *"Oh, and I'm also my ordinary identity that I've had since I first became conscious in this body."* So now I have two identities. Which is the real one? Neither is real. Both are illusion. The mind itself has no need of identity.

Manifestation arises as patterning within the field of patterning. If you go for a walk you see houses, people, cars... These appearances are born from your identification. Usually, when you're in the street, you don't think the car is an aspect of emptiness, or that a person is an expert of emptiness. That's why in tantra we visualise again and again an open sky out of which comes rainbow light that forms the seed syllable. The seed syllable becomes the mandala and in the mandala palace is the deity. Through the repeated practice we realise that everything is the mandala of the deity.

We use the imagination, or visualisation or conscious hallucination, as the means to see that this whole world is a hallucination. Without your mind there is no world. You might *think* *"Yes, but*

when I die the world will still be here.” That's an idea in your mind. Without the mind there is neither nihilism nor eternalism. These are all ways of fantasising how the world is. If you see that the ground of the mind is open and empty, then you see these imaginings are playful; they're not serious. Better not to be serious. When we are serious we want to know the truth and when you know the truth in a way that you can articulate, then you can find other people who don't agree with you. These are the heretics, the misbelievers! And then you have to decide what to do with them. Do you murder them today? Do you banish them to the gulag? Once you are the standard bearer for the holy burden of truth, there are many nasty things you have to do!

The function of the guru and the yidam is to prevent us from being caught in the notion of dogmatic truth. Everything that arises is an illusion. The word dakini has many different meanings but for meditators the dakinis are the movement of whatever thoughts, feeling, sensations are rising moment by moment, like shooting stars in the sky. The Tibetan translation of yidam is *khandro* which literally means moving in the sky. The sky is the symbol of our mind. Day or night, things are always moving in our mind: memory, sensation, smells, taste, colours and so on. This is the play of the dakini. It's movement. This is why she is called *khandro*. *Dro* is a verb and means 'to go'. In dzogchen we are concerned with the self-arising and self-liberation of whatever occurs. This is like the *khandros* – appearing and then vanishing. Sometimes in the summer you can sit outside and see the little fireflies. Light comes on then it vanishes, then it comes on again somewhere else. Well, this is like in our mind. Something appears – you hear a sound, you turn your head, then you see something else, something else.

As you develop a sense of this as revelation of the dakini you then come to see that the teacher or the guru is also moving. The guru has a human form. They have a name and you can find out things about them: where they were born, what they like, what they do and so on. What does that tell us? You have information – but about what? You now have some ideas in your mind about someone. Does your knowledge about the guru tell you what they are thinking or feeling in this moment? The guru is ungraspable. That's why the texts are always recommending us not to judge the guru. This is not because the guru is unusually special. It may even be that the guru's behaviour is quite provocative for you. *“When they do that, I feel this. They are the cause of me feeling like this. I don't want to feel like this. They can't be a very good guru if they make me feel like this.”* If you notice yourself having a sequence of thoughts like that then hopefully you realise that *“This is all in my mind however I don't know what's happening in the guru's mind.”* and see how you bring concepts together into a very solid and definitive package.

My thoughts and my memories and my knowledge of the guru seem to go out to the guru. This is how it appears on the stupid level of ordinary functioning. But when we do a little practice, we start to see it a little differently. When I throw my concept at the guru, it doesn't quite arrive there but turns like a boomerang and suddenly it's hitting me – because I'm much better at throwing the boomerang than catching it. So now we get beaten up by our own thoughts. And it's not just to the guru – I throw my thoughts out to my mom, my dad, my kids, my partner – whoever.

When I believe that my thoughts tell the truth about the world as it is – I am deluded. The patterning of the arising of thoughts, feelings and so on is like an ornamentation of the space of our manifesting. To be alive is to be in a drama. It could be tragedy, comedy, tragic comedy, soap opera – there are many different kinds of drama. To see this and see how we interpret the characters around us – this is all just entertainment. Nothing is established. These plays can last the whole of our life. If we don't wake up from the play, then our actions and reactions are conditioned by the script that we are following.

So the guru, the yidam and the dakini function together to indicate that this is a drama. What arises for us is dynamic and interactive. There is no true existence to it and yet we can't just jump out of it. To really believe in it is delusion and leads to endless confusion. But if you thin your belief, then you see that the delusion is just an illusion – like a mirage. Then you don't have to fight against appearances nor go under their power, but maintain the clarity of form and emptiness and respond with kindness to beings who are trapped in delusion.

[14.4] I AM NOT SURE IF I WANT TO HAVE A FAMILY OR IF I WANT TO DEDICATE MY LIFE TO DHARMA PRACTICE. I COULD LOSE TIME IN FAMILY LIFE. WHAT IS YOUR ADVICE?

You can lose time in all sorts of things. You can lose time by living in a dharma centre, by being involved in organisational politics. You can spend a lot of time studying dharma in a way that gives you a lot of information, which you will forget at the point of death.

Several issues are embedded in the question. What does it mean to dedicate a life to dharma practice? Do you have such powerful one-pointed attention that if you direct your mind to something it will stay there? If you have never found dharma boring, then you are very unusual. To have a life influenced by dharma, massaging dharma into your life, is one possibility.

