

---

*Integration in Dzogchen.*

*Public Talk*  
*by*  
*James Low*

---

*Freiburg, Germany. 12th to 14th June 2009*

*Transcribed by Angelina McMillan. Edited by Barbara Terris*

## Excerpts

*It's a bit like in the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. After she pricks her finger on her birthday, she falls into a deep sleep. Gradually the wild plants, the briars and brambles grow over her. But one day a young prince takes care of this beautiful woman. He enters the dark forest and sees this whole mass of sharp thorns. Drawing his sword he cuts his way through it. With one tender and gentle kiss he awakens the maiden. Many people see spiritual life in some way like that—that all beings are some kind of sleeping Buddha, wrapped around by different kinds of conditioning and karma, but drawing our holy sword of truth, we will cut through and liberate them!*

...

*Our existence is structured in two modes: the host and the guest. The guests come and go; the host is always there. The host can neither be grasped nor defined. The guests can be known and defined. We all know what it's like to feel sad or lonely; we know what it's like to feel happy; we know what it's like to feel full of energy and eager to work. Each of these mental states can be known. They have a particular shape. But the one who receives and illuminates and shows these passing guests has no form or shape that can be grasped. The quality of the host doesn't have any boundary. This is not an abstract proposition but something one can experience oneself in the practice.*

...

*Movement is the energy of stillness. They are not oppositional, they are not enemies; one is not trying to block or inhibit or destroy the other. That which is still, spacious and open, is in fact inseparable from all the movements, or energy that arises for it and in it.*

...

*We are not the owners of our nature, but rather we are the children of our own nature. The domain of I, me, myself is an energetic arising. It's not a problem to be solved; it's not something to be removed, but it needs to settle back and be held safely in the arms of its mother. The mother is space. The nature of our awareness, the ground of our existence is an open spaciousness, without corners or edges, something without beginning or end.*

*Contents*

---

<b>The vision of mastery .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The house of control .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Sleeping Beauty and Sleeping Buddha .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What is the nature of my existence? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>'Awareness' or 'presence' refers to the state prior to the arising of thought .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Making friends with yourself .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Compassion and connectivity.....</b>	<b>7</b>

---

The topic this evening is integration which is a central concept in the practice of dzogchen.

Many kinds of spiritual paths involve a movement from here to somewhere else. As soon as we have a notion of a journey or a road, the obstacles will arise on that. Even just trying to walk along the road, immediately there are people coming towards us, or there are some dogs or some rubbish on the road and we have to adapt how we go in accordance with what meets us. The more one is in a hurry and the more determined and committed one is to arriving somewhere, the greater the obstacles appear.

We might to reflect on why we feel it's important to go from here to there. Usually that's because we are not very happy here. We experience some kinds of problems in our daily life. We feel that things aren't quite right. Then we hear about the different kinds of spiritual traditions; we get a sense that there is somewhere better somewhere else. We study a bit and then we decide, "*Ah yes I want to get to that better place.*" This of course can instil a sense of hope because if where we are is not very good and it's all there is, then we'll likely to feel trapped and depressed and hopeless.

There are many advantages to having a vision of an alternative possibility of one's existence. Often this is because it gives a sense of a particular kind of purpose. Our own lives are often established around principles of reactivity. Things don't happen exactly the way we would like them to. We seek to in some way make them better. We can learn different methods for doing this: worldly methods, education, training and getting advice from friends about how to plan and carry forward our existence in a more efficient way.

We also have physical methods like tai chi and yoga and so on. There are many many things to learn. In terms of meditation, there are endless numbers of meditation practices one can learn. Some methods are described as being quite slow, others are described as being fast. All these are methods to transform what is going on, to transform ourselves and transform the situation around us. All of them are essentially existing in the house of control. That is to say they are about power; they are about increasing our power to be effective and efficient in the world, with the hope that this increase in power and competence will allow us to have some degree of mastery on the world.

### The vision of mastery

---

But of course the events that we encounter in the world are very powerful. The winds of faith and karma are very strong. Everything that we build up will eventually fall down. The vision of mastery, the vision of achieving a capacity to control events is an illusion. Events have a power greater than any individual has developed in order to control them.

