
Finding your way home: an introduction to dzogchen

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Excerpts

In Tibet it was said that dzogchen was in Tibet before buddhism arrived. It was there before the bön religion too. That is to say, it is not an invented system, but is something that was, and is, always there and that people in all places, in all times, have access to.



The view of dzogchen indicates that you have to be fully present so that you are as connected as possible to everything that is there in the undivided uninterrupted phenomenological field, which includes yourself. From the state of relaxation, your spontaneous movement will be connected with the situation. Activity is then effortless and intrinsically ethical. Dzogchen texts describe this as ‘the path of non-meditation’ since whether alone or with others, still or in movement, there is no imported object of meditation.



This whole world is the same river, but each of us is a little movement. However when we sit inside this bubble of ourselves, we protect our difference from other people because we want to be unique and special. Yet actually we are made out of the same stuff as everyone else. This does not mean that we are the same as other people. We are neither the same nor different; we are unique forms which are inseparable.



The body is not a thing, it’s a great river of change, and the same is true for sensations and feelings and thoughts. Once we start to experience the ceaseless movement of experience we realise that within this movement there is nothing to hold on to. Yet we don’t get lost, because the ground of this movement is completely still.



If you go out on a boat and the wind is blowing a bit, you can see the waves moving. Then along comes a seagull, and it lands on the sea. It was flying and now it’s sitting on the water. It’s having a little rest, but what it’s sitting on is moving. It’s like that. The thought is moving in your mind like the waves on the sea. Another thoughts arises, and ‘Ah’, you think, ‘I can stay here.’ In the very moment that you think, ‘This is where I belong’, you are being moved along. All manifestation is dynamic, which is why we have to look again, and again, and again, so we really see the essential difference between stillness and movement.



Movement is never still; you cannot make it still. The only thing that is still is presence, and it never moves.



When life is hard it is difficult to trust that awakening is easy.

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[Day 1]

The basic principles of dzogchen

The basic principles of dzogchen are important, because dzogchen, as a practice and as an understanding, is different from other paths in buddhism. In the dzogchen view the base, or the basis of awakening, is something that we already have, and therefore the path to awakening is not a path *going* somewhere else, and the result of awakening is not *being* somewhere else. Rather, it's to find a way of being fully present as oneself, which is revealed through opening up the possibility of exploring *'What does it mean to be oneself?'*

For this to occur we need to develop a capacity to observe ourselves across the range of our manifestation. Thoughts, feelings, sensations, movements of the body and so on form the constituents out of which we arise as ourselves. If we fully identify with these factors, they appear to be the definition of who we are.

One aspect of observation is the clarity whereby all these different factors are revealed just as they are. In fact we exist as the co-emergence or integration of the two factors: an openness which reveals *all* that is there and the *precise nature* of all that is there. This is not something mystical, it's not something symbolic; it doesn't belong to any particular system of interpretation. Dzogchen meditation resists the temptation to fall into interpretation.

From the time we were small our parents, school teachers and employers have been encouraging us to try to understand a bit more and to think a bit more and therefore to rest on thoughts as building blocks to establish understanding. Clearly, knowing about the world and how it functions brings a kind of clarity, but conditions change and our accumulated knowledge is quickly out of date.

In dzogchen we are aiming to awaken to a quality of awareness, a particular kind of knowing that is not dependent on circumstances. The most important aspect of this practice is trust in your ability to relax. Generally speaking when we read buddhist texts they explain that the basis of samsara is ignorance, leading to attachment. The word 'ignorance' can create the sense that there is some kind of cognitive disorder and that we need to learn more to get rid of ignorance. However from the point of view of dzogchen, the problem is more an ontological one about the nature of being. That is to say, in becoming alienated from ourselves and the ground of our being, there arises an anxiety, and this anxiety drives us into activity. For example, when there is an accident or something difficult in our lives we tend to think *'Oh what should I do?'* We become mobilised and ready to become very active.

Of course in that state of arousal and agitation our selective attention identifies many things that needs to be done and the more we do the more there is to do. Every religion is very generous in presenting thousands of things for us busy people to do! You can do prostrations every morning, then fill your water bowls, then clean your altar, and there are all these many mantras to say... So there is always something to do. In Tibetan buddhism there are thousands of different gods. First you praise the buddhas, then all the bodhisattvas, then all the gods, and then all the dharma protectors. That's a lot of praising to be done. Since you have said hello to them once, then the next time you go near them you have to call them by their name otherwise it's a bit rude... This kind of activity is good activity, but it *is* activity.

In dzogchen we are concerned to understand the nature of activity. That is to say, what is the movement of the body, what is the experience of speaking? What is sensation in the body? What is emotion? What is the experience of listening, eating, walking and so on?

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[A phone rings in the room] These phones are invented to keep you busy. You can imagine the buddhas sitting in Bodhgaya, under the bodhi tree ready to be enlightened and then a phone rings. It's his mother *'Are you alright, dear? I heard you were getting very thin...'*

Settling and calming the mind

So now let us do some simple practice to arrive and settle in, allowing our attention to settle on a simple focus. Settle either on an external object such as a mark on the floor, or focus on the sensation of the breath going in and out of the nostrils. We sit with the spine straight, shoulders relaxed, chin slightly down, the tongue resting on the hard upper palate. The eyes are slightly closed and gazing down the line of the nose; the mouth is slightly open and we are not controlling our breath. Once you have decided on your focus, develop a clear intention that *'This is what I'm going to do'*. If you find your attention wanders off into something else, then as soon as you become aware of that, just gently bring your attention back onto the line of your focus.

The practice of tenderness and gentleness in meditation is very important. It's a way of healing some of the wounds which develop around the heart on the basis of the harsh messages which we have received from the outside and which we continue to give to ourselves, blaming, judging, and criticising and so on.

So just return to the focus and we stay with that. We will do this for about half an hour.

[Meditation]

The main goal of the practice we have just done is not to develop any particular insight but simply to calm the mind by cultivating a kind of disinterest. That is to say, the usual contents of the mind, which we normally find fascinating and which pull us into all kinds of developments, thoughts and associations, are now allowed to pass by without our paying any particular interest.

This kind of practice is something you may do from time to time to develop your capacity for focussed attention, but from the point of view of dzogchen it's not useful to have it as one's main meditation practice. The main goal of buddhist practice is to develop wisdom and compassion and if the mind is simply very calm and undisturbed then there is neither wisdom nor compassion. However, what this practice *can* do is start to give some kind of space, a kind of perspective, so that you begin to have a choice, *'Will I be involved or not?'* When our mind is very distracted we get into a habit of reactivity to whatever comes whether it seems to be internal or external.

So in calming the mind we give ourselves the sense or the capacity to stop and look before we get involved. This helps us to start to see where is the main glue that binds us into what is going on. Is the glue in the object or is the glue in the subject? Sometimes we feel it is inevitable to be involved in something; the object seems so interesting or necessary that we have no choice. It is as if the object is pulling us towards it, causing us to fall into an involvement. "What else could I do?"

This is the basis of a lot of events in our existence. For example, if you go to any courtroom where the person has to explain to the judge why they did the bad thing they did, you will hear explanations which point to the inevitability of what occurred. *"Because I was poor"...* *"Because the person hadn't locked their car"...* There was some reason out there which made me do this. *"So you can't send me to jail; circumstances made this happen. I am a victim of circumstances."* We often think like that, as if the outside is sucking and pulling us, or our thoughts, feelings and sensations are sucking us into something.

The advantage of calming the mind is that we can start to create a laboratory, a place of examination where we can see what is the nature of the forcefield of subject and object.

From a buddhist point of view we have been born many, many times before, and in all these lives we have developed likes and dislikes, habits, attitudes and so on. When we are born into this life we have particular vulnerabilities or susceptibilities. Some people, when they go to a party and hear the music, think 'I have to dance' while other people at the same party, as soon as they see the bottles, think 'I have to get drunk'. So in these ways we have a selective attention, that is to say, an attention that moves towards the world looking for things that are our particular individual patterning or a construction.

What may feel natural is in fact quite artificial

This habitual involvement feels exactly normal for us so it's often difficult to see it because I am just doing what I do. How would I do anything else? This is me. But in fact in that moment our potential, our capacity to express ourselves in many different ways, is being caught by an old pattern and shaped in a very narrow form that is really limiting us.

So by calming the mind and being less immediately reactive or involved with the thoughts and feelings and so on which arise, we are able to start examining ourselves and the world around us and start to seeing how we actually function. An aspect of this is to start to see how other people function. It's always surprising to see what other people do. So for example, if you go to the supermarket and you come to the queue at the checkout, it's very interesting to look in other people's baskets. What are they buying? Why would they buy these things? What kind of person is that? How strange. Then we realise '*Oh they are not me.*' They have another life; they have another mind. Their mind is arising due to causes and circumstance due to their childhood, their education, their work or their not-work, and the same is true for me.

The function of looking in this way is to see that what I take in myself to be natural is actually something quite artificial. Because my mother was as she was, my father was as he was, my school was as it was, I have, through my integration with them, developed certain pathways inside myself, certain tilts of my gaze so that some things look shiny to me and other don't.

The real practice begins when we see that 'I am artificial; I am a construct; I am made out of habits, attitudes and tendencies, all of which have a historical basis, a contextual basis but no true foundation. There is nothing fundamentally reliable in them.' If I keep following these habits and attitudes, I'm constantly winding myself into story time, into a narrative, into the myth of my existence. Inside of that many things are very important and many things don't bother me at all. So following the things I like and trying to get more of them, and avoiding the things I don't like and trying to have less of them, I spend my whole life going this way and that. I am always busy trying to maintain the sense of the continuity of this construct that has been created.

The view of dzogchen is a way of looking through the story to see if there is a different basis for our existence, one which is not simply our old individual patterning of the stream of experience, but something truly reliable which could be always there.

Refuge is like an umbrella – you'll get wet if you let it down

In the general buddhist practice we begin by taking refuge in the Buddha, the teachings and the association of the people who practice. That is to say, we recognise that we are like a leaf in the autumn wind and we want to find something to hold onto.

Once you have a refuge you have to hold onto it. All kinds of refuge are like umbrellas; they will only keep the rain off if you hold them up. That is to say, without the effort of keeping up the umbrella you don't get any protection. As soon as your arm gets tired, your arm goes down and you get wet. So that's why it's very important to see the nature of religious practice. As long as we are trying to stop doing bad things and develop good things, we are engaged in activity. This activity may be a very good activity, but whenever you stop doing it, whatever you have constructed will start to crumble.

We can observe this again and again when you look in a garden; if the gardener is not working hard then many other things start growing. At one time, here in this nunnery [outside of Bilbao] there would have been many people living here, with many servants and everything would have been very perfect. Now there are just a few old nuns so things don't go so well.

The same principle operates in our mind, whenever you are creating something by your own effort, if your effort stops, that creation will become vulnerable. This is not a punishment; it's just how things are. You'll know this from any kind of possession, whether it's a motorcar or a house or an animal—you have to take care of it.

A natural state of perfection

The central point of the practice of dzogchen is the clarity that from the very beginning in all beings – not just humans, but animals, insects, everything which has life – there is a natural state of perfection. The practice is designed to reveal this natural perfection. That is to say, we are not trying to construct ourselves in a better way; we are not trying to improve or develop ourselves since awakening is awakening to the perfection that is already there.

There are two aspects to this. There is what is sometimes called the nature of the mind itself, that is to say our own nature as we sit here together. This is openness, meaning that there is nothing closed or defined or conditioned about it. It's a naked quality, not covered with any habits or karmic accretions, and it's there automatically by itself. This is the state of awareness that illuminates everything in the same way that a mirror illuminates everything that is placed in front of it. Just as the mirror is not touched by any of the reflections that arise in it, so our awareness is not conditioned or distorted, or improved or contaminated by anything that arises in it. This state never moves and never changes.

Within this state everything moves, for nothing that appears is stable or reliable. The biggest problem in samsara is that people try to stabilise things which cannot be made stable. We try to make our own mental state stable; we try to make other people stable and reliable and what we find is that something is always happening, since, as the Buddha taught on many occasions, everything is impermanent.

When we are present in our experience rather than thinking about it, we can see that everything is dynamic and changing, unfolding moment-by-moment. We see that each of us is at the centre of this evolving world. The one who is at the centre of the moving world does not move. That is to say our awareness, which never changes, and this display which is ceaseless, are inseparable in non-duality. The infinite stillness of awareness and the ceaseless movement of the world, including ourselves, are not two different domains. What we call 'my body', 'my thoughts', 'my sensations' or 'my feelings' is the movement of energy; there is nothing stable about our existence. Breath is going in and out all the time; the blood is going round and round; electric impulses of the brain are ceaseless; the hormones and endocrine system are operating ceaselessly, bringing about communication inside the body. The body is not a *thing*, it's a great river of change, and the same is true for sensations and feelings and thoughts. Once we start to experience the ceaseless movement of experience

we realise that within this movement there is nothing to hold on to. Yet we don't get lost, because the ground of this movement is completely still.