To give your life to dharma to protect yourself from worldly activities is another. In Tibet you could become a monk or a nun. If you lived in a small cave or a hermitage usually there were people

who would make sure you at least had some food to eat. This is not the case in every country. If you were living in a cave in Tibet, there was no tax collector. There was no national bureaucracy that was sending you endless forms to fill in. In western countries there's a lot of activity necessary for simple life maintenance. It may not be helpful to set up a duality whereby on the one hand there is ceaseless dharma practice, which is good, and on the other hand worldly life, which is a waste of time. We have to know that dharma practice can also involve bad things. Building a monastery destroys many insects. Butter lamps are very good for frying moths. Monasteries may insist on the superiority of their lineage. There was a lot of competition and rivalry between different monasteries and schools in Tibet.

Living alone and doing your dharma practice every day may be very good – if you have the temperament for it. Some people are very extrovert, others are more introvert. Extroverts gain energy by communicating with other people and may get a bit depleted on their own. Introverts replenish themselves by being on their own and may get overwhelmed by being with other people. If you think that one way of life is good in and of itself, then you're saying that there is an inherent existence, a true truth, to this activity. But that's not true. Everything is relational. Everything arises in dependent origination. Dependent origination means that on the basis of this, that arises. Our embodied self is in an environment. How the environment influences me. *“No, but once I decide that I’m going to do it, I can make it work for me.”* If you have to make it work for you, you're constructing a self, which is something artificial.

From the point of view of dzogchen, you have to work with the circumstances. Circumstances have many different flavours. In general other people are quite annoying however being annoyed and irritated could be a very helpful dharma path. It's very easy to say, *“May all beings be happy.”* but if you believe that your lover is a real bastard or an absolute bitch, then it's more difficult. *“I’m very happy to pray for all sentient beings, but just not the people near me. I’ll leave them out since they are quite annoying!”* Life can be simpler in a retreat: it's only you and your holy thoughts. Having annoying people around gives you a sense of your existence. You might even want to say something to them, tell them how terrible they are. Subject and object are dancing together very strongly. If you live an ordinary life – family life, working with other people in an office or a factory – it can provide many such opportunities for dharma practice.

We have to remember the structure of the practice. It begins with our immersion in duality, where things seem quite powerfully real. We pray to the guru or to the deity and receive the blessing of the lights of initiation. We dissolve into the light with the deity or the guru and enter non-dual emptiness. From that state we arise with the understanding that all sound is mantra, all appearance is the body of the deity, all thoughts are the movement of the *dharmakāya* mind of the deity. Whether

you are alone in a cave or in a room in a busy house that you share with other people – both are mandalas. Whether the sound you hear is the wind blowing past the entrance to your cave or your children fighting over who's going to go on the bicycle first. Both are sound. Sound and emptiness.

Or we can have a more pure vision, where we see everything as the display of the energy of the mind – moving in many different patterns. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing, we have to not forget the view. If we're practising according to dzogchen, our meditation is a way of confirming the view. The view is how we see. So if you see according to the view, then life is easy.

It always depends on your own character – what will suit you. Everything is equal in emptiness. Some people are drawn towards peaceful deities; some people are drawn towards wrathful deities. One form is not better than another but the form has to speak to you. To put yourself first and dharma second is not helpful. To put dharma first and yourself second can also not be helpful. If you are doing a practice that you don't feel connected with, if you're just bean-counting hundreds of thousands of mantras, the practice is unlikely to have its full power. It has to be a heartfelt connection.

So in terms of devotion – you have to follow your heart – then it becomes fully alive. Each of us – alone – has to find out what our heart is, where our heart is pointing and then see if we can follow it.

[14.5] I HAVE DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING THE DZOGCHEN VIEW. HOW CAN I OVERCOME THIS?

It depends on what you mean by 'understand'. Understand is to stand underneath something – as if there was a dogma, like an umbrella, that we are holding up. The dzogchen view is to be massaged into yourself. When the text says that the mind is like the sky, don't think about the sky. Go outside and look at the sky. The sky is sometimes very light, open and free; sometimes it is very cloudy and dark. Does the sky rest on anything? Does it have a top? Does it have a limit on either side? Don't think about what science says about the sky; that's another narrative. Have the flavour of the sky – *"Oh I can't say anything about the sky. Sometimes it looks big, sometimes it looks small."* The sky is a space of appearance. *"Okay, so my mind is like the sky. Maybe then my mind is a space of appearance. What is appearing in my mind?"* Stay with that and allow it to be self-revealing – as it is. Sometimes the mind looks like subject side, sometimes it looks like object side, sometimes it looks like inside, sometimes it looks like outside. This doesn't make sense. Well, that's because it's not like anything else. It's easy enough to provide some explanation or evaluation of the things we encounter in our daily life but our mind is not like that. If we try to understand our mind in the same way that we

would try to understand something in the world, then it will be hard to understand our mind. This is why we spend time looking first at these famous five questions:

Does mind have a size?

Does it have a shape or a colour?

Does it come from somewhere?

Does it stay somewhere when it seems to be here?

Does it go somewhere else?

You have to look and look without expectation. Look without prediction. Look without hypothesis. The more you see clearly how it is, then you will see that there is nothing to understand – it just is. However if you start from immersion in a conceptual framework, then it's very difficult.

So don't try too hard. Don't get distracted. Stay present. See without looking. To see without looking doesn't make sense, but try going outside into a park, slowly turn around and just follow your gaze. You're seeing a lot. You're not looking – you are receiving. You're not looking *for* something. See what you see. *"I cannot tell you what I see. I don't see any-thing. I only see light."* That is what seeing is. When you *look* you see a mix of light and concept – because you're looking *for* something. So just be kind and fresh and enjoy life and see what you see.