From the point of view of dzogchen, the desire to have control is embedded in our sense of being a unique separate individual occupying an individual private space. We experience ourselves inhabiting our body, inhabiting our minds, having certain resources and certain possibilities. These are made vulnerable by changes in the environment. The behaviour of other people can easily cause us distress. If someone is driving badly close to you, immediately you feel some anxiety. We know that many people die every year in car accidents. To be embodied, to be identified with this organism of flesh and blood is always to be already poised on the possibility of our extinction.

This body which we have doesn't really have a basis apart from the environment that it's in. We are born into the world, as part of the world. Yet we experience ourselves as being apart from the

world—as either moving towards the world or having the world move towards us. It's this very sense of apartness which is at the centre of the buddhist teaching on the nature of ignorance and attachment. When we have a dualist experience—when we see self and other as truly separate—the sense of self and the sense of other start to solidify into the experience of concrete entities which are essentially defined, internally defined.

With that notion, the actual dynamism of our existence, the actual moving, responding, being caught up in this responsiveness of embodied existence, becomes hidden from us as we seek to maintain a sense of continuity of what we define and take to be ourselves. All the buddhist teachings are attempting to bring about a relaxation of attachment or fixation to a construct that we have defining who we are.

## The house of control

---

Many of the methods that are developed in relation to this are still within the house of control. For example, there are many practices to develop merit; to develop the positive energy and qualities that can be used to directing a better kind of existence. This of course is a useful thing to do because the methods of generating merit are methods which involve good behaviour, the development of generosity, of willing to be available for other people to help them in whatever way we can.

When we look around the world we see that there is a lot of suffering. How much merit would we have to accumulate to liberate all beings? It sets one on an endless task. There's an advantage in that task, which is that it keeps our heart connected with the heart of all beings. The daily intention to bring benefit and value into the world with others is enormously important. Developing a very strong proactive intention to benefit others can give a direction and purpose. But it's structured a bit like a monologue: I want the best for you, I'm going to do the best for you and inside this monologue I'm sure you will be very happy to receive all these blessings I'm giving you. Most of the time in our daily life we are not given the luxury of enjoying this monologue. Other people exist and mostly are happy to share their existence with us, so they put us into a dialogue and then life gets much more complicated. Although we want to help other people, they seem to be very annoying and they don't respond to all the good things we do for them. We then become split inside between the bit that really wants to save beings and the bit that just wants to tell them to go away and not bother us. That can create a lot of guilt and anxiety and grief.

This is because it is looking at people in terms of their potential rather than in terms of their actuality. Everybody has a lot of potential. In buddhism that is expressed that everybody has a buddha nature. But this potential is covered over by many layers of karma, conditioning, habit and so on. When we relate to people because of their potential we often have a lot of hope but then we start to encounter the complexity of their conditioning and life becomes more complicated.

## Sleeping Beauty and Sleeping Buddha

---

It's a bit like in the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. After she pricks her finger on her birthday, she falls into a deep sleep. Then she's laid in this beautiful casket deep in the forest. They try everything possible to waken her but nothing works. Gradually the wild plants, the briars and brambles grow over her. But one day a young prince takes care of this beautiful woman. He enters the dark forest and sees this whole mass of sharp thorns. Drawing his sword he cuts his way through it. With one tender and gentle kiss he awakens the maiden.

Many people see spiritual life in some way like that—that all beings are some kind of sleeping Buddha, wrapped around by different kinds of conditioning and karma, but drawing our holy sword of truth, we will cut through and liberate them! Maybe Sleeping Beauty didn't want to wake up? Maybe the first thing she did was to slap the prince! That often happens in life when we try and help people. Our idea of helping them is not exactly what they feel like would be helpful for them.

The key thing we are working with is not so much the potentiality of the other person, but the complexity of how their conditioning and habits bring them to be in the world in a particular way. Of course we can only do that if we have some kind of relationship with our own complexity. All of us have habits and patterns of confusion, things we don't like about ourselves, things we feel we should change and improve. We live in a state of dissatisfaction with ourselves: not really accepting ourselves as we are and making discriminations of this is good, this is OK, this is bad. These discriminations are very useful on one level because they help us to struggle to develop a profile which has a better fit with the world as it is.