Our nature is always still and calm in the midst of the movement which is always happening. This is the basic vision in dzogchen. It's not about trying to become enlightened, where 'enlightenment' is some special state, which if we try really hard we can one day achieve, a place that will somehow be secure. When we look directly into the phenomenology of our existence we can see that thoughts come and go. Bad thoughts come and go, good thoughts come and go. All constructs are impermanent. And yet ungraspable, indestructible awareness is always right here.

Many things that people have thought to be very safe and secure are revealed by events to be not so secure. Year by year the Catholic Church is becoming less powerful in most countries and churches that were once full of people are fairly empty now. A hundred and fifty years ago this would have been unthinkable. When the Chinese came into Tibet and attacked the monasteries many of the Tibetan people could not understand how it would be possible to take a statue of the Buddha and break it up. They thought some big dharma protector would kill all the Chinese because they were doing something very, very bad. That did not happen. A statue is just metal; if you have faith it's more than metal, it's metal plus faith. Metal plus faith is very powerful. I myself have a lot of faith so I have lots of such pieces of metal in my home. However these things are very important because of our relationship with them; they let us see directly that *we* are making them shine. The energy of our mind is the radiance of the world.

Becoming more at home with oneself

The basic task is to become more at home with oneself by starting to observe what is reliably oneself. You can start with a general reflection on your own life. For example when you were young you had different interests from now. The dolls or the bike you played with as a child are no longer important to you but once they were really important. Then we can look at all the things that are in our life now and that seem very important to us, and ask what has real value? This doesn't mean rejecting everything and renouncing the world and going to live in a monastery but rather, we can start to see that value arises as the interplay as subject and object.

The illusion of existence

The Buddha explained many times that things are like an illusion, like a reflection of the moon on water, like a mirage, like an echo. Whether we are happy or sad it is just an illusion. An illusion does not mean that there is nothing there at all; it means that nothing is there that is inherently true, true from the inside out. For example, we might feel that meeting together like this is a useful thing to do; we might even enjoy being here, but then we look out the window and we see that there are many houses in this town and yet no one from this town has come here. So is it our duty to go out this evening and knock on peoples' doors and tell them, *'Friends, please come, enjoy'*? They will say *'Don't be stupid? Don't you know the World Cup is on television?'* It's like that. If *we* want to be here, it's *our* construction. This is an illusion too.

Everything is an illusion. Perhaps you have been out on a beautiful full-moon night by a lake and noticed the reflection of the moon on the water. It really seems that the moon is in the water, but it is not. In the summer if you are driving your car on the road you may have seen what looks like water, what has the appearance of water, but there is no true water there. It was a mirage. This is the nature of our experience here. There is nothing to grasp. That

doesn't mean that there is nothing at all. There is *something*, but it is not a solid entity that you can build on or hold on to, and the same applies to ourselves.

Inside our body we feel the muscles tense and relax, we notice how our breathing changes, how our posture moves. That is to say, our body is something that appears for us, just as our bodies also appear for other people and this appearance is changing in time. Our skin looks different as the daylight changes, if the sun is shining, or if it's raining or there is artificial light. That is to say, ourselves and everything that we see is an experience which is arising. It is there as an experience but you can never get hold of it. This usually is hidden from us because we are caught up in our thoughts, being busy 'making sense' of the world. We have our ideas about how things are and on the basis of that we create a base of solid enduring entities. On the basis of that we start to build up a composite picture of outer things and inner things, and then we move these reliable entities around to create the world we want. But all the time it is really an illusion. I remember when I was in school we were always being encouraged to work hard to get through the exams. So every year in May and June I would be writing and writing for hours to do these school exams. Then a month later through the post I would get a letter telling me if I had passed or failed. Once I had opened the envelope and knew the result, well, life goes on. In English we talk about 'a storm in a tea cup'. This is what happens when we take things too seriously.

Storytelling

Sometimes I sit and eat with my colleagues at work. We talk about ourselves, where we have come from, what we have done at the weekend, what we plan to do in the summer... That is to say, we all tell a story about ourselves. But when we are relaxed and open, there is nothing to say. Most of our social interaction, even when we are interacting with ourselves on our own, is just a flow of stories. Stories about the past – what has happened, stories about the future – what we hope will or will not happen. While we are telling these stories there is the immediacy of our presence as ourselves, and this we can't talk about. We can't say what it is, yet it is the heart of our experience. Words describe things, events, manifestations—yet the mind itself is not a thing. It is beyond language, being the open field through which language moves. So the very ways in which we try to communicate with other people, which are the same ways in which we talk internally to ourselves, conceal the immediacy of ourselves in the very moment that they reveal the story about ourselves.

This is an important principle. It's not that story telling is wrong or bad, but it's to recognise the status and the function of the story. If I tell you something about my childhood, then I'm making little bridges from my world into your world, like some fast-growing creeper like Russian Vine or Virginia Creeper. When people are talking together little tendrils are growing out from their mouths and wrapping around each other. This creates the possibility of feeling connected and warm, and it also allows us to be helpful and to get a sense of the shape of the other person so that we can find a way to be close to them. That is to say, it is about compassion; it's not about wisdom. Wisdom is how things *actually* are, that is to say, staying relaxed open and present with the immediacy of our direct experience. Direct experience cannot be described because it is not a thing. Speaking can create the illusion of there being real entities.

The actual function of speaking is about connection and connection permits the movement of energy. For example in this room right now we are different types of people and we are moving together through time; we are *directly* the movement of time. Along this ceaseless gesture of time, we are all moving. It might help to imagine that this whole room is a big river with a strong current moving. This is what it like being here; we are in the same river. This whole world is the same river, but each of us is a little movement.

However when we sit inside this bubble of ourselves then we protect our difference from other people because we want to be unique and special. Yet actually we are made out of the same stuff as everyone else. This does not mean that we are the same as other people. We are neither the same nor different; we are unique forms which are inseparable.

This illustrates the fact that wisdom and compassion inseparable. In wisdom we are at home in the spaciousness that is the ground of all beings. In buddhist language it means the dharmakaya, or true nature, of all beings is exactly the same, but as we manifest we each have our own particular qualities. These qualities influence how we talk and how we walk and so on, and this influences the play of our compassion – how we can relate to other people. If we are cut off from our own experience of our spaciousness then instead of having this ungraspable and infinite openness at our centre, we find ourselves wrapped up inside stories. We talk ourselves into existence just like Scheherazade but these stories position us in particular ways that limit our capacity to respond to other people.

So the function of the practice is to integrate the openness with the expression, the stillness with the movement, so that our movement becomes an expression of the integrated movement of the situation as it presents itself moment-by-moment, rather than being the expression of ‘who I am’ in terms of my habitual story.

Practice

We will do a little practice now. This is very, very simple, we just sit as we are and without doing anything artificial we just allow experience to flow. We are not trying to do anything special, we are not trying to develop something or create something in particular, simply to stay present with everything that is occurring. You can do this with your eyes closed if it's easier but normally we do this with our eyes open. If something moves outside, some sounds come in, just allow it to come. Don't block external experience, don't block internal experience.

If you find yourself spiralling into a particular pattern of thoughts, as soon as you recognise this just let go and let these thoughts vanish. As it often says in dzogchen, the mind is like the sky. The sky is open to whatever comes into it. Sometimes it's clouds, sometimes it's rainbows. Birds and planes fly through it, bombs go off in it but the sky stays open. So in the same way, just like the sky, remain relaxed and open... Whatever comes, you just let it be there. OK so will we sit like this for a while.

[Practice]

The basic instruction for dzogchen meditation is to not do anything at all. That does not mean that nothing will happen because, strangely enough, you are not the only one making things happen. The ego has a big fantasy about being in charge of mental activity, yet stuff is happening all the time—what Freudians might call the unconscious and Jungians might call the collective unconscious. Whatever it is, there is a lot of stuff going on that I don't know much about.

Since the instruction is not to do anything interfering or artificial, whenever a thought arises in your mind—and your next response is ‘I like it’ or ‘I don't like it’—then following the instruction, just allow the thought to come and then just allow it to go.

The one who says ‘I like’, the one who says ‘I don't like’ is just a thought. All that we think we are, is just thoughts. As long as we identify with these thoughts as being our true selves, our preoccupation with the transient arising moments gets in the way of just seeing ourselves in the moment of our openness. For example, if you are driving a car every time you look in the mirror you see something different. You are looking up in the mirror inside the car and you go ‘Ah, that car is coming up behind me’, ‘Ah, that car is passing’... Many things are

appearing in the mirror for you. Then when you arrive at your destination you look in the mirror again and tidy your hair a little bit, maybe put on a little more lipstick. Now when you look in the mirror you see yourself. The mirror is full of you. Why? This is our attachment.

When you were driving, things were happening in the mirror; it was very dynamic but now when you look at your own reflection in the mirror it seems to be more real. This is because you invest it with a particular kind of significance. So when the meditation instruction is 'Don't do anything at all', it gives us the chance to see the process of investment of *me*. That is to say, one idea says to another idea 'I really like you' and the next idea says 'I really like you too' and in those way ideas chase ideas, chase ideas. This is what is called samsara. The freedom from samsara begins with seeing that an idea is only an idea. But when we live inside our habitual attachment we don't see a transient idea—we see another appearance. This is the illusion created by sitting inside an idea as if it were telling the truth.

OK so now we will break for today and morning we will meet together here at 7.30 and we can do more practice. If you prefer to stay in bed that's also allowed, because this is not a punishment camp! You have to be in touch with your own condition since the heart of the practice is to make friends with yourself, to be so close with yourself that the internal division of subject and object is reintegrated, and that's when we can start to experience the state of non duality.

[Day 2]

Dzogchen: everything is already perfect

Dzogchen means great perfection or great completion. That is to say whatever needs to be done is already being done, and therefore the idea that there is any fault or error is incorrect. The only fault or error is, in fact, to think that there is a fault or error! Clearly this makes it different from most religions. Most religions start with some kind of fall from grace, some variation on the stories of having to leave the Garden of Eden, some entry of ignorance... These myths involve two aspects: one is that the good place is lost, and the second is that the door to get back in is closed.

From the point of dzogchen, the natural state—or the open ground of our own existence and the existence of all beings—is not something that is lost. It can't be lost and it can't be gained. It can't be sold and it can't be purchased. It's always there, but one can *attend* to it or not. By taking it for granted we create a false notion of what it is we actually are dependent on. For example when you walk down the street, you are walking on your shoes, and our shoes are walking on the pavement, but both the shoes and the pavement are invisible to you as long as things are going well. But then if somebody has spilled oil on the pavement or if there is a banana skin or some dog shit, suddenly you become aware of the pavement and of your shoes. The very ease of our existence makes us not look very carefully at what is there. The practice of dzogchen is to avoid the extremes of either lazily taking things for granted or anxiously reacting to a crisis. Rather, we attend to what occurs without interpretation or bias.

In Tibet it was said that dzogchen was in Tibet before buddhism arrived. It was there before the bön religion too. That is to say, it is not an invented system, but is something that was, and is, always there and that people in all places, in all times, have access to. Very often, if you spend some time with small children you can have that sense that they are in this experience. Of course when children are small they do not make a commentary on what they are doing which means that their life, their experience, is open and immediate for them. It's wonderful to see people when they encounter a small baby and, generally

speaking, something in the heart opens up and the face becomes light, and they are friendly and immediately connected with the baby. It's the very openness and undefendedness of the baby that invites the adult to enter that world. Of course a baby is rather helpless. Then as it grows up and learns how to take care of itself, it loses that openness. This is very sad yet it has happened to each of us. There was a time when we were just ourselves, and then we 'developed' ourselves, which is necessary for social adaptation, but in the process we lost ourselves. We became turned into, or turned towards, the rhythm of the world, the necessary demands of existence. Moreover if our childhood is unhappy, then that process becomes even more complicated.

However from the point of view of dzogchen, openness is always there and the task in meditation is to integrate our capacity for complex 'being in the world with others' with the simplicity of the ground. The basis of the practice is to awaken to, to be fully open to, the state that is already here, a state that is hidden from us by nothing other than our own activity. This last point is very important since it means that all you need is already here with you; it is about how you pay attention to your existence.

If you are familiar with buddhism, this is not the usual presentation because usually it is described that a situation arises due to ignorance, that is to say, that we have lost touch with true knowledge and we have to find a way to this knowledge again. So, people will pray and make aspirations like '*May I become enlightened for all sentient beings*', that is to say,

I recognise that my interests are small and I am mainly concerned with myself and I want to open this out so that my attention is with all beings equally. Through that I will escape this limitation, creating freedom for myself and so I will become more available for other people.

