
Finding freedom at the bus stop

Macclesfield, November 2003

Talk by James Low

Transcribed by Gordon Ellis and Sarah Allen

Edited by Wendy Bates

Excerpts

To be a self does not mean that we are a 'thing', rather 'selfing' is a narrative, a mode of organisation of the moments of experience into a pseudo-coherent narrative of self. This always involves a huge amount of editing. Social politeness means that we tolerate the slippages in other peoples' narratives – 'I won't tell you you're incoherent if you don't tell me I'm incoherent!'

I can see how, when I identify with and merge with these thoughts and feelings that feel like 'myself' I engage in a process of constituting or creating my sense of self. These thoughts are not just mirrors that show me who I am, but the building blocks of who I am. It is through merging with the thoughts that I become 'me'.

If we have enough things around us to prop us up we seem to be ok, but it's a kind of magician's sleight of hand. We delude ourselves into thinking we're grounded when actually we're impulsive and reactive and truly unstable.

Buddhism is saying something very disturbing and very radical. It's saying that we are asleep within a dream which is not the whole reality; a dream constructed out of a particular set of causes and events. Because we created causes in the past, we come to be born in this dimension, sharing a particular kind of karma. After a while, the causal forces which generate our access to this domain will get burned up and then we'll be in another domain, another kind of hologram, another kind of experience, and it probably won't be as nice. So we need wake up from the dream world of samsara.

There is no rulebook that tells you how to live; we are all flying by the seat of our pants. In this situation it's best to keep your eyes open, your ears open and your heart open.

Contents

A relationship with the practice	1
The hinayana view	1
Dependent co-origination	3
The mahayana view	8
Effective help	12
Tantra	14
Three stages of ignorance	17
Consequences of ignorance	20
A transformed world	21
The functions of methods	25
Discrimination	27
Dzogchen.....	33
The meditation.....	39
The view	40
The three aspects of the mind	45
Refuge	51
The mind and its clothing.....	61
A right to 'be'	65
Generosity of the heart.....	70

A relationship with the practice

I'd like to introduce to you some of the basic ideas of Dzogchen and to place them within the context of the various systems in Tibetan Buddhism. I'll do this in terms of the view – the way in which the world, and our place in it, is understood. I'll also introduce the kinds of meditation we do, and the way of being in the world which arises as one practices living in harmony with that view.

In the nyingmapa tradition of Tibetan buddhism which has evolved from the teachings of Padmasambhava, there are nine main styles of practice, and I will discuss some of them in detail later. Each style attends to a different aspect of the human condition. Although these divergent views of our potential open up different paths of practice they are in harmony about the goal of awakening. On one level they can be seen as conflicted, but on another level they are in harmony. People tend to be drawn towards certain views according to their own character, but since our character is usually fairly inconsistent, we may find that different aspects of ourselves are benefited by different views at different times.

The hinayana view

The nine *yanas* or vehicles or styles of practice in nyingma buddhism can be grouped more simply into four main approaches to practice and experience. The first is the hinayana approach, an attitude that sees the world is a dangerous place. It's easy to get lost, so keep your eyes open and be wary! Things which look safe and familiar have to be re-examined because they may be more dangerous than they appear to be. Situations and objects that intrigue us and seem to be fun may prove to be problematic.

For example, it's Saturday so 'let's go shopping.' The big store is nice; you go in, music is playing, and there is so much on offer. You find something lovely and you put it on 'Ooh this is so nice! However from the hinayana point of view shopping is dangerous for it is based on desire – the desire to improve my existence by adding a commodity onto myself. The urge to have more often arises from the assumption that there is some deficit in me – either a collapsed deficit where I feel a bit sunk and need to cheer myself up or a hungry deficit where, although I don't feel so bad I just want something more. We look to an object to repair some sense of lack or fault in ourselves.

Often that is how we pass our time – playing with our appearance, polishing our persona, having different ways of facing towards the world and giving ourselves little confidence boosts which don't last long. However, there is a kind of avoidance or even anaesthetisation in this, because we are not questioning 'What is this lack or anxiety that I have?' Perhaps it's about getting older and feeling less attractive and worrying that perhaps people won't like us?

The question which then arises is 'How will I be *me* if people don't like me any more, or find me sexy anymore? What will be the basis of my existence?' This could set us on a treadmill of anxious speculation or take us back to the question, 'Well, who am I?' If I'm basing my existence on something which is fundamentally unreliable, such as physical appearance or health, then it's a house built on sand. It's fundamentally unstable. I have no way of being sure that it will be the same tomorrow as it is today.

Even if you're very healthy and very beautiful and very rich, you can be driving your beautiful car down the road and some idiot drives into you. Your head goes through the windscreen and your face is cut to ribbons. When you wake up and you look in the mirror you see that the person you thought you were has gone forever. The various frameworks that we think will be secure and enduring – our sense of self, our network of friends, our jobs and so on – are very unreliable. As we get older our friends die off, our parents die, and as this happens we start to see our social world shrinking. What will we be able to rely on?

The hinayana point of view highlights that we need to sort out what is actually reliable and to establish what can provide us with a true refuge. If we take refuge in the world, in money, in friendship and so on, we are turning towards things which will betray us even as they provide support. For they often serve to blind us to the actual nature of our existence. Even if we have a long happy successful life, that life will come to an end and we will have to move on.

This viewpoint attends to the operation of karma. Karma means activity and it indicates that everything we experience arises from causes and acts itself as a cause for further experiences. Our life manifests as the results of previous actions, and the actions we perform now, in this life, will lead to our manifesting in some other form in some other existence.

According to the tradition it is a rare event to be born as a human being, especially one who gains contact with the dharma. In order to obtain this precious situation we burn up a lot of our good karma – the potential arising from previous good actions. Then, not having much left, if we don't gather more in this life, we're going to be born in a situation with less potential next time. So spending your life enjoying yourself is really just moving the deckchairs on the Titanic because, sooner or later, we're going down, maybe be bubbling about like little fishes with big sharks coming to eat us! Death will come. It will be the end of what we know but not the end of our existence – so we need to prepare.

Seeing this, we should use our time well. Instead of seeking dependency and attachment to unreliable things outside myself, can I find a way of shifting my relationship, both to myself and to my being in the world with others, in a way that allows fewer disturbances? This can lead us to the intention to become more calm and stable so that we don't career around like a ball in a pinball machine, bouncing off the bumpers and setting the lights flashing.

This path is associated with renunciation and in its ideal form you become a monk or a nun. You say, 'I give up on money, I give up on sex, I give up on social status, I give up on family involvement, and like a snail pulling in its little horns, I will retreat from the world and have a sheltered existence with minimal disturbance.' However, in the west nowadays few people want to be a monk or a nun. As a way of life it is at odds with the dominant concerns of the culture.

From the hinayana point of view we are so lost, so completely addicted to consumerism, that we can't separate out our sense of the things we have and the things we need from our sense of self. If I am my possessions then renunciation will seem mad. Nobody wants to take that path because the power of the object, the power of consumption, the power of instant gratification, is so pervasive and taken for granted. We are on the internet all the time, filling ourselves with information or expressing our opinions. This can give a sense of intention, agency and control but actually we are distracted, caught up in the flow of stuff. This has been normalised as just 'how life is'. School teachers say it is so difficult to get a class to pay attention for a sustained period. Such a lot is going on – but does it have any value?

The renunciate way of life is increasingly difficult to follow, but I think it is helpful to hold its principle in mind. By renouncing something, by thinking 'No, I won't have that,' and paying attention to the intensity of the impulse that seeks the object, you can recognise just how destabilising desire is. We start to see our mind moving like a drunkard, staggering down the street and leaning on things to keep himself vertical. We actually see that this is what we do all the time. We're not grounded in ourselves. We're out of kilter, off balance and using object relatedness (moving out towards the world and moving in towards our concepts, plans and fantasies) as a means of maintaining a pseudo-verticality. If we've got enough things around us to prop us up we seem to be ok, but it's a kind of magician's sleight of hand. We delude ourselves into thinking we're grounded when actually we're impulsive and reactive and truly unstable.

Renunciation is not easy. Not just because the objects that we try to give up are so attractive, but because we have built our sense of self out of a very fragile relationship with them. The moment of renunciation puts into question the contours, or parameters, of our own existence. But from the point of view of meditation this is a wonderful thing to do. It's a sort of diagnostic test that reveals the truth about our habitual assumptions. We start to be able to see the complex movement of 'me/not me' whereby we create and then dissolve, construct and then deconstruct; splitting the field of experience into the lineaments of our existence moment by moment.

Dependent co-origination

On an inner level, renunciation requires a close examination of the thoughts out of which I construct my sense of self and my experience... are they me or are they not me? When we practise calming the mind by focusing on the breath, or focusing on an external object, thoughts and feelings continue to arise.

These thoughts and feelings seem to have a lot to do with me, and indeed they do, for in fact they constitute my sense of 'self'. When I identify with and merge into them, I engage in a process of constituting or creating my sense of self. These thoughts are not just mirrors that show me who I am, but the building blocks of who I am. It is through merging with the thoughts that I become 'me'.

If, when I go back to London someone says 'What's Macclesfield like?' I can say 'Well it's like this and this, I did this and this and this... blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' I feel that I'm telling a story, just as I feel that I'm talking now. But what is actually happening is that words are arising in response to the other. I have a concept that I'm speaking, I have the physical sensation of my voice box vibrating and so on but there is also the question 'Who is the 'I' who is speaking?' What is the agency of that speaking? The simple answer, of course is that I, James Low, am speaking. This seems to be a self-evident truth.

However, in the Buddha's teaching there is the notion of dependent co-origination, *pratityasamutpada*. Put simply, it means that on the basis of *this*, *that* arises. There is an on-going dynamic interaction between various field factors – we are a part of the ecology which is around us, a part of the whole context. We are constantly in feedback loops with our environment and we are constituted out of what appears around us.

Last night, when I was travelling here on the train, I was not talking like this, I was sitting very quietly reading my magazine. If I had started to talk like this in the train I might have had a bit more space around me! So, talking in this way is contextual. It's not that I talk in this way because I have a burning desire to do this, rather that in coming here and being with you I find myself talking in this way. If I'm working as a therapist I talk in another way and if I'm talking with my kids I talk in yet another way, for we manifest in relation to others. Although I can say that I am talking and these are my words, these words arise on the basis of *you*. In the moment of emergence, I am co-created by you – without you I wouldn't be talking in this way. I look around, I see your faces, and then I speak with you, to you, among you. In that sense, although in formal terms 'I'm' doing it, the 'I' who is doing it is not an autonomous monad separated from the world, but is co-emergent with the field of sensory experience, including other people.

This is weird. It's not what I was taught in primary school! The teacher would say, 'James, why are you fidgeting? Come out here!' 'But he pushed me.' 'I don't care what he did, you're disturbing the others! You come out here.' In that way it is as if scissors are snipping us out from our environment and its provocations and then we can be treated as separate isolated individuals who can be named and shamed. Thus we are taught to take responsibility for ourselves. Saying 'It's wasn't my fault because he...' is likely to evoke the response 'No, the issue is what you did.' Of course there's truth in that but it's only half the story, because how we are is dependent on our situation.

None of us really know how we would behave if a fascist dictatorship came to this country. None of us knows if we would end up murdering other people, working as torturers or whatever. We could imagine we wouldn't, but that's usually because we are lucky enough to be in a fairly benign environment that doesn't take us to the edge where we are faced with these tasks. Likewise, we do not know how we would act if we won a fortune in the lottery.

Dependent co-origination is very disturbing if we take it seriously. We start to see that what I take to be 'I, me, myself' is a series of constructs which edit out the impact of the way that I am constituted with, for, and by the other. This also means that I am part of the world and have no individual unique personal essence. The sense of an individual essence is created by abstraction and by ring-fencing particular moments within the flow of experience. These moments are 'captured' as images which are then layered with complex and often conflicted associations. Due to this we each have many positions or voices or states that are then evoked by specific events.

We are the manifestation of karmic impulses which have multifarious histories, and we are operating in a world of others whose behaviour causes us to react in ways specific to the moment. Finding ourselves responding in different ways we get a sense of how inconsistent we are, yet we need to be able to sustain some image of ourselves if we are to function in the world. It can be both difficult and frightening to realise that we are always more than, and indeed other than, the stories we tell about ourselves.

But how could we resist a world which we are part of? We are 'enworlded'. We do not have a choice as to whether or not we are part of the world, we have nowhere else to go. We sweat, our hair falls out, we are breathing in and breathing out all the time – we are in a constant exchange with the world. We cannot cut ourselves off from the world; if that happens we are dead. Yet even when we die our body immediately enters the disintegration process, forming another kind of relationship with the world.

The concepts of impermanence, of the pervasive nature of suffering and of dependent co-origination, are all designed to help us see that our 'self' – rather than being a thing, an entity – is a movement of dynamic unfolding. 'Selfing' is a narrative, a mode of organisation of the moments of experience into a pseudo-coherent narrative of self. This always involves a huge amount of editing. Social politeness means that we tolerate the slippages in other peoples' narratives – 'I won't tell you you're incoherent if you don't tell me I'm incoherent!'

You can see this happening when you are sitting chatting with a friend and suddenly the conversation shoots off in a different direction. You're thinking, 'Hang on a minute. How come we're talking about this? I thought we were talking about that.' Like people on ice who can't skate very well, we don't have a stable basis. If we think we should be coherent, seeing our actual instability can be alarming. It could become something we want to defend ourselves against.

This view is something very radical. Usually we live inside an egg of self-concern; inside a bubble where our self-concept bears very little resemblance to what actually goes on. Our notion of who we imagine ourselves to be is very different from how we actually are performatively. Sometimes when people awaken to this they feel as if they are having a breakdown, 'Oh my God, I'm not who I thought I was!' and that can be very frightening. But not to be who you 'think' you are might indicate that *being* is not a thought, nor a concept, nor a construct. When the concepts still themselves, even momentarily, there is something that goes on being. Exploring what this might be is a prime concern of buddhist enquiry.

The hinayana view of renunciation indicates that we should avoid involvement with the flow of thoughts as much as possible. However another view would be that thoughts are 'misunderstood.' It's not that they are operating as a false layer that hides us from ourselves and therefore must be got rid of forever, rather the problem is that we confuse ourselves by asking thoughts to perform functions that they cannot do. The ideas and the concepts in our minds should not be given responsibility for our lives. They cannot look after us; rather we should be looking after them.

The consequence of misidentification

In Tibetan a common word for sentient beings is *drowa* which means moving, going, always in process, always on the move with nowhere to settle. This term points to our primary identification with the moving aspects of our being. When we identify with our physical sensations, with our thoughts and our feelings, we are identifying with experiences which are unstable and unceasing. We want to have a stable identity but this cannot be achieved by merging with transient events.

Let's take the example of a Saturday morning market. At six in the morning the stall holders arrive and the empty space is rapidly filled with stalls. People arrive and it's busy, busy, busy. Then by two in the afternoon the workers start to take the stalls down, and by five the market square is empty again. If you came at midday you would see only the busyness. The empty space which is the basis of the busyness is hidden from view by the very busyness itself. The function of renunciation is to open up space by letting go of activity that formerly felt necessary and inevitable.

Our culture in the West has been humanistic for the last three hundred years. We live in a human-centred world, everything is human sized, and we have the sense that we, as human beings, are the most important thing around. From a buddhist point of view the human dimension is an aberration and renunciation, moving towards the goal of awakening and freeing oneself from samsara, is freeing oneself from the human condition. Buddhas are not human. A buddha is not just a kind of improved, added value human being; a buddha is radically other. The buddhas point to priorities that are not our daily concerns. They are the expression of wisdom and compassion while human existence is the fruit of the karma of pride and desire.

The functions of shamatha practice

The hinayana path is a method for enquiring into the construction of the self out of processes of interaction. This is done by the practice of maintaining a clear intentional focus on a simple object such as the flow of the breath at the nostrils or a small stone or statue of the Buddha placed a few feet in front of us. This allows a sense of continuity of attention, of non-distraction, resting on the renunciation of the thoughts and feelings with which we constitute ourselves. In this practice we're working at bringing focused attention and intentionality into a field where we are usually in a high degree of reactivity. If you watch a sparrow eating in the garden it could be a saddening experience because the sparrows are constantly moving their heads about looking for the cat, they're not peaceful.

Likewise, when we start to do this sort of practice we realise how unstable and even paranoid we are; how excited we are by bright shiny thoughts and how frightened we are of dangerous thoughts. Some of our skills of hyper-anxiety are required for functioning in our world. If we didn't terrify ourselves with thoughts of collapsing pension plans perhaps we wouldn't stay at work. This dimension we live in is a pretty nasty place. We're cooked by fears all the time; fears of war, fears of economic annihilation... fears that generate anxious, often mindless, activity. There is a real tension between the ways we need to mobilise in order to survive and the orientation we should adopt if we wish to become calm and clear.

These kinds of meditation techniques were primarily developed by monks and nuns who were not required to be very busy. It's actually quite difficult to move from a state of focus into a busy existence. Renunciation is not designed to support worldly engagement – in fact of course it does the opposite. If you retreat from the world you can't expect to get right back in step immediately. However, entering retreat from time to time can be a helpful way for people with busy lives to see the artificiality of their 'necessary' structures. Choosing to be where we are can bring a sense of freedom within the constraints of obligation – the freedom of acceptance.

Karma

It is clear that the patterns of experience are governed by cause and effect. If you are lucky enough to grow up in a reasonably balanced, healthy family you develop patterns of interaction and responsiveness and attunement to others which are very healthy; if you grow up in a very crazy family you don't do that. Being constituted in a crazy environment is very disturbing because the lack of stability inhibits our capacity to predict and to plan.

If people have had a terrible childhood where they've been abused and unloved and objectified and treated like a thing, they often don't have a healthy relationship with their body. When they come into therapy, maybe age thirty or so, they have often been attacking their body, using drugs, and so on. What

is so difficult is that, having been abused and exploited by others in ways that have encouraged disturbed behaviour, they've now got to start taking responsibility for how they are. If you've had a bad deal in your youth you're likely to have to struggle, struggle, struggle to turn it around. It's really painful to face the fact that it's up to you to do it, that the cavalry ain't coming, there's no rescuing band going to ride over the hill. It's especially difficult because if our life has been very disrupted we don't usually have very good allies. Maybe we are living in a housing estate and already have a lot of kids and no money and we're with a drunken guy who's off chasing someone else. You think, 'What *can* I do?' It's very hard, because life in its actual given shape is not open and expansive; it's just terribly constrained by the exigencies of getting the kids to school, getting the shopping done, staying safe on dangerous streets at night time and so on.

So, if we're lucky it is wonderful to be constituted by the environment, but if times are bad then it's hellish because there is no protection, there is no wall between me and the other. If the bad people ride over the hill and the want to loot and rape and murder who's going to protect me? It's got to be me. This way of thinking focuses on the individual as someone who experiences just one life. So if bad things happen in childhood the cause must lie in the bad intentions and actions of others.

Understanding the notion of karma offers a different perspective. Karma means that actions have consequences. Each action has both immediate consequences and long term consequences; there are no random accidents. With this understanding the world can be seen as meaningful and ethical because everything that happens to us is connected with how we have situated ourselves in the world. Not that we create the world, but rather that the positions we take up and how we gesture towards others have an impact; that gesture will be returned to us at some later time in a gesture by another. This helps us to be thoughtful about the gestures that we make and also, when a gesture is returned to us, to be thoughtful about how we are implicated in that.