[14.6] IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE OUR EYES OPEN IN THE WHITE AA GURU YOGA?

Again, it depends on what you mean by important. For some people it's difficult to do it with the eyes open. It's important to do the practice however you can do it. If it's easier with your eyes closed, then do it like that at first. But be aware that the openness you experience with your eyes closed, is partly conceptual. So, if possible, have the eyes open. But never with a strong light shining into them.

It you are doing the Guru Yoga with dissolving – the question is, *"If I am visualising merging with guru and into a ball of white light, can the eyes be closed then?"* The eyes can be closed or very slightly open. Some people need a lot of light to come in to give the sense of visualising. Although we say 'human being' there is no standard factory. You are generated and emerged out of your karmic tendencies, so you have to work with yourself. The practice of merging into the guru and the ball of light is designed to open you directly to the experience of emptiness. There is nothing – but I'm still

here – but not here as someone. If you really have the experience of nothing, then you have nothing and awareness. At first anyway, you can do that with your eyes closed.

[14.7] PLEASE SAY MORE ABOUT WHAT THE IMAGES OF THE MIRROR AND THE CRYSTAL BALL ILLUSTRATE. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THEM?

The texts describe placing a crystal ball on a piece of blue cloth and then on some red cloth. On the blue cloth it has a kind of bluish tinge. On the red cloth it has a slightly reddish tinge. The ball itself has not changed colour, becoming red or blue. It remains pure and clear, but on the cloth it appears with this slight coloration.

This is used as a symbol of the mind always being open in relation to whatever is arising in the mind. It takes on the coloration of an emotion or a memory. These arisings are not in the mind for very long. It is as if suffused with emotion – and now it's gone, and now it's gone. So that is the quality we get from the crystal ball. Tibetans call *dangwa*. It points to the brightness or the bright specificity of this moment. It is not caused by a thing, but the constantly shifting energy of the field of our experience brings up coloration after coloration after coloration. This is happening in you and through you.

This is very helpful. Some moment of anger arises in the mind. It has a particular tonal quality to it – and it's gone. At the time it seemed to have some hooks that pulled you into the feeling of anger – that you might want to be angry or that you don't want to be angry. Being in that conceptual elaboration is like taking a syringe of coloured ink and trying to inject it into a crystal. That would be a ridiculous thing to try but we do it with our mind. I'm really angry. Something is happening. Nothing is happening. Nothing looks like something – if you believe. That is the attachment. Stay with the first arising, the first emergence. That is the function of the crystal ball.

The image of the mirror is used in different ways but generally it's showing the ungraspability of what is appearing. The reflection is in the mirror. You can't take it out. You look in the mirror again and again. You see "*The reflection is in the mirror.*" What you see is the reflection. The emptiness of the mirror is the host of the appearance of the reflection. The reflection is the generosity of the mirror. The generosity of the mirror is inexhaustible. The wing mirror of a car will show hundreds of thousands of reflections. The number of reflections doesn't exhaust the potential of the mirror – it is an infinite potential. Likewise when we look at our mind stuff is happening all the time, like reflections. They are in the mind and then they're gone.

If you are committed to the dualistic view that 'I', the subject, am inside my body and that is the world out there, outside my body, then this will be very hard to understand. When you do the practice, especially the Guru Yoga of the White Aa sitting with your eyes open, experiences arise, seemingly as if inside and outside with no true separation between them, no differentiation. In that sense everything is a reflection. What you see – houses, trees, cars – these are like reflections in your mind.

Normally we would say, *“Hang on. This is actually a motor car. It's not something in my mind. If it was traveling on the road and hit me, I would be hurt. It might even kill me”* That's a very logical sequence of thoughts. But our practice is to be a little bit suspicious of thoughts. Start with the openness at the end of the third Aa. Very open. Very cool. The mind is empty and full simultaneously. This fullness is passing through. Ungraspable. It's already gone before I can apprehend it. Each moment is this and this and this – like a bubbling mountain spring. But if I fall into the flow of thought and employ the thoughts to make sense of what is happening, then I think about what is going on. I think on the basis that my thoughts tell me the truth about what is happening. So then it seems self-evident that *“I'm in here, and the world's out there.”* The teachings of dzogchen are very difficult to follow then.

Dzogchen says to start with relaxation and stay with relaxation. Whereas worldly life says to start with effort. Perhaps you can remember being a child, encounter things you don't understand. *“Mum, why are these people doing that? Where does dad go in the morning? Why do we eat this food?”* Children are fed stories before they are fed food. It is true that thoughts and concepts will give you power in the world but they also enslave you to your karmic vision.

[14.8] I SEE SUFFERING BEINGS YET I PRACTISE TO SEE THAT THERE ARE NO ACTUAL BEINGS. THIS IS CONFUSING.

Well, from what we've been looking at this evening – it's not true that you see sentient beings. You *think* sentient beings. They are your interpretation – according to the nature of your eyeballs, the way your brain functions, whatever concepts you've internalised in the course of your life and so on. Some people are very happy when they are aware of suffering. You would not be a happy torturer if you got upset at people's screams. For a singer on the stage, the applause of the audience is a sign of success. For a torturer, the screams of the victim are a sign of success. Everything is open to interpretation. Whenever we think that we have discovered a definite truth, this is usually the limit of

our imagination. How could people be so cruel? Quite easily. How can people be so selfish? Quite easily.