To do that it is traditionally said that you need to have developed 'the two accumulations of merit and wisdom' which become the basis for achieving of enlightenment. This is often described in terms of removing all that has to be removed and gaining or developing all that has to be developed. The Tibetan word for 'Buddha', *sang-gye* comprises these two activities. *Sang* means to clear or to purify; *Gye* means to increase or develop. So the state of buddhahood is seen as one in which all faults, obscurations and limitations are cleared away and all good qualities necessary for the benefit of oneself and others are completely achieved, completely fulfilled. Buddhahood is seen as the result of a process. Should you enter a traditional pathway of training, as you get in the four schools of Tibetan buddhism, you are immediately concerned with these two activities of clearing away obstacles and developing whatever is useful. This activity is seen as taking many lifetimes. However the so-called 'higher tantras' teach how it can be achieved in one lifetime.

Tantra: transforms ordinary into perfect

The word 'tantra' means continuity and refers to the continuity of the states of limitation—called 'samsara', and the states of non-limitation—called 'nirvana'. The practice is to transform all that we take to be samsara—the world of separate objects, the world of truly existing phenomena—into the mandala of the deity. A mandala simply means a situation that has no limit. Essentially 'mandala' means that whatever aspect of existence you get fixated on and invest as being very important is not sealed inside an internal definition, but is actually a fractal of all the other things that are arising

In that way we come to see that each thing, which in our ordinary perception we take to be something very strong and very real, is actually inseparable from the open field of actuality. In particular, our sense of 'I, me myself' which seems to differentiate us from all other people, is revealed as merely the play of empty signifiers which establish nothing. In the

path of tantra we come to realise this through a transformation of our ordinary identity into the symbolic realm of the deity,

For example, we could visualise the yogini Machig Labdron in the clear blue sky in front of us, her body translucent so that you can see through it. She is there but she is an appearance without substance. Then by doing the meditation practice we link our energy with hers and out of her body rays of light come and dissolve into our body filling our body with light. So now her body is made of light and our body is made of light. Her body now comes to the top of our head and dissolves into a ball of light and that ball of light comes down into our heart. Our body, which is light, dissolves into that ball so there is only one ball of light. That's all we are paying attention to, and this ball of light gets smaller and smaller and smaller until it is just one little dot, one point. The point now dissolves into emptiness and we rest in that open state. Then gradually thoughts, feelings, sensations arise and all of these are the forms of emptiness, the forms of the deity.

Gradually we become more aware of the world around us, tables, chairs, flowers, people and so on. Everything we see, we see as being inseparable from the body of the deity. For example we see flowers. Actually we don't see the flowers because 'flower' is the name we give to this. What we actually see is something quite strange, quite unbelievable—there is a little ball of something and gradually it opens up and wow! A flower. But as soon as we say '*It's a flower*', life becomes easy, we feel safe. Now we 'know' what it is, but if we just look at it, it's just a pretty shape and colour.

The more we do the practice the more everything surprises us. Instead of being asleep in the dream of language, the fresh vitality of each moment can be revealed to us.

In order to enter into the path of tantra you have to get any necessary initiations and then do the practice every day, do the visualisations, recite the mantras. Then gradually you will get some experience. The danger with this method is that because it takes you a long time to do, and you know that if you don't make the effort you don't get the result, it becomes easy to draw the conclusion that 'I am making it happen'.

I might think that I am imagining this mandala, in the way a child imagines Batman or some other hero. That is to say, this activity comes out of me. That belief maintains the centrality of the ego—the very opposite of the intention of the practice. We have to imagine that we are entering the timeless world of the symbolic, of the sambhogakaya, in which all the aspects of the practice are unfolding by themselves. By merging with the deity we merge with our own true nature.

Dzogchen: kadag and lhundrup

From the point of view of dzogchen, from the very beginning everything has been very perfect and the state of buddhahood is present in all beings. There are two basic principles in dzogchen.

The first is *kadag*, a Tibetan word, meaning 'primordially pure'. It means that your own mind, your own state, is pure from the very beginning. It has never been limited, or defiled or covered up by anything else. Whatever bad things you may have done in this life, none of this has conditioned or limited your own nature.

The purity of the mind is indestructible. This is a fundamental principle. Without this you cannot have any confidence. When you wear nice white clothes they look very attractive, especially if the sun is shining but you do have to be more careful when you drink your coffee because white cloth shows up every possible stain. Such relative purity is always a

cause of anxiety but the purity described in dzogchen can never be stained or destroyed since its nature is empty. I will talk about the nature of emptiness a little later.

The second principle of dzogchen is called *lhundrup* in Tibetan: *lhun* means 'a heap' or 'a pile', and *drup* means 'to be made' or 'be accomplished'. Therefore *lhundrub* means 'made all at once', not bit by bit. This refers to the aspect of manifestation. Whatever we experience is immediately here, we don't need to construct it. The more we understand the openness and the purity of the mind, the more we see that the immediacy, the spontaneity of manifestation, is inseparable from that purity.

This might sound a little bit abstract but it is exactly our experience as we are sitting here. That is to say whatever thoughts, feelings, perceptions arise, they have an immediacy. They show themselves. Who is this shown to? Me. Who is this one I call 'me'? It's a noetic capacity or a possibility of being aware. That is to say our ability to register experience is not done by *something*; it's not the product of a function, but it is a revelation. For example if I put my hand in front of a mirror, the reflection of my hand is immediately in the mirror.

Because the mirror has nothing inside it, because it has no fixed content, it can immediately show what is there. Because our *mind* is naturally empty, it also has no fixed content and therefore it immediately reveals whatever is arising.

Yesterday, when I came here with Marta, we looked a little at the room to see how we could fit the seating, Marta had already been here some days before and moved some of the chairs. That is to say, the room was already occupied or filled in a particular way, and we had to work with what was here in the room. This is the way our ordinary consciousness works. We already have furniture in our head and when you come into a new situation you can only manage these new experiences according to the amount of remaining space you have. A very normal way we have of dealing with this problem is to say this new experience is very like this old experience.

By comparing and contrasting events, two functions arise. The first is that I have a kind of confidence that I know how to make sense of the world, and the second is that I am protected against the shocking freshness of each new experience. Because if you really look at the flowers they are very very strange, even if you look at just a plastic cup, it's very, very strange. When I was a child things like this didn't exist. Suddenly someone developed the capacity to make this, something that is so cheap you just throw it away. When I was a child you always had to clean everything and keep it very safe. Maybe we could say that this plastic cup is part of the Buddha's teaching because this is a something that is already nothing, but this kind of nothing is simply capitalist consumerist nothing! It's very strange, very strange and we tend not to see the strangeness.

In that way we tend to exchange the unsettling immediacy of freshness for the power of knowing. If you're with children—especially boys about seven, eight or nine—it's sad to see how they become very obsessed with knowing things. It starts with knowing the names of all the different kinds of dinosaurs, then the names of all the motorcars, and then all the football teams and so on. If you don't know all these things people say you are stupid. Of course from a developmental point of view this is the accumulation of knowledge, but it is an empty kind of knowledge, knowledge as a defence against the anxiety of not knowing who you are. Now that we have the internet and knowledge banks like Wikipedia the problem is much worse. This is because there are a lot of things in the world that you can know; you can spend hours and hours on a computer getting more and more information, and all the time you are looking at the information you are not looking at yourself. So the existential question of 'Who am I?' becomes hidden within the search for information about other things.

Emptiness is linked with the question of time

OK, now I am going to say a little bit about emptiness and then start to look at different kinds of meditation in relation to understanding our own nature and relaxing our body speech and mind. Then we will have plenty of time for questions you may have especially about how to apply this in your ordinary life.

Emptiness is very strongly linked to the question of time. Generally speaking we move in what is called the three times, the past, the present and the future. When we talk about the present, we usually mean *'Here I am in this room with you. I know I am here and it's already 11 o'clock because we have already had breakfast and lunch is still to come'*. That is to say what we can generally consider to be the present is something which stands at a crossroads between the past and the future. It's not the radical present of being fully awake to what is here, with a great freshness, rather it's the point where the past turns into the future.

The past moves into the future on the basis of there being the continuity of truly existing entities. So, here is my watch, my watch shows the time because it continues in time. If it turned into an apple it would not be very useful. When I put it on my arm in the morning I put on a watch. If after two hours when I looked at my wrist, it was a fried egg I would be very surprised! That is to say I expect *something* to remain *something*.

It's the same watch I had yesterday, which makes sense. But from a buddhist point of view this is not correct, because when I look at this and I say 'It's a watch', then 'watch' is itself an interpretation. It's an abstract concept and what I have in my hand seems to be an example of that abstract concept. For example, maybe you're out shopping and you stop for a moment outside a jeweller's shop, you'll see they have a hundred different kinds of watches. All of these are watches but they don't all look the same. So the *watch-ness* of the watch exists outside the particularity of this watch. When you were small you had to learn to tell the time. There's a big hand and a small hand. The big hand shows the minutes and the small hand shows the hours. You have to look again and again and eventually you get able to tell the time.

Now, when you are a child it is presented to you that everyone knows how to tell the time and if you want to be a normal person you also have to learn to tell the time. You are given to understand that time is in the watch and if you know how to read the watch you will get the time! The *watch* however doesn't tell you anything. In fact *you* tell the watch that it is the watch that is telling you the time. That is what is happening. You are deceiving yourself in the name of giving knowledge.

You develop a mental capacity which you project into this movement of the watch hands and with that you move within the cultural construction of the frame of time. The sense of time is different in this nunnery where we are now for clock time is not the most important time. The most important time is the time of the bell which brings you to the different church services through the day. This goes right back to the 6th century when the religious day was divided up into its six periods of devotion. It was the same in Tibet; the day was divided into six periods. It starts with the middle of the night, and then cockcrow and so on.

So, watch time is a cultural construct, and when you live inside that construct it appears to be just how it is. Its artificial nature, its conditioned nature, is hidden by the fact that we all take it for granted that it is two minutes past eleven. In buddhism when they talk of the root of suffering being attachment, this operates on different levels.

On the outer level I am attached to this watch; this is *my* watch, I have had it for some years and so I have grown accustomed to this particular watch, but if I lose this watch I can always buy another watch. For a while I'll still remember 'Oh, how much nicer my old watch was!'... but then I'll forget about it and become used to the new watch and then it will just become *my* watch.

Much more dangerous is attachment to the idea of watch-ness of the watch. So that every time I see something like this I think 'Oh it's a watch'. Between the arising of the object and the arising of the thought in my mind there is no gap, which means that instead of being able to really look and see what this is, I look at it through the lens or the filter of my knowledge or assumption of what it is. In the western tradition of phenomenology Merleau-Ponty, Husserl and others struggle with, as they say, the epoché, the bracketing off, of assumptions that we put onto the object. They attempted to put the assumption into parenthesis but thoughts come so quickly and are so plausible that it is very difficult not to be taken in, in the moment they arise. And analysing and using the thought patterns after they have occurred does not take us very far.

For example when I was growing up and was around eighteen or nineteen it was still possible as a man to say that women are like this or like that; but in my thirties I came back from India and the new feminism had occurred during my absence and so now it felt very dangerous for any man to voice any assumption about how women were. Women said if you want to know who I am, you can I ask me. I will show you, but you can't know me before you see me.

This is very important, because it is a beginning of a kind of freedom. So long as men can define women according to an old patriarchal structure, that knowledge of the woman precedes her own individual existence. So, you could say that buddhism is applying a similar level of consciousness-raising, but is applying it to everything in the universe.

That is to say, if you want to know what things are, you have to look. You can't just assume, especially since your assumptions are full of old limited patterns. Although it seems very clear to *you* how to see things, this is the pseudo-clarity, the false clarity, of the intensity of your own opinions! Therefore, instead of telling the world what it is, we need to receive the world and let the world tell *us* what it is.

This is why, as I was saying yesterday evening, there is a paradox in the main function of the practice, which is not to do anything at all. The less you do, the more you will receive, because there is so much—in terms of the colours of the tiles of the roof, the shade of the trees, the way different people walk and talk—there is so much richness in the world and it will show itself if we just let it be absorbed into us.

The ungraspability of self

The buddhist notion of emptiness can be made very, very complicated, but it's not complicated. It means essentially the absence of inherent self-nature. Which means there is no essence inside the object for you to grasp, and its ungraspability means that the move of the ego to gain power over the world by knowledge is exposed as something ridiculous.