The mahayana view

The mahayana view follows on from the initial consideration of dependent co-origination. The focus of attention shifts from trying to free myself from webs of connectedness which toss me around like a leaf in the autumn wind, towards my responsibility towards all beings.

There is a move towards a more proactive intention where, realising that I am part of what is going on, I see the need to do my best to make it work well. Instead of trying to protect myself and keep away from others the question becomes 'How can I be in the world with others in a way that is of mutual benefit?' This way neither privileges the other over myself, nor myself over the other, it is a middle way in which benefit for all arises.

When I start to observe myself through meditation and look closely into the nature of the constituents of the self, I don't find any deep, irreducible, self-substance. My sense of 'I, me, myself' is constituted out of various aspects: thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, none of which are fixed or continuous. My 'self' is seen to be a kind of agglutinative process where bits stick together like sticky rice forming what seems to be a solid 'me' but actually it is composed of parts. If we lay all these parts out and start to look at their nature, we find that they themselves are constituted out of other transient appearances.

Each thought carries some relation to the previous thought and is also moving forward, evoking other thoughts; so each thought is linked both to the past and to the future. On close examination we find that what we actually have are just hazy swirls of energy which, when looked at in one way appear to be substantial thoughts or building blocks but are actually waves of emergent energy. There is no inherent self-nature in any phenomena, external or internal. When we look we cannot find anything which is truly self-existing.

Impermanent situations

People on the move are constantly being regenerated in new forms, reconstituted out of new environments. What we consider ourselves to be is not something innate and inherent. If you are a child in Pakistan and your parents decide to move to England, you have to learn English and this changes your relationship to your mother tongue. All that you would have learned if you had stayed in Pakistan, speaking Urdu, with an extended family and so on, is no longer available. New forms of yourself are constituted out of your interaction with the new environment.

We can see that there is nothing truly existent in our external environment. Here in Macclesfield the economy has clearly changed a lot. Once weaving was done here in a small way, on looms in weavers' cottages. This way of working changed as the process was mechanised. Factories were built to house the huge new machines. When the factories went bust things changed again, and now the buildings have different uses. If you grew up here you might look at a building and remember which factory used to be there, but it is no longer that; although the bricks are the same, internally it's changed. The factory didn't always exist. Somebody had an idea to make money; silk was the new thing and investment followed. Money was used to buy bricks and employ brick-layers who built a factory out of the bricks. Later, if you no longer want a factory, you get a crane with a steel ball, and...whack it's gone!

Growing up in Glasgow I saw a lot of demolition in the late fifties and early sixties when developers took the centre of the city out and threw it away. They put up tower blocks and housing blocks that nobody wants to live in. A human environment is destroyed very easily. It was the same with the Clearances in Scotland: when new landlords came in wanting to run deer or sheep on the hills they cleared out the crofters. At one point two thousand people a day were forced to leave their homes. This kind of thing is

going on all over the world. When the Chinese government decides to build a dam in China a million people are displaced. What each considered 'my house', 'my home', vanishes.

The landscape on which these movements occur also changes. As a child climbing on the hills you think, 'Oh these hills have always been here.' Then you learn a bit about geology and find they weren't always there and that they were formed a long time ago as earth plates came together, or as a result of volcanic activity. Everything is in movement in relation to other forces.

Making 'something' from processes

This watch that I am wearing will continue to be with me until it breaks down. Although I like the watch and have all kinds of emotional associations with it, when it's finally broken I'll throw it away because it will no longer serve its primary function of telling the time. In the same way, people live in a house for various reasons and it becomes their home. They may really like their home and have all kinds of memories relating to it, but if something changes and they have to move house they say 'goodbye' and go and live in another house. Gradually they make that new house their home.

We invest things with meaning. Just as the tide comes in and goes out, we put meaning into things and then we take it back out again. As we invest things with meaning we give them the appearance of having a substantial, enduring, self-existent reality that will continue through time. However forms in the world are actually shifting and turning and changing, as are our own micro-responses to them.

The rights and freedoms of British people have, over time, completely transformed. What it means to be British is currently changing radically, yet it has never been stable. When we look back in history there has been no period where you can say 'That was true British existence' because to be British is to be part of a process. So we can see that what we call 'things', entities, are actually processes which – because they are moving like a river tumbling down a mountainside – are essentially ungraspable.

Now it seems ridiculous to say that a thing like this watch is 'ungraspable', but we might ask 'How do we grasp it?' Well, I grasp it with my hand. So what is my hand? My hand is composed of fingers and thumbs. Is it 'my' hand? Well, I think I've got a hand, a hand forever, and I hope that I do, but if unfortunately I had an accident I could end up with a stump instead of a hand. You do see people who have had terrible accidents to whom this has happened, so their hand wasn't permanent. It existed while they had the factors for the continued existence of their hand; then they had an accident and then suddenly they had a stump instead.

You see people who've had a stroke and perhaps their legs, which used to move up and down, are no longer functioning, they're just flopping around. If this happened to you, you might think 'What's happened to my body?' But that body was never yours in that sense – it's not a possession.

www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

It seems really peculiar but we cannot grasp things. Normally our relationship to the world is one of appropriation, in which I have these things which are 'me' and through engaging with these things I reassure myself of the continuity of the 'me-ness' of me. But actually all the things I look at are themselves constituted out of other things which are also changing. What we really have is processes interacting with processes and creating the sense that some 'thing' is there. So when I grasp my watch this is actually one concept grasping another.

Selective attention obscures emptiness

If you go to the theatre the curtain opens to reveal the stage. On the stage there is perhaps a table and two chairs. Then somebody walks across the stage and within a couple of minutes you're right in the play; then the play ends, clap, clap, clap, and off you go. If you go back next week there's another play on the same stage. This is similar to our daily experience. We get caught up in a situation at work or at home, a play which seems very, very real and then it's gone.

If you have a good, well directed play, then although there is just a stage, a few props, actors with a script and so on, something happens; it comes alive and you get captivated. Although it's only people walking across boards with some light shining on them as they talk in a particular way, these parts somehow generate, through the dynamic of their movement, something more. What is that extra? Is that extra out there? Or is it some energetic quality that we have in relation to this multi-fold interactive movement?

Using our notion that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts' we can see that it is we who add on value. If we recognise that this added value is a distraction from the facticity of what is actually there, then the real meaning of emptiness in buddhism becomes clear. On to the shimmering surface of emergence we ourselves add in the sense that there are real entities. We do this habitually, automatically, and are then taken in by our own constructions which we proceed to evaluate in terms of our current likes and dislikes.

For example, if you hear about a play which sounds wonderful you might go to buy tickets. If the tickets are sold out you might be upset. However the play is nothing but a momentary event. Even if you do get to see it, when the play ends, it has gone. You can't take the play away with you because it only exists in the moment of its performance, after that it's a memory. What you take away with you is a response which, as you tell the story of your experience, gets transformed through the energetic responses of other people.

If you thought the play was fantastic but I didn't like it at all, as we talk about it you may begin to have doubts about it, then your lovely shiny memory is tarnished and starts to fade. How can this happen?

It can happen because your memory of it wasn't a thing; it didn't cohere, it had no true existence. Your memory was a construct of your energetic commitment to the moment of the manifestation – an illusion. This illustrates the meaning of emptiness, which is at the heart of all buddhist practice, and particularly dzogchen.

Effective help

If we want to help people there are various ways in which we can do that. We can help on an outer level giving food, clothing, medicine and protection from danger. This is, of course, very important, but it is help on the level of the 'true existence' of the person. According to buddhism our suffering is generated out of ignorance and attachment. It is our misapprehension of reality – the ignorance of not knowing our own true nature – which generates attachment. Our attachment to the body, where we think we *are* the body, means that we get very upset when the body gets sick, but if there is no inherent self-nature in any phenomenon, if everything is empty then we ourselves are empty of any enduring essence.

In mahayana buddhism the focus is on uniting wisdom and compassion. The main act of compassion is to try to awaken people to the recognition of the emptiness of their own nature. It is not so much about saving people from danger because, in this world, it's always out of the frying pan into the fire. If the whole of samsara is in flames then where can you go that will be truly safe? If you can help to take somebody from a war zone and put them in a place of peace then clearly that makes sense. However, even in a place of peace, people have all sorts of things cooking inside; they are still on fire internally.

The style which is advocated here is the bodhisattva's practice of giving oneself a great intention which is grounded in the bodhisattva vow: *In this and all my future lives I will work for the benefit of all beings.* This means that at all times, whether waking or sleeping, I know what my purpose is – to work for others. That immediately clears away lots of confusion. 'What shall I do today?' 'Well, I'll work for others.' When you wake up in the morning you think 'May all beings be happy'; and as you go through the day, you remember all sentient beings around you in everything you do. If you make a cup of tea for yourself you think 'May the thirst of all beings be removed.' You think of beings in the hells, people who are burning, people who have fever, and you include them as you drink your cup of tea. You think 'May this be like cool ice-water flowing into the mouths of those who are tortured.' At all times you remember that your existence stands in relation to all other beings.

That very remembrance all beings, as you offer good wishes to them, pulls you out of yourself. What could be better than to be taken out of ourselves? This is not martyrdom or self-sacrifice. It is a mutual exchange where, realising that 'in as much as you do it unto the least of these' you actually do it unto yourself. You don't need a third party signifier like Jesus since to be thoughtful of others is to be thoughtful of self. In this way mindfulness and compassion start to become integrated. A bodhisattva is

one who has wisdom and compassion like the two wings of a bird, and is flying towards enlightenment with both wings at the same time.

This links with the idea that's set out in the *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, the *Vajraceddika*, where it says: 'If a bodhisattva wants to save sentient beings he has already broken his bodhisattva vow.' This means is that if you think that there is a truly existent sentient being, and you think 'I want to save that sentient being' then although it might formally look like compassion, the reification evacuates wisdom. If I want to help you and I see you as a truly existing separate being, rather than as a processional manifestation of emptiness then I have already concretised the situation. By perceiving myself as the participant moving towards you I am seeing myself as a truly existing entity. So I'm 'me' going to help 'you' and we're stuck in some kind of transaction, some kind of movement between two entities. Where 'A' writes a little message on a dart and sends it to 'B'...Ping...'did you get that?'

However the experience of dependent co-origination and emptiness shows that the interaction is a feedback loop. It is a processional loop with no end points, where I am an arising field which is co-emergent with you as an arising field. Thus the gesture of compassion flowing towards you is not something being transferred to you, rather it is a movement in our undivided energy. In shifting your energy my energy is also shifted, and we arise as this endless co-emergent movement.

An image that is very famous in connection with this idea is that of Indra's net, an infinite net of jewels each facet of which is like a mirror. Each of these millions of jewels is connected to the others and is moving, so that each facet is reflecting all the other facets with their infinite reflections. Each person can be seen as being like a mirror that contains the images and reflections of each other person. We experience ourselves, the world, and others, through the movement of these reflections. The mirror itself is like an empty stage in that, although it displays the reflections, it is always inherently empty. So we can also see ourselves as an empty stage on which new plays are being elaborated moment by moment – a field of continuous drama. It's as though the whole world is a jazz dance improvisation with music that never stops.

Because there are so many beings, to help them all out of samsara will take a very long time so the commitment is for many, many future lifetimes. The idea of past lives and future lives is very important because it constantly re-contextualises human existence. It helps us to see that perhaps we are not finite unique 'self-sealed' creatures, but are in fact part of an infinite process. However, it can be rather daunting to imagine that for lifetime after lifetime as a bodhisattva, your enlightenment will be dependant upon the awakening of the most stupid people on the planet. So the mood of the mahayana is heroic – one of will and of patience. It is a marathon, it's not a sprint, it's the long haul. It's not about a momentary manic excitement, 'Yes I'm going to do this!' but rather, 'I need to get in gear and build up a

way of containing and being with this for a very long time.’ The elaboration of the six or the ten paramitas concerns the development of the qualities required for this.

Tantra

The next level is tantra. Tantra is not essentially different from mahayana; it’s simply the application of different methods within the basic mahayana view. It uses visualisation to move from a path of aspiration and analysis, which is the paramitayana (the commitment or bodhisattva level of mahayana), towards a path of transformation. In the paths that we’ve looked at already, the basic view is that we are here as limited people with problems and that enlightenment is in the distance; so, in order to move towards these benefits, we need to develop ourselves. What we’re concerned with at this stage is to develop the causes which will, at some stage, lead to the fruition of that good goal of enlightenment for all beings. The methods utilised here are called the vehicles of the cause.

When we come into tantra we are concerned with the vehicles of the result. In tantra, after gaining an initiation into the practice of a deity such as Tara, Padmasambhava or Vajrayogini, I visualise them and receive blessings from them, and I can also visualise myself as the deity. Through that practice, and through the opening of the mind that arises from that practice, I then start to see that this world is inseparable from the mandala of the deity. Through that transformation it is ‘as if’ I am a buddha now, today. The buddha is now not just a kind of inspiring symbol, but an actual presence in the world.

In the general mahayana view, we imagine that there are buddhas in buddha realms. In the western direction lies the pure land of Sukkhavati or Dewachen, where the buddha Amitabha lives. Amitabha is a very nice buddha who helps people who pray to him. When he took his bodhisattva vow he said ‘By the strength of this vow, when I become enlightened, I don’t want other people to go through all the hardships and difficulties that I’ve gone through. Just by saying my name they can be reborn in my buddha realm, where life will be much easier and where enlightenment will come with minimal effort.’ That’s a very attractive idea, but it is about you going *towards* the Buddha. It is as if there’s a good place over there so let’s try and get there. The difference in tantra is that instead of the deity being somewhere a long way off, the deity is so close that we are able to form a relationship.

In the practice we imagine Padmasambhava in front of us and as we say the mantra, we believe that light flows from him into us. This light purifies our body, our voice, and our mind, so that all impediments and obscurations, all the limiting perceptions of ourselves that we have been hanging onto for such a long time, dissolve into light. At this point although our body is its usual shape, all the rough material substance of ourselves has dissolved into light. Then we imagine the deity coming to the crown of our head. He then dissolves from the top down and the bottom up and becomes a ball of rainbow coloured light. This ball of light moves down into our heart, and thus we have the actual presence of the Buddha

in our heart. Then our body, which is light, merges into that ball of light. The light of the given enlightenment of the Buddha and the light of our purified nature merge together and become inseparable. Nothing else exists, just this ball of light which starts to get smaller and smaller and smaller. The focus of our attention and our entire existence is just this vanishing light which dissolves and then there is only open space. Then, after a while, thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise within that space.

If we really see that there was only space, and that's *all* there was, then where do these thoughts come from? Although you could say that they come from your mind and that your mind is in your head, the question would then be: Where was your head in the open space? If you actually inhabit that space, then you see that the thought that 'the thought is coming from my brain' is actually a thought arising in the space. The thought is the energy or natural creativity of spacious awareness. With that experience we see that everything arises as the fruit of space. Everything is the child, or the manifestation, of emptiness itself. Through direct unmediated experience, you taste the flavour of emptiness in its dual aspects of empty of self-substance and infinitely full of radiance.

Out of this rich potentiality arises the experience of being ourselves in our world. Now where is this world? If it is always waiting outside the meditation then meditation is just a children's game of hiding 'Ha, ha you can't see me.' If that is the case then no actual transformation can occur. But when we really go into the meditation, where is the world? Can we trust our actual experience more than our habitual reliance on received concepts?

Moments of experience

This is so important because, if we have understood that there is no inherent self-nature in anything, then what we have, moment by moment, is an experience which is always changing. If I look away from you and then I turn my head back towards you and say, 'Ah, you're still there.' What is still there? Are you the same people? Have you changed? Well of course you've changed, but my concept, my memory of you, has not. In that moment when I turn back and say, 'Ah, it's you!' I am imputing a particular identity to a shape that I have seen before. I'm constructing, for myself, the seeming continuity of existence through time of a fixed entity when actually, I'm having a perceptual experience where something is being revealed to me.

After doing the meditation and dissolving, light, sound and shape start to appear for us; these phenomena are coming out of the ground nature, out of space. In Sanskrit this is called the dharmadhatu, in Tibetan *chö ying*. It indicates the open dimension of being, before it formulates itself into 'something as such'. Then everything you see is encountered as a manifestation of this ground or open nature; everything is the unfolding experience of this infinite place. Manifestation, all that appears,

is not coming from anywhere else and its not truly existing in itself. This is the non-duality of open spacious emptiness and manifestation.

It's not that there are real things out there which we train ourselves to see as empty – that would be some kind of crazy delusion, a madness that wouldn't take us anywhere. What we have is a shift from reliance on concepts and memories towards a radical phenomenology, a radical attention in the moment to what is actually there.

I'm sure we've all had these unmediated moments, perhaps looking at a sunset or a flower, or suddenly hearing a bird and you're just there, there is nothing else; there is this sound or this beauty and you don't need to process it because it is delivered directly, it is immediate. In that immediacy there is no separation of an experiencer and an experience, there is just the infinity of the moment, which is clear and precise.

I can remember running along the sand on a beach in Scotland when I was about six, and the beach was forever... it was like taking a million years running along it... and the lights on the water and I just.....
ahh. Now what is that? You can't speak about it; but this is the quality of experience that we want to try to bring more and more into our life. We can live more in an aesthetic relationship with the world with its lights and colours and movement. The beauty of the world is something we need never turn our back on.

If you see someone pushing their baby in a buggy you feel that whole movement; if you see someone walking in front of you it's like a goddess dancing. The whole world becomes the mandala, in which there is nothing other than the revelation of existence moment by moment. We don't need to look to the past for an explanation; we don't need to look to the future for some kind of proof of the meaning of the moment, we are just there in the moment.

However, there is a facticity to the emergence of existence. Shops have opening and closing times, trains leave at certain times and so on. If you don't want to get a parking ticket you need to remember when the ticket runs out. You could say, 'This is real because if I don't do this, that will happen.' However these things that will happen are happenings; they are movements of experience. We are in this world and able to change it and move it – but that doesn't make it real; it's like a hologram.

There is a certain rationale to what happens; because we are in the human dimension our experience is generated out of the karma that we share together. Although we share many things, we also have our more personal karma where we each have very different experiences. Some people have experiences to which we do not have access; men cannot know what it's like to have a menstrual cycle. All of these

factors, both common and unique, are manifesting in patterns that give them shape. But the fact that something has a shape does not mean that it has an inherent self-nature.

If we look at something like a table it clearly has a particular shape to it, but we can also see how it's constructed. It's made of pieces of wood put together in a particular way. The fact that it has this shape doesn't mean that there is an essence of 'tableness' to the table because if we took it apart and laid out the pieces of the table on the ground its 'tableness' would have vanished; we'd just have bits of wood. But if we put them together in a particular way again the 'added on' thing happens; this magic event where the whole is seen as greater than the sum of its parts.

Three stages of ignorance

Karma and the sense of truly existent entities both arise from ignorance and attachment. There are many ways of thinking about the nature and function of ignorance, but it's usually described in the tantric literature as a three stage process.

Open relaxed awareness is the experience of *non-duality*, where emergence and the ground of emergence are inseparable, like a cloud floating in the sky. You can't take a cloud out of the sky yet, as the cloud passes through the sky, it leaves no trace. This is an image of the unconditioned nature.

The first level of ignorance occurs when open awareness gives rise to an attention which is caught by an object and spaciousness is lost. The subjective pole of this manifestation is a refracted aspect of open awareness; it is partial yet its claim to be the whole obscures its relation to its own ground. This fragment generates the sense of being a specific individual who, in the swirl of energy which is the dualistic interplay, starts to get caught up in something.