It's not as if we have a fixed amount of trouble or difficulty in our life—that if we give everything a very good cleaning it would all be done forever. The very fact of being in the world ceaselessly evokes and provokes unknown patterns of complexity inside ourselves; the same thing is happening in all the lives of others.

It is often said that there is no end to samsara. It means that there is no end to action, reaction to moments of clarity, to moments of confusion; the ongoing pulsation of the interaction of the many different factors. If we seek to clarify our situation by sorting out the object—by sorting out externally other people and the environment and internally the furniture in our own minds, our complex emotions, our habitual thoughts, the waves of sensation, the behaviours that pass through us—we commit ourselves to a task to which there is no end.

Although there is a lot to be said for the possibility of change and transformation, when we look at the actuality of how things are, perhaps the methods that we use are not sufficient for the task. People have been praying and meditating for hundreds of years. The world is still full of grief. The grand vision that we can have of universal transformation and the liberation of all beings, as long as this fixated on the idea of objects to be saved, perhaps this is something beautiful as a vision, but persecutory as a commitment?

## What is the nature of my existence?

---

The first thing we really have to do is look at ourselves and enquire *what is the nature of my existence?* We take for granted that we are alive. We get caught up in all sorts of cultural stories that we've learnt in the course of our lives. These have generated lots of storylines, narratives about what we could do, what we should do and so on. When we actually look at the process of actually experiencing a thought, even a thought like "*May all being be happy.*", when we look we see that thought comes and then it goes. Then we might have a very negative thought, "*I hate everyone, just leave me alone.*" We look at that thought as it comes and then it goes.

When we sit in these thoughts—when we believe in these thoughts and take them as real and as a basis of identity—then the world opens in different directions. Almost as if we were taking different kinds of drugs some that make us feel a bit manic and elevated, and others that make us feel a bit down and depressed.

What are these thoughts themselves? Moments of passing energy. Who gives them meaning? Who gives value to them? We do. Who is the one who is doing that? It must be me. Who is this me? What is the nature of this self? We can all tell stories about ourselves, our lives, our history, our likes, our dislikes. But these are also just arising and passing sequences of words; a semantic web, a domain of conceptualisation. This domain is dependent on our capacity for abstraction in which we step outside of the direct moment of our own experience and tell stories about what it is like to be me.

Of course to be in the world with others we have to tell stories. This is all that culture is; it's just story time. If we believe these stories to be strongly real, then we are building our lives on the basis of bubbles, the arising and passing of thoughts. You can't catch a thought. When it arises in the mind it often seems to be illuminating, *"Ah now I understand!"*, but then that thought is gone. Then what's left? *"Oh no need to worry, because here comes another thought!"* You're never alone with thoughts. From waking in the morning to going to sleep at night and even in your dreams, thoughts are running.

There is no end to thinking. If our identity is built up purely on particular patternings of thoughts, it's a very fragile basis for our existence. It's not as if these constructs are somehow emotionally neutral for us. They are invested with meaning, with power; they seem to define who we are and therefore they're very vulnerable to the comments of other people. We do something, we develop our life in a particular way then we find that the people we know don't agree with what we are doing. We can feel let down or betrayed. So this very protective screen, or this sense of ourselves that we build up, is both soothing on the inside because it gives us a sense of who we are, but it's also making us vulnerable because anybody can move it around from the outside.

### 'Awareness' or 'presence' refers to the state prior to the arising of thought

In this tradition of dzogchen a central point is to move into experiencing prior to the arising of thought. In the absence of thought there is a givenness of the continuity of our being but it's not a being you can speak about because it's not locked in to the normal signifiers: I'm male, I'm female, I'm from this country and so on. This quality can be called awareness or presence. Because it has no fixed content, because it's not resting on a particular pattern of thoughts or emotions or sensation, it's not vulnerable to the changing pattern of events. For this reason in the tradition it is described as being indestructible.