In the same way, in the first wave of feminism in Britain, from the 1890's to about 1910, the suffragettes had the explicit aim of getting the vote for women. Then in the second wave in the 1960's and 1970's women were saying that women can define themselves, that they were not a puppet of the male gaze or the male definition. Nowadays we have what some people refer to as the 'third wave feminism', where women do many, many different things. Last year was an anniversary for many of the founding writers of 'second wave feminism'

and it was very interesting because many of these women had been very passionate about establishing rights for women and there had been a sense of solidarity, of women being sisters, and of going in the same direction. But when I went to conferences about this, I heard these women saying *'Now it is much more difficult. These young women nowadays do things that we would never, never do. They think it's a sign of freedom to wear a skirt so short that it shows their knickers'*. The older feminists think *'How can this be? How can it have come to this?'* and the younger ones respond, *'If I want to look like a tart, I will look like a tart. That is part of my freedom.'*

That's very, very interesting, because the more that you have freedom, the less you can grasp anything, what can you say? As long as you have an enemy and you're fighting for something, you can define yourself. *'I am against this; this must change.'* But once you have some degree of freedom, life can go in all sorts of directions. If you take that change in the feminist movements as a metaphor, you can see that something similar happens with our relation with our own mind. When you stop struggling to gain enlightenment by overcoming your obstacles, you find yourself participating in a realm of infinite possibilities. Of course this brings a lot of freedom but also its own particular difficulty, because we still have the question *'How shall I live?'* If you follow the theravada path, and think, *'Inside me I have many impulses and if I indulge these impulses I will get into trouble. Therefore maybe I should become a monk or a nun and then I will have many rules to follow and these rules will show me what to avoid and what to do.'* then you can always check the rulebook on how to proceed.

In mahayana buddhism what is developed instead is the intention, *'I want to help all sentient beings'*. So this gives a sense of direction. That is to say that in any situation I try to think what would be beneficial for the other. So you have something to refer to, which is the vow, the bodhisattva vow or intention.

If you practice according to tantra you have the commitment to see the whole world as the mandala of the deity and to see everyone you meet as a god or a goddess. So, again, you always know what to do.

But in dzogchen there is no rule. *'What should I do?'* Nobody can tell you; you have to be an adult and that's not so easy. Life is easier if you are a child. Somehow you can find a mamma or a papa and they will tell you what to do. Sometimes mamma and papa are mad. In the last century we had many mad mammas and papas, Stalin, Hitler and Franco and so on... somebody who always knows what is right. This is a big problem.

The view of dzogchen indicates that you have to be fully present so that you are as connected as possible to everything that is there in the undivided uninterrupted phenomenological field, which includes yourself. From the state of relaxation your spontaneous movement will be connected with the situation. Then activity is effortless and intrinsically ethical. Dzogchen texts describe this as *'the path of non-meditation'*, for whether we are sitting or whether we are moving around and being with other people, we don't have any imported object of meditation.

The object of meditation is always simply that which is arising. Sometimes it feels inside, sometimes it feels outside. Without editing, without trying to improve or change, without falling into a fusion with the object or seemingly protecting yourself by trying to maintain a distance, stay completely close to whatever is arising, letting it come and letting it go. This is illustrated by the traditional image of the mirror. The reflection seems to be in the mirror, and yet when the mirror moves, that reflection vanishes; it doesn't leave a trace. The more you open and you experience the indestructible emptiness of your mind, the more you lose the fear that experience is going to mark or condition your openness. Your mind can remain

fresh and clear. This is not a position of macho indifference, like the attitude of a matador, because if somebody says something that upsets you, you can cry. The one who is crying is the patterning of energy. The content of the mind and the nature of the mind are not the same. Nor are they two different things. If you cry you have not shown yourself to be a weak pathetic person. Everything is possible. When you are happy you can be happy, when you are sad you can be sad. The difference is, who is the one who is happy, and who is the one who is sad?

The sadness is me, as an experience which is manifesting. The one who is experiencing or revealing this manifestation is the unchanging awareness. These two aspects are present simultaneously. If we were *only* this absolute clarity, nothing would touch us; we would not be human. But if you are only passionately involved in your life, you don't have any clarity. Awakening to the integration of these two is the basis of dzogchen.

[Break]

Relaxing our body, speech and mind

Our body speech and mind are aspects of our existence which are not separate from each other but rather are mutually influencing. They indicate our having a kind of dignity, of welcoming yourself into existence. Think of a cat. When cats look at you it is as if they are telling you 'I'm here too'; that's a quality of their vitality. Body, speech and mind refers to not leaking out into the world... to neither pouring out all your energy, nor hiding inside yourself, but really being alive in your own skin, with the sense organs fully alive. This quality of just being in one's skin, not too far out and not too far in, is the basis for abandoning neither other people nor oneself. Usually we tend to tilt in one way or the other.

In terms of relaxing the body, make friends with your skeleton, particularly the spine. When the weight of the head is properly balanced through the vertebrae, the muscles in the neck can become very soft, allowing all the muscles in the body to relax. We tense up when there is something to be done but now, when there is nothing to be done, if you are *still* tense, then there is a double message. The mind may be telling you to relax, but the tension in the body is saying 'Oh what next?' Western medicine describes the autonomic nervous system as having two regulatory systems: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. For most of us our parasympathetic nervous system is not very healthy, that is to say we are over-aroused a lot of the time and we are used to feeling relief by even more arousal! For example you might watch television in order to relax, but television is a stimulant; you might smoke a cigarette in order to relax but tobacco contains many stimulants. In these ways we become habituated to a state of alertness that is not necessary to the actual environment we live in.

Maybe we had bad or frightening situations in our childhood, which have left an impact on our capacity to self-soothe, so it's very important to allow the body to come to rest. There are many western techniques for doing this. A common system is autogenic training which involves consciously working through the whole body, tensing and then releasing the muscles. Such systems are often easier to learn than yoga.

Yoga is very useful but it can be difficult to integrate into ordinary life. Patanjali, who taught the yoga sutras in India about two thousand years ago, laid the basis for the development of eight paths of liberation, with each of the eight paths having its own particular kind of logic. Sometimes people may do a little bit of yoga just to keep their body flexible and that's ok though perhaps not something you can do in the office. Say you're at work and your boss gives you a hard time you might be feeling angry and humiliated which is immediately

presented in tensing of the muscles, changing of posture, of breathing, of capacity for eye contact and so on. At such times it's very important to breathe freely and openly from the diaphragm and to release the tension in the muscles. Although you have been attacked, and have felt attacked, you are no longer being attacked so you can release the arousal and tension in your body. As human beings we often have to cover things over, to hold ourselves together in public. This is much less helpful than immediately releasing as soon as the causal situation has passed.

Being flexible

Although it may be good to learn Indian or Tibetan systems of yoga, the essential thing is to start to know your own body. For example, when you are sitting at your computer you can check for yourself if some of the muscles in your body, maybe in your neck, are tense. We adjust our posture to our mental image of what is right for us, so very often people think that they are sitting straight up when they are not, because they have developed a habitual sense of their posture that feels right, but is actually off-centre. Ballet studios have a wall of mirrors because the line of balance you feel inside yourself is not always the true line. There are modern methods like the Alexander technique and the Feldenkrais method which will help you identify when and where you are going off-centre. You can pursue the enquiry: what are the factors that tense me up, what are the factors that help me release? Our body, as the vehicle of our movement into the world, needs to be flexible because we do not know what is going to happen.

You have the most freedom to move when your body is in a non-committed position. By 'committed' I mean that when you have an intention to move your body in a particular way, you have less freedom. You can see how important this is for goalkeepers, for example. The goal area is quite big and the goalkeeper can't show the striker which way he is going to dive, so he has to be like a master of martial arts, able to move from zero to a hundred very quickly. As soon as he leans in any one direction, that makes the other possibilities less likely. So, it comes back to finding the central position, to resting in the middle way.

Do we operate from our own intention or do we operate from a central point that is outside ourselves in the co-emergence of self and other? For example, some people can dance but they can't really dance with other people. That is to say, they dance doing whatever they do, and in their own world they are expressing themselves, but they are sealed within their own relation to the music—there is no room for anyone else. To dance with another person, their movement and your movement have to work together. In many dances, like waltzes or tango, this problem is solved by one person leading and the other person following.

However the goal in dzogchen is not to have a dominance and submission movement but to have a co-emergence, that is to say, that the subtle interchange of messages between the two people allows something to arise between them whereby for each, their response to the other provides them with a holiday from themselves. I am sure we have all had this experience, parents especially. When the parent relates to the child, the child leads them into doing things that the parent wouldn't do for themselves. The parent might have to go into school and confront the teacher about the way their child is being spoken to. The parent might be able to do that but then find that they cannot bring their faulty goods back to the shop and ask for their money back. The mother or father might lack the confidence to be strong for themselves, but for their child they can transcend their own limit.

Not feeling stretched like an elastic band

When dzogchen talks of non-duality it refers to the lack of a real separation between subject and object. So, if we stay connected with the world and with other people we are always being called into conversation and into ways of being which are not our familiar territory. As

long as you have a home territory, a familiar position, and as long as you feel that in order to make contact with other people you have to go out of that territory, then this can be like stretching an elastic band. At a certain point you feel you have gone far enough and you need to come back to being yourself. At the end of the day you might think *'Oh, thank God that's over. I've had enough for one day. I don't want to talk to anyone; I don't want to see anyone... Where is my wine?'* Maybe all day you were quite happy to be with these people, but then if a friend calls you in the evening you go *'These bloody people, they are on my case all day long...'*

This is important, because this is where compassion and wisdom have become separated. That is to say my generosity towards the other person, which I gave freely, which I enjoyed giving, is still linked to a tight definition of myself. So when I'm giving it, it may be feely given, but inside there is a meter, like a taxi meter, and at a certain point I think *'Oh, that was too much.'* Many people who work with other people get what is called burnout because of that.

This is why deeply relaxing is important and opening up every fixed position we have, so that we are not resting anywhere and so that our movement is always from this place to that place, with no home place to come back to. That is to say, where we live is where we are.

How do we apply this in our meditation? You can be sitting doing your meditation and you go off on some sequence of thoughts, then suddenly you realise—*'Oh oh, I am way over there...'*, and then you come back to doing the meditation. This is what we do when we are meditating focusing on the breath; we come back to the breath.

However in the practice of dzogchen since the object of meditation is whatever is arising, you cannot get lost. If you are present, then wherever you go, there you are. You are simply presence. There is no rulebook that says this is where you should go, or this is how you should be, or this is how your mind should be. Sometimes when we do meditation we may find ourselves crying—suddenly we are full of a lot of grief and sadness and maybe we don't even know why. You don't have to push that away or change it; just stay present with it and then, after some time, it will change into something else. The danger in thinking *'I don't want to be like this. I shouldn't be like that'*, is that you then try to find a 'right' way to be. Don't do that. Whatever state you find yourself in—angry, proud, bored, whatever—just be with it.

Our breath is our friend

To go back to the body, sit in a comfortable way, with the spine holding your weight. You can be aware of particular tensions that turn up, and if you feel you want to stretch your limbs, then just do that. In some systems of meditation everyone has to sit in a particular posture and try not to move. Here it's fine to move, but to move with awareness so that the movement of the body is moving *through* the awareness and you remain aware. The movement of the body shouldn't disrupt the meditation because while the body is moving, that is the object of meditation.

Relaxation of the body follows from having free easy movement of the diaphragm. Yoga has many methods for holding the breath, for extending the period that you can remain without the flow of breath and the associated flow of thought. However, in daily life deep slow breath, using the diaphragm is the most important.

Many of us breathe in a very unhelpful way. When we get a bit anxious, or excited or frightened, we shift into upper chest breathing whereby we have rapid short breaths, with slightly longer in-breaths than out-breaths. This increases the amount of oxygen going into

the bloodstream, which prepares mobilisation for fight or flight. When we have habitual shallow breaths what we are doing is saying to the body there is danger. Often people slouch on the sofa at home watching television, maybe leaning forward and with their shoulders collapsed so that they can hardly breathe. They may be trying to relax but actually there is a biochemical wind-up or tension.

When you breathe in, imagine it's like pouring a bottle of water into a jug; the jug fills up from the bottom. So as you breathe in, your belly comes out a bit as the diaphragm comes down and there is space for the lungs. When you breathe out, breathe out first from the bottom, slow and steady. So, we will just sit and consciously do this for a little while.

To develop the useful habit of breathing deeply and slowly you need to consciously practice it several times a day. For example, once you become used to sitting with your spine straight, it becomes easier to recognise when you are slumping and so you can straighten your spine as required. The more you maintain this slow deep steady rhythm, the more you can monitor when you move away from it. Then you can start to notice what are the external situations and the internal thoughts and feelings that are bringing about any change in your breathing pattern.