For example, let's say you're at the ballet and watching the corps de ballet perform a complex manoeuvre. If your eye is caught by the way one dancer is moving and you start to attend to that you are experiencing a figure/ground shift by which you're caught up in just one aspect. A few moments later you notice that the rest of the action has moved on and you have missed something. There's been a slippage into a micro-focus and the integration with the wider field has been lost. In this example it is only the object which has been isolated from the field, but with ignorance both what appears as 'subject' and what appears as 'object' are cut off from the field in which they operate. Decontextualized, they are apprehended as self-existing entities and the energy vibration generated by their separation gives rise to all the seemingly real entities in samsara.

The traditional image for illustrating this is that of a drunken man who is walking along, quite relaxed, and then suddenly falls down some stairs. There is a shock, and in that shock there's a separation out: 'Who am I? What happened?' There is experience of a disruption: there's *me* and there's *that*. The first www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

impulse is to try to stabilise the situation and try to work out what happened, and in trying to make sense of what has happened we go from shock to control. Individual self-reflexive consciousness, which is an aspect of awareness, is ignoring its own ground by being intoxicated with its own busyness. This first stage of ignorance is called co-emergent ignorance. In this stage the displacement and the possibility of a return to integration are very close together.

The next stage of ignorance occurs when, having lost my ground a bit, I think that I have to make sense of what is occurring. As I step back to look at what's there, there is now a perspective of apartness rather than one of relaxed spaciousness. There isn't yet a clearly elaborated self, but there's a kind of energetic move experienced as oneself, which arises in relationship to the energetic move of what is experienced as an event. This involvement diverts energy from relaxing back into the openness. It is at this point that *self* and *other* start to form as the experience of duality.

The more perspective I have, the more I start to see differentiated entities. The more differentiation there is of objects then the more differentiated mental processing there is to make sense of them. So now I have not just a range of sounds and colours evolving in my mind as separate things, but I also have feeling tones associated with these colours. I start to have the differentiation of 'I like this' 'I don't like that.'

This second stage of ignorance is very powerful. It's called the 'ignorance of naming everything', or the 'ignorance of mastery.' It is the ignorance of believing that semiotics establishes something in truth. It is the merging of semiotic play, which is a mode of creativity, with the dulling urge of reification. It's a bit like in the Bible, when God creates something by calling it into being, he then names it and says that it's good. It's a kind of three-stage lock on leading to ... '*this is how things are.*' By now, because language use and the experience of entities have become closely linked together, we've got *things*. Language becomes linked to the direction of attention and this makes us capable of very subtle nuancing of intention and interpretation. Attention becomes merged with the habit of reification, the sense that things are solid and separate and real. You can make anything 'real' and significant if you focus on it with the belief that it is a truly existing object.

For example we can become a bit obsessive about a situation. We speculate, and try to understand, and go on and on about it. We have been sucked into the situation, and the more we think about it and turn it over, the more we make a 'mountain out of a mole hill.' Someone else might say 'Hey you're reading too much into it, just let it go, it's not so important.' But when you have given yourself over to something it is difficult to see it clearly.

Our attention is a wonderful aspect of our intelligence, but as we focus in, first on this and then on that, our attention goes from being wide-focused, panoramic, and inclusive, to becoming partial, serial, and

staccato. Like in a vorticist or a cubist painting, the different aspects are turned around so there is fragmentation. Then we're struggling to create a whole, a gestalt, out of juxtapositions which don't quite make sense. We think 'I have to make sense of this; it's hard work, but meaning is not going to arrive on a plate, I've got to work it out!'

Children are often told this: 'You have to think about it!' 'You have to work it out!'... 'You want to go out on Sunday and get back at eight but you have two essays to write. What are you going to do? It's not my problem, you're sixteen, good luck! I don't have to go to school. I'm just your dad.' The child thinks, 'Oh, what am I going to do, because I want to do this, and I've got to do that?'

We give ourselves headaches trying to plan and cut and paste and shift all these bits of our lives to make complex images fit together. We feel 'I am a separate entity, trapped inside this skin bag and faced by a world that bombards me with all sorts of stuff. How do I work it out?' If you look around, everybody else seems to be able to do it: 'Look at all these people; they've got their lives together. Why am I the only one that hasn't worked it out?' This is a private paranoia that everybody carries and nobody really wants to talk about!

These multitudes of daily problems are part of the flow of life. But their difficulty is greatly increased when both subject and object are taken to be truly existing entities. Relaxing our commitment to reification releases us back into the freshness of the flow of experience inseparable from its open ground.

The third stage of ignorance is called the ignorance of the stupidity of not understanding karma. At this stage we think, 'Yes, I do have to take responsibility for my life because if I don't look after me who will? I've got to hold it together; I've got to do everything.' At this level the situation is very self-referential, where I see myself as a separate agent creating things, doing things – 'I did this and that's that'. If I do something then 'it is what it is' no more and no less. However the law of karma says that every time you do an action there's an immediate result and also, because we are part of the world, there are long-term consequences. This energetic ramification means that your gesture or your movement towards the world is not just what it appears to be.

Life is not a two legged race

If you can remember running with a partner in the three-legged race at school, you could only go as fast as your combined energy and also you've got to get into step together. That is a child's introduction to the notion of synergy; if you both can't harmonise and synthesise your energies then you both fall over. We are always in a three-legged race, tied together with others. When we imagine that 'I am myself

alone, I am just this entity' we think that we stop at the end of our fingertips, but our energy is always moving out and impacting on other people.

If you're travelling on the train and someone talks loudly into their phone it makes it difficult for you to read your book. Their voice doesn't just go into the telephone, it goes into everyone else's ears. Noise pollution is everywhere. If you change gear going uphill outside someone else's house that noise has an impact. Thought pollution is also pervasive. When we get agitated and talk to other people about a troublesome situation we may be stirring up further thoughts and agitation both for ourselves and for them.

In this way we can see that thinking of ourselves in terms of discrete entities abstracted from all circumstances, blinds us to the fact that we are always moving things around. Of course, if I push you the result is not necessarily that you want to push me back like boys in the playground. However the energetic movement of that push means that after a while, as with the tide, the wave comes back. It's just a pulsation of activity, it's not a punishment. There's nobody up there in the sky weighing up the scales saying, 'It's time for your comeuppance, bitter herbs this week!' It's simply a cause and effect relationship – whatever goes expanding out will eventually bring about a retreat. All the great empires and the expansionist projects of the world show this to be the case: 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave.'

In the moment of expansion there is an impact on other arrangements, on other people; and then of course, sooner or later something spirals, and it returns. Victory cannot be permanent, so if you live with a notion of victory, of total control, all you're doing is storing up huge numbers of reactions which will come back to you through time.

Consequences of ignorance

When these three levels of ignorance are functioning together it is very difficult to see what is going on. If we do not understand karma, we might think 'Well my life's not so bad. It's worked out ok' that is very blind. We don't see that, like lemmings about to leap off the cliff, we have no idea where we're going. We have not understood the structure of the world.

Buddhism is saying something very disturbing and very radical: that we are asleep in a dream which is not the whole of what is going on, it's just a dream constructed out of a particular set of causes and events. Because we created causes in the past, we come to be born in this dimension, sharing a particular kind of karma with all the other inhabitants. After a while, the causal forces which generate our access to this domain will get burned up and then we will not be in this domain. We'll be in another

domain, another kind of hologram, another kind of experience, and it probably won't be as nice. So we need to wake up from the dream world of samsara.

In the traditional Tibetan buddhist view samsara is considered to consist of six realms which are depicted in the image of the wheel of life. It shows six kinds of trance or experience; one of which is the animal realm. If you have a cat you will know that cats don't live in a human world. Although they come close to the human world they live in a cat world. Sheep live in a world where they have a completely different experience from humans; they are absolutely alien. A sheep's vision of the world is not like mine. So as I walk around in this world I'm passing creatures, and I think 'well that's a sheep, that's a cow, that's a dog', but just *what* that is I haven't a clue. What is it like to be a dog... sniff, sniff, sniff, sniff, whimper, whimper? It's a world that is much more about the sense of smell than ours is; but we really don't know *what* it is. However we could think, well that's a sentient being, and if that existence is an experience generated out of karma, when we die that could become our experience.

If you're a dog you can't read and write and you can't speak. Dogs, cows, cats, goats, don't have all the freedoms that we have in our wonderful human bodies. We project a rather anthropomorphic view onto these animals of having character, personality, freedom and choice but actually they're much more instinctually constrained. When we look at ourselves we can see that when we get overwhelmed by our instincts, we often don't do very well. So imagine what it would be like to live entirely at the mercy of your instincts, imagine not have any hands and going through life nose first. Understanding karma in this way really is a wake up call.

A transformed world

From the point of view of tantra the world is a fantastic mandala. In front of us we imagine a clear blue sky within which the form of the deity arises. When we visualise Padmasambhava his body is translucent, almost transparent and glowing with light. There is form, but the emptiness of the form is manifest. It's as if you can see Padmasambhava but you can almost look through him as well – the body is not substantial flesh and blood.

When Padmasambhava speaks, his speech is the sound of mantra. The roots of the word mantra are *manus* which means mind; and *tra* which means to protect. So a mantra is a mind protector; it protects the mind by limiting the expansion of ruminative thought, discursive thought, and conceptual elaboration. So that if you're saying, 'Om Ah Hung, Om Ah Hung, Om Ah Hung' or 'Om Mani Padma Hung' or whatever the mantra might be, the sound itself performs the function rather than any concepts that might be associated with it. You can put a gloss on a mantra but that's not so important, it's just sound and emptiness, just breath and vibration in the voice box, specific vibrations which influence the

field of experience. A mantra is the powerful sound of emptiness. The power of the mantra to make good things happen is not embedded in its semantic content, but in its energetic movement.

Our normal speech is also very often gestural. The meaning or semantic content of what somebody says is only a little bit of the message isn't it? A lot of the communication is in the tone of voice, the pulsive quality, the intensity, the clippedness of tone and all the rest of it. What really impacts us is the energetic quality and that's what mantra is about.

When we imagine Padmasambhava's mind it is open like the blue sky. Anything and everything can come and go easily, there are no traffic jams. Thoughts don't snarl up with each other so *things* are not built up. They're there – fresh, vivid – then gone. At the end of the meditation we blend this vision with the world and see everything as form and emptiness, radiant like the body of the deity. All the sound that we hear – car doors slamming, children screaming, people talking – is just sound and emptiness. Instead of jumping into the sound, building on it, and turning it into a vehicle for meaning – 'Oh, *that* means *that*', or 'Where *was* that?' or 'God was that my car?' – we just stay with it in its expressive gestural form.

With regard to our own mind, we relax and allow it to be a space in which many things can arise. Rather than regarding my mind as 'my' mind, so that I am the guardian and the owner or the controller of my own private sphere of mental experience, we say 'my mind is open, receptive, welcoming and empty.' If this is coming, let it come and let it go; if that is coming let it come and let it go. Because all of these thoughts are empty and impermanent, they arise and they pass, and in that mode they leave no trace. Thoughts start to leave a trace when we, in our attachment, grasp onto them, get involved in them and then build up from that. The essence of the path of tantra is very much about trusting to the transformative power of the heart connection with the deity.

Tantra and attunement

The structure of tantra in the early days was quite wild and crazy, and the people who first practised it in India were 'outsider' people. They tended to be people of lower caste with low quality occupations, people who washed other people's clothes for a living, potters, prostitutes, wine sellers and so on – people on the margin. These people brought the body back into buddhism.

Because of the domination of the monastic orders the body had had a very negative reading; it was seen as a sight of temptation, a place where you get lost. However in tantra the body is very important. Many of these tantric deities are depicted in sexual congress because sexuality is a play of energy in the body. If we get sexually aroused our breathing changes, the blood supply changes, our gaze changes, we become focused into what's going on and the rest of the world falls away. If you're trying to maintain a

calm focus as a monk that energy could be seen as an energy of lostness but in tantra it is seen as a very powerful resource which, taken into a meditative state, can become a useful support for awakening.

Alcohol was also used; if you drink some alcohol you loosen up. The first effect of alcohol is a kind of depressant for anxieties and tensions, so there's a kind of release, and as you become a bit disinhibited, more of how you are starts to reveal itself. Rather than getting drunk on Friday night after working very hard all week – a situation where you have too much tension and then crazy release – by taking a mindful presence into engaging with alcohol, and experiencing the impact of alcohol on the body in an attuned meditative way, you start to experience the body in its dynamic mode. Linked to this was dancing, singing, poetry and – as it's clearly going in the direction of a party – fancy dress! You don't really want to go to a party dressed as a monk or a nun, so you get to wear a hat, jingly earrings, and all the lovely things that yogis wear.

This sense that meditation can be taken proactively and intentionally into the world with a spirit of freedom and engagement means that it is not some weak, fragile flower that has to be protected from the exigencies of day to day interaction. Rather it means that meditation is a heightened sensibility which, if brought into the world, allows more of world experience to reveal itself. The real value of tantra is that it becomes a support for the revelation of the innate beauty and 'givenness' of life as it unfolds.

A couple of hundred years after the death of Shakespeare his works were bowdlerized. All the dirty bits, the nasty bits, and the bad words were cut out so that nice girls at good boarding schools could read Shakespeare without blushing. A similar constraint was applied as tantra came into Tibet and into a monastic structure, so you get tantra for virgins, tantra for monks and thus it became a more mental practice rather than a practice of ecstatic embodiment. There are advantages and disadvantages to that. The Nyingma sect tends to be a lineage where people go into relationships; developing stable married relationships or unstable relationships. Rather than living in meditative communities as monk and nuns they are in the world with jobs, and so the life of tantra can be enacted through the body.

Instead of having control as something imposed onto a chaos which is always about to break through, order is revealed in the movement of awareness. You can't impose order onto the fresh vitality of life in the manner of a conductor working with an orchestra; it's not an orchestration, or choreography for dance. Rather it's as if you're playing jazz. Jazz musicians have to be able to feel the development of the music – they have to be able, not just to hear the structure of the music, but to feel it throughout their body. When the saxophone played by their colleague is rising they know when to pull back because they are part of the same flow of music. They're not playing in a competitive way, or trying to mark out an individual territory.

In life we take our place within the shared field of experience, just as we do in dance or theatre improvisation, or skipping games back in primary school. You've got two girls with a rope, and you stand there, and then, when you've got the rhythm in your body, you jump in. But if you jump in before you've got the rhythm you whack the rope. So that's what tantra is really about – how to be able to feel the rhythms of the world on a very subtle and yet open level, and move into them. It's about a profound kind of empathetic attunement on many, many different levels. About hearing the world as rhythm, as tune, as melody – dynamic and unfolding and unpredictable; you have to be there, you have to be relaxed yet ready to move.

In the summer, I like to go to the opera at Holland Park in London, and I've often watched the man on the timpani at the back of the orchestra pit. Sometimes for twenty minutes or so there's nothing for him to do, so he looks bored, and entertains himself by looking around at the audience. He can afford to be distracted because he knows what's coming; he has the music printed out, but in life do any of us know what music is coming? We just don't know, but we've got to be there because this moment will not be repeated. If we're somewhere else it won't happen again.

There is a big difference between this and what we have been told. Growing up in this culture, our parents and our school say, 'This is the rule book for your existence. If you follow this rule book life will work out well. Get a good job, settle down, that'll be fine, all the way through.' This is not true, it's a comforting lie. It's just like believing in Father Christmas, except that we usually wake up from that particular lie at the age of five or six. Many of us don't wake up from this universal rulebook until we're dead. We just don't understand that there is no rulebook that tells you how to live; we are all flying by the seat of our pants. In this situation it's best to keep your eyes open, your ears open, and your heart open.

Mistakes

Of course, sometimes you will get it wrong but there is no point in being too upset by that fact. A mistake is simply a miss-taking of a situation. If you have taken it wrongly you can take something else, you can't go back and retake it. Just as you can't retake your exams; what you can do is take another exam. It will be a different exam paper, but this time you can take it with more preparation, more openness, and more attention. At this point you have to believe that what happened was not so bad otherwise you think, 'Oh, I failed it last time, I'm not going to do it any better. What's the point of studying, I'm going to leave school.' Lots of kids say things like that. They get a fixed definition of their capacity and then they are conditioned by an event that occurs, coming to see it as a definition of the limits of their being.

One of the functions of tantra is to show the illusory nature of all these sites of closure. There is never, ever, a final moment, just the next and the next and the next. So this has gone, what's next... what's next? Being here now means you are not contaminated by the mistakes of the past – they fall off you. You've plenty of chances to make new ones in the moment, but each time you make a mistake it's gone. This is very important because, without hope, we tend to go into a bunker mentality and try to make life comforting and safe. In that way we deny ourselves the possibility of awakening.

The functions of methods

The different kinds of meditation all have a function. *Shamatha* meditation, where we focus the mind in order to become calmer, is not done simply because it's good to be calm for its own sake. According to tradition, within this realm of reincarnation in which we revolve, the highest states are those of formless meditation, achieved by great meditators who were able to still the flow of thoughts for a very long time. People exist in these states for hundreds of thousands of years without any physical manifestation and without any movement in their mind. They have a kind of latent consciousness which is completely undisturbed, like a very long dull sleep. That exists as a product of the karma of the meditation they have done before. Then, after a while, that karmic cause is exhausted and thoughts start to arise. In all these aeons of calm no new learning has occurred and, as these beings get caught up in their thoughts, they come back into more disturbed places in samsara. So just trying to block thoughts and make the mind calm is not therefore, in itself, inherently useful.

In practising according to the middle way we avoid these extremes of agitation and quiescence and although this practice of non-identification and non-fusion with thoughts does act on a surface level to calm thoughts it also has a deeper function in trying to help us see something about ourselves – to be able to develop a capacity to examine *what is the nature of thought?* This is very important in dzogchen.

In the same way, when we develop compassion in mahayana buddhism it's not just because it's good to be kind to people, that is something most people in the world would agree with. It's because the intense development of altruism, of putting the other first, acts as a kind of depth charge exploding below the surface of our existence, churning the depths, and letting us see how deeply self-preoccupied we are. The more we go out to help people, the more we start to feel the rubber band of self-reference pulling us back 'But what about me? I've done all that for you, where were you for me?' When we notice that, we start to see that there's always something cooking underneath. Every gift I give is actually a boomerang and I'm waiting for it to come back. This attachment to the primacy of one's own welfare has to be seen, purified and dissolved if we are to abide in relaxed openness.

The inherent purity of emptiness

In tantra there are various layers of practice and the first stages focus on purification. So, in the style of Kriyayoga, before you do any ritual practice, you would take a bath and put on clean white clothes. You would then prepare offerings that nobody could take offence at, such as beautiful fresh flowers, pure substances like milk and yoghurt and butter, very sweet delicious things. You regard the buddhas as very wonderful, glorious people, radiant like kings and queens, and you're like a humble courtier saying, 'Oh big, strong, shining people, please give nice things to me, this very small, stupid, unworthy person.'

On this first level of tantra every offering should be very pure. If you were going to offer some nice rock sugar but it fell on the ground, even when you have picked it up and dusted it off you would feel that you shouldn't offer it because, symbolically, it has become contaminated. You believe that this sugar, which was pure, has now been contaminated by proximity to something bad. Here the sugar is *real*, the polluting agent is *real* and the result is the contamination, which is *real*. But if that is the case then it becomes very, very difficult to know what to do, because it means that any kind of dirt which arrives has the power to remove the purity. Whatever purity you achieve is very easily destroyed. Clean and dirty are seen as distinct and opposite categories that are mutually conflictual. We can act to create pure substance and a pure way of life, yet is it truly pure? What is the inherent self-nature of purity? Purity is a construct; purity is a notion that exists only in relation to impurity. If we don't have a notion of impurity how will we have purity?