This quality of being is an openness, an availability, an openness, a welcome. A welcome to whatever arises. This openness is grounded in the awareness that it's not improved by the presence of good thoughts, kind thoughts or shining thoughts, nor or is it defiled or debased or contaminated by the presence of what we could take to be negative thoughts.

Our existence is structured in two modes: the host and the guest. The guests come and go; the host is always there. The host cannot be grasped or defined. The guests can be known and defined. We all know what it's like to feel sad or lonely; we know what it's like to feel happy. We all know what it's like to feel full of energy and eager to work. Each of these mental states can be known. They have a particular shape. But the one who receives and illuminates and shows these passing guests has no form or shape that can be grasped. The quality of the host doesn't have any boundary. This is not an abstract proposition but something one can experience oneself in the practice.

Sitting with your own experience relaxed and open, aware of the arising and passing of various aspects, some of which seem like subject—me having this experience—some of which seem like

the object—this is what I'm experiencing—both arise and pass. Whatever we can say about ourselves is already vanishing. So in the practice we see what we take to be our usual basis of I, me, myself, the reliable ground of my own identity is in fact just a sequence of passing, arising moments.

If when we start to see this we can move from trying to stabilize the pattern of our existence, and try to create stability in the midst of movement, we come to see movement for what it is. Movement is the energy of stillness. They are not oppositional, they are not enemies; one is not trying to block or inhibit or destroy the other. That which is still, spacious and open, is in fact inseparable from all the movements, or energy that arises for it and in it.

So our lives continue as they do. But the incredible investment that we have in trying to secure territory in this moving flow of circumstances, that has relaxed and in the relaxation we continue to exist. Who is the one who is existing? I am. But I'm not one thing. We are both the openness and the manifestation. The manifestation has two aspects to it: one is the sort of unformed, vibrant emergence with potentiality; the other is the shape forms that we encounter as we enter into the domain of conceptual thought, habitual patterns and so on. So in this room when we look around we see people. When we see the people we see how they dress, how they look; we can imagine something about their lives, about the lines around their eyes and their mouths and so on.

This is not something false or wrong but it's the domain of the gestures of connectivity when we're constantly reading each other and making interpretations of how we are. If we just relax a little bit from that level and experience people as pure colour, just as if we were in a life drawing class. At first you're aware of the person sitting there as a person, but as you try to draw or paint them you become aware of line and tone. What is in front of you has shape and colour. You're trying to get the feeling of that and bring some representation of it through onto the paper you're drawing on. At the end of the drawing session you might speak the model, then come back to being a person in the same way. Each of us is this radiance of energy this emergence of colour and shape—colour and shape which will be interpreted by each person in the room in a slightly different way. That is to say on the level of emerging energy we're all in the same world just seeing colour and shape, but as soon as we come into making sense of it, we interpret it through the matrixes that we built up through our education, our karmic habits, neurological patterns, neurosis and so on.

This basic potential of light and sound arises directly in and as the gift or the breath of the state of openness. So in a very simple way we are open, we are swimming in the sea of radiance and we are precisely this talking and meeting other people. These three aspects of modes are always occurring simultaneously. However we are usually not aware of that, because we're over-connected, over-invested in the storylines we have about ourselves and others. That is what is traditionally called samsara—being drawn into a partial experience and imagining that the key to happiness, to fulfilment is hidden in that part and that if only we could try harder or get more of this then somehow we would get to a point of completion.

But of course that doesn't really seem to be the case. We can see that even people who are very, very wealthy don't seem to be so fulfilled and happy. Often people who are very intelligent are not fulfilled and very happy. Or people who are very beautiful, or people who are very good at sport. But often these people keep trying to buy more jewels, get some more degrees, write more books or read more books...

Where is the golden key? Where is the thing that will give me what I'm searching for? Of course in the domain of spirituality, there are many, many people selling keys: old iron keys that have been around for thousands of years, bright shining new age keys, crystal keys, peacock feather keys. There are many, many places to keep looking.