For example, a tightening of the breath may be grounded in the sense of not wanting to be somewhere. When we notice this it is helpful for the shift in our breathing has alerted us to how we have gone into a narrow vision of our potential. Some situation or some thought pattern is arising which seems to be controlling me or defining me, or putting me in a place where I don't want to be. The expression 'it's getting to me' is quite helpful in this context because it indicates that I have become a thing which something else can get. Gradually we start to recognise this pattern of thinking and feeling and see that it's just a temporary construct, and on a deeper level, that there is none to be caught,

In that way the body and the breath—which is linked to the voice—and the mind all collaborate together. If you get stuck in one aspect, you don't have to work on that area in order to free yourself. For example, if you get caught up in habitual negative thoughts, rather than trying to think about the thoughts and think your way out of thinking..., if you shift into focusing on your breath and relax the breath and have it free and deep, then the lock into the thought will go. You could achieve the same by standing up and shaking your body because when we lock into a thought very often we lock into a posture; if you change your posture you break the lock.

[Loosening up when you get locked in](#)

I used to regularly have dinner with a couple of psychotherapist friends. Sometimes we would be joined by a colleague of theirs whom I did not know well. We would be sitting having dinner, having some wine and talking and predictably, inevitably, I would get into some sort of an argument with their colleague. We would get completely locked into something. Then one of the others would clap his hands and say "*Everyone stand up and move around the table!*" Then we would get up, move around and sit down in different places and the conversation would become very sweet again.

It's very interesting how you just lock into a particular place and then more and more, like an accelerator or an amplifier, you get locked in. This can be useful in the sort of meditation that says sit still and focus your mind in order to decrease the likelihood of distraction. But if you get locked into something unhelpful, then clearly it makes sense to do the opposite, that is to say, to move about, to distract yourself from whatever you are trapped in. Most of us will have seen this working with small babies. They start to cry but if you bounce them up

and down, do something with your fingers or maybe sing a song then once you catch their attention, they stop crying. It's the same principle with ourselves.

Being aware of tightening and loosening, its pulsation and triggers, is very helpful for regaining a sense of balance. Yet it is predicated on us having a sense of who we are, on the primary identification that we make with certain constructions as if they were our true self. In dzogchen our practice is to rest in the state of openness free of constructs, our self-balancing natural freedom.

Thoughts are moving *through* me

We have already looked a little bit at impermanence. When we become aware of the flow or stream of our experience, we see that the same sort of feelings and patterns arise again and again. If we focus on the semantic content of them then there seems to be a reaffirmation of the sense of the continuity of our existence established by them. But if you pay attention to the energetic *movement* of the thought then you start to see that although I am frequently like this or I am frequently full of this kind of thought, these thoughts are moving *through* me. As such I cannot hold a thought nor repeat it. The second occurrence of the 'same' thought seems identical with the first occurrence only because I am focused on the semantic content. Actually the context within which the thought arises, is changing. The outer field of what other people do is changing. The inner field of my own emotions and sensations is changing and the thought itself is different. It is different because along the line of time it is actually a *new* thought.

Thus we might ask, '*Do you want another cup of coffee?*' This could mean, "*You have had one cup of coffee. Do you want another which is the same?*" It would be the same because it's just another cup of coffee, but it's *another* cup of coffee. It's not the same cup of coffee because the first one is already gone. It's a *new* cup of coffee; it's really new, and it's really a different cup of coffee. But it's also 'another cup of coffee'. Does that make sense? These two things are happening at the same time; it's both fresh and familiar.

If you focus on the familiar it seems to be almost solid; you know where you are. If you focus on the freshness it's something new, and this brings us back to ourselves.

- Oh what is this that is happening for me?
- What is this thing in a cup?
- Oh, what an amazing smell!
- You call this coffee?

Each moment is new. The fact that we bring some knowledge to it, which helps us to manage it, doesn't need to make it old and stale so that we fall asleep inside it.

OK, now we will do a little sitting meditation and bring together these elements. The breath flowing easily, deeply through the diaphragm: the skeleton holding our weight so that the muscles can relax: the awareness open so that whatever is coming is not interfered with. Now our consciousness—that is to say our conscious sense of self, our conscious sense of what is happening to us—is always busy with what is going on, but we can also be aware of this movement of our consciousness. As we looked earlier, we are these two aspects. We are this open awareness, and as a quality of its display or radiance, we are also the movements of the engaged consciousness.

In the meditation we want to gently tilt the focus of our attention towards the experience of spacious awareness and not be so interested in the movement, in the movement of the particular thoughts and feelings that are arising. The practice is very easy to do but it's also easy to slip out of, so for that reason we start by doing it for short periods of time. If you get a bit tired or a bit spacey then you focus more on the breath, slow and deep breaths that will

bring you back into a more grounded state. When you have done that for some time, release the focus of your attention. Be aware of whatever is occurring. Often our attention is like a torch on a dark night, creating a circle of light outside of which everything else is a bit dark and recedes into the background. However in this meditation we want to have a more panoramic vision. We are sitting with our eyes open, not staring at anything in particular but incorporating our peripheral vision. Have a sense too of the space behind you so that all the potential of awareness through the senses is open to whatever is occurring. This takes a little while to get used to. You're not trying to do anything in particular, but simply to offer the widest possible welcome to what is occurring.

[Break]

The immediacy of perception is self-organising: nothing more need be done

The key focus is not going after past thoughts, not expectantly waiting for future thoughts, but staying present exactly with the moment of time as it unfolds, because time is a quality of our own existence. Very often we can feel trapped by time; there are so many things to do in the course of a day and we have to fit into time.

From the point of view of dzogchen this is a very alienated vision, because the immediacy of being present here now is itself inseparable from time and when we integrate openness and movement we escape from the prison of sequential time. We also escape from the building up of patterns, so that we can truly experience what is occurring without being caught by it. We don't fall in to thoughts like 'what if...', 'if only...' and 'maybe...' that starts streams of speculation.

Now at first when we are just with the immediacy of the moment, it can seem that everything becomes fragmented, because our habitual pattern of organising what appears to us in terms of narratives or stories falls away. But if we just stay open we find that we don't need to make sense of it; the value is immediately transmitted and doesn't leave any trace.

If you are drawing with a child who is about four years old, very often they draw circle shapes with little things coming off them. While they are doing it they are concentrating very hard and when you ask them what it is, they will tell you '*This is a house...*', '*This is my mamma...*', '*This is a car...*' It doesn't look anything like that but in the moment the child is doing it, it *feels* like that to them. That is to say, in the experience of making the mark there is the affirmation 'Yes, that's it.' It doesn't have to leave a logical trace that has to be followed or justified and explained. It just *is* and the child has a full belief when he tells you '*This is a motor car*' which gives some indication of their sense that it just is. The immediacy is self-organising; it does not have to be tidied up into some familiar category. This takes us more and more close to the immediacy of perception.

Garab Dorje's first point: awaken on your real nature

Awareness of the natural state of being was transmitted directly to Garab Dorje by the primordial buddha, Kuntu Zangpo. Garab Dorje then brought these teachings into the world in his famous *Three Statements*. According to the tradition, he rose up into the sky and from a mass of rainbow clouds he pronounced these three simple statements. The first of these statements is to awaken on, or in, your real nature. The second is to keep finding yourself in that nature. And the third is to never leave that nature.

This raises an interesting question. If it's our real nature, how is it that we are not in touch with it and we need someone else to teach us about it? To answer this we need to look at the nature of mind itself. The mind has three aspects. The first is natural openness, which is to say that our capacity to know is not a construct; it is not a thing resting on other things. This is not a materialistic view. It may well be that our consciousness—our interactive sense of who we are—is linked through the brain and the body and the five senses into the world around us. However awareness itself is not created out of anything. It is the state which reveals all that is created.

This has many implications for who we are. All that we take ourselves to be is an illusion, momentary identifications that cannot, and do not, remain. We are not what we think we are. And the very thing that we don't recognise about ourselves, well, that is our actual nature. This is what Garab Dorje is pointing out.

The transmission of these teachings requires no formal initiation, but in order to awaken to ourselves, it helps if our nature is pointed out both through words and through the co-emergence of joint practice. Our nature is pure from the very beginning. From this morning from when you first got up, you have had many, many experiences, such as walking in the garden and seeing the trees blowing in the wind, having a chat with people whilst you were drinking coffee, sitting in here and thinking about these various issues. There are different kinds of experiences; when they are there, they are there, and then they are gone and another experience arises. There is a simplicity to this. Yet when we are inattentive or split our attention we can create jumbled, hazy confusing experience. For example last night at the meal I had some water to drink and then I thought I would have some wine. Not paying attention, I put the wine in the glass which was half-full of water. The wine did not taste strong and mixed with water, it did not taste of anything, neither water nor wine. It's like that. If everything gets mixed up you never know what's what.

Our mind offers us the same choice, clarity or non-clarity. We have two aspects. One is our open awareness which, like the mirror, allows experience to come and come and never gets filled up. The other is our consciousness, which is the aspect of our mind whereby we engage with and make sense of the world. This has a limited capacity. We all know the experience of being filled up until we have had enough. We can only absorb so much and then we need some fresh air.

Knowing about these two aspects, in the meditation practice we can recognise when we need to shift our focus if we are getting trapped in involved consciousness. It's not that consciousness is bad and awareness is good. Fundamentally they are not two different things, but they have different qualities, different functions. It's like a bicycle which has gears on it. Some gears are very good for going on flat ground, and some are good for going up a hill. If you have a bike without gears you really know the difference. It makes sense to change gears and get this support when you are going uphill or over a difficult surface.

The Tibetan word for awareness is *yeshe*: *ye* means from the beginning or primordial and *she pa* means to know. The word for consciousness is *namshe*. *Nam* means shapes or forms and *she pa* means to know. These two words have the same root in 'knowing'. Awareness indicates just knowing, like the shiny surface of the mirror, it shows what is there. While consciousness attends to knowing this and that, knowing how things are, knowing what to do. If you were just in a state of open awareness all the time you could not do anything.

Chogyam Trungpa, one of the first lamas to come and teach in the west used to say that if the mind was only open and shining then you would need to have a special hospital ward for buddhas! So it's very important to have both capacities: to be in the world with all the detail but not get caught in it—to be relaxed and open but not to hide in it. When consciousness is

integrated in awareness it is deconstructed, freed of its enmeshment with reification. Then it is revealed as being the energy of awareness, its modality of participation.

All that we see is like an illusion but illusions have their own logic

Garab Dorje describes how from the naked open state that is not artificial, not covered up or conditioned in any way, an illumination arises, which is the natural clarity of this open state which reveals everything that is here. It reveals dreams in the night-time and all the experiences in the daytime. All that we see is like an illusion. Here in this place where we are now, we can see a train running along the tracks across the valley. You might think that the train can't be an illusion since if you stand in front of it and it hits you, you will die. This idea would indicate that we do not understand the buddhist meaning of illusion.

Illusions have their own logic. Each form in the world has its functions and structures, yet it exists in a dimension which makes it inseparable from everything else that is manifesting. Thus the train is on the train tracks; it has to be *somewhere*. When you wake up in the morning you don't find a railway track parked outside in the street beside you. When you come home from work and you open the door into the kitchen, you don't find a train. Everything is somewhere, that is to say everything is connected with other phenomena. All phenomena arise together. If I look out of this window I can see sheep on the hill, but I also remember seeing one of Bunuel's early films where there were a lot of sheep inside a rich person's house. Do you remember this film?

Group: Yes, *The Exterminating Angel*.

It's very shocking to see sheep in the house because we expect everything to be where it should be, and generally that's the case. Everything is coming in its own particular place. This is the quality of clarity that does not have to sort things out but just shows, '*Oh everything is where it is*'.

Our particular manifestation is arising from and within this clarity, and changing moment-by-moment. That is to say, every day we are doing something; all day long something is happening to our voice, to our thoughts, to our bodies. What I call myself is an unfolding. Now, if the flower has the right conditions it will unfold as the flower we know it can be, but we do not know how *we* are going to unfold. We may be happy in the morning and sad in the evening or vice versa. It depends on what happens. That is to say, between myself and the world, there is not a wall. This is the great freedom and creativity of the human situation.

The centre of my existence is always outside myself

My existence is revealed to me through my participation in the world. I can't find my existence by looking inside me. It's not an essence like the bulb of a flower, closed in and of itself, and which will reveal itself if the conditions are right. Rather we have many many different potentials and how these arise in not dependent primarily on our intention but on the possibilities that arise in the interaction we have with the world.

In the course of my working day at the hospital I see many patients and each person has a different kind of conversation with me. The way the conversation develops is influenced by how they are when they come into the room. I may have decided beforehand that it's time we talked about some particular thing but if they come in and say 'Oh, I have just found out that my child is ill...', then my idea about what is important to talk about is suddenly not so important. That is to say how I found myself coming into the situation is defined by the quality of the space. It's not all up to me; it's not all up to the other. So it means the centre of my existence is always outside myself since it is at the point where self and other are interacting. Both self and other are potentialities, not entities.