As we progress further into tantra we make more radical offerings. We start to offer meat and alcohol; things which are disturbing, which involve killing, which involve intoxication. We can offer, even more radically, human flesh. We can offer dog flesh. We can offer faeces. We can offer urine. Now you might think, 'Why would anybody want to put out a little plate of pooh for the buddha?' Well, we have a body and in our body is shit. When the shit comes out you go 'Hmm.' Actually most people don't even go, 'Hmm' they think 'Go away... not me!' but where did this pooh come from? 'Me.'

This is an important point because, if shit smells bad, and shit comes out of you, and you think that shit is dirty, what does that mean about you? You take in nice food this end and you put out stinky pooh that end. You are a machine for turning lovely things into nasty things! If you really believe that shit is bad and food is good, then you have a basic dualism. By putting the good things on one side and the bad things on the other your freedom to move in the world is always restricted because you are afraid... 'What will happen if my good substance gets mixed with a bad substance?'

In some cultures virginity is very highly prized; if a woman is unfortunate enough to be raped she is then unmarriageable. This is an abomination, a terrible distortion which comes from a patriarchal reading where an attack on the male pride and the male ego is enacted through raping a woman in the family. It is used politically to punish people in many cultures. It's disgusting, but we can also see the logic of it. The logic is: here we have pure, here we have impure; if you make the pure impure then you have power

www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

over it. To be able to make disgusting something that someone else regards as holy is very useful if you want to destroy them.

When the muslims first invaded India, one of the things they did was to cut the heads off cows and throw them into the hindu temples. Cow's blood, in particular, is not a nice thing if you are a hindu, you really don't want to have any contact with it. In revenge the hindus would get a pig and cut the head off the pig and throw it into the mosque, because then the muslims would go, 'Oh no, now what can we do? We can't pray here, this is now completely defiled.' They would have to knock it down and build another mosque. Purity based on concepts and exclusion is always vulnerable to defilement.

But the function of tantra is to try to see the whole world, the whole universe, every aspect of it, like a mandala, which means that it is *all* pure. If it's all pure, then what you think of as impure is pure. This purity is not that of the juxtaposition of good and bad, clean and dirty, pure and impure; it's not a dualistic frame of reference. Rather it is that, being devoid of inherent self-nature, it does not have a basis on which an attribute like pure or impure could really abide.

When you have a substance and apply another substance to it, the original substance will be altered, it will be marked by what touches it. But if you understand that both of the substances are devoid of inherent self-nature, what is there to take up the marking? What thing has truly been changed? You can stain your shirt, you can throw paint on your walls, but even if you take a big bucket of black paint and you throw it up in the air the only thing that will get covered is yourself when it comes back down, it will not stick in the air! When there is space, when there is emptiness, what can contaminate it?

As with the sky: the clouds cover the sky, then the wind blows, the clouds move along and there is the sky again, clear blue sky; the clouds pass through leaving no trace at all. If we understand emptiness as having the nature of space, and see that all phenomena including ourselves are empty, we know that purity and impurity are modes of emptiness. There is no ground for contamination in that which is essentially pure. This is enormously important. All we ever encounter is the endless patterning of emptiness, like the ever-changing patterns in the sky.

Discrimination

The purpose for the higher tantric practice offerings, those which would normally cause us to say, 'Oh, how could you do that? That's disgusting!' is to make you question your assumptions about value. What is the basis for these discriminations that you make – this is pure, this is not pure; this is good, this is not good? This kind of dualistic thinking is the basis for all the troubles that we have, and is the one thing that we should be disgusted by.

We have troubles like this in terms of people's prohibitions around food, around jobs, and around marriage – what kind of person can marry what kind of person. In western Europe many of these prohibitory categories have collapsed in the last hundred years and now women do many of the jobs which traditionally were only done by men. Even so, new kinds of discrimination come into being all the time in which some attitude or behaviour is installed as an absolute limit.

An example is the consecration in America of a bishop who is overtly gay. Many other bishops from other parts of the anglican church then say, 'No, you cannot be gay and a bishop. These are two categories which you cannot put together because they antithetical, they are contradictory. It is impossible to have that. We can see how the lines of definition in people's minds cause them to create walls that block off possibility.

Our problem is that each time the culture changes, we close down one so called 'bad' area and we open into another so called 'bad' area. So in the human dimension, where meaning is generated by the mutual exclusion of categories, it's very difficult to have a really open heart and to say, 'Everything in this world is Ok.'

You might say 'Well, if there's nothing wrong with offering shit to the Buddha, what about human sacrifice? Why shouldn't we kill people?' This would be to confuse a meditation practise, designed to release us from prejudice and transform our experience, with an actual act of aggression and harm. Dissolving categories does not mean that everything is good in itself. When the motive is narrow ego gain or protection and there is no integration with the natural purity of the unborn awareness then many actions are harmful. One of the reasons why killing people is not a good idea is that other people don't belong to us. Our rights of appropriation and mastery over others are always an abomination, particularly because we don't really have very much mastery over ourselves.

I find that getting myself to do the things that I need to do in the course of a day is very hard because I'm avoidant; I leave bits of work right to the end of the day because I don't want to do them. When the post comes I look at the envelopes and find myself opening the friendly looking ones and putting the others aside until later. Controlling ourselves is very, very hard but bossing other people around is easy.

Controlling other people is like arranging objects into the configurations we want, but the main purpose of buddhist teachings is to try to understand that there are no inherently-existing entities. Any action that involves moving towards the world in terms of appropriation and annihilation of entities is fundamentally forbidden. This is not because it is bad in the sight of some god, but because it is a complete misunderstanding of what is there. We ourselves have no enduring, inherent self-nature, we are always changing contextually, yet we do not want to die. So if we don't want to die, having already

studied these things and done some meditation, we can imagine that other people who haven't had that same benefit certainly don't want to die.

Moving towards others in an aggressive way saying, 'If you don't do what I want, I will kill you' always begins inside a structure of thinking that real, separate, people have real, separate agendas that are oppositional to mine. The whole basis of tantric practice is to try to move away from this. So in these offerings we bring ourselves into relationship with categories that exist in our mind, and we start to see how, when we transgress that category definition and go over the edge, we feel huge anxiety. Conventional categories are held in place by anxiety and power. If we want to release the energy of experience that is trapped in them we have to face our anxiety and resist the urge to try and control what is going on.

Challenging dualistic categorisation

The second level of ignorance, *kun tu tag pai ma rig pa*, is about shaping and naming all things. This is exactly what is put into questions through the offerings of higher tantra, because if shit is not impure then what is the meaning of shit?

We live in a world where we can ascribe value and quality and status to everything we meet. When you go into a shop looking for a sweater, if you pick one up you can tell immediately whether or not it will do. Your eyes are very quick, you look at the stitching and the quality of the wool, you pull it and think 'Oh the wind will blow right through that' so you put it back again. Of course, on the relative level, ordinary discrimination is essential. Buying a useless sweater is pointless, so seeing the precise details of what arises is useful. We see colours and shapes and on the basis of that can impute value and function.

We're very good at that kind of discrimination; we're always putting things in their places. We do nothing but pigeon-holing all day long: good or bad, mine or yours, useful or not useful and, although this looks like a function of intelligence, it is actually a product of ignorance. The problem lies in reification – in the creation of seemingly truly existent entities, the manipulation of which confirms our own sense of existing as an entity. This is where, having placed things in different categories, we think that there is a radical, real difference between the 'things' in the different categories. This is the function of control – 'I can know *what's what* and by exerting my control I can make the world arrive the way I want it to arrive.' This is very dangerous because we are lured into a fantasy that we are more powerful than we actually are.

Then again, in the higher tantras, we move from very peaceful gods like Tara sitting smiling, looking very nice, to more wrathful gods who have flames all around them, who have wings, who are draped in elephant skins, tiger skins and so, whose faces and bodies are covered in ash from the cemetery, who wear a rouge of blood from corpses on their cheeks and so on. They are rather terrifying and look like demons. Yet we say that they are gods and pray 'Oh, holy blood-drinker please save all sentient beings.' It is very important to know what it means to pray to someone who looks dangerous. The meaning lies in an investigation of who is kind and who is unkind? Somebody who is very sweet might let you off the hook. They might provide solace and comfort, but they might never say, 'Just grow up! Eh? Get a life. What are you doing? Come on now.' They won't challenge you.

Someone who looks very dangerous is not going to say very sweetly to you, 'Life's been very hard!' They're going to say, 'You are a waste of space. Wake up!' What else do you think a heruka would say? They would say, 'You're rubbish. You're useless. You're a dreamer. You waste your whole life in blah blah and kaka. Wake up! Get on. What are you doing? What's the problem? I'm in flames. The whole world is in flames. This is a burning-up place, it's not safe, and you want a little snooze time!' If you like things soft and sweet you might pray to Tara, but of course Tara also has some angry forms and she'll bite your head. These gods are dangerous because the world is dangerous. They also show that you cannot judge a book by its cover. Sweet people are not always sweet and ugly-looking people are not always dangerous. There are many ugly people with beautiful hearts.

In the last month the nicest person I've seen was a homeless woman who came up to me as I was leaving the hospital. She had big shiny eyes and we had a very strange conversation for about five minutes, but for about three days afterwards I felt like I was in a warm bath. There was something radiant shining out of this woman, but she looked completely mad. Had she crossed the door into the clinic we would have thought she *was* mad, but there was something alive in her that I was really touched by. On the other hand you may have sweet looking managers from whom you get no light or joy, only headaches. Something looks sweet so we think it is sweet, something looks dangerous so we think it's really dangerous; we assume that we can see people's qualities by the way they present themselves, but it's not like that.

Moreover, dangerous things can have a good function. Many medicines can be made out of very ugly looking plants, they can also be made out of pieces of animals' bodies and so on, so things that look ugly or dirty or strange can be enormously helpful. If you're going for an operation it's not usual for the surgeons to take you into the operating theatre and introduce you to the things that will be used to cut you open, because most people would faint at that point. We really don't want to know too much about what the surgeon's going to do. The difference between an operating theatre and a torture room is not all that great. Many torture chambers have doctors in them as well; people who know exactly how to stop someone dying so that they can take more pain. The difference is in the intention.

Although the tools that a surgeon uses – saws, things for cracking open bones – look horrible, the person using them is thinking 'Let's make this person better'. This is exactly the situation of a heruka. Someone like Vajrakilaya is very sharp, very pointed, but this is like a surgeon's knife – it is cutting into the heart of the five poisons, taking out the cancerous growths of egotism, of reification, of attachment to self. We have to see that the intention and the function are more important than how things look. In that way we start to see that everything in the world can have a good function if the intention is useful. So, in tantric practice, we're always trying to expand our repertoire of possible engagement with the world. Not turning away, not starting from an assumption, a prejudice, but being open to what is occurring and

thinking, 'What resources do I need so that I can be open and engage with this situation rather than turning away?'

Dzogchen

Now we come to dzogchen which has many similarities to tantra but is rather different. Dzogpa chenpo refers to a lineage of teachings which exists both in buddhism and in the bon religion. There are many differences of opinion between the different Tibetan schools as to whether dzogchen is a legitimate or illegitimate part of buddhism. At certain periods of time the gelugpa sect has said that it's not legitimate, however the fifth Dalai Lama himself wrote many texts on it and the present Dalai Lama is very much in favour of dzogchen and has taught it many times. The basic view is that there is no real difference between samsara and nirvana. The key object of refuge is not an external form. It's not a symbolic form like the buddha, or the teachings of the buddha, nor the holy sangha. It's not a meditational deity. It's not a human guru nor is it a dakini, a feminine energetic form. It's not even the realised structures of the mind – the three kayas – but it is our own mind itself as it is.

If we recognise the nature of our own mind then all the limitations that have been accumulated for millions of lifetimes vanish in that moment. As Milarepa said 'If you recognise this in the morning you're a buddha in the morning; if you recognise it in the evening you're a buddha in the evening.' So then we have the question, what *is* our mind? The mind we're used to thinking about and thinking with is our consciousness. This is a kind of thought-processing factory where thoughts and feelings are juxtaposed, put into relationship, so that patterns of meaning can be developed. These are the patterns of energetic flow which create the passing dreamlike structures which we take to be 'how things are.' We are always conscious of something; consciousness generates our familiar sense of being a subject engaging with objects. This activity generates and organises the content of our experience. But it is not the real nature of our mind.

In dzogchen the real question is, 'Who is the one who is having this experience?' We are all sitting here, sitting with our bodies in different ways, listening to what I'm saying, having your own thoughts, maybe drifting off. You're each having an experience. In that sense each of us knows that we are alive. We think, 'I am here.' So the question is, 'Who is the one who is here?' If we say, '*I'm* here' we stake a claim through identification, taking the manifesting moments to be indicative of who we are, '*This* is me.' But in the next moment something else is arising and I am identifying with that. So, moment by moment 'this is me,' then 'this is me,'... but there's not much clarity in that. The content is always changing yet the act of identification is continuous – it is this that generates the illusion of a continuous personal identity.

In the moment of identification, 'This is me', there is identification with a manifestation which is changing. So to say, 'This is me' is also to say 'I'm unreliable, I'm changing, and I don't know who I am.'

Something's gone wrong here and it is a bit disturbing. However we keep doing it, and if we keep doing it fast enough and everyone agrees to be in this folie-a-deux, we can deceive ourselves into imagining that this identification *is* what we are.

Many, many thoughts can arise: 'This is me.' 'I feel tired.' 'My back's a bit sore.' 'I'd like to go for a walk.' As I go into each one and say 'Yes I am having this thought, this is what I believe' that is a movement. Where is the one who is aware of the movement? Where are they in relation to that movement? Are they inside the thing that is moving? Are they standing apart from it? If they're standing apart where are they?

We could look at that for a moment: without moving or particularly trying to meditate, just observe yourself in the present moment of being yourself and try to get a felt sense of who is the one who is having this experience. With respect to these thoughts and feelings: are they self-luminous – do they illuminate themselves like fireflies or is something else illuminating them? You know that thoughts come and that they go. So who is the one who is doing the thinking about it? Is it a collection of bits and pieces that happens to be in this space at this moment, with some bits appearing to be thinking about other bits?

It is difficult to express this in words; mostly we don't get to look at what is beyond language because we have an immediate identification *with* language. We don't experience language as a formal representational system that our awareness stands in relation to. We inhabit language as if it was as much a part of us as our fingers, and we experience thinking as moving these notions around in pretty much the same way as we move our digits around. This is very important to see, because when we say that there is an absence of inherent self-nature – that there is no solid substantial basis for 'self' – we still do carry a sense of some continuity of being. Not 'Being' with a big 'B', but just the fact that, somehow, something is 'on-going'.

I have a continuity of being in that I am able to recognise that I am the same person today as arrived in Macclesfield last night. My constructs about who I am could become a kind of bedrock. We get a sense though, that these constructs are not really so stable; they are more like a pontoon bridge which moves under our feet as we cross it. Yet somehow they seem to give us the sense that we go on being, and we go on being *ourselves* even as we have different thoughts, feelings and sensations. When we reflect in that way, using linguistic formations, we say 'I am me, having this experience' and that looks like the light coming on. It looks like I'm explaining something useful to myself, but actually in the moment that I think I am being intelligent and understanding myself I am confusing myself – because the mind is not a thought.

[The mirror of awareness](#)

In order to understand this, in the traditional presentation of dzogchen, we say 'the mind is like a mirror'. When you look into a mirror you see many things – you can see your own reflection and many shapes reflected in it. These reflections appear to be inside the mirror, but if you take the mirror and you turn it around and point it in different directions, it keeps filling up with new images and emptying out the prior images. Each image, as it goes out of the mirror, leaves no trace of ever having been there. If you have a glass and you fill it with water, and then pour the water out, there are always some drops that cling to the inside of the glass, but as this mirror empties itself of images no trace of them is left. The qualities of the mirror are that it is empty and that it has clarity – the potential to display images.

The images in the mirror exist as a manifestation, but they don't have any separate self-existence because they exist in relation to each other. They cannot define for themselves the place they will take up because they arise in the interplay between the event that's reflected and the reflective surface of the mirror. Relating this to our own mind – we move, we speak, we talk, we have thoughts and each of these events arise and pass in time and register on the open dimension of the mirror, which is itself empty of any inherent content. That is to say there is no semantic or conceptual content in the mirror itself, it just opens to whatever arises. In the same way our mind entertains a huge range of arisings, and then lets them go. These arisings occur as patterns which manifest but they have no true self inside them.

One of these patterns of arising is 'I'm thinking these thoughts. I'm speaking to you. I am James Low. I have come from London'. When I lose my sense of an open awareness in which the arising 'I am James Low' comes and goes, and I collapse from the infinite openness of the state of the mirror into an identification with this momentary arising 'I am James Low'...'whoosh'...it's as if I invest that arising with myself and that then reflects back to me 'I am this enduring object'. Although that arising is empty and very transient, just passing through the mind, the energetic relationship of attachment I have to it tricks me into believing that something substantial has been created.

The same process happens when you see a film at the cinema. The film, as we all know, is composed of a sequence of frames, just little serial moments strung together. When reels of film are used the reel is locked into the machine and it starts to turn. At the beginning the frames are obvious, but as it get going at its right speed, suddenly you are in the movie. Even when you know that the movie is a construct, if the movie is good, it somehow captures you and you surrender your open awareness, you get taken in. The self-reflective place where you think 'I am watching a movie' just vanishes.

If you are reading a good novel, that's just what you want to happen, you want to be captivated. It's hellish lying in bed at night with a novel that you can't get into. You're thinking 'What am I doing?'... 'I'm reading a novel. ... I really *am* reading it ... it's hard work!' but if you get a good book you are right in it, it's fantastic!

Finding our way home

Now, unfortunately, samsara is a very, very good book so we get right in it, and we think... it's really happening, it's really happening! As one book finishes we pick up another one, chapter after chapter, life after life, we are *in* this book. So the function of the practice, which builds on all the other kinds of practice, is to relax the attention back from its merged identification, its merged fusion, its merged attachment in the arising. This attachment is onto an arising which has no real existing true self, yet the attachment creates the felt sense that both subject and object are entities with their own defining essence.

In the practice we start to see that our mind is an awareness which is not established anywhere in our body, and that in fact, what I call 'my body' is not a house sheltering my mind, which is somehow in here, but rather this whole experience I have of being *me* cannot be separated from my experience of being *you*. Subject and object are arising together as an infinite dance or interplay within the realm of the mirror which is my natural state, or true presence, or awareness. This is what is called *rigpa*. *Rigpa* doesn't mean a kind of search-light, but rather it is the natural luminosity of the space within which everything reveals itself. It's like in the early morning before the sun has risen, you get this soft light that just fills the world; everything is there but not standing out sharply.

So whenever we find ourselves in a state of identification with any arising, whether that arising appears to be on the object side or on the subject side, we have to see that what we take as subject and object are revealed as being devoid of inherent self-nature. In the more traditional technical language we say that the actuality of the object *chos nyid*, is a quality of the basic space of existence *chos ying*; that is to say that the empty side of any object can never be removed. Whenever we perceive an object it is only the shimmering glimmering quality of emptiness itself. In the same way, on the side of the subject, what we take to be 'my mind' is in fact the radiance of the ground nature. So the *sem*, the conscious mind that is thinking, reveals itself as *sem nyid*, which is mind when it is inseparable from emptiness.