If you develop a sensitivity which brings your attention towards how people are in the world and you construe that in terms of your interpretation –‘they are suffering’ – that is your mental activity. In general terms that is ethical or good mental activity. Dharma would like to build on that and to show that we should help suffering beings, but do it in the manner of a dream. As long as beings are attached to the idea of the reality of their existence, then they become upset whenever this is undermined. However we all know we are going to die. We still need to be able to sleep at least some of the night. Our being in the world with others is not a fixed situation at all. It is an emergent situation influenced by how we conceptualise it. Our practice is to get direct opening. Then you see without any doubt, without any storyline, that everything emerges from the open empty ground.

[14.9] WHEN I’M SITTING, RESTING IN STILLNESS & PRESENCE, AT SOME POINT THERE IS A LOSS OF VIVIDNESS AND LUCIDITY. I DON’T FALL ASLEEP YET I’M NOT FULLY AWARE, IT’S RATHER FLAT & DULL. WHEN I RETURN TO THE MORE SPACIOUS EXPERIENCE I BECOME AWARE THAT I HAVE BECOME SOMEWHAT VEILED OR COVERED.

This experience is not uncommon. From the buddhadharma point of view, we have different kinds of obscurations. We have the obscurations of the emotions, especially the emotions that we group and refer to as ‘the five poisons’. The primary poison is mental opacity – the home base of my sense of self – and from this come attraction, aversion, jealousy and pride. We also have the obscuration of all that seems knowable. So, when we are walking about, we not only see things but we *know* them – we experience knowable things. There are two aspects to this: one is their thingness, and the other is that they are know-able or apprehend-able. That has been going on for us for a long, long time – in previous lives as well – and so there are many hazy veils of thingness.

We may rely on the light of faith, which is useful, but it is developed by faith and in that sense it's like the light of the intellect. Both are like the kind of torch that works when you keep squeezing the handle. The light is bright for a while, but when your hand gets tired of squeezing then the light stops. The key thing is to relax into the intrinsic light of the mind. That becomes easier when you see that everything which occurs has the same ground of the open sky of the mind. We see rainbows in the sky and we see clouds in the sky. You don't find rainbows outside the sky and you don't find clouds outside the sky. These are two citizens of the sky. They're not there on a transient visa; they're entitled to stay there. This is how the sky shows itself. The cloud and the sky come together.

From the point of view of dzogchen, the mind and dullness, depression, anxiety, loneliness and so on all come together. If we think, *"I don't want my mind to be miserable like that. I want the bright shiny mind that I've read about in the books. I've seen the pictures of the Buddha. I've looked in the online catalogue and that's what I ordered. But now when I open the package – it's not the same. I've been cheated! Either I have very, very bad karma or the meditation practice is not right or my teacher has taught me the wrong things."* Maybe that's how it is for a while. All emergent things – all phenomena – are impermanent.

So in the dzogchen practice we don't do anything to change it. Sit for short periods of time. If your mind is very heavy – sit for five minutes and just sit with the dullness, with the heaviness, with the confusion. If you try to brighten up your mind you are only creating something artificial. You want to find the clarity of the disclosure of the mind. Your dull heavy feeling is the clarity of the disclosure of the mind.

The problem is when you interpret a particular mode of the arising of the mind and take it to be a problem. In fact the problem is not what is arising but rather that you interpret it. Everything is the radiance of the mind. We only find this out by long sitting. Then however the mind is, is fine. Because this mind is not my mind. It's not my possession. How it is, is not a report card on my value as a human being. It is like this for a while, just as we have all been meeting this evening on Zoom and in a while we will vanish.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

15

ZOOM

JAMES LOW

6.10.2021

www.simplybeing.co.uk

[15.1] CAN DZOGCHEN BE RECONCILED WITH A SCIENTIFIC VIEW OF THE WORLD? DO THEY NEED TO BE? IF THEY CAN'T BE RECONCILED, HOW DO WE RESOLVE THE TENSION BETWEEN WESTERN CULTURAL BELIEFS AND DHARMA VIEWS?

They are oppositional. Generally speaking, science begins with a materialistic view that life begins from chemical interaction and gradually the species evolved and then human beings. Human beings all have culture and language. In the culture of Tibet there was a subgroup interested in dzogchen. So in that sense it's like a small leaf on a small twig from a branch of the great tree of evolution. It's a reasonable, ethical non-violent way to pass your time until you die.

The view of dzogchen is that the mind is not a thing. The ground or basis of our presence is the luminous quality of the infinite expanse that we manifest into and from. Science starts from objective inquiry, with experiments which should be replicable. From a Buddhist point of view, everything is impermanent and specific to the moment and so it cannot be replicated. These are very different approach.

The second part of the question is *"Do they need to be reconcilable?"* I don't think so. Science is a language for functioning in the world of duality and dzogchen is a method for awakening to the illusory nature of duality. They run on parallel train tracks; they don't meet.

The third part of the question is *"If they can't be reconciled, how can we resolve the tension between western cultural beliefs and dharma views?"* Generally, we manage this by cognitive dissonance. That is to say, we hold in mind ideas which are fundamentally contradictory but yet we still support each of them. You might support a football team and believe it's the best, but you know that it doesn't win many matches. The idea that it's the best team is linked with emotion. The knowledge that it's not the best team is an abstract concept. I have read in books that I'm going to die but I don't really believe it. We're used to holding such irreconcilable different views. As long as the ideas are speculative concepts it doesn't matter too much. But if something is a spiritual path – a way of living, a guide to how we should live – then maybe it's different. Then we have to gather our energy together and allow it to flow in one direction because if we're dispersed all over the place, we won't make much progress.