I think this is actually how it is for us, but it is not the usual way we think about it. Normally we have the idea that you have to be in charge of your own life. The powerful and pragmatic view is that we need to form a practical engagement with the world, in order to get what you need and ensure that the things you want, happen. It's a view of dominance and control: I assert my own individual existence by living life on my own terms.

From the buddhist point of view this is madness, since it means that each little person sets out to be the world dictator. The main mood is competitive but competition is not all that helpful for various reasons. It alienates us from each other, it reduces empathy, and it gives us the sense that 'my success can be established through your failure'. But if of course *my existence* is tied to my lived interactive environment, then I don't have my existence with me as a personal possession like something in my pocket. Rather my existence is co-emergent with the field of experience. So, if I then become competitive with you, I am really becoming competitive with myself, because I need your existence in order to develop mine.

Now if we are friendly together, and do things together then the quality of me being me is quite nice, quite happy, quite relaxed. But if I think that in order for me to be happy I need to squeeze you so that you work harder for me to give me the things I need even if you are not happy, then at the end of the day I sit in my room on my own counting all my money. Outside I hear you crying, I imagine your tears. *'Don't disturb me. I am victorious.'* What kind of a life is that? From this point of view, ethics in dzogchen isn't a rulebook about how you should behave; rather it is based on the principle that if we stay connected with each other an ethical connection arises automatically within the field of our experience.

It's not something you can know in advance. Just as you can't know how you are going to be in advance, you don't know how you *should* be in advance. This is what is meant by *'being time'*: that you are exactly in the moment of your arising in existence. It is not an abstract concept but rather a reminder that activity arises in the field of awareness and so we don't have to struggle to work out what to do. Unborn openness, and the ceaseless display of clarity, and the precision of our gestures moment-by-moment are the three inseparable aspects of our experiences and we can start to trust that, and it will be fine.

Practices for opening up: Phat!

We can use the sound of Phat! to help us get a sense of our open dimension. Phat! is a sound which represents cutting and is used to cut away the thoughts and feelings that wrap themselves around you. First relax into the meditation practice and then whenever you find you are getting distracted into some thought pattern or feeling or bodily sensation, simply release this sound. It comes right up from inside you and you imagine it coming out of the top of your head.

In the commentary by Patrul Rinpoche he said we should be shocked open. *Hedewa* is the Tibetan word used to describe this state. It means very open, without any thought in your head, but not spaced out. Here, but nothing. There are two aspects to this: the first is cutting off the immersion in thoughts and the second is being completely balanced, present and open. We are not attacking ourselves but we are freeing ourselves to see what is there without obscuration.

Try to have the sound of Phat! coming from deep within you. You don't want to shout it out from your mouth or throat for that will hurt. As the force is coming up, try not to be trapped in anything but you just stay open. Have the feeling of the force coming up and through, cleaving everything away.

[Practice shouting Phat!]

Your throat may feel a bit blocked and you may have some tension around shouting. As children we are often told to be quiet, to not make a noise or disturb other people. This can lead to retroflection whereby we push things back into ourselves out of fear and anxiety.

Phat! is an uninhibited sound. For example in India there are many dogs wandering around in the roads and sometimes these dogs carry diseases with them, especially rabies. So if an unknown dog comes towards a villager, they shout out Phat! Phat! Poor villagers cannot afford any treatment for rabies so a dog biting them is something important. Something is at stake.

It's the same here with us. These thoughts, which on an ordinary level are like your best friends, are so friendly that they might be stopping you from getting your one big chance. Imagine you've saved up all your money and now you're going on a pilgrimage to India. Five of your friends come to the airport to say goodbye to you. They say *'Let's drink some champagne before you go'*. So there you are, drinking and laughing and joking and kissing and saying goodbye. Then you look at your watch and... the plane has gone!

This life is going by. Our friends, our little thoughts, our feelings inside ourselves, are always giving us something to think about. There is no end to the conversations inside our head. You're sitting there trying to focus on your breath going in and out and a thought pops up, *'That was quite interesting, what we were talking about yesterday...'* and off you go on another little journey. It is important to see how something very important is at stake here. Now we have a chance to drop this immersion in the thoughts and feelings. Don't worry, they won't vanish forever!

All we are going to do is open a space in which we see this unborn ground or spaciousness, which we actually are. Then the thoughts arise again as an expression of this state, connecting ourselves with everything else that arises. The thoughts—which act as a kind of blanket or duvet around us—need to be dropped in order to reveal the fact that they are the energy of emptiness. We have to stop them spiralling around this illusory solid self, like candyfloss winding around a stick. Phat! cuts the thought and the thinker simultaneously, revealing natural effortless clarity.

In this practice we need simplicity and total commitment. If we feel inhibited, a little shy, a bit embarrassed, thinking that we are going to make a funny noise or we won't do it right, we have to recognise that these thoughts themselves are the limit of our existence. If we believe such thoughts, they will continue to define how we can manifest but if we see each thought for what it is, as an illusory phenomenon whose only power is the fact that we believe in it, then by saying Phat!, we break free. We break the investment that we have put in the thought that is our own prison guard.

Phat! is the sound of wisdom and compassion

No matter what kind of thoughts are inside us, happy thoughts, sad thoughts proud thoughts, frightened little thoughts... whatever kinds they are, we want to taste what is hidden behind them. So instead of being frightened by our own reflection, which is all that our thoughts are, allow this sound to come though. In the commentaries it says this is the sound of wisdom and compassion together. It's the sound of wisdom because it cuts through attachment, and it's a sound of compassion because, in freeing us from this self-centred view, we are immediately part of the world with others.

OK so now we will try it. We don't want to make it too serious because that's another kind of heaviness. We are just loosening ourselves up. So we sit and relax and go into the practice.

First we just relax, breathing in and out, sitting quietly. Then whenever you find yourself wrapped in thoughts, release the sound.

[Practice]

This is a good practice to do on your own. There is more detail about it in Chapter 11 of *Simply Being*.

What buddhism means by 'emptiness'

When you read in books about the empty nature of the mind it's not like going into an empty room and finding nothing there. The familiar furniture may not be there but *the empty room* is there. Sometimes we think there is going to be nothing at all, but if you think of the mirror, the mirror always has reflections inside it. The fact that the reflection is in the mirror doesn't diminish the capacity for the mirror to show reflections and in fact it is the presence of the reflection that shows the emptiness of the mirror.

Compare a mirror with a picture like this one here. It's not a mirror although the glass surface is a bit shiny. It is a particular picture and although it can look slightly different according to the changes of light in the room, generally speaking we can say it's the same picture in the morning as in the evening. Nothing else is going to arise inside this picture. Whereas with a mirror it shows what is there, *because* it doesn't show itself. So the picture shows itself, and by being full of itself, it can't show anything else. The mirror never shows itself but it always shows reflections and through showing reflections, it shows its emptiness. Is that clear? That's very important. If you get a sense of that then you get a sense of what buddhist 'emptiness' means. Emptiness refers to both the empty ground of the mirror and the empty experience of the reflection. Both are devoid of inherent self-nature; they have no intrinsic defining essence that can be established as something truly existing.

For example, if you decide to have a party you might move out some of the furniture. The first people who arrive may think your house looks a bit empty but then more people come and the place fills up, the music gets going and people are dancing. The emptiness of the flat was the basis of your hospitality. If you run around saying '*This is a new white carpet. Be careful with the red wine*', it's not going to be much of a party because hospitality means letting things happen. It means that the flow of experience, the coming together, the moving, is more important than trying to keep everything in its proper shape.

It's the same when we do meditation. The emptiness of our mind is revealed through the flow of image and sensation. If you do the Phat! or some other practice intensively then for a very brief moment of time, it's as if there's nothing at all. But it's the very nature of the mind to display thoughts, feelings, sensations, colours and so on. Their presence in our mind is not the problem. The problem is if we lose our openness to what is occurring and become over-identified with whatever is arising, then it becomes strongly real in our experience. Then, whatever occurs seems to be inherently important and so the seemingly real object and the seemingly real subject seem to resume their familiar interaction. Identifying ourselves as our specific, personal consciousness we try to push away bad thoughts and try to hold on to good thoughts. And the endless activity of samsara keeps rolling on.

Relaxed openness is non-defensive presence with whatever is happening. Part of what is happening is the familiar sense of 'I, me, myself'. But because we are not strongly identified inside ourselves the hospitality includes *everything* which is arising including ourselves. Through this we awaken to the primordial integration of the three aspects of existence. These are, firstly the empty open hospitable ground, the source and sphere of everything. Secondly there is the infinite field of spontaneous expression, the richness of the potentiality of the ground—the immediacy of non-duality. Thirdly there is the unique specificity of each

moment of the movement of the field—the exquisite, ungraspable ‘thusness’ of our being alive as participants in the shared field. Although these aspects can be described separately, they are not ‘things’, and they are inseparable.

In the meditation we are not trying to go from one place to another place. Sometimes when we see pictures of Buddhas, they look very bright and shiny and we might have an idea that if I recognise my own nature I will see rainbows in the sky. I will feel completely different inside; no one will ever be rude to me again, and so on.... This is a nice fantasy, but actually the experience of existence continues; now we are present in it as movement in time.

Rather than moving our life around like pieces on a chessboard, trying to get to a better safer place, it is more like movements of water *within* a river. Movements or currents or little rivulets running inside the general flow of the water. Experience never stops; it continues but now we can be more light, more playful, more an integrated part of it.

If bad times come we won't feel so determined by them or downcast. If happy times come, we can enjoy them but without imagining that they are going to last forever. Then our life becomes more simple, more direct. We find that we are not afraid of death.

OK so we have a break for half an hour.

[Break]

Practices for opening up: Guru yoga

Now we will look at another method for opening ourselves to the natural state. In our ordinary existence we are caught up in a duality of subject and object. We become very concerned with the difference between ourselves and other people. The differences are manifest but that doesn't mean that there is a true *essential* difference between ourselves and others. This is to say, we have different ways of existing but the nature or structure of our existence is the same. We see, we hear, we taste; sensations arise and pass and so on. So if somebody tells us about their life and we listen with an open heart, generally what they say makes sense to us. But our belief in the duality of self and other can operate as a limiting threshold. Dzogchen is concerned with non-duality.

Non-duality is not the same as homogenisation. We don't put everything into one pot and stir it around. Rather, non-duality, in some ways, is the same as co-emergence. It means everything is arising at the same time, within the same dimension, with mutual influence. In order to get a sense of this we have to be aware that we are always in relationship.

There is a kind of elliptical movement in the development of beings and cultures, that is to say, we tend to go towards one extreme and we get so far and then we have to come back. You could say that from the time of the European enlightenment we have been moving in the direction of individualism. Exemplified by the French Revolution, we have the collapse of the royal hierarchy and also of the religious hierarchy. People start to think that just because my father was a peasant farmer it does not mean that I have to spend all my life following a cow. I can look inside myself and find out how I am and then try to bring this potential into the world.

As this idea developed more and more people left the land and went to the city where, with the opportunities and the anonymity, they could forget who they were according to their class or family occupation, and become somebody new. We start to develop the idea that my life belongs to me and it's up to me how I use it. I want to be independent and autonomous, I don't want other people to define who I am. But of course when that goes to

a radical extreme we end up being disconnected from other people. In the city of London now, people are so alienated now that they find it very difficult to talk to other people. When children throw rubbish on the pavement, adults don't feel able to say 'Hey what are you doing?' If someone is attacked on the street, other people often look away, because there is no sense of relation.

From the point of view of buddhism the loss of the direct experience of our own ground is definitely leading us in the direction of individualistic alienation. There are two aspects that go together: awakening to the non-duality of our manifest form and this open, aware ground of our being, and awakening to the non-duality of self and other; these are inseparable.

In order to relax our fixation on duality and open to the givenness of non-duality, we can make use of our connection with another. Traditionally this is done with what is known as guru yoga. 'Yoga' can be interpreted in many ways. One aspect is linked to its root which means 'yoke', the wooden beam that is used for joining two cows together when they are pulling a cart. The Tibetan translation of 'yoga' is 'naljor'; *nal* means relaxed and *jor* means to join or to be in the state of. Thus the heart of yoga is relaxation. In guru yoga we relax into the inseparability of our mind and the buddha's mind.

'Guru' includes all the people you have learned from

All our teachers are linked to the path of awakening for they have opened doors to a wider world. 'Teacher' 'guru' thus includes our parents and our schoolteachers, because without their help we would not have been able to enter the door of dharma.

You can read these accounts of children who have been abandoned in the forest when they were very small. Sometimes they were raised by wolves. When they are found again years later they find human contact very difficult and cannot easily develop the capacity to speak. What's very nice is if our parents spoke to us, even if sometimes we did not like very much what they said to us.