In a sense nothing is changed, and yet everything is changed. It's like when somebody has been adopted but they have never been told about it, when they are told that they are adopted things suddenly makes sense. We are all living like this – we think we know who our mum and dad are but we are completely wrong. You were not born from your mother and father. Tut, tut, tut! Very bad! Your actual mother is emptiness and your father is compassion, or method, or energy. When emptiness and energy move together everything comes into existence. We are constantly being reborn in this energetic moment through the eternal copulation of these forces. This is why, in the higher tantras, we see the buddhas

engaged in sexual congress. This is not two people making love but the eternal interplay of these forces of emptiness and energy, of emptiness and awareness, and it is the basis for every moment.

Everything that we are experiencing just now is arising in emptiness. It is often said that: 'Emptiness is unborn and unceasing.' If your mother is emptiness this means you have always been inside emptiness, you never came out of it. Nothing ever escapes out of emptiness and everything is revealed within it. I can say 'This is my name. I went to this school. I'm from this country. My favourite food is, I can't bear eating this' I can define myself in many, many ways. I can say, 'Oh I remember being a child' and it looks like I exist, but when I say 'Oh yes! When I was five I did that ...' *what* is that? That is energy arising in emptiness.

Saying 'I live in London' is just 'blah, blah, blah.' What *is* London? London is energy; it is an energetic field of manifestation which is always in the process of emergence. The stability of London is the interpretation of London. It is the movement, through representation, whereby I make sense of London. I know what the names of the train stations are in London, and I know what the underground map of London is; all of these are thoughts and patterns that I generate and hold in my mind. If I speak on that level with someone else who is interested in these things, they *seem* very important, but what do they actually establish?

If we go to Crewe Railway Station we will see people there with cameras taking pictures of the engines, not steam engines but very ugly diesel engines! In Glasgow there are poor junkies who, when they can't get heroin, inject temazepan. This is a dreadful drug to stick in your veins, but how could that be worse than taking a video of a diesel engine. That is hard core addiction! Do you remember Ian Allen Train Spotter's Club... writing down all the numbers of train engines? This is samsara at its worst! Where the fact that you have seen a train going by has to be written down so you can show ...who? Somebody... anyone.... 'I have seen all the train engines in England!' Like people who can remember the names of all the people who have ever played football for Manchester United...and so what? But we can also say, 'Oh I can speak five languages'...and so what? 'I am a nice person' and so what? 'I can cook well' and so what?

These moments of experience arise and we attach to them, we invest them with significance, and we seek out the people who like the things we like. We create what is meaningful to ourselves. For some people it is playing golf, for others it's gardening. Clearly, all of these things are not wrong, they are not bad, but what we can observe is how when you invest something with meaning it starts to shine, and when you take that meaning away it feels awful. Many people have had that experience in love affairs; it is a very horrible feeling when you have experienced somebody filling you up with meaning, and then they suck it back out again. You are left feeling 'Ooh, this is not very nice.... come back!'

The meditation

We can see how this attachment and investment operates on an outer level; but the function of the meditation is to recognise how that is occurring on an inner level and there is a very simple way into this that we can start to use for examining ourselves. Up to now the paths that we have looked at all stress a particular kind of effort. For instance, if you are practicing mindfulness you have to keep your mind on your breath, or on an external object, and you have to try to resist impulses. If you are practicing according to tantra you have to memorise the ritual, you have to do all the mudras and so on, at the right time, and you have to maintain a particular orientation. This requires a lot of effort.

However, in dzogchen, the object of meditation is whatever presents itself. We are not putting in any special object of meditation, we are not visualising a buddha or focusing on the breath; we simply relax and then attend to whatever occurs. This sounds very simple. However, in order to attend to what occurs, we have to be fresh and open and available. If we get caught up in the thoughts that have just gone and we start to pile further thoughts on top of them, or if we anxiously wait for future thoughts to arrive and become busy about them, we lose the spaciousness in which actuality presents itself to us. So we want to relax and open into a state that is not exactly passive, but is definitely not active, it is poised.

In this state, when things manifest, we give them space and let them go. As we relax, we want to move away from our mind being our private concern, a concern where we have ownership. Because if my mind is like my house then, just as I am responsible for keeping my house clean and tidy, I am responsible for making sure that I get nice clean thoughts, not dirty bad thoughts; compassionate thoughts, not selfish thoughts. So in the meditation, not as a visualisation but just as a metaphor, we imagine that we are sitting in a public park; a space which belongs to everyone. Things are happening – someone's coming along shouting at their children. We think, 'Oh, you shouldn't shout at your children, but... they're not my children, I'm not a social worker, do what you like!' Somebody else comes along and they're drinking... another can... another can – 'You want to get pissed, get pissed. I'm not on duty, I'm not in control, I'm not the owner of the premises!' This is how we want to practice in the meditation. Whatever thoughts come... they are not ours and they are not about us!

If I sit here as if I am being sent off to school, stitching my little 'James Low' name labels onto every thought that comes, I will be very, very busy and I can fill a whole big box full of my own thoughts; but this is not meditation, this is making samsara. In the meditation, we want to relax and let whatever comes, comes. It doesn't matter how stupid our thoughts are. If your mind is dull and heavy, just relax and be with what is dull and heavy. If your mind becomes very agitated and lots of buzzing thoughts

come, just relax and give space to that. Don't try to control it. Don't try to change one kind of thought for another thought, just be with the mind however it arises. If you become fully of bodily sensation, don't worry about that, just give space to it.

With this kind of meditation it is better to do very short pieces frequently to avoid it becoming effortful. Sit comfortably, not crushing your vertebrae, and let your skeleton support your weight. In the previous practice we had our chin down, but with this kind of practice we have the chin slightly raised. With our eyes open we let our gaze rest in the space in front of us. In the space you can still see the wall and the people, but don't focus in on the wall or the people's heads. Maintain a relaxed, open mode as if you were sitting on top of a hill gazing out into infinite space. There is always space to relax into.

Sitting in this way we make the sound 'A' three times. 'A' is said to represent the nature of emptiness or space itself and it is a very basic emptying sound – when you say, 'A' you feel you are emptying yourself out. We imagine all the tensions, all the knots, all the problems that we have, just pouring out through the sound and dispersing in space. In this state we are relaxed and open, integrated with the space around us; not blocking visual sensation, not editing experience, not retreating into a predetermined meditation, just staying present with whatever comes. If you find yourself getting caught up in something, don't push it away; just very gently relax your awareness back into the openness.

The view

The notion of a 'view' is a very important concept because we always view the world from some particular perspective; we cannot be without a view. Another way of describing a view would be the 'world of our assumptions.' Very often these assumptions are subconscious and are not very directly available to us for reflection. We find ourselves forming opinions about things without particularly knowing why we do, but the opinion as it forms, seems to fit; you think, 'Oh yeah, that's the sort of opinion I would have'.

In some kinds of therapy, for example C.B.T., they look a lot at the underpinning structures, the schemas, which generate how someone stands in relationship to the world. These schemas are a kind of subconscious view such as 'I'm not a good person' or 'I'm an unlovable person' or 'I'm not a successful person'. That belief or thought is not held very consciously but it is a major determinant of our experience of situations.

Thus, if you believe that you are incompetent, when you perform an action you are more likely to take a negative reading of the action you've done. This then reaffirms the core belief, which has itself never been very conscious. So you might know that you are a bit critical, but the criticism you make about yourself will feel justified because you'll think you are applying rational criteria for the evaluation. Out of

that process of criticism, drop by drop by drop, like honey, you are nourishing and feeding the core belief that you are incompetent and unlovable and a waste of space. That's how karmic views operate all the time. We view the world from positions we don't even know we hold.

In buddhism each of the nine levels, or vehicles, has its own particular view. Each view is an intentional way of reconfiguring our relationship with the world. In the view of dzogchen, the first thing to be aware of is that the answer does not lie in the object. The meaning of my life, the understanding of my existence, cannot be provided for me by any object in the world. There is no man, no woman, no possession, no book, no teaching as an *object*, as a *thing*, which is going to remove my distress.

Most of us spend our life looking out in the world for something. We look for the right house, the right partner, the right school for our kids, the right diet to have, the right hairstyle and so on. People also worry now about the right funeral. There's always something to worry about if you want. As we get older, we start to see that all these things that we thought were right didn't last very long in their wonderful state of 'rightness.' What was right became wrong. In fact no object can fill the gap inside us because the longing, the hunger, the need, is not a shape that an object could fill.

In Europe we have an old story that Ovid tells in the Metamorphosis, of Cupid and Eros. Eros or longing represents the fact that at one time all people were androgynous, both male and female.

At a certain point the male and female parts came apart, and so when we say 'That's my other half' or 'I'm looking for my missing half', it originates from this idea that there is someone somewhere who will make me complete. The fixation on the romantic ideal causes us to project a huge amount of energy onto another person, as if somehow their presence close to us would magically heal all the wounds that we have been carrying. With the divorce rate that we have in this country that is clearly an absolute illusion... and a very sad and painful illusion for many people. Especially if you think, 'I'm sure I have met the right person but I must have driven them away' or 'I wasn't good enough.' People can be very, very cruel and self attacking.

From the point of view of dzogchen what is missing is the re-integration of oneself with oneself, that is to say, we have slipped into a false identification with what is essentially an object as if it were the subject. With this view, 'I' as I am now – speaking and in my body – everything that you see and hear of me, is all 'object', not just for you, but for me as well. I exist for myself as a flow of experience. When I identify with that experience as 'myself', I turn my back on the question, 'Who is the one who is having the experience?' This is the most important question because...yes, *I am* talking, but there is also a state of awareness or presence in which, and through which, my words and gestures are arising. So I am manifesting, and this manifestation is me, but it is not the whole of me.

I cannot be encapsulated, neither in my self-referential thoughts which are, of course, invisible to you, nor in my manifest activity. It's not as though there's a private bit of me that I alone have access to, and the rest of me which you have access to. Both of these domains – what appears to be internal and private and what appears to be external and public – are processes of manifestation, and in that sense are part of the flow of experience.

So, in as much as I see you, and you arise as an experience for me, I also have the same relationship with myself. I am as much an experience for myself, as you are an experience for me. That is the point of non-duality, of subject and object; that I cannot be more real for me than you are for me, because you arise as an experience and I arise as an experience. Everything is just experience in that sense. Here, by 'experience' I don't mean the memory sort of experience as in 'I had that experience yesterday' I mean the moment-by-moment process of engaged revelation – how the world reveals itself to us. I reveal myself to myself, and you are revealed to me; both of these are revelations.

Using the analogy of the mind as a mirror, you are a reflection arising in the mirror, and I am also a reflection arising in the mirror. This mirror aspect of my mind cannot be captured by names, by concepts, by labelling. It has no shape or form, it cannot be attributed, it has no top or bottom, and it doesn't rest on anything. If I look for my mind itself it I can't find it, but although I can't find it, here I am; something is manifesting. This manifestation is *gag me*, ceaseless, without inherent self-nature, it just keeps coming, and *zangtal* which means subject and object have no differentiation. The manifestation of myself, and the manifestation of yourself, is without any interruption.

Although I appear to be in my skin bag talking out to you, my words arise because of you; you are the co-creators of my words. The line I draw between myself and others is an illusion, because what we call 'self' and what we call 'other' has only the status of a reflection in the mirror. It manifests, yet is devoid of inherent self-nature. Without the mirror, the reflection would not be revealed. If we hold this image or metaphor in mind then we are here in the shining experience of reflection. What is the nature of the mirror? The mirror is pure presence. The mirror is an awareness that reveals without itself ever being revealed.

You cannot really see what's in a mirror because what you see is not the mirror. How can you look into a mirror and not see a reflection? You might ask 'What's behind the reflection, I want to see what's there!' but you cannot see a mirror in an appropriative way. The 'mirroriness' of the mirror is ungraspable, it is not an object. This is really, really important. Most of our lives we act from the three levels of ignorance – as soon as the ignorance of shock and confusion occurs it brings anxiety and this spirals into dualistic interaction. What is essential is to observe for oneself that this energetic manifestation is only a reflection; it never ever establishes anything real. All the stories that we tell about ourselves don't give us any true reality. We cannot be substantial because we are processional.

www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

Being in the movement of the moment

Although the flow of manifestation is unimpeded, objects impede each other. If I identify with my flesh and blood manifestation, other people are always getting in my way. If you live in a city like London everybody is spaced out and they don't give a damn about each other; if you are walking down the street people walk right into you. There may be three people chatting together and it's as if you don't exist, they push you right off the pavement!

If we occupy space and feel that we are a separate person it's very easy to start feel that the world is hostile and think 'Well I've got to stand up for me!' Whereas with a felt sense of co-emergence this is one big dance stage and we are moving together and what then becomes important is to stay in the dance. If you are focused on the dance, it can't be about winning or losing, it's about being flexible. If we're focusing on the music, the interaction, the constant processing and being together, all that matters is participating. We learn a bit about this in primary school in the playground because if you want to be in the gang you have to join in, you can't do it on your terms. If they want to do skipping, if you want to be in the game then, even though you want to play cowboys and Indians, you do skipping. If you say 'No I'm only going to play my game' then you stand on your own in the corner.

What happens with our ego is that we take up a position - that I'm entitled to this, or I need to do that, or why do you keep getting in my way, why am I not able to do that? And whenever we lock solid as a person we bang into other people. Afterwards we look back and think, 'What was that all about? Oh God I'm so sorry! Why was I doing that? I was just being stubborn and stupid! What on earth was the game?' I was saying, 'No surrender! This is really important. I will not give in on this issue.' After a while you can't even remember what the issue was! It's just gone!

The more we see the co-emergence of subject and object as a dynamic interactive place then, if the others block our move, why shouldn't we move differently? But we think, 'You won last time and you want to win again? Why do I have to give in? It's always me! It's always me! I'm not doing it!' But does it really matter? If you are walking in a straight line and there's a tree in front of you, do you say to the tree, 'Oi, you there! I met your brothers down there, I walked round each of them, and I'm not walking around you!' ...that would be daft. In India, in the old days, that was a form of ritual suicide especially adopted by kings when they wanted to do a form of penance called tapasia. They would make a vow to walk in a straight line, and if their path was obstructed by an object they would just stand there; they wouldn't walk round it, so they would starve to death and die. That's a pretty blockheaded way of behaving!

Starting to see the nature of mind

For many, many lifetimes we have been identified solely with the level of manifestation and although this feels problematic in all sorts of ways it also feels reassuringly familiar. What we are seeking to do in the process of the meditation is relax back out of this false identification and the practice needs to be firm, slow, steady and clear in order to achieve this.

In a traditional example they say it's 'like pulling a hair out of a lump of butter.' When you make butter in Tibet you make it in a churn. If a hair gets into the butter when it is being churned then later on, when the butter is packed together by hand, the hair doesn't just stay in a straight line, it gets folded in many ways through the butter. If you try to get the hair out by pulling it very hard it will break, and if you pull it very gently the butter melts on your fingers and you can't keep a firm grip. So you've got to get the right grip and the right pressure. When we do the practise, after we've said the three 'A's we find that we tumble into and merge with what's arising. When that happens don't be alarmed and think you've made a mistake. Without stepping back from what arises, trying to create a separation, just very gently ease your way back.

Between a fusion where you are lost in it, and an apartness where you re-establish the self in this dualistic sense, there is a kind of proximal presence in which you are present in a non-dual way with whatever is arising. Like the mirror and the reflection, you are present in an inseparable way with the arising. Yet, just as when the reflection leaves there is no mark or stain left on the mirror, the arising also leaves without a trace. It is important to understand this point. If the mirror and the reflection had become 'one', you would never get the reflection out of the mirror; and if the mirror was completely apart from the reflection, they would be two separate things. But when you look in a mirror, you can see the mirror as the space holding the reflection. This is how we want our awareness to be.

Our mind is not something in our head, it's not a point in space, it is a quality of infinite presence. This is the view. In order to get clearer about this, when we do the three 'A' practice again we can start to look to see 'Where does my mind rest? Where is my mind?' If you inspect your mind in the manner of a policeman following a suspect you will be looking for an object and it will always slip away; rather, just try to hang out with yourself and observe 'Where is my mind?' Like a detective sitting in a café, he's not walking the streets following someone; he's just observing what's occurring.

When we recite the three 'A's it's very good to relax into the sound as much as we can. In this kind of meditation practice, effort doesn't help. There are many kinds of meditation like doing prostrations where you must use a lot of effort, but for this it is better to be very tender and relaxed. If you feel that you are closing in on a thought, open into spaciousness and trust that the thought will reveal itself without our having to search for it.

I think it is a really important to see that we are normally identified with the subject as a kind of agent. We explore: 'I am thinking these thoughts', 'I'd better have a look at this', 'I'd better have a think about this.' In this way we get a sense that we are moving out towards thoughts yet that experience is itself a thought, it's a mental arising. It is very difficult to recognise that we are fused with a mental arising when the arising seems to be ourselves but teasing ourselves, as awareness, out of that point of fusion is really important.

In the state of presence the whole field is the surface of the mirror. Another image for this ground of experience is that it's like the early dawn when the first light comes into the sky, soft and diffuse. It's as if the very air itself is somehow alive, or like on a bright summer's day when it's as if everything is shining in every direction and light is pervasive.

What is being gestured towards is actually beyond language so these images don't exactly fit, but they give us something of a flavour of what is involved. If we relax we simply become the presence, the open and empty 'core vitality' or 'non-deadness.' We are not a presence of *something*, but into that presence, or through that presence, we are revealed. We are not having thoughts about thoughts – that's what we normally do – 'I am a thought about me having thoughts about something else.' We are just gently pulling back from that and as space we are offering space for the thoughts to display themselves. This is very difficult to do because we are so used to merging into the thought in a kind of daydream. We think we are being spacious but then all of a sudden we're wrapped in thought again. Here the process is one of very gently unwrapping ourselves.

If you give up smoking and someone says 'do you want a fag?' you might say 'Oh yeah,' and then as you remember 'Oh, no. I'd quite like to smoke...but no, I don't smoke anymore.' So there is an impulse arising which you block. When you have a definite object like a cigarette which is out there, it gives you some space for thinking about the response. The physical separation between smoker and non-smoker also makes it easier to establish a difference and refuse the invitation; even so it's very hard to do. When a thought seems to be inside your head then it's even more difficult; you are not standing apart from it and it's very difficult not to merge with it. But the whole point in the meditation, when we relax and open, is that we are not anywhere, we are everywhere. The notion that awareness has a core location is itself confused.

The three aspects of experience

In dzogchen the mind's nature is described in terms of three aspects; *ngo wo*, *rang zhin*, and *thug je*. These terms are difficult to translate into English. *Ngo wo* means the bare givenness of noetic being. It refers to the fact that we are here as our basic liveliness before the fact of manifestation, rather than being *something* as such. *Ngo wo* is not something which can be grasped, our basic existence is not

closed around something; it's not 'me' being 'me', it's just open. Sometimes you might be walking in the country and you're just at one with the world; it's rather like that but more intensified and with less content in it.

The next aspect, *rang zhin*, is the way in which expression, or display, or potentiality, arises. *Rang zhin* means 'face' as does *ngo wo*, but from a different aspect. In this life, although we can all see your face, you never will. Isn't it amazing that our own face, where we show ourselves into the world, is the one thing we never see! We see it in a mirror, we see it reflected in other people's eyes, but we can't directly see it ourselves. What we can do though, is to inhabit our face – to face out with our face. *Rang zhin* or *rang dang*, is the energetic quality of our body shining out. If our body is healthy you will have a good complexion and, when we are functioning well, we express our creativity in dreams, sensations, and thoughts. We are not caught just in anxiety or depression, in sinking thoughts or in manic thoughts, for the whole potentiality of our being is present.