For the purposes of practice, we have to choose. Personally, I think dharma teachings go much, much deeper than modern materialist thought.

[15.2] ARE MIND & MATTER TRULY DIFFERENT?

These exist in binary opposition. If it's the mind, it's not matter. If it's matter, it's not the mind. In modern research, science pushes towards the conclusion that the mind is matter. From the dharma point of view there *is* no matter. Everything that you are in contact with is revealed to you as experience. If you pick up an orange, you feel the skin. Its different sensations are revealed to you. When you pick up a rubber ball it feels different. On the basis of processing your sensory experiences you apply the concepts you have learned and so you are able to say that an orange is not a rubber ball. But the experience of both objects was mental. You don't actually experience the orange as orange. As you hold the orange in your hand some scent may come out from the peel; you're aware of the smell, of the colour, of the weight. Colour and weight may appear to be objective facts but what we experience is a colour. That is to say, the colour is revealed through a co-emergence of relatedness – there is the object, the sense organ and the sense consciousness. On top of that we have mental consciousness, which is providing additional information to tell us something about oranges. So in fact if we attend purely to what is arising for us, we see this as a flow of experience. I cannot find the orange *per se*, in itself; what I experience is the orange *for me*. So we have a co-emergence of what we call the object – an orange – and myself, as the experiencer.

From the dharma point of view, materialism is simply one way of thinking about experience. You can change your notion of materials. Some people, for example, like to go rock climbing. They look at a cliff face and they feel excitement. Someone else looks at the cliff face and immediately feels fear. Are they looking at the same surface of rock? Can we separate the perception from the emotion, which arises so very quickly? The dharma says that everything we encounter is interpreted. It's not that the world is there and we arrive afterwards to meet it. The world is a vast potential which reveals specific patterns according to our participation. So in that sense there is no matter, or if there is, we have no contact with it. As soon as we start to think about it, we bring in our concepts of it.

This is expressed traditionally by saying that the dharmadhatu – the space or the openness within which things or phenomena appear – is the hospitality of the mind itself. The mind is not a thing inside myself. The functioning of my consciousness through the sense organs and memories and plans and so on is movement within the space of the mind, within the field of awareness. These mental experiences – memories, feelings, thoughts – come and go very quickly. They are like the light of little fireflies flying around the garden in the summertime. This infinite garden is the dharmadhatu. It's the space of all these transient movements of appearing, disappearing, appearing, disappearing.

Once you start to become aware of impermanence and you sit to do some meditation, you're aware of the ceaseless flow of appearing and disappearing. The same is occurring when you walk down the street. The same is occurring when you go into your kitchen to make a cup of coffee, when you go to get water from the tap. You've done this so many times before. You know this is the tap for getting water. What you're approaching is something that you are interpreting: *'This is the tap.'* The tap doesn't say anything. It's you who calls the tap 'the tap'. The tap doesn't call itself 'a tap' – it just is. And what is it? It's a tap.

We approach everything through our mental interpretation, through our concepts which are linked with feelings and associations. From the Buddhist point of view, this thing we call stupidity or mental dullness or assumption is the dullness or the blindness of not being in a permanent state of wonder at the strangeness of the world. You go to a gallery, an art gallery, a museum, or a big park to look at sculpture. There's a famous sculpture there – so you look at it and you walk around it seeing it from different points of view. Imagine bringing the same attitude into the kitchen to look at the tap. When you look at it from one angle one shape arises, when you look from another angle there is another shape. The actuality of what is there is incomprehensible. You can't comprehend it – too many possibilities are displaying themselves in this object, this tap, this site of manifestation. But we don't need to trouble ourselves doing all this *"because it's just the kitchen tap"*.

Falling asleep in our own life is actually quite reassuring and comforting. There's a kind of comfort in knowing what things are, but it's the comfort of wrapping yourself in a veil. When we look, when we start to look and see what is there, we see the gap between what is revealed to us and our interpretive conceptualisation. So then we start to notice that the flow of experience through all the senses never stops. This is the challenge for our dualistic concepts, our consciousness that says, *"I need to know what things are."* However once we can start to relax and stop straining to impose meaning on the situation, we find that the whole field of experience is arising together with us on the inside of it. This is not something happening *to* me but is a co-emergence. As I participate I get this specific revelation of the potential. Alongside this particular revelation I'm also moving. Out of my potential some new sensation arises and so constellation after constellation is moving. By staying with this we come to see that I am not a thing and the world is not made of things. This field of potential is self-showing. It has a clarity. It's ceaselessly displaying. As I am, so the world reveals itself. If I am present and sensitive, many kinds of revelation or experience arise. What will I do with them? There's nothing to do with them. When you swim in the sea – there are some waves moving – you move with the waves. Sea is moving, you are moving. *"What does it mean?"* Nothing, it's just movement. *"But what is it for?"* It's not for anything, it's just pleasure. *"But surely it must be for something? Oh, I know. It's for exercise. I'm keeping my body healthy. Every day I'm going to swim and I will feel better each*

day." I now have a narrative of self-management. I have an intention towards the water which blinds me to the water. But if I'm swimming *with* the water, then how I move is dependent on the water and I also influence the water.