Reflecting on what others have done for us we can start to have a sense of gratitude and to see that right from the very beginning as a baby our life was connected with other people. Of course for nine months we were growing inside our mother's body. The distillation of her food, the strength of her body was going into ours. The first music we heard was the rhythm of her heart, then we drank her milk. In these ways, our body develops through relationship. Through all the different ways people have talked to us and listened to us we develop the sense of the extension or contraction of ourselves.

We imagine all the people who have ever helped us, including meditation teachers and so on in the sky in front of us. We imagine then in space because *everything* has the nature of space, they are the radiant appearance of space manifesting in space.

We imagine them all contained in the form of a white letter Aa. You can think of it in the Tibetan form or as a capital A. Aa represents emptiness, emptiness in the form of a 'plenum void', a full void, a void which fills itself up. It's a void, it is empty, but it is full of everything. It's not empty, empty, nothing, nothing, but it's empty and full at the same time.

The sound Aa represents nothing at all, yet as the root vowel it is our first sound. From Aa you have mama, papa, then all its variations as the words and sounds of the world. In that sense Aa is stillness and movement. It's the first sound that arrives from silence and it contains within it all the potential of the other sounds. So with Aa you can go into nothing at all, and out into everything.

When we imagine the letter Aa, it is surrounded by a ball of light, like the sort of shimmering bubble ball that children blow from washing up liquid. We have the sense that this is in front of us. We say Aa slowly three times. As we say Aa we release the tensions in our body, our voice and our mind and open into integration with the presence of the qualities of all the teachers.

The space of our heart—the openness of our heart—and the openness represented by Aa are inseparable. After we have said Aa three times, the letter Aa dissolves and we sit in space. Now our awareness is open and empty, inseparable from the mind of the Buddha and we stay relaxed in this state and allow whatever comes to come.

[Meditation]

The ground of experience is empty

As we looked before, in terms of ordinary consciousness the ground of our experience is the movement of the thoughts, sensations and feelings that we seem to be resting on moment-by-moment. But awareness itself is not resting on anything. That is to say, it doesn't have a base; it doesn't have a ground. The ground of experience is empty, just as a rainbow appears in the sky though there is nothing supporting the rainbow. Everything we see, and hear and touch has the same nature.

On one level this sounds completely mad because you can think *'Well my feet are on the ground; there is something there supporting me'*, but that sequence *'something there supporting me'* is a mental sequence. I am the one that says that this is the floor. I am the one who say that this is me. One idea follows another idea, and together these two ideas create some image, or some expectation that something is truly the case. But as we started to look earlier, each thing is related to other things. The seemingly solid floor beneath our feet has a space underneath it. Then we can go right down to the foundations of the house. One piece of earth is resting on another piece of earth; we go down and down and down, and the earth becomes very hot, it becomes magma. One atom of magma is resting on another atom of magma, then another and another. Eventually you come to Australia! So in fact we are resting on Australia! In that way ideas sit on ideas and we create this structure of our interpretation, this structure of our meaning, and for as long as it makes sense, we think that it must be true.

From the buddhist point of view, there is no solidity in any of these aspects. If we look at the walls of this building we can see that it's made of big blocks of stone. If you have the right tools you can cut into any so-called earth substance. So the stonewalls may feel very solid to me but eventually someone will decide that they are going to knock the building down and they'll bring a big machine and within two days everything is knocked flat.

What holds this building in shape is not the strength of the stones but that the fact that the church has enough money to fund the continuation of the building for now. When they can no longer pay for it, it will be sold. Maybe some business will buy it or will knock it down and build some houses. So what we take to be a very solid structure which seems to have some integrity of its own is held in place by the contingent fact that people like us come here and rent this space, by the fact that the local council probably does not charge too much to the church for rates, water and so on, by the fact that people like to have their weddings here... It's like that. There are factors of maintenance or continuation that keep this place going.

Again and again we have to inspect what are the seemingly solid self-existing phenomena that seem to create a limit to our mind leading us to say *'This is mental. This is physical'*.

Experience is all we have: different ways of looking at the world

I use the word experience many times because actually all we have is experience. Part of our experience is our capacity to use abstract concepts. So we can say that the table is quite solid and that is a fact because the things resting on the table don't fall through it. But, with the idea that the table is solid, we tend to link the assumption that the table is therefore truly existing. Because in the west our main polarity is reality and fantasy. We can say that the table has a reality; you can touch it, you can lick it, you could run your hands up and down it; it shows that it is there. To imagine the white letter Aa and rays of light spreading out would normally be described as a fantasy, like watching Bambi in the cinema. Better to stay with reality. Get a good job, work hard, and don't waste your time on all this funny buddhist stuff. Think of your future. This is the sort of thing that anxious parents say. *'What are you going to do when you get older?'* These two categories are very powerful: the solid, the tangible, the facts of what really exists and the rest, which is just some kind of fantasy.

It's very important for us to explore this because it is one of the organising systems which we were educated to believe in. Here in the west we take the material as something reliable and the imagination as something deceptive. The material is reliable and the immaterial is unreliable. For people who were raised as children in Tibetan buddhism it's very different; they are taught that everything is illusion. Either you grasp at the illusion and try to make it real or you accept that it is an illusion. Grasping at the illusion and trying to make it real will make you stupid, whereas trying to directly understand illusion and live within that free movement, will set you free. So you can see, how that is a completely different way of looking at the world.

It is still the tradition in India to see the world in terms of the five elements. According to this view there is space, and the most subtle movement of space is the wind. Space you can't touch or feel in any way, it's just the arena in which you are moving. The wind you can't catch, but you can feel it when it blows on you. You can see it by the effect it has on a tree; we see the tree moving and impute the action of the wind. Then, with more shape, we have fire. Fire exists in relation to fuel. The fuel can be like the wind element, gas for example; it can be liquid like the water element, petrol for example; it can be like the earth element, wood or coal for example. You can see fire but it's difficult to catch. If you have a fire burning outside the flames are moving all the time. Water has more shape than fire. Water flows easily and adapts to where it finds itself. If you put your hands into the sink, the water rises to give them space. Earth is the most solid and tangible of the elements. It holds a shape but that shape can be altered by other elements acting on it.

It is generally believed in buddhism that everything is created out of the interaction of these five elements, and from the point of view of tantra and dzogchen, the basic nature of all these elements is light. The energy of the universe, the energy of existence, manifests light and sound. The light takes on many different shapes and this is what appears to us in the universe.

Light and sound are vibration. If vibration becomes dense and 'heavy' it can take on the form of earth. So something like this metal object [*James is holding a metal bell*] is quite heavy and hard; you can say that this really is the earth element. It is created out of metals which are created out of the earth yet it is *revealed* to us through our senses. Because I am holding it now, I can feel the weight of it but primarily it is revealed through our being able to see it. As with all we encounter, the quality of light which is displayed from them, shows our relation with them in this unrepeatable moment. If you look at the flowers and then you look at this brass bell, their ways of showing themselves are very different. The qualities of the 'object' are relational, not intrinsic; they are both attributed to the object and uniquely revealed in each moment of experience of them.

My experience of myself emerges at the same time as my experience of the world

All experience is moment-by-moment revelation. It's not that *I* am seeing things outside *myself*—that I am real and they are also real—but rather my experience of myself emerges at the same time as my experience of the world. The experience of both is always changing. What appears to be solid and real and reliable is only concept.

It is a paradox that the things which seem most reliable, are the most abstract. We are now in Spain; this is a fact. Spain is a concept; it's a concept people are willing to die for, to die for the dignity of Spain. 'Spain' is a word, and it's an idea. As with everything you can see in the world, what seems solid and real and reliable is actuality an idea, while experience itself is tumbling and changing. It is immediate, it is phenomenological; it's what you get, except you can't get it because it's already gone. Names, words, concepts seem to endure—yet they have no substance. And what they seem to refer to is only available to us as fleeting experience. The actual world is ungraspable. The usual world we inhabit is a mental world made of the rapid flow of mesmerising concepts.

For example in the worst practice of psychiatry, some person, often a young man of eighteen or nineteen, starts to hear voices and see strange visions. The parents or friends get worried and eventually he goes to his doctor who refers him to a psychiatrist. After asking a range of questions for half an hour to an hour, the conclusion is that the person has a psychotic illness and that they need medication. "*If you take this you will feel better.*" So the psychiatrist opens up a file and writes in it 'Psychosis'. Now the person *has* something. When they went into the room they had voices and strange visions, now they have psychosis as well! This is called adding value! Now that we know what is wrong with the person we don't need to listen or try to understand. There is nothing more to be found; it's just that the person has psychosis. Because we now we 'know' what the problem is. This is, of course, not very helpful, but we ourselves are doing something similar all the time when we rely on our *concepts* and don't attend to what is there.

Questions to ask about our mind: it's shape, size, colour...

It is important to explore how our mind is. We can do this now in a very simple way. We will again do the three Aa practice and then, when you have been sitting relaxed for a while, I invite you to take up the questions: What shape is my mind? Is my mind inside my body? Is my body inside my mind? Does my mind stop here, or does it go way back? Is this building in my mind? How far does my mind extend? If I think of Madrid, is it in my mind? Does Madrid exist somewhere in itself? If I go to Madrid will I experience Madrid itself, or my mind experiencing Madrid?

Hold the question very gently: Are there any walls at the end of your mind? Is there anything you can find that is outside your mind? As you think about the thing that is outside your mind, while you think about it, the thought about it is inside your mind. While you are thinking about something that appears to be *outside* your mind, you are thinking about it with thoughts that are *inside* your mind. So is there something outside your mind that is different from the thoughts that you are having about the thing that is inside your mind? This is a chance to put into question the assumptions you have about the world you live in.

[Break]

Question: When we talk about the ground, is it one ground for one and everything or has each person has an individual ground?

James: According to tradition everyone has their own ground, but it's all the same ground.

Question: So they are individual but everyone has the same, identical?

James: We each have our own unique experiences yet their nature is identical because the ground of experience is itself emptiness and emptiness tastes the same in all directions. By looking we can see that our existence is arising moment-by-moment out of this emptiness—not arising out of it like a fish jumping out the sea, but more in the way that reflections seems to come out of a mirror but remains in the mirror. Then we can experience, *“Oh, there is no solid basis for ‘me’. I am movement. The base of my existence is empty because I can’t find anything there, and yet it’s always full, because there is always something happening.”*

Each person who looks to find who they are, how they are, will find exactly the same thing. This is the case because as far as I myself can tell, and according to the lineage, it’s not a cultural construct. It’s not created out of concepts, although in order to talk about it we make use of concepts. Therefore it’s not conditioned by your age, your gender, the culture you grew up in, the colour of your skin and so on.

However of course, on the level of personality, our experience is exactly individual. It’s not direct in the manner of awareness, but is mediated through our history, our language and so on. So when we examine ourselves, if the limit of our enquiry is our individual history, our personality traits and so on—the kind of enquiry you have in psychotherapy for example—then each individual looks completely unique. They have their own special personal package.

If the enquiry is based on the nature of your personality, and your own personal history is the limit of the definition of yourself, then you will find the particular details of your life determine who you are. These details are not shared by anyone else. And so, from *that* level of analysis we are completely unique, sealed inside our own private world. However, dharma enquiry is seeking to go through concepts, not to push them to one side, but to see how they function, and to reveal that they themselves have no solid basis. That enquiry shows an openness, which I think is shared by everyone.

Questions about mindfulness and awareness

Question: What does ‘mindful’ mean?

James: ‘Mindfulness’ is nowadays often linked with cognitive behavioural therapy as a method for disrupting neurotic patterns. Traditionally in buddhism ‘mindfulness’ means remembrance. The word for it in Tibetan it is *drenpa* which means memory or recollection.

I lived for quite a long time in India and I developed a habit of remembrance of my money. So now many, many years later, when I’m walking down the street, I check that my money is still there. In India you become very used to knowing where is your bag where is for you can’t just be in a daydream or else somebody will take it. Thus mindfulness means being careful. It is a focused intentional use of attention. That is the traditional sense of it.

You can be mindful of the body, of the breath, of the emotions. You can be mindful of the passage of time, of death and so on. In that sense mindfulness is narrow and focused; it’s a method; it’s not a state to arrive in. It is an artificial method of increasing your receptivity to a particular area. However because it’s a focused attention, whilst you are focussing on that one thing, something else is happening and you are not attending to that.

Also, generally speaking, mindfulness is self-referential. That is to say, *I* know *I* am being mindful because *I* am the one who decided to be mindful. So although it frees me from being distracted into this and that, it has within it a subtle reinforcement of my sense that ‘*I* am

the agent', 'I am the actor', 'I am the one who is doing this'. This can increase the sense of 'I really exist'. Mindfulness is a technical intervention.