Just as the mirror, which is itself empty, has the potentiality to display infinite forms; so this aspect of the mind is like the potentiality of the mirror. You can hold a mirror to every object in the world and it will display whatever is there; there is no limit to what it can show. If you hold the mirror up to something horrible, say for example a child having it's throat cut, we would think 'God no' and look away, but the mirror just shows it, it doesn't turn white, it has no judgment on that level. On this level the mind is able to simply be open and nakedly display what is there, which is why we say it's like a public park.

Most of the time we edit our experience; we decide that we don't want to have thoughts like this. We think 'I'm not the kind of person who wants to think about children being murdered. God, I hope don't dream about that tonight, that would be horrible! I wouldn't like that!' But if we do this we are saying 'My mind is a private garden and I will only have roses. I'll throw any other flowers them over the wall for the neighbour, because I don't need them!' Do you see the difference?

This is the aspect of our experience of the field, of what is occurring, rather than our precise participation – that will shortly be described in terms of *thug je*. When we say 'the mind is public and infinite' it doesn't mean we are going to go out and do crazy things, it means just being open to tolerating all the infinite potential as they manifest; understanding that whatever the display, it is the energy of the mind.

The third level is *thug je*. This refers to compassion, but its particular meaning in dzogchen is compassion in the form of our gestural movement within the world. So, in the non-duality of our being together in the state of openness, in which there is no separation of self and other, I find myself speaking to you, 'I am speaking to 'you'. This seems like a precise, finite act, yet at the same time, simultaneously and inseparably, it is also the unborn open dimension.

In that sense, I manifest towards the other with the specificity of seeing the face of the other – being in relation with you. However I'm not defined by that because it is a gestural moment; in the moment that it's completed it dissolves itself like writing on water. If you write something on the surface of water with your finger, it's there just for an instant and then it's gone. In the same way we constantly gesture into a world which has no basis for holding what is manifested as solid. These three aspects of dzogchen are inseparable and beyond reification.

The path of dzogchen is to bring about our experience of the simultaneity of these three aspects – the openness, the potentiality or the energetic display, and the precise manifestation – so that we are present as these aspects are occurring without any division between them. The inseparability of these aspects is the vision and goal of dzogchen meditation. Then one can be fully in the world, being with others, speaking, responding, holding babies, singing lullabies, cooking food, doing all the wonderful things in life, and yet not caught by these moments. Not thinking 'Ah! *This is me*' because this *is* me *and* I'm infinite space as well; the manifestation and the space are inseparable. Awakening to or relaxing into spacious presence deconstructs our habitual tendency to reification.

This means that we don't need to change our external lives or adjust any of the behaviours that we do. We don't need to give up work in an office or bank to become a social worker. Ethics or compassion has more to do with how one can be available than with doing good things for others in a particular formal way. When others call upon us, we move towards them within the same field. We are not held back by thinking 'But what about me?' or 'I don't want to do that.' Of course that thinking will be there, but the more space there is, the more possibility there is to manifest towards the other, and in that manifestation not to be defined or limited by it. This notion of non-duality is difficult to understand but is something very beautiful.

A lot of Buddhism is presented through visual metaphors and images. We talk of 'a view', of seeing 'our own natures', of seeing our 'true face' and the impossibility of seeing your own face then becomes a symbol for the ungraspability of emptiness. It's not that we get to see our 'face' as a thing, for we *cannot* see ourselves as something. When we seem to see ourselves as something this is confusion, the taking of an illusion to be real, actually we are grasping at representations, at interpretations which we impute to be signs of the 'real'. Paradoxically to see ourselves is to experience that we are not some thing, not an entity, there is nothing to own, or grasp, or to hang on to. It's more a matter of relaxing into ourselves.

It's rather as if you say to me 'Why do I have to go to this party? I'm not sure what to do, I don't feel like it' and I say 'Oh just be yourself! You'll be fine, relax, come on.' In that way I'm just saying 'Hang loose! Be in your own skin; don't make a big thing out of it.' You know that kind of feeling? We know when we lose it, because we get sort of jittery. Maybe later you're sitting down talking to someone at the party and thinking 'Hey, it's quite nice. I'm glad I came, this is good fun.' In that moment you're not out of your

www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

skin and feeling too exposed, you're not frightened and hiding halfway inside yourself; you're just *here*, living on your surface, which is the interface of you and the world.

So when we say 'look at your mind' or 'see where your mind is', essentially it means to relax into the presence of your mind. From the very beginning, your mind has been present. The mind is not created, it's not destroyed; it's not made by the good deeds of buddhas, and it's not destroyed by the bad deeds of sentient beings. It's not a '*thing*'; it has no shape or colour and it doesn't exist anywhere. When we think 'where is my mind?' we often imagine it's like something that we've lost, like a cow that's wandered off up the hill, but that is to see the mind as an object, and if we do that we will be lost forever. Rather, start with the fact 'I'm here. God knows who I am, but anyway here I am. What is this being here? What is this 'here-I-am-ness?' and just relax into it.

It's a bit like dancing; when the music first comes on you just feel it – you let the rhythm touch you– and then your body is moving in time. In the same way, we are not actively looking for the mind and we are not passively waiting for it to arrive, but we are putting ourselves in the place where this might occur. We are putting ourselves in the way of the revelation of our being, which is to be as profoundly relaxed as possible.

So in everyday life it's good to do something like Tai Chi or swimming, maybe play football or put on a bit of music and have a bop... anything which helps us to relax and feel part of what is going on without being merged and it, then sit down and do the practice. When the body is relaxed, when you feel happy, you will be less resistant. If you are feeling very anxious and you start to look while in that mode, you will be in your problem solving mode. But your mind is not a problem; you may not find your mind, but your mind's there alright.

Observe yourself

If you don't try to sort out your mind, if you don't try to control your mind, if you just trust, then you are close to the heart of the teaching. The Buddha says, 'your minds nature is un-born, pure from the very beginning, unconditioned, without shape, naturally free, relaxed, clear.' How wonderful! No more hard work. Everybody seems to want to do difficult things: 'Let's go for a holiday. What shall we do?' 'Let's climb the north face of the Eiger in winter, without ropes!' It does not have to be like that!

The mind has always been there but we have turned our back on ourselves, we are alienated from ourselves; we have to just relax back into the integrated state of being. This is a practice for daily life but it really helps if we do some formal sitting, maybe ten minutes several times a day, just relaxing and also keeping an eye on the internal process by which we wind ourselves up through anxious worry. The key

for dzogchen practice is to observe yourself; not observing like a policeman but just letting yourself reveal yourself to yourself.

There is always activity, physical and mental and so on. If you become aware of this you then relax and let it happen. This is very different from being always busy as a person, caught up in demands and projects. The activity of the ground is ceaseless yet flows easily, whereas our own projects are full of stress and preoccupation. It says in the Bible, 'Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not, neither do they spin, yet Solomon in all his glory is not arrayed like one of these.' Flowers are just there, they are given, like small children. Small children do not have to do things to please you, just by smiling they please you, just learning to walk they please you, you cannot help but love them. But we are so cruel to ourselves. We ceaselessly alienate ourselves by making such hellish demands: 'I should be kinder' 'I should be more thoughtful' 'I shouldn't do this' 'I shouldn't do that'. '*Only, only*, after I do all this work will I become an acceptable human being.' This is completely contrary to the view of dzogchen.

From the very beginning everything has been perfect; this is the meaning of the name of the founding buddha of the dzogchen lineage, *Kuntu zangpo*. *Kuntu* means 'always' or 'in all conditions'; *zangpo* means, 'good.' Not 'good' as against 'bad' but fundamentally pure, *kadag*. This means there has never been any stain or any fault. Even if you have hurt other people, even if you have been lying and cheating, acting cruelly, none of these actions has stained your buddha nature. Your ego has a lot of twists and turns in it, and on the level of manifestation you have some bad times coming; but the buddha nature itself – the quality of the mirror – is not harmed. So if you take refuge in your own mind as it actually is, you will know that, fundamentally, you are pure. On the level of manifestation, of energetic movement, there is always work to be done unpacking and loosening karmic knots; but the fundamental level, the basic nature, is good. There is no original sin in this at all; you do not need to be saved because you have never been lost. That is to say ignorance, as the cause of suffering, has never covered over the buddha nature.

In dzogchen we say there is one ground, which is emptiness or dharmadhatu, and two paths. On one path you recognise your own ground; on the other, you forget your own ground. If you forget your own ground you start to think, 'I am this, or I am that.' When you recognise your own ground you can see that 'I am all that I think of as 'this' and 'that', but as the expression of the ground, which I also am.' So my openness, my emptiness and my manifestation are inseparable. This is really the heart of the practice and, if we do this, we can become more light, more free, more happy, and more at ease with others. That is very nice; it is our birthright, and it is everybody's birthright. So without straining or trying, relax; relaxation is the most important thing.

So much of our world is driven by anxiety. America is driven by an anxiety that says, 'We will not be safe until we have killed all our enemies.' This is absolute madness because you can never kill all your

enemies. It is like in the early Greek stories of the hydra, every time you slice off one head, another ten heads grow. So, even in the face of difficulty, relax. If you learn you have cancer, relax. If your partner leaves you, relax. If your children die, relax. It may sound like madness but what will your tension do? What benefit has worry ever done for you? Worry is the most ridiculous waste of energy in the world. Worry does not solve problems. Most problems, if they can be solved, can be solved in five minutes – you get a bit of paper and you sit down and you think, ‘Right, what am I going to do?’ You do not have all that many options, if you have three things, its going to be ‘A’, ‘B’ or ‘C’. You make your choice and that’s it, full stop, have a drink! But if you just sit there churning it over, all you do is wind yourself up.

If you become anxious or overwhelmed then purification practice can be helpful, but this is on the understanding that there is nothing to be purified and it will only work if you believe that purification is possible. At the heart of the practice is a belief in the buddha nature; if you believe that fundamentally your nature is pure then purification is simple and effective. Belief prevents dispersal of energy into transient thoughts and emotions and helps us to gather ourselves together. However if you fundamentally believe you are a bad person, if you believe you are a sinner, if you believe you are unlovable, if you are identified with guilt and believe that you deserve to be punished, then purification is going to be very hard work.

If you have an ice cream, and you drop it, and it falls onto dog shit, and then you pick it up, what are you going to do? You think ‘I’ll purify it!’ So you put the tap on and hold your ice cream under it. It washes off the dog shit but at the end what have you got? Not much! Our mind is so like ice cream, we are so soft, we are so mushy, we get so addicted to bad thoughts and think ‘But oh, I could have done better’ and so on. It’s like picking at a scab; something feels quite nice about it! If you are like ice-cream you will be contaminated by your negative karma, your negative karma will get massaged right into you and then how will you separate the ‘good me’ from the ‘bad me’? But the mind is like a vajra, it is like a diamond, so if it falls in dog shit and you wash it, the shit will wash off and the diamond will be left. Just as with confession in catholicism; if you make your confession and the priest says ‘Ok, don’t do it again, make your reparation and then you can go for mass.’ You have to believe that it works. What is the point in going for confession and still feeling guilty afterwards? If it’s over – it’s over!

A diamond and ice-cream are not the same. Most of the time our ego is soft and mushy like ice-cream, but our buddha nature, our actual nature, is like an indestructible diamond. If you are fully identified with yourself as an entity, then when suffering hits you that is all you have got. But if you have some spaciousness, then you can integrate the manifestation with the spaciousness. The mirror is not affected by whatever reflection arises, so when bad times arise, hold to the integration with the mirror and you will not be collapsed into identification with a negative image.

In the meditation the idea is to keep a balance between being totally absorbed and being a spectator. As I am talking with you, the 'me' that is talking with 'you' is not the whole of me, I also have a sense of what is happening in the room. It is about being connected with you, so that you feel that I am connected with you, but not collapsing into the interaction and getting lost in that. I also have a sense of where the room is, a sense of some spaciousness, a sense of everything that is there; and that this precise interaction is occurring inseparably from the continuing manifestation of everything else.

In this way, if I stop speaking with you and look over there, there is a seamless move from one moment to the next. Otherwise I am talking to you, then I am distracted, and everything becomes fragmented and discordant. Presence is not like a daydream where we are spaced out and focus is lost; you can be exquisitely focused and spacious at the same time.

A ballet dancer, for example, has to hold the awareness of the space of the stage. A good dancer never forgets the space. A good actor is aware of the audience and all that's on the stage; they are also completely in character. It is not impossible. People in ordinary life do these things and, through meditation, we can have more of this presence. Normally we think, 'Either I'm focused in this, or I'm kind of laid back.' We are trying to move out of that dichotomisation.

Refuge

It is normal in Buddhist practice to take refuge. Traditionally, we say 'I take refuge in the Buddha, his teachings, and the assembly of the people who truly follow those teachings.' The idea of a refuge is that it provides protection so that you can withdraw and have some respite from the impact of a difficult situation. When I start to get caught up in the confusions and busyness of my life I lose perspective and by taking refuge and having a remembrance of something outside my preoccupations, I am able to bring to mind a situation which is very peaceful. In this way I can prevent a kind of collapse into the current situation as if it was 'the only thing.'

However this kind of refuge is a kind of 'time out.' Like the Vera Lynn song about how one day, when the war is over, 'we'll meet again'. Do you remember? Everything was going to be great. It gave that sense that 'The war is only passing, don't get too caught up in it. It'll be fine, the sun will shine'. That is a kind of refuge, but it is apart from life as it is. If, next thing, a bomb explodes you think, 'bloody hell the war is not over!' So it's not a real refuge. In the same way, if you have a lot of problems, saying 'I take refuge in the Buddha' does not remove or protect you from the problems; but it does re-contextualise them.

What really gives protection is to be able, in a very direct and immediate way, to manage all the events of existence within a state of spaciousness. Through not merging with life, nor avoiding it by turning away, spaciousness becomes the arena in which life itself is arising. In dzogchen, all the thoughts and

feelings that arise – which can become the site of lostness and collapse – are also potentially the site of awakening. This is because if you experience a thought as a thought, if you know that a sensation is just a mental arising, then through that you can return to the nature of yourself. If you don't do that then you will just get sucked into the flow of experience.

It's similar to watching a play. If you do as is required and suspend disbelief you 'collapse' into the play – you allow the play to work on you and you get right into it. At the end you have to release yourself from the play, just as the actor has to learn how to go into the role and then come out of it. If, on the other hand, we don't allow ourselves to get caught up in what's going on, we would be quite detached and think, 'Oh, this is just a play.'

In being able to hold a sense that it is both a play and not a play –that there is something enacted which is spacious and precise at the same time – the shining revelatory quality of our experience is present. We are not falling asleep into an assumption, nor are we in a state of blind stupidity where we don't know what is going on. Rather we abide in an on-going freshness.

Sometimes you walk down a familiar street in your hometown and you don't even know you have walked down it. Other times you are just a bit relaxed and, particularly in the strong summer light or late afternoon autumn light, you might notice that some of the patterns in the bricks or the colours are illuminated. There is freshness in that kind of experience. This really is the purpose of the meditation practice: to bring us to a place where we can be fresh moment-by-moment with whatever experience arises, because the whole idea of impermanence in buddhism is that the past is gone, what is, is now.

Holding knowledge lightly

Of course we can make cognitive leaps from the past to the present and claim to have a knowledge. I came into this building yesterday for the first time, but already I know my way about. It would be sad if I had completely forgotten everything that I had learned about the building yesterday, it would be a sign of some kind of mental collapse. However, that knowledge doesn't need to remove or constrain the freshness of being able to attend to the building as it presents itself. It is as if you have two buildings, there's the building that you might know about but also the situation of being in the building which you experience. If you privilege the 'knowing about,' it is likely that, resting in that and having that as your refuge, you will dull yourself to the direct immediacy of what is there.

Some of you in this room seem to know each other; maybe you have known each other for a while. It is important to think, 'What does it mean to know someone?' A lot of the time it means that we know something *about* someone. If you meet them and you know that last month they had an operation, or that their kids are taking exams, you say 'How are you doing, are you getting on ok?' These things are

important, it is part of friendliness to remember things about each other; but these are particular pathways of communication in which we return to our familiar configuration of the other. If I know you as somebody with four or five features, and I only ever speak to you about these four or five features, we now have a very set piece kind of engagement. We only talk about *this* and *that*; all the other aspects of your existence remain hidden from me.

We probably all experience this in the way we relate to our different friends. With some you might talk mainly about gardening, with others about children, and with others about dogs, and in this way we connect through certain limited bits and pieces. These are lines of friendship and communication but they are also patterns of absolute blindness to the other, somehow our open curiosity is being switched off.

I can remember this very clearly from being a child and going shopping with my mother. Going to the shops would take about two hours because she would stop and chat to everyone but if I asked her a question about someone she had been talking to she would say 'Well I don't know, we don't talk about that.' With each person there would be a particular deal about what you would talk about. My mum would have known some of these people for twenty or thirty years and yet she would know very little about them because the conversation would always cover the same ground.

This is about the reassurance of the familiar. Often we are not actually interested in other people, but we are using them to reassure ourselves that the outlines of our world are safe and reliable and predictable. If however, we have a genuine curiosity about others, that will take us out of our field of presumption and it may also engage with the other in a way that lets them see more about themselves. Many people don't know themselves very well because nobody has asked them with a curiosity that takes them off the beaten track. How many people actually say to someone else, 'Why do you think you were born? What is the meaning of your life?' This kind of question is not very common.

Observation is very important in the practice of dzogchen. To observe the dullness of your own mind, to see the fearful compromises that we make to avoid being truthful, and our avoidance of being really curious about what goes on. Observe the way the choreography of our socially acceptable, family acceptable, perception becomes a way of maintaining the various constraints we have inside. This doesn't mean we have to create an encounter group where people are just very direct about their feelings, that is not usually very helpful. It is not about changing external forms, it's not about turning ourselves into somebody else, it's more about observing the patterns that we take up and seeing their function.

These patterns arise from historical causes and conditions, and from them we develop pre-dispositions or tendencies to behave in predictable ways. This gives us only a very limited take on the world; there

are many, many things that we just haven't done. Many people have never gone into a restaurant and eaten a meal by themselves; some people never go to the cinema on their own. People have all kinds of fears or anxieties 'Oh, I wouldn't like to do that, that wouldn't be me.' It's not that one has to leap out and make big changes, although of course, in dzogchen practice that is one of the things that people often do. In Tibet they would go up into the mountains and, for a series of days, they would act in a way that was completely contrary to their normal way of behaviour. It's a practice called *rushen* and it is about breaking the normal boundaries or barriers of your being. You might decide to run around like a dog or might decide to walk on your hands for a day. By doing this you would start to experience the fact that you could be many, many different people. It's not that you *have* to be many different people, but that you have this potential.

Our infinite potential is evoked in very precise ways because to be with others is always to be, not necessarily constrained, but certainly particularised. If you go to visit family you know there are certain things to talk about, and certain things not to talk about; that is just polite. It's part of the choreography of attunement and it's not that one has to destroy that. Rather, what one is doing is observing the specificity of how we come out into the world with others.

There is nothing worse than somebody being a bore; because to be a bore means to only do the same thing again and again. People are boring when they don't attune to a situation. What makes people interesting is that they somehow find a way of reaching out towards the other and getting very close to them, being tender towards them. Whereas to be a bore is to be self-obsessed and to present yourself as a preformed package towards the other, to insist that what you are saying will be of interest to the other without having any real feedback loop to check out whether that is the case. That is monstrous because it is an annihilation of the other, its saying that the content of my communication is much more important than whether you are interested in it or not.