## Making friends with yourself

---

From the point of view of dzogchen, the most important thing is to start to make friends with oneself, to observe oneself. Through this quality of observation come to see that there is more to us than can be established through concept. As we proceed in that we come to a point of integration. Nothing has to be changed in the external life, because the ground of our being is not determined by the quality or pattern of the manifestation that is occurring. So sometimes our lives go well, sometimes they go badly. When they go badly we can spend a lot of time trying to make them go better. But it does seem to be the case that most people get quite a lot of grief in their lives. That is because happiness is arising. That is to say something which arises, manifests, comes into being, fills us, seems to be what we're all about, and then starts to go because everything that arises will eventually go.

The same is true of sadness, of misery, of pain, mental pain, and physical pain. The more we conceptualise and concretise the difficult things in our lives, the more solid and real and determinative of their identity they appear to be. But who is the one who is caught up in our shitty life? Who is the one having a bad time? Well it's me. Don't you take me seriously? Who is this 'me' who wants to be taken seriously?

That's the problem with suffering we all want it to be validated as being important because it seems to be so powerful so concrete, so determining of the quality of our existence. But it's actually ephemeral. It's not something we can grasp. Instead of telling it what it is, if we observe it and stay close to it, it reveals itself as a series of moments. When we start to observe the nature of these moments we can see directly that the ground of them is this open dimension of our very existence.

When we say the open dimension of our existence, it's not something that we can possess in the way that we own a watch. We are not the owners of our nature, but rather we are the children of our own nature. The domain of I, me, myself is an energetic arising. It's not a problem to be solved, it's not something to be removed, but it needs to settle back and be held safely in the arms of its mother. The mother is space. The nature of our awareness, the ground of our existence is an open spaciousness, without corners or edges something without beginning or end.

When we move into sleep at night or when we move into the process of death we have the experience of letting go of this outer domain where we tell the world what it is and become more in touch with the dissolving liminal, ungraspable aspects. If you imagine just falling asleep everything becomes a bit hazy and vague and it dissolves open. This is the same process of death. But if we spend our lives totally fixated on the external level of manifestation, if we believe that this is all we have, then these moments can be very frightening. The more we can open and experience the spaciousness, the more we derive an infinite contentment from this.

By not looking out into the world of objects to give the meaning of life, we stop trying to ask and get the world to give us something it can't give us. Through that we start to see the world as it is—a ceaseless play of energy. We mistake it to be solid, of the earth element, something that can be built up like a Lego construction.

## Compassion and connectivity

---

Our world is much more like water. If we go and swim in a lake, every movement our body makes ripples the water. If other people are also moving in the water, the ripples that come from them, will be affecting how we can swim or relax in the water. That's what water does. That's what our world is doing all the time. You cannot stabilize it. If you don't over-invest it then it becomes a play of movement which you can participate in. Not with a will to power and a determination to control, but rather in terms of enjoying the connectivity which comes from being in the world with others.

This is the meaning of compassion in dzogchen. It's not trying to do something to somebody else, or rescue people from the place they're in. Compassion is finding a way to be with people which doesn't further confirm the identification they have with their consolidated reified view of themselves.

One of my teachers explained that it's as if we are sleeping. We are sleeping in quite a safe bed but we're having a nightmare. The teacher tries to awaken us. On the one hand they awaken us from the nightmare. On the other hand they waken us to the fact that we are safe in our own bed. Awakening is not awakening into something else. It's awakening in to what's always there.

Through integration, our being in the world becomes one of constantly trying to experience being open to the world as it comes and working with the energy, with the conditions as they manifest. There are different kinds of meditation involved in the practice of dzogchen but they all go in the direction of bringing into being the taste of this integration, then supporting us in maintaining it through the many different circumstances which arise in life.

That's that. There's lot more to say but it's a very nice evening tonight. You can be just walking in the evening air, listening to the birds... The possibility of practice is everywhere. You hear a sound, and you identify "*Oh the bird is singing.*" You might identify what particular kind of bird is singing; then maybe it sings again and you simply hear the sound. When you just hear the sound you are very open. When you know it's a blackbird, then you have already become a little bit closed. So it's like that. It's bringing this kind of practice into everyday life. The possibilities are everywhere.

OK. Thank you.