In relation to the three kayas, the three aspects of the Buddha, the *dharmakāya* (the openness of the Buddha's mind) is just being there in the sea, in the openness of everything occurring at once. Dharmakāya is the awareness that reveals the sea and the swimmer together. As soon as you think, "*I am swimming. I'm doing quite well, swimming so far out. I enjoy swimming,*" you get a retraction into this isolated autonomous person, and that is not the *dharmakāya*. That is the individual ego-self.

If we relax and allow the arising of the experience, then this movement is *sambhogakāya* – the form or the modality of enjoyment. We enjoy . What's it for? It's not for anything. How do we feel when we enjoy? We feel connected. A sense of immediacy of participation. We're freed from the need to enter into judgment and make our commentary about what is going on. We simply enjoy and within that we have the sense of specific movement. This movement – your body moves, depending on your stroke, on whether or not there is wind, on whether the water is cold – the specificity of the movement is changing, moment by moment.

This is *nirmanakāya* – the illusory form of the Buddha's manifestation or apparition. The terms illusion and apparition don't mean that it's nothing at all. If you're swimming, the energy of your body is pushing on the water or you're slapping with it; in any case, you keep moving. That's what we call swimming. You don't stop, otherwise you start to sink. So if someone were to take lots of photographs of you – there's nothing stable because you are moving with the water. You can't extract one photo and say, "*This is James swimming and this is what he does when he's swimming.*" because next moment I'm doing something different. And then another and another as a big wave comes and my body is moving.

Nirmanakāya is indicating the unique specificity of each moment of participation in the field of enjoyment. When you participate in that way, a term like 'matter' has no meaning. '*I am swimming in the sea.*' – that grammatical structure allows a consolidated account of what is happening. It seems to be referring to certain clear entities. There is 'me.' 'I' am the one who is swimming. There is the sea. It is there. That's where I go to swim. I go into the water. I come out of the water. We are used to that kind of conceptualisation. My body is matter and I have to organise it in relation to other matter – the material surfaces – that I encounter. Whether it's the sea or the beach or getting into a motor car.

Here we can see the difference between samsara and nirvana. In samsara we have the experience of being a sentient being, of moving and going somewhere, in search of something. Most of the time we're acting on to the environment, trying to get some particular outcome to occur. But when you relax into the openness of awareness, a whole different quality of experience unfolds for you and then you see that the whole of life occurs within non-duality. Connectivity is primary. This is the great completion, dzogpachenpo. Everything is always connected. Separation, isolation, individualisation – these are aspects of delusion. From that point of view, material (or matter) is a misperception, a misinterpretation.

[15.3] WISDOM INDICATES THERE ARE NO TRULY EXISTING BEINGS. COMPASSION INDICATES THAT WE SHOULD RESPOND TO THE SUFFERING OF BEINGS AND TRY TO HELP THEM. HOW DO WE RECONCILE THIS AND NOT BE AN UNETHICAL BYSTANDER?

From the point of view of wisdom, we see that everything is empty. From the point of view of clarity, we see that many things occur. As I was just describing, we are part of the field of clarity. It's not that I can choose to step in or not, since I am already on the inside, but I may deny this to myself, usually in order to maintain my sense of self. Because if I am separate from the world and I have to take care of myself, then it's very important that I determine how I am.

This is the burden of isolation. It's all up to me. What shall I do? Sometimes these questions make us feel very lonely. But because I'm just me and not you – I can't copy exactly how you live. I have to work it out for myself. The more I think about myself, the more particular, the more distinct I become. This all can make the step of connecting with other people quite difficult.

I am a construct: this is a basic Buddhist idea underlying the notion of five skandhas, or five ingredients. There is form, feeling tone, perception, association or compounding, and finally consciousness. These elements have to operate together and how they operate together has to be managed. A lot of my energy is required for this self-maintenance. It is not just the maintenance of this body that I call 'my body' but also the maintenance of the patterns of concepts that I use to establish my specific individual identity. This is a fragile edifice and if I'm determined to hold it in place, then I need to say to people, *"Take care if you come near me. Don't flood me with your emotions. Don't disturb me."* Now I'm safe but lonely. I may want to connect with you, but on my terms. This leads to all the problems that occur in families and couples and so on.

From this point of view, compassion is quite difficult. For meditators the issue is – not enough emptiness. If I want to help you, then who is this 'I' who wants to help? What does 'I' as a concept

refer to? Does it refer to my history, to the pattern of my daily life or does it refer to the immediacy of my presence? To being aware, being cognisant of these things occurring? If I start from the immediacy of just being here, there is a freshness in this which allows me to drop a lot of the factors out of which I construct the shape of myself. So I'm unburdened, which allows me to be freer in how to relate. If my relating is about connectivity, then I will find myself becoming – as is possible – in this movement of connectivity.

This is the path of the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is for the other. This doesn't mean a kind of ascetic sacrifice. It's more the warmth of a plasticity of co-relatedness. We can't know in advance how it will be but in that process I will find myself revealed to myself. Through being for the other, there is more self-revelation, or revelation of the potential, that I start to manifest. So in that moment, the centre of my gravity is outside myself. But if I get frightened of that and bring it back into me, then I start wondering about my own reactions and wonder what's in it for me? Once we start calculating in this way the barrier between self and others starts to thicken. We become transactional – we're looking at the to-ing and the fro-ing rather than simply being participatory. To participate means that I start as a part. I'm already a part of the whole. I'm not placing myself, like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, into a game which is already going on. I'm already on the inside.