The purpose, in some ways, of dzogchen is to understand that we live in a communicative world – we are nothing but communication. Our existence is experience, and experience is the continuous flow of connectivity – of movement out and of movement in – in which we, in communication with the ever open ground, respond to the precision of situations as they evolve. That is all there is. In order to stay in the dance we have to be present in the dance, so taking refuge in things which are somewhere else doesn't help us.

[An omni-present, indestructible refuge](#)

Once I was seeing a patient who, in every session throughout the therapy, brought up the fact that he had been to a good school and then gone on to Cambridge. Because he had attended these two institutions he felt that his life should have developed in a certain way and that the big door should have

opened for him. However, life is full of all sorts of opportunities; people come from all sorts of different places and get different kinds of luck. His good father had told him, 'We have invested a lot of money in your education because we really want you to have a good future.' But this guy had missed the boat; he hadn't been fully present when the doors opened for him because he was caught up in a fantasy, assuming that somehow, out of the heavens, this beautiful future would arrive. He hadn't realised that, having been to a good school and a good university you still have to hustle, everybody's got to hustle, it doesn't arrive for free. His belief in himself was linked to situations from the past, which should have been supportive; but in the very moment that he's telling himself 'I'm going in the right direction' he was going in the wrong direction. Rather than keeping his eyes open on the way ahead, he was looking back over his shoulder as he was walking forwards, so he kept banging into things.

Because the world is revealed to us, the world is what we get, not what we imagine we are going to get. This applies to our health and that of our partners, friends, children, and parents. Maybe you thought you would never have to look after your mum, but if suddenly she gets sick and you're looking after her your whole life starts to change. Accidents happen, many things happen, and life changes.

So if we take refuge in an idea or in a fixed notion of who we are or in a belief system, we create something which we then have to import, moment by moment, into the next situation, and that importation will always change the situation. It means that we have one eye on the ball, on what is going on here, but also one eye on our set of suppositions or imaginings or beliefs. So, in relying on something from somewhere else, we cannot be fully present.

Therefore, in buddhism when we take refuge, we want to have a refuge or support which is here, which is embodied, which is part and parcel of ourselves. If it is an 'add on' – some kind of conditioning that we apply to things – it is always vulnerable isn't it? The vulnerability of the situation means that we can never be quite sure if something is going to work out.

In life everything is vulnerable and that which is conditioned, that which is put in, that which is added, will always wear out. If you paint the front of your house you have to repaint it after a while. Everything has to be repaired; things are installed for a moment and then they fall away. What actually continues is just what is there, not our fantasy about it.

For example, thoughts and feelings will change and come and go, but if you stop breathing it is very different, the breath is fundamental. As part of the life maintenance system, the breath is something which, in the healthiest sense, becomes an automatic part and parcel of our functioning. It's not an automatic response that cuts us off from life – like when we walk down the street on autopilot – but one which is integrated with life.

What we want is for the buddhist practice to be as close to us as the automatic electrical impulses that keep the heart beating or keep our breathing flowing, so that without having to think about it, or making it intentional and effortful, we find ourselves moment by moment being present where we are. That really is the goal of dzogchen practice. When we take refuge in dzogchen, we are taking refuge in the presencing of our own mind as a vivid state of awareness which is open to all experience.

One way of doing this is to continue the practice we did yesterday, sitting with the chin slightly raised, letting our gaze rest into the space in front of us. This time, in the space we imagine a white letter 'A'. You can use the Tibetan letter if you know what it looks like, but you can also do it just with a capital 'A'. This 'A' represents and is the actual presence of the state of emptiness, the state in which both the open dimension and the emptiness of inherent self-nature of all arisings are integrated. The ground is empty and everything that grows from it is empty – everything is the flow of manifestation of the ground.

As we visualise this 'A' we imagine that it contains the essence, or energy, or presence, of all our teachers. It contains the essence of our parents who took care of us and taught us various things like how to speak and how to walk. It includes our school teachers, our relatives, our friends, all the people who have taught us something. It includes teachers of meditation and so on, but not just spiritual things because spiritual life is inseparable from ordinary life.

We make the sound of 'A' three times and, within the 'A' that we visualise, we maintain the sense of the openness of our being, and the openness of the space around, and the presence of our teachers. We unify our state with the state of our teachers. We connect with all their kindness, all their generosity, all their compassion. We are not alone; we are part of an infinite matrix, an infinite network of interrelated energies, and the basic nature of that energy is good. Of course there is always some trepidation in opening our heart to the other, but if we wish to be present in our existence as it is we have to lean forward; we have to move out and accept what is there.

So we say the three 'A's' and then rest in the state of openness with the sense of the 'A' in front of us; then we let that go of that, and relax into the space. Then whatever comes, comes. If good thoughts come or bad thoughts come we just give space to them, not blocking, not editing, not trying to improve them – without attachment. That is very easy to say, it is difficult to do. If you get tied in knots or woven into the situation, don't worry, just relax. In this sense it is a counter-intuitive kind of meditation, instead of mobilising into the task, we relax into the task. So resting with your spine supporting you, muscles relaxed, gaze gently in the space in front, not staring but just resting in the space.

[What we need is accessible](#)

Let's think right back into your early days, remembering the kindnesses that people have done you and remembering what you have received from others. Just becoming aware of how the process of you becoming the person that you are now is inseparable from the interactions that you have had with all these people who taught you; people who showed you how to hold a knife and fork, showed you how to tie your shoe laces, all the things that you can now do automatically and with ease. Reflect that everything that you can now do, and feel to be an expression of yourself, was at one time an external knowledge, which you took into yourself; and that you also carry inside you the energy and concern and the demands of other people.

If you hadn't been to school, and you couldn't read or write, you wouldn't be able to read any spiritual books. School teachers are very important and I think it is really tragic that they are insulted so much in this culture. They help us to find our way into the world and without that help we wouldn't know what to do. An ordinary person by themselves would not be able to invent differential calculus, or Euclidean geometry, it's not possible. You wouldn't invent anything, you would just play with your little toys and be as thick as two short planks.

Our mind exists in relation to method so, had it not come into an interface with those who were willing to share and offer things to you, all your native wit, intelligence, and potential would have come to nothing. Certainly in Tibetan buddhism the idea of lineage is very important; we see that what is available to us now is dependent on the good work on the people who went before. People took care and attention to maintain and develop what they received and then pass that on to other people. Without this enormous thoughtfulness, what would we have?

The space of emptiness allows an unconstrictedness of our being, we are not foreclosed and already in a box. Each moment we can be fresh; but that freshness has to relate to something, it has to find a way of connecting with what is there. Martin Heidegger often speaks of this –'Life is about what is to hand' and the Russian psychologist Vygotsky indicates that 'Human beings are functions of activity.' This activity depends on tools.

If you don't have good tools it's very difficult to make anything. If you are an engineer your local gods are the toolmakers; they are fantastic people, the precision of the engineer who can make a good tool saves the bacon of everyone else. A bad tool maker would be a disaster because nothing would work; there has to be absolute precision. Teachers provide us with tools, and some of the people who were taught by teachers go on to be teachers. They also have to be able to make tools that other people can use, because an imprecise tool is a dreadful thing, it just becomes a kind of confusion.

So, the key point in this is that we need means or methods, and these come to us from the environment. We need to have some wisdom and spaciousness in ourselves, and also some knowledge in ourselves, but generally speaking the knowledge that we have comes from the environment.

Returning to the analogy of the mirror; when we identify solely with the reflection in the mirror we are making a primary confusion between what is subject and what is object. For example, I could say, 'I speak English.' I have some knowledge of English, but my experience of my speaking is that words come to me. I am not sitting here having thought about what I am going to say, I am just speaking; I open my mouth and words come out. This speech comes from many things, from my education, from books I've read, from my meditation practice, but this doesn't mean that I am constructed like Clapham Junction, with a thousand little trains lines from all the bits of my past coming in and lights going on and off. Given the difficulty of running a railway that kind of arrangement would be a disaster. Communication is not a materialistic function like that. It's that we find ourselves in the openness of our being, manifesting that which arrives for us, as us.

People used to believe in divine providence – that the Lord will provide what is required – and if you relax and have faith it is like that. Although in buddhism we wouldn't talk about the Lord, we would talk more about the way in which, if you trust that it will, the moment of being with another brings forth that which is required. However, if you have a very narrowed, limited sense of yourself – if you worry, if you have a lot of self doubt – you will intrude a lot of anxious thinking into the situation and feel the burden of 'I have to get it right. I have to find the right thing to say.' At this point 'I' – the anxious, conscious self – is installed in the place of relaxed openness of being. So we can see that if I take refuge in in my ordinary sense of self, then I condemn myself to constantly worrying about what I should do. But if I just trust and I keep my senses open, then generally speaking, that will be ok.

[Refuge and non-duality](#)

It is similar to when you are cooking – if you relax and you keep your eyes open and you taste the food as you go along, if you are in your body, and you trust your body, it will fine. But if you start thinking, 'oh, this looks like a lot of salt, should I put less in?' this thinking is no help. You have got to taste it; if you don't trust your own taste it is going to be quite difficult. You might ask some one else, 'How does this taste to you?' Although that may be useful, it means you have now lost the project of your own cooking. What you are doing is installing, in the middle of the process, the thought that 'I can't trust myself' and in this way you are alienating yourself from the food you are providing.

Rather than the food being a manifestation of your connection with the world – your sense of smell, colour, taste, timing, your sense of the others you are cooking for, all of which is enormously intimate, connective, lively, physical, and a place where you can find your whole being – it has become a set of problems that you are desperately trying to solve. You are imagining that there is an objective frame that will tell you what is right and what is wrong. But even if you carefully follow a famous recipe, it will turn out differently from how it would if the chef who created the recipe cooked it because it will always be *your* cooking.

The idea that we can edit ourselves out of the process is meaningful on the level of our anxious self, but if you try to evacuate the whole of yourself and just become some kind of automaton moving the recipe around, that's not going to work. You have to have a feel for it. People often say the main ingredient in cooking is love – that there is a quality of the heart that goes into what you are preparing, as love flows through your fingers into the food.

Non-duality

Our ability to go out and feel at home in the world is a quality of life; to feel ‘yes, I know what an onion is, I know what to do with potatoes’ not as an abstract ‘thinking about’ but more that my hands know what to do with an onion or a potato.

Dzogchen as a path of non-duality is exactly about this. Non-duality means that between subject and object there is no absolute differentiation and that between our ‘subject self’, our conscious sense of our self, and the infinity of our being there is also no separation. We have a pulsation, or a movement, as we were looking yesterday, between the most expansive aspect of ourselves and the most precise aspects. So the work is a continuous loosening up, decontamination, shaking free, of the constraints of our being, with the fundamental proposition that anxiety has no value. Anxiety needs to be acted on immediately and then let go of.

If you are driving and you hear something roaring up behind you, that instant of anxiety is very useful because it makes you more attentive and alert, but then you need to drop it. If, later that evening, you say, ‘Oh, it was really terrible today; this car...’ etc., etc. What is the benefit of that? None whatsoever! The anxiety arises in the moment, clarity is produced, and then there’s the release and you are free to be in the next moment.

We have an enormous capacity to maintain states of anxiety, to maintain worry; we are usually much better at maintaining worry than happiness. If you get someone to talk about the worst event in their life they talk on and on, but if you ask them about a good childhood holiday they have much less to say. There is much more juice in the horror; we get much more turned on and worked up about difficult things, and part of this is because of the physiological response.

When we have anxiety provoking events an imbalance occurs in the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems; our breath changes as we get the introduction of adrenaline into the system which drives a brain reaction. The whole system goes into tightness and we go into a set of responses of fight, flight, freeze, or flop and there is a lot of energy in these bio-chemically driven responses. Relaxation doesn’t have that kind of chemical wash, it just eases things out so that events have a presencing but not the intensity of something that is felt as a disaster. In the practice we shift the focus of our interest and attention towards these expansive moments which are the moments of real intimacy with life.

If you are sitting down having lunch with people and just chatting about things, there is something fantastic about that. The highest buddhist mandala can be the communication over Sunday lunch – the

buddha's at home 'pass the gravy.' We also know that, in a normal family, sometimes it is not like that at all. Sometimes it's really awful, everyone is in a bad mood, or your son didn't come home the night before and you are thinking, 'Oh, Oh!'

Much can come in to interrupt that ease, but the question is 'How do we get back into the pulse?' because, what event is important enough to destroy that kind of movement? Why is it that we say 'Right that's it, I've had enough, I can no longer integrate this experience into the openness of my being. What you have done has upset me so much that I can't put up with this anymore. I am drawing the line here!' Now sometimes that may be necessary, but of course the line we draw is never out in the middle, it is usually right through ourselves. We cut ourselves in half when we cut people off; if we love them, it breaks our heart.

So, the question is: how to open to the other as they are, warts and all, without getting abused? Part of the answer I think, is to be in movement. When people are more disturbed you move more. If you have teenage kids you have to be on your toes. To keep making rules and regulations that they are going to bang into is pointless, you then have fights and it doesn't really go anywhere. You have to work with closeness and distance; you have to know when to give your kids space and when to be on their case. No rulebook is going to tell you how to do that, the only way is to really pay attention. It's like when the child was a very small baby you had to learn to differentiate the baby's cries. When you woke up in the middle of the night and you heard the baby crying you developed a feel for whether to leave the baby to settle or whether you needed to get up. This is the kind of sensitivity that we can apply in situations; it is not about imposing something from outside, it is about finding ourselves exquisitely attuned into the situation.

The mind and its clothing

Some of you may have read an old sentimental novel by Charles Kingsley called 'The Water Babies.' It's a story about a boy who was apprenticed to a chimney sweep. In the old days they used to send the boys up the chimneys to do dangerous and painful work; they would be harshly treated and malnourished. It was a world without love. The little boys worked inside sooty chimneys, so they were very dirty and they wore ragged clothes; so when people saw this little boy, they would say, 'Oh, dirty little scamp, get away, we don't trust you.' If someone looks dirty and poor, most petit-bourgeois minds immediately think 'Thief!' 'This person is going to steal something from me; they are up to no good.' In the story he has many adventures and eventually, in a fairly suicidal mood, he jumps into the river and finds a new life under the water as a pure shining beautiful baby.

This is a story of spiritual re-birth in which all the dirt is washed off and the little boy starts to recognise that the dirt was not who he was, the dirt was just a covering. It is very, very important to see that this is

really the story for all of us. We are covered in stuff: we are covered in our histories, we are covered in our beliefs about ourselves, and we are covered in our behaviour patterns. We identify with these factors, and other people identify us with them. By taking these 'external' factors to be an indication of who we really are, we feel constrained, limited, and not as good as we should be.

In this culture it is normal to wear clothes. People often have anxieties about their naked body and feel safer when they are clothed. They feel happy when they buy nice clothes that cover up their body because it is easier for them to show their clothes than their body. When you get dressed up to go out you might ask someone 'How do I look?' In the moment that they say, 'Oh, you look really good today' you and your clothes are one. But we know that we can take the clothes off and we put on other clothes; when we go in the shower or the bath we don't wear clothes and we feel ok because we are just relaxing and washing rather than judging ourselves as an object. This is analogous to how we are in the meditation. Our thoughts, feelings and sensations, are a kind of clothing – like garments that we put on and wrap around us. Very often we only see these 'mental clothes', we don't see our naked body. One of the terms that is used in dzogchen for the nature of the mind itself, is *jenpa*, naked, without covering. Our mind is *chigpo* which means that its not standing in relation to anything else, it is unadorned, unelaborated and uncompromised.

Samantabhadra, the founding buddha of the dzogchen tradition, is dark blue in colour. This colour is used because dark blue is very close to black; the colour which, symbolically, is used to represent ignorance. The enlightenment of the primordial buddha is not something very bright and shining, it's just a very early pre-dawn light, in which obscurations and awareness are very close together. This buddha is 'naked, unadorned' – no ornaments at all.

This is the experience that we want to enter in meditation; in zen meditation they call it 'dropping the mind'. It's an experience where we drop our preoccupations so there is just a sense of empty presence, without knowing who I am or feeling that I have to do anything, just 'being here.' Usually when this occurs it only lasts for a very short period of time. Thoughts, feelings and associations very quickly become wrapped around it and we then identify ourselves as a particular person with a history, a set of tendencies and so on.

So we have two phenomena. We have our naked being, which is not 'being something' but just being *per se*, and also our particularity – the specificity of our being this and that. It is the co-emergence, the non-duality, of these two phenomena which is the key to bringing freedom into ordinary life. In the hinayana, view in order to find liberation, one has to renounce the world and go elsewhere. But if liberation does lie somewhere else and is something completely different from what we are, then we will have to abandon everything that we are in order to gain it. However, in non-duality we are being both naked and clothed at the same time – able to wear whatever clothes are required without being defined by them.

Being at home with being naked allows us to have a more conscious attitude to clothes. We can see this in terms of the physical body by the way fabulous supermodels, who have gorgeous bodies and are completely confident about them, change their clothes all the time. They are changing their appearance because they recognise that their body is ok and the clothing is just like a game. Other people, who have more anxiety about their body, are using clothing as a defence. They have to be a lot more careful, because the clothes are now not just doing the function of clothing; they are doing the function of filling a gap created by the ego's anxiety about its basic physical appearance.

When clothes are worn out or out of date we don't keep wearing them, we throw them away or tear them up and use them for dusters. So why is it that we hang onto ideas? Why is it that we wear mental clothes, which are completely useless or out of date? If we have size eight clothes in our wardrobe we would probably say 'well I'm not size eight anymore and holding onto this in the vague hope that I will fit into it again is not very wise. Let's be realistic and get rid of it. I would like it to fit but it doesn't.' In the same way we may carry hopes inside us and, as time goes by, it may become clear that some of these hopes are not going to be realised. Keeping that hope in my wardrobe doesn't help me, it simply persecutes me. Instead of that hope being something which could inspire me to move forward and mobilise my actions, all it does is remind me that I've missed my chance and this can become very painful.

Ignorance diminishes us

Ignorance is where we lose the major part of ourselves in the forgetfulness of being *per se*; we lose our open expansive relaxation and become a small, fearful person. In that state, we use our 'clothing' very defensively. We wrap ourselves in all sorts of garments. Some people go for academic qualifications; they do degree after degree and think that all their bits of paper will make them feel like an important person. Other people want to make lots of money with the thought that 'If I can adorn myself in these signifiers, a big car or a big house, then I'll *know* that I'm a worthwhile person.' Most of us have got a little repertoire of moves that we use to reassure ourselves that we are ok and sometimes they don't work too well.

Our primary task is to relax into the state where the unification of the open naked dimension of mind and the constant display of thoughts, feelings, sensations, of all experience – the movement of clothing, unclothing, re-clothing – are in delightful interplay. With this comes an irreducible confidence in the basic givenness of being, which is the confidence of the buddhas. When the Buddha is sitting there smiling at the moment of enlightenment, he is sitting under a tree and he has had his first good dinner in quite a number of years. Outwardly he hasn't got very much going for him, but he's sitting there, 'I'm alright. I'm still wearing rags, but it's not so bad.' He is at home in himself; just himself being there with himself. There's nobody saying, 'you're a great guy', he's not thinking, 'well, tomorrow I'll do that' he's just at www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

home, peaceful. With that as the basis, as the ground of your life, you can go out and do anything. Of course as we move out into the world with others, things go wrong, we make mistakes; but if the basis is good you can forgive yourself your mistakes. However, if you think that the basis is bad, and your activities are a constant defensive cover up and disguise for this basic badness then there is a lot more at stake and mistakes become much more frightening – ‘If I screw up on this one then people will realise that I didn't just mess up on this one, they'll see that from the beginning I've been a waste of space!’