This is the meaning of wisdom – always to be on the inside, to be in the infinite space of emptiness. Because of this we find ourselves responding to the situation of others. We can respond to others with our mind. We can hold them in mind, we can pray for people, we can send them rays of light, we can respond with our speech, we can speak sweetly to people. We can telephone the hospital to say there is a drunk person lying on the pavement and that they need help – and the hospital will send an ambulance. We can respond with our body, feeding other people, being tender with them, and so on. How our energy flows into this field of participation will be determined by many factors and not just by our own sense of self.

If we do all that we're not going to end up as an unethical bystander. If your mind, if your heart, is turned towards the benefit of the other and you wish them well, then from the dharma point of view this is very, very important. We live in cultures which are quite materialistic and since we know that we have to care for the poor, we have to send food to people who are starving in conflict zones. What was the cause of famine in Ethiopia? War. Because the Eritreans don't like the Ethiopians. The Ethiopians don't like the Eritreans. It is called concepts. People are not intrinsically Ethiopian or Eritrean. These are concepts applied from the outside which we then internalise.

So when we say, *"May all sentient beings be happy"* and walk about seeing sentient beings then we might be aware of some cultural judgments arising in us. So relax a bit and say, *"Well, may*

they all be happy.” You might declare that *“We shouldn't have illegal immigrants.”* but when you see someone and make that judgement, be aware that *“Ah ha, this is a concept.”* The concept ‘illegal immigrant’ is not intrinsic to the person; they are just there. You see their eyes. You see some light is in their eyes. They are breathing in and out. This is their potential.

When we keep the idea ‘May all beings be happy’ we are making some great, infinite inclusion which helps to soften and dissolve the bigoted definitions of inclusion and exclusion. From that point of view saying prayers for people is very powerful. We may not be able to feed everyone we meet, but we can certainly dedicate all our merit to all beings.

From our dharma point of view, the basic cause of all the suffering in samsara is to take subject and object as truly separate and oppositional. We know that as soon as we say, *“I am not the same as you”* we move into other binary oppositions – high and low, good and bad. We see what happens in politics, in racial conflicts, in civil wars and so on. First there is the concept of difference, then there is reification of difference, and then antagonism. Conflict arises and people die.

Have a warm, open, inclusive attitude. Then you won't be an unethical bystander.

[15.4] WHAT DOES THE TERM ‘UNBORN’ MEAN WHEN APPLIED TO PHENOMENA? DO THOUGHTS ARISE FOR THE GREAT BODHISATTVAS? PLEASE EXPLAIN.

‘Born’ indicates a separation. The baby has to come out of the mother's body. Until that happens it can't participate in the world. Developmentally, the progress from a baby to an infant, to a child is ever new kinds of birth. You become born as somebody who can speak, as somebody who can feed themselves, as someone who can stand up and not fall over, as someone who can catch a ball when it's thrown to them. As the flower of their life opens into a full blossoming, at each stage the child is born into new displays of potential. That's the meaning of ‘born’ – that there is someone there, someone who is seen as having their own life, their own existence.

If something is unborn it has not come into existence. Usually we think that once you're born you keep on going until you die. There are these two markers: birth and death. There is another way of looking at it: each day something is being born, each day something is dying . For example, a child asks, *“Dad, give me a carry on your back.”* One day the dad replies, *“You weigh quite a lot now that you're four. I'll carry you to the next tree but that as far as I can carry you. You're not a baby anymore.”* Baby is gone. Baby has died. Baby was born – baby died. Now infant. Then infant dies, and adolescent comes. So many, many births – so many, many deaths.

As you apply this observation very precisely you become aware that when you breathe in and when you breathe out, you experience your mental processes differently. When you breathe in, if you start to think about something, then when you breathe out it feels more spacious. So breath by breath, I'm born in this modality and in that modality. They are not the same. I have access to different patternings, different formations, different births. Because this sequence is moving so quickly – have any of them actually been born? There is this feeling of 'Can I catch it?' Nowadays people take endless photographs and videos of their children. You can put the image in the camera and you won't be arrested but if you try to put a child in the camera then they won't fit. Children are uncatchable. Whatever you say about them is not accurate. School teachers have to write reports on their pupils. This is quite difficult; they only have so much time and so much space to write. What they write can be quite important for the child's future. Are they writing about the actual child or their own mental representation of the child?

The more we become aware of the difference between the conceptualised person and the actual immediately-revealing person, the more we see that we live mostly in a realm of fiction. We are novelists, telling stories about the world and stories about ourselves. The story creates a pattern which is comprehensible. A character has to ring true, but we are much more complex. This complexity is not a problem when it is lived; it is the quality of being unborn. If something is born then there is a place where we put it: we put a name on the baby and say, "*This is Maria.*" We hold up the baby and say, "*Look, here is Maria.*" and other people respond, "*Hello Maria.*" This baby is not Maria. Maria is a name floating in conceptual space, hovering over the child. Maria is the sign indicating her birth. But has this person been born? Is there one baby that always stays the same? When we look, maybe not.

So, conceptual apprehension creates the entity which is comprehended. I can still remember my dad saying to me "*James, why do you do that?*" Usually I had no idea. Who is the James that's being asked? It is as if I should be able to review my behaviour and my intentions and give some kind of rational explanation. But children have not yet been forced to learn how to manage themselves. We give small children the freedom not to be managed – then as you get bigger you have to self-manage. You have to maintain the cultural expectation that you are predictable – that you are an entity, that you exist in a form which can be known. This is a very heavy burden to carry. We participate, we flow with the situation. The reason we can participate is because we are part, not apart. But the name makes me apart.

When someone calls my name, I look round. Other people don't look round, because it's my name, not theirs. It's useful to investigate for ourselves how we are born according to the tone of voice of the person who calls our name. With my father's voice I could be born as 'guilty James' or

'happy James' or 'James who has to do something'. According to how my name was called, out of the portfolio or the palette of potential, a particular form of James arises. None of these is the real me or the true me, because there is no real me or true me. In that way we start to see that we are unborn and yet always birthing.

The dzogchen texts refer to this as self-arising and self-liberating. It's like when we look at the sea; the wave is arising and then it's descending. It doesn't arrive anywhere. It's like our moods and how we talk with people; we're expanding, contracting, we're pulsatory. We can investigate this and find other examples for ourselves. See how you are constellated with the various people you interact with. With some people it's very easy to say intimate things about yourself. With others it's just not, that particular patterning of yourself cannot be born – cannot manifest – with this particular person. This is also referred to as 'dependent origination'. As you are – for me – in this moment – so I am – with you – in this moment. In that way I come to experience myself as a flow of energy coming into formation, formation, formation. The same applies to all phenomena – whether it's the road where you live, or cats, or dogs, or whatever. How you experience any particular object is mood influenced.

Buddhism alerts us to be aware of the danger of objectification. Once I identify a thing I fill it with my own ideas about it. The thing is born for me through my thoughts. A house is not self-existing. A tree is not self-existing. It is born with me, or emergent with me. Everything is unborn. This is the middle way between a kind of nihilistic oblivion (that there's nothing at all) and the idea that there are permanent, reliable phenomena. Maria may be willing to say, *"Yes, I am Maria. I am willing to put the name-tag onto myself that says 'Maria.' Maria refers to me."* But how Maria is – Maria doesn't know. Maria is revealed to Maria. Maria doesn't have innate Maria-ness. The name 'Maria' is referring to a process which is continuing. Continuous, but ungraspable

Seeing this brings us to the second part of the question: *'the consequent fact that for the Great Bodhisattvas thoughts do not arise.'*

"Maria looks very sad today. I just saw her two hours ago. We didn't talk but I saw that look on her face." I interpret that she's sad. Maybe when I saw Maria, some transient thought pattern was running through her and on the basis of that I come to the conclusion that Maria is sad. I am now sharing this with you. What shall we do about it? Now we're talking about Maria as if we had definite access to the truth of who she is. The bodhisattvas don't waste their time doing this. They recognise that 'This is not Maria. This is Maria for me, my Maria.' Thinking about Maria is not Maria. Likewise when we say, *"May all sentient beings be happy"* we're not defining sentient beings. It's just an open flow of goodwill.

Generally speaking, we use concepts to secure the territory, to provide definition and prediction. I have now created this mental furniture, these structures inside me, on the basis of which I am going towards Maria. There is an actual Maria and a conceptual Maria. Perhaps Maria *is* sad – perhaps Maria's mind is full of sad thoughts – for a while – intensified by certain factors, diminished by other factors. She knows she is sad at this moment and because it's intense she's not thinking for this moment; she's just experiencing 'I feel sad.' She is pervaded by sadness. Recently the sky over London was pervaded by grey clouds full of rain and then the sky cleared. It's like that. And then Maria's happy.

Thoughts are the midwife. They are bringing illusory, graspable, definable objects into existence. But the actuality of our life – that is to say what is arising immediately into the space of the mind – is dynamic, relational and without its own essence. We now have this tension between the graspable, the seemingly born – and the unborn, the ungraspable.

The Great Bodhisattvas relax in the unborn. This is called awareness or *rigpa*. It's not a thing. It reveals a clarity – that is to say, the flowing display of this and that and that and that... Nothing has been revealed because it's unborn. And yet this revelation never stops. This is where the Great Bodhisattvas are situated. It's about enjoyment. They are enjoying the flow of experience. They're not relying on it. The mind itself is open and empty, as some of us have explored many times. It's not a thing. If something is open and empty it doesn't need anything else, it doesn't need anything added on or anything taken away – it's just open.

The Great Bodhisattvas relax in the *dharmakāya* – open mind. Experiences arise. Where do they arise? The mind is infinite. Nothing is outside it because it's infinite; it has no limit. The mind is empty. Can you get something from nothing? What you get is the appearance of something – like a rainbow in the sky, like a mirage. We can't say that nothing has occurred because our experience is continuous. But nothing that we can grasp has occurred. Ceaseless emergence of nothing-something. This is what the **HEART SUTRA** says – form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. The emptiness and the form are not two things. It's nothing-something. Because it's nothing, it's not really there. But because it's something, there is something there. What is there is the illusion of appearance, of this illusory appearance. From that point of view, in the mind of the Great Bodhisattva, many things are arising – thoughts, feelings, sensations. It's not that they don't arise at all, otherwise the mind would be just a big hole. But the thought arises as empty thought, as unborn thought. Think of the Great Mother Prajñāpāramitā, the mother of all the Buddhas. All Buddhas are born into the womb of the Great Mother. They don't come out of that womb. They are born in emptiness. Empty of individual essence and yet ceaselessly radiant with appearance.

Our delusion is that we project the false notion of real, individual substances into phenomena and into ourselves.