It used to be like this with the terrible eleven-plus exam where, if you did badly, you were sent to the comprehensive and that was the end of the road. This way of writing people off is not just installed in social functions but it is installed moment by moment in people's social anxieties. Many people are terrified of having a dinner party, or inviting people round, because they feel as though they are going to be judged. Of course, many people are unpleasant and have a sadistic delight in judging others, but that's them, let them stew in own juice. If people want to be narrow minded, bitchy, controlling, they have got to live with that all the time; you only live with it for an evening! Don't worry, they will get their own consequences somewhere else; this is the blessing of karma, you don't need to punish people, as they sow so shall they reap.

If we make other people out to be too separate, too real, too powerful, we give them power over our existence. In the moment that we see them as separate, big, solid, and real, and ourselves as separate, small, solid, and real – we become conditioned by them. Then rather than the moment of interaction being dynamic and revelatory we turn it into a re-definition of ourselves.

I think it is so important to observe for yourself, how you position yourself in a way that can make you solid, constrained, and diminished or relaxed, open and responsive. You need to do this because it's only from the inside, in a very subtle way, that you can rebalance yourself. It's like learning the Alexander technique, although you can be shown the method it is you who has to remember how to position yourself; it's the same in Tai Chi where you learn the moves but, for it to flow, you have to inhabit them from the inside. Only you can relax into your own being, nobody can do it for you from the outside.

It is helpful to do an audit of how you act in the process of being ‘yourself’ with others and see how you constrain your own being. It doesn't really matter how other people are. Some people have happy lives, some don't; some people have difficult marriages, some people have children who are a nightmare, most people have some experiences in their lives that make them feel awful and useless. These are precisely the situations that we need to look into with calmness and clarity and an attention to ‘how does this function?’

The problem with judgment is that it is a quick easy answer. Judgment tells us it's useless, it's rubbish, it's never going to change, full stop, no need to think any more! – but then you are trapped. What we are

concerned with here is a phenomenological attention – attending to life as a process of unfolding and seeing how we are positioned with respect to others in an on-going movement. Within that, if you have attention to the detail, you can make the necessary micro-moves of adjustment – there is a spacious possibility for that. Clearly, becoming more familiar with this view of the world takes a bit of time, and there are plenty of books now available on this kind of practice. It is not a special kind of practice; and it's not about retreating from the world, so perhaps, in conclusion we could look more at how we can apply this in our daily lives.

If you practice tantra, which I do think is a very good kind of practice, there is quite a lot of paraphernalia involved. It also requires us to applying a particular frame of reference to our experience – one in which we see the world as a divine place and all human beings as like gods and goddesses. So we are taking up a position of difference from the environment; this is difficult to maintain because you have to add something into the process. From the view of dzogchen the key points are to relax and to be present. This awareness does not relate to being aware of something in particular, for that would create a dualistic mode. It is very difficult to put this into language, for we are easing ourselves into ourselves, being present both in and as oneself as one manifests as part of the world.

As we have looked in various ways, our culture, our background, our own belief systems –we could say 'our karma' – keep affirming to us that we are apart from others. Even if we try to break free from this, other people are affirming us in our status as a separate human being. We are in a sense separate, we do have a separate embodiment – if I put food in my mouth your stomach doesn't get full. Yet, if I am eating and you are not eating, I would feel embarrassed. We want to share food because we are connected as people. We can't just say, 'Well this is my lunch, and if you are hungry well tough!' That's a wee bit too hard because your existence impacts me. The very fact that you are in the world has an undeniable impact on me; your being transforms and influences my ability to be myself.

A right to 'be'

So the key question for us all is – am I entitled to exist on the basis of my intrinsic value, or do I believe that my acceptance by the world, or my freedom to feel ok about myself, is dependent upon the value that I bring into the world? The latter opinion is a very deep belief for many people in Western Europe. Historically much of this attitude, particularly the idea that ones relationship to God is revealed through ones activity, was developed in the protestant revolution. It became a predominant view in England that you could be judged by your activity; that your value as a person was displayed by your deeds.

When I was growing up in Scotland there were two kinds of poor people; there were the 'good poor' who were hard working and the 'feckless poor'; and what were the feckless poor entitled to? 'Nothing! They have brought it upon themselves!' Changes in social security have diminished that kind of thinking

but have installed in its place a notion that just because you exist in a human body it is a basic human right and entitlement that you should get everything for nothing. I don't think that really helps people either because it is a dogmatic imposition from the outside.

In dzogchen we are concerned with the direct experience of embodiment. This is revealed in the direct experience of other people as they manifest in the shared field of experience and through the energetic interchange that goes with that. In that open field, your face for me is something irreducible; your face stops me in my tracks. If your face doesn't interrupt me in my self-referential trajectory then I am diminished and also I diminish you. When we experience being relaxed and open and participate in the world together, life starts to feel very different. Even if other people are locked into their sense of isolation, even if they disown us, we won't disown them as we do not rely on retaliatory judgment to keep us safe. You know, as Jesus says 'Forgive them Father; they know not what they do.'

It used to be quite common for parents to disown their children and say 'You are a disgrace to this family, get out!' 'If you don't do what I like, if you cross this line, you are dead to me. I harden my heart to you; I turn my face from you.' What could be more appalling than to say 'I harden my heart towards you', what on earth is the meaning of that? If we do that, we harm the other and we also harm ourselves. We also suffer because a hard heart is a dreadful thing to live with. The heart is soft, it's tender, it is sensitive.

However, if I keep my heart open to you and you are getting up my nose we have a wee bit of a problem! So, how do we manage difficult situations? Well, as we have been looking, we manage them by honest open engagement, being there with the difficulties. Pretending difficulties don't exist doesn't help, neither does being obsessed by difficulties and making a huge world out of them. It is about seeing things in their proper proportion. If we deal with a problem as being the size it is then it's manageable. Very often we generalise our problems, we globalize them. By smothering a situation in memories of previous difficulties we make one event into a continuation and validation of our fixed view. Yet it is not, it is just a momentary event.

So in day to day practice, whatever we are doing, we try to attend to being and observe how we get distracted and what kind of thoughts and worries take us away. This is not just about mental activity it is also about our embodiment. It is important to keep reviewing how we are in our body – do we allow our skeleton to perform its function of holding our weight? If we ask our muscles to do what our skeleton should be doing, that's not helpful. Do we allow our breath to move freely so we support ourselves? The breath stabilises and balances the endocrine system and our metabolic rate. So much of our energy is rhythmic; the whole body is nothing but rhythmic pulses. Science is showing more and more clearly how the body is a fantastic complex interweaving of different systems, all of which have to stay in relation and modify each other. The breath is very central to that and it connects us to the world. If we are not in www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

our bodies it is quite difficult to be in the world because our being in the world is not a mental event, it is an embodied event.

In the Tibetan system there are many kinds of yoga and so on but I don't think it is helpful to privilege particular systems; it is more important to find out what evening class is available that you can easily get to. The 'adequate' practice that you actually do is much better than the 'ideal' practice you never do. If you can, and provided that the teacher is not crazy, it is probably a good thing to do some qi gong, or tai chi or yoga. The key thing is that you are doing something thoughtful, intentional, peaceful, and non-attacking with your own body, for your own body, in the presence of others.

If you are in a tai chi group you are becoming more aware of your embodiment and you are also more aware of your embodiment as it is moving with others. Simultaneously you are keeping an open awareness of how the whole group is moving and a precise felt sense, from the inside, of how your body is. If you look from the outside at your body, you then don't really feel it from the inside, and you don't really attune to the whole group. At first people try to 'work it out' and they are not there; but once they start to relax a bit and feel it from the inside, paradoxically they are more present on the outside.

If you can get that experience then you can then bring it into your job. Whether it is teaching or being a nurse, digging an allotment or shopping, in all of these activities you are moving in a world with others. Being present in your own skin, with your awareness without limitations, including everything, brings about a natural harmonisation. This happens because you then have optimal contact with all the data that you need. You have all the information coming from the world and you have optimal contact with your own internal feed back loops.

This world is about the movement of knowledge, of information. What we call 'information' is not entitative things being moved from one place to another, rather it is about energetic flows. As soon as we give our attention to something, our energy flows with that; energy and attention are inseparable. So if our attention is in our embodied presence and also out towards the whole environment, our energy is there as well, and when you have an energetic sensitivity you can pick up whether or not something is good.

You may do that with a friend who has met someone new. They may be very hopeful and tell you all about them, but you meet that person you think 'Oh, Oh! Maybe not so good!' You can see that your friend, having fallen in love, is actually in a kind of intrapsychic state. Through being caught up in their fantasies and projections and hopes they are not really seeing the person, they are 'in themselves'. For them the person is a fantasy, but you are able to see the person without fantasizing and have a bit more sense of some of the problems to come. That is very sad isn't it; should you break your friends bubble or leave it to the bastard? Life's dilemmas!

We know that we ourselves get seduced by things; whether it is people or possessions or problems, we get pulled into over-privileging the value of specific events. If we think about a field of experience, when something is very particularly attended to it comes out of the field and into the foreground. It becomes figural, the focus of our attention, as the other phenomena which are presenting recede into the background. That pulsation of foreground to background goes on all the time. If you are driving a car, you are looking in front of you and also in the mirror to see behind you, and it is by the movement between these spheres that you stay in touch with the evolving field whilst moving along at some speed.

When we get fixated, we tend to make figural something which needs to recede and we tend to keep in the background things which need to become figural. That is what happens with attachment, where we lock into highlighting phenomena according to our own disposition or tendency, irrespective of the actual needs of the evolving environment. When we do that we lose the plot, because life is what arrives for us.

If I were to give the Pope a bit of advice about who should be canonised, I would say 'Saint John Lennon!' because when he said 'life is what happens when you are busy making other plans' he spoke the highest truth. This is what it is all about. Stop worrying! Because you can't work it out from somewhere else, life is here, it is in your face. Life is what you get and if you're not here, you are not alive – it is that simple. All the mental cyber-space stuff that we spend so much time in is simply the theft of our own existence, and that is the real demon. Instead, we can stay close to our embodied existence, close to others; where the heart is open and love is what is moving around between us, not in a sentimental way but in the way of valuing honesty, connectivity, and the expansion of peoples' potential.

How do we know how peoples' lives are going to evolve? How can we say how somebody is? The biggest disservice we do to others is to 'know' them; because if we know them, we get into a place where we re-affirm to them that they are who we think they are. If who we think they are, is also who they think they are, you have got a set piece where nothing moves, and knowledge in that sense is a violence. In our culture that may seem to be a bizarre notion, but I think it is actually true. We do not know what we can become, and we also don't know what we will need to become as the culture changes. So if we can stay close to ourselves, and to others, we can see more precisely how people start to manifest themselves, and with that manifestation stay with the broadest reading of the persons' potential.

In my clinical work I often see gay men and when they tell the story of growing up and having to tell their parents that they are homosexual it is dreadful, because the parents often have no mental space for this possibility. So the child's state, what they experience as the absolute givenness of their being, is experienced by the parent as an attack on their identity as a parent. Then the parent becomes preoccupied, 'Well, if only I had done this' and 'I shouldn't have sent you to that boys' camp...' The child is saying 'I'm really scared, I'm finding that I am someone I never thought I would be, I don't know

www.simplybeibng.co.uk © James Low

anything about what should happen in this world, and I am very unformed.' But they are being whacked with all these judgments and with people trying to get them back into the required shape. We can see why the parents do that – out of their anxiety, their rigidity, their lack of freedom in themselves, their prejudices and so on – but what we all need welcome into the world and the biggest enemy of welcome is prejudice.

When we see someone else's face they are already here, in front of us, and how can you not welcome somebody when they have arrived? If you say 'Well you shouldn't have arrived! Go back and pretend you haven't' that's daft; we are as we are. Thus the key work is looking at our own hearts and seeing 'How do I not welcome myself and how do I not welcome others?' And moving from that to 'How do I not welcome the world, and how do I experience the world in such a way that I feel it doesn't welcome me?' because many people act on the world as if it was the enemy and see the world as something attacking them.

I remember as a child that wasps would come into the house in summer time and people would say, 'What are these terrible things doing in the house?' as if the house had a little sign outside saying 'Halt wasp, do not enter!' The wasps don't see it like that. They are just flying around, then they go through some little hole and suddenly they are in this terrible 'demon zone' where people are trying to kill them and there is nothing to eat! If we think 'It is my house, there shouldn't be ants in it, there shouldn't be any of these things in it' then we get into spraying everywhere. Then I am determining that this is my territory and 'I don't want moths, I don't want flies, I don't want lice, I don't want any of these 'creatures of the world' in my space. And it *is* my space because I'm paying the bloody mortgage, I bought it...its mine!' this is the mentality isn't it? Of course it is difficult to know what to do with creatures, but one can also be sensitive, you can pick them up, put them out, throw them over the wall into the neighbour's garden!

In my experience dzogchen makes life interesting. Rather than seeing things as problems to be solved, every moment is an invitation to be curious; curious about 'well, how shall I position myself here?' For example, if you find that you have a wasps' nest what shall you do about this? Is there any way of not persecuting the wasps and also of not feeling persecuted by them? Is there a possibility of living together where species interact in a way that does not cause pain and difficulty? Without domination and control can we have a co-existence? What is the price of that co-existence? Usually it is some time, some concern, some thoughtfulness; and with that we move a little bit. When we move we make space for the other and then it is not so bad; we actually learn something about the other. If however, we start with an assumption, 'Oh wasps are very dangerous, we had better destroy them before they destroy us' or 'Iraqis are very dangerous we had better destroy them' or 'Americans are very dangerous we had better

destroy them' that looks easy... but we have to live together and living together is very difficult, it is not easy.

Generosity of the heart

How can we find it interesting to be in the project of living together, or sharing space with people, of collaborating with people – given that seeing the limitations of others is always easier than seeing the limitations of yourself? 'The mote in my brothers eye, the beam in my own'... this is how life is; this is why it is always easier to try and sort out other people. If we are thinking in accordance with the bodhisattva vow about mutual benefit then, as much as possible, we are trying for a win-win situation. Because if you win and I lose that's unhelpful, it is an imbalance – we both have to win; and this is dependent on a view of the world which is infinite.

If you operate with a notion of a fixed set of resources as your dominant metaphor, what people call a 'zero sum game', you have a vision which says that one person's gain is another person's loss. With this view generosity is a mug's game; it just means to give away something you have, so it is a means of having less. There is no perception of anything following on from that gesture. If I think there are only a hundred units of something and I only have two units from this hundred, then I have to hang onto my units, because if I give you one of my units, I will now only have one. I don't want to have just one, because one is very close to none, so I would rather have two. That way, if I lost one at least I would still have one, so having a bit more always helps. Trying to stop you getting access to mine also makes sense because if I lose mine I then have nothing.

If we say 'I'll only give to you, if you give to me' and, at the end, 'it has worked out well and there is no gain and no loss, we're even' that involves a great deal of effort because the books often don't balance. Whereas with a notion of complex interdependence, if I give to you then even if you can't give back to me somebody else will. We are making a gestural move where, seeing the need in a situation, we do what we can with the confidence that something will come back to us. It is because I make a move towards you that another person might see something in me, and so may make a move towards me.

The heart needs to believe that giving is worthwhile. Once you lose that hope, once you are counting all that you have got on every level of your being, you have gone into a little prison, you have made a walled room for yourself and it is terrifying. It is important to note the emphasis in buddhism: that the view and the meditation need to be in place before the activity. Compassion doesn't necessarily mean giving money or giving things or giving time to other people. It is not primarily about the concrete transactions in the world, it is about our disposition or orientation. The economy of the heart is based on the infinity of openness and love. These resources are never diminished and in fact seem to grow and blossom through the generosity which is the pulse of non-duality.

You can sit in the morning with thought 'may all beings be happy; may I bring peace and love to all beings that I meet today' and you move out into the world with that possibility. Compassion means availability, a turning towards all beings and welcoming them as they are with an open heart. It doesn't mean that if a beggar asks for some money you give him ten pounds rather than one, it's not about an idea that to be compassionate means to give a lot. It is about an orientation, because if I give a lot to one person then I don't have much to give to the other person. Fundamentally it is about an energetic availability and then, in terms of precise resources, you have to make some judgments about what that means.

I remember when I was living with CR Lama in Shantiniketan there was a woman who had taught at the university and who had become disturbed, she was probably psychotic, and every now and then she would become quite wild. CR Lama's wife wanted to bring her into the house because she was in a disturbed state and vulnerable. The lama said to her, 'You bring her in, you look after her! If you have the time and the energy to look after a mad woman in this house where you have four children, three dogs, and a lot of students, enjoy it! But me, I am not involved. So you think!' Of course she didn't bring her to the house. It was a lovely idea but the reality of bringing somebody who is very disturbed into your house when you are already at your limit needs to be thought about clearly. Compassion needs to be grounded in wisdom.

It's not that one has to martyr oneself, or sacrifice oneself, because compassion is about mutual and universal benefit all those involved need to be validated. Yesterday we were looking at the three levels: the openness, the potentiality and the precise manifestation. The generosity of the heart is to remain infinitely open. This supports contact with the potentiality of the field, with all the possibilities within the situation. Within this there is precise manifestation of infinite spontaneous responsiveness.

This needs to be an integrated experience, because if our body acts against our mind there will be consequences. There is no point in the right hand signing blank cheques while the left hand is holding a gun because we have gone bankrupt – some people live their lives that way. The more we know ourselves across all the dimensions of our being, the more we live with a sense of capacity. It is undeniable that our capacity fluctuates, some days we can do a lot and other days we can't.

If you assume that someone is always available in a particular way, you are blind to impermanence which is the most basic of all the buddha's teachings. Everything changes – we are fundamentally unreliable on the level of our precise manifestation. Any of us could get a depression, or be in an accident, and in that state our energy to be available for others would diminish. Then people who had seen us before as friendly, energetic, available – and assumed we would always be like that – would be surprised to realise that we were no longer available in the same way.

These fundamental changes in our manifestation can occur because we do not truly exist as fixed entities. The idea of enduring self-existing people is just an illusory concept. They are patterns of energy which arise in dependent co-origination, dependent upon the balancing of many, many factors. Because of this, because we are field phenomena, as the field changes, so we change. We are not the masters of our fate and therefore we need to be careful what we promise to people; what the heart promises the mind needs to know, and the mouth often shouldn't say.

Being aware of the nature of your capacity, and that it can be limited, is about the function of your energetic engagement in the world. Just because I don't want to give everyone my address, and invite everyone to eat my food for ever, it does not mean that I have to close my heart to them. It doesn't mean that I have to see them as dangerous or bad; my heart goes out to them.

If someone rejects us or exploits us and we slip out of this felt sense of the infinity of our being into our limited defended ego self then it is very easy to come to the conclusion: 'Well I am not going to do that again! What's the point of helping other people; you just get ripped off and abused. I am going to take care of myself!' This is why compassion needs to be grounded in wisdom, in the unconditioned limitless openness of awareness.

As you walk down the street you can think 'may these people be happy, I wish them well.' When we see people going off to work we can wish them from our hearts 'may you be happy, may you be happy'. We don't know these people who are anxiously off to their business, but why would we not wish them well? This intention is a gift; it is not an intention to elicit praise or a positive response. This light, this fire, this love, cannot go out if we stay in touch with it.