In dzogchen open awareness is sometimes compared to the sun. The sun gives out rays of light and illuminates everything. The sun doesn't decide what to illuminate and what not to illuminate; it just illuminates. It is active but it is not intentional. Sometimes awareness is also compared to a mirror. The mirror doesn't have to do anything to show an image; its capacity to show the reflection is more like the way the moon receives the light of the sun, and thus, without any effort, it seems to give out light all by itself. It's a more passive way of showing what it's got, which is the light of the sun.

Likewise, in the state of awareness everything is registered, without any particular choice. Out of this state of awareness, energy arises. What's called *rigpa'i tsal*, the manifesting energy of awareness itself which illuminates particular situations. This is compared to the heat or the light of the sun, because it can make something happen. This does not have any intention either, so from the point of view of dzogchen, activity is not concerned with doing anything. Benefit will happen automatically if there is the unimpeded flow of the energy of manifestation non-dual with the ground. This is different from the quality of conscious intention, which is connected with mindfulness.

When a child is learning to ride a bicycle, at first they can't find their balance; then they find their balance but they can't yet steer very well. We can see children in the local parks learning to ride their bikes and their little legs are going round and round and they are very excited and talking to each other and the bicycles are going all over the place. We want to say *'Hey, be careful! There are people walking. Look, there's a dog. Be careful!'* That is to say, don't forget where you are and enjoy the space with others. However once somebody is used to riding a bicycle they get to a place where it just flows through them. Then although they are relaxed, their peripheral vision will pick up any difficulties so that they move smoothly and easily dealing with every problem, without having to be especially attentive.

People in that state could either become more aware or become more complacent. They could close down their attention and lose a little bit of their competence or they could open their attention to the wider field and enjoy being on the bicycle while being completely relaxed and present.

The key thing is we are never aware. We can be conscious, we can be mindful, because these are activities of the individual organising their energy of manifestation. But awareness or presence is a state we relax *into* it's not something we *do*. So I can't 'make myself aware'. It is not that 'I' am aware, but that I find myself in the state of presence or rigpa.

For example, if you are walking in the summer and you are very, very hot and you might come to a place where the river is tumbling down the mountainside and there is a waterfall. All you have to do is to walk into the waterfall. The waterfall will cool you. You can't cool yourself. You could say you are cooling yourself using the water which would affirm your ego agency, but actually you are letting the water cool you—no effort or agency is required.

Similarly the state of openness or presence is always there, and according to the tradition we are never more than one hair's breadth away from it. But that hair's breadth makes a big difference. Our natural freedom is always here saying, *"Here I am. Here I am"* but we reply *"Shh, I'm busy getting enlightened. Go away and leave me alone. When I get enlightened I will have time for freedom. But first I have to do this and it is very important."* From the point of view of dzogchen, trust freedom. Doing less could be enough. But this is the big sacrifice; this is what is hard because the ego feels as if it is being made redundant. The ego has been the centre of our existence for as long as we can remember. Usually after some years have

gone by our heart has a few scars on it. We are a little less trustful and that brings with it a certain heavy feeling, *“Oh, better be careful. It’s all up to me.”* Because we remember when we were still young and more fresh and open and spontaneous – we got burnt. So in terms of the practice we have to confront these anxieties and the desire to go back into an isolated sense of ourselves and protect ourselves, because it is our attitude of self-protection that is causing our limitation. When life is hard it is difficult to trust that awakening is easy.

[End of Day 2]

How do we learn?

Now we can explore what it means to make progress with this practice. The main traditions of spiritual learning are very hierarchal and so they tend to privilege the teachers, but the teachers already know something, so that’s not very exciting. Much more interesting is the learner, because the learner is the site of potential. How then do we learn? If you want to learn, the most important thing is not to know. Not-knowing can be both exciting and anxiety-provoking. We might feel that we should know, we might become very hungry to know, we might try to be knowledgeable by accumulating bits of information. But I think learning actually involves a kind of self-forgetfulness, a leaving of the places that are familiar to us and a moving out, with trust, hope and confidence. Learning is about enquiring, about putting what occurs—including ourselves— into question.

This is a work only you can do. If I eat a very nice dinner when I’m back in London, even if I am thinking of *you*, your stomach won’t get full. You yourself have to put the food in your own mouth, and you yourself have to chew it.

So there is a particular way one has to find one’s own style of learning. For example in the dzogchen tradition, there is the notion of the teacher ‘showing the nature of the mind’. You could say to the teacher *‘Please show me the nature of my mind’*. Then somehow you imagine it’s like being in the barber’s; you sit in the chair and in front of you is the mirror. The hairdresser does something to your hair and then they come behind you and they hold up another mirror, and the reflection of the back of your head goes from that mirror behind you into the mirror in front of you. In that way they show you what you cannot see yourself. Without the barber you would never see that aspect of yourself although it is always there with you. Yet when you leave the barber’s shop you are likely to forget it.

Metaphor of a tent and tent pole

In teaching we can create some kind of mood, use words that operate as metaphors to open up a kind of space. But each of us has to explore that space and find our way of being at home in it. It is a bit like if you have a big round tent; you stretch out all the pieces on the ground and you put in the pegs and then you put the pole in the middle and up it all goes.

The teaching is like the pole. For a moment you understand a little bit more, but then the teacher has to go and takes the pole with them and you find the tent has collapsed all around you. You have a tent but it’s not much use, in fact you can’t even walk now. So the main thing is to find your own pole. The pole needs to be straight, like your spine; it’s about your dignity. By putting yourself in that place gradually you understand more.

This relates to the second point of Garab Dorje, ‘Not remaining in doubt’. That is to say when you become full of different ideas, don’t follow after the *content* of the idea but observe what is the nature of the thought that is arising. Because if you follow after the thoughts they will lead you astray. They may start to create fantasies of your being stupid, of not

understanding, or of it being too difficult. This is the problem of not knowing what thoughts are.

Yesterday we looked at how thoughts themselves are like Janus, they have two faces each looking in a different direction. In terms of the semantics, in terms of the content, the thought is looking towards the construction of meaning but the same thought, simultaneously, is looking at its own ground which is this open dimension of presence. So once one has a sense of openness and relaxation, the central point is to observe how every experience which arises is inseparable from its own ground. That ground is empty—we won't get to a secure or solid place. Yet because that basis or ground is not a *thing*, it gives the freedom to manifest in every possible way, which is why the instruction is, 'Don't interfere with your mind'. If you become sad then be sad. If you feel hopeless you can feel hopeless. If you feel jealous you can feel jealous.

This is where this path is very different from many other paths. Some paths would say, '*Don't become sad. Put on a cheerful face and think of good things*'.

But this practice supports equal opportunities for *all* kinds of mental events. For too long happiness has been made too important, but we dzogchen practitioners are members of the Buddhist Sadness Party! We defend the right to cry, since everything that arises in the mind is illusory and impermanent. If we take it as strongly real—if we say, '*this is bad*' or '*I really don't like this and therefore I have to change it*'—then the site of our operation, the place we are entering into experience from, is our narrow, historically developed ego consciousness. But we are not the masters of the world. Dharma is not a path to narcissistic inflation. We are participants in the flow of existence, neither in charge nor a slave to it, but finding our way, taking our place.

The more we can offer hospitality to whatever is arising and find ways of being with that, then the more we become flexible; we start to be able to allow our energy to flow according to the situation. Because we are not holding onto a self-referential identity we become more useful to other people. Actually, the flow of existence is *always* being interrupted. Interruption *is* existence. You do one thing and then something happens, then something else happens. Openness means available and that means welcoming, or at least accepting, interruption.

The more we try to be in control, the more dangerous the other seems

This is one reason for being a little bit careful with meditation. You can get into the idea that if you do a retreat then life would be better—that you could then have space and uninterrupted time to practice. Yes, that is useful for developing wisdom, but a key aspect of wisdom is knowing that you can't control your mind.

Why would you want to be a dictator of yourself: '*I am the boss. I know exactly what to do. I am in charge. Now I will tell myself exactly what to do.*' The myth of control, the fantasy of control is very poisonous.

When I was child, maybe about seven, I got stung by a wasp once when I was out playing. I became very angry with all wasps, and so every time I saw a wasp I'd try to hit it with my stick and kill it. My mother asked me what I was trying to do? She did not like killing things at all. I said that these wasps were very dangerous and you've got to kill them. Then she very nicely explained that there are many wasps in the world and that I was one little boy with one stick and that life would be better if I found a way to live with the wasps. It's like that.

The more we try to be in control, the more dangerous the other thing seems. Eventually dictators become paranoid, always imagining that they are going to be betrayed, initially by

outside enemies, and then towards the end, they are always looking at the people around them wondering which one is going to betray them.

If you apply this fantasy of control to your own mind, if you try to control all your thoughts and only have very good thoughts, then any bad thought that suddenly arises can destroy all you have created. I remember when I was first studying buddhism reading in Santideva's *Bodhisattvacharyavatara* that a thousand aeons of practicing virtue will all be destroyed by a single flash of anger. This can mean either of two things: first, you must try harder, or second, why bother being virtuous since clearly it's very vulnerable to events.

Virtue has to be done for other people, not for gaining anything for yourself. It is a fantasy that I can somehow create an ideal self. As the Buddha explained, everything that is created will come to an end, everything with a beginning moves inexorably towards death, towards its extinction. In dzogchen, we are working with the nature of the mind, which is *not* born, and is *not* a thing.

In practice we have a chance to observe the precise point at which the construction of samsara occurs. One thought is flowing along, then another thought lands beside it and something seems to be created. My mind is resting on this idea; it is the basis of my activity. Whatever we find in the moment seems to be an adequate support for my identity. The ego can rest on anything, identifying with anything. The thought that appears to be me, and the thought which appears to be the site of the mind, are both moving.

For example, if you go out on a boat and the wind is blowing a bit, you can see the waves moving. Then along comes a seagull, and it lands on the sea. It *was* flying and now it's sitting on the water. It's having a little rest, but what it's sitting on is moving. It's like that. The thought is moving in your mind like the waves on the sea. Another thoughts arises, and 'Ah', you think, 'I can stay here.' In the very moment that you think, 'Ah, this is where I belong', you are being moved along. All manifestation is dynamic, which is why we have to look again, and again, and again, so we really *see* the essential difference between stillness and movement. Movement is never still; you cannot make it still. The only thing that is still is presence, and it *never* moves.

So when you look for the shape of the mind, or where the mind rests, or where the mind is coming from, or where the mind is going to—in all of these cases the temptation is to choose something familiar, which *seems* to us to be right, but which is actually an aspect of movement. We look at something that is moving, and try to imagine that it is still. As we explored in some detail yesterday, the dynamic nature of experience is hidden by the projection of assumptions regarding fixed stable entities.

For example, some of us have been in this building before. That seems quite a reasonable thing to say. We were here last year; we're back in the same place now. But is it the same place? We can say *some things* are in the same place, and we know that because what we see fits the map that we have created. So I am using the memory, or the map in my head, as the proof that these phenomena are the same as they were last year. But of course when we do that we are not looking very carefully, because many, many things will have changed.

For example, I can see from the way the sun is shining that there are many marks on the windows. They are dirty this year in a way that they were not dirty last year. Does this matter? Well, it's what is there; it's what is actual. If we say, 'It's a window with a bit of dirt on it. What does the dirt matter?' this is a concept. Whether we are interested in the windows being clean or dirty does not matter; the fact *is* that the window as a window is there *with* the dirt on it. So once we start to look really carefully, we see that everything is changing.

This is a very simple thing to do but if you bring it into your life you will be able to see that everything is an illusion. For example, when I go to work in the hospital, I go on the underground. There is an announcement which says when the next stop is London Bridge. The doors open and I get out onto the platform along with some other people from my compartment. I always get off at London Bridge because that's where my work is, but as I come on to the platform and go up the escalator, it's not the same people every day. We don't have the Half-Past-Seven London Bridge Club where we agree to meet. So each time I get off, London Bridge is very different. It's called London Bridge Station, but my experience of it is always very different. Different commuters, different underground staff, the lighting a bit different, and so on.

So we have these two worlds that exist simultaneously: the world of immediate experience—what is here—and the world of concepts, of maps, of interpretations. When the buddhist teachings say that everything is an illusion this means that the construction which is created in the world of concepts is not truly existing. If you attend to what is actually there, it's there but ungraspable. You can't catch it, you can't keep it, and you can't build on it. This is true for everyone, however your life is. If you have to take children to school, every day is different. One day they are very slow in eating their breakfast; the next day they can't find their shoes; the following morning they are worried because they have forgotten to do all their homework. This is how life is. So, when you say you are taking your children to school, this is a concept. What is revealed in the moment of participation in our existence, you cannot know in advance.

This is the meaning of illusion. It doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all but it's like a dance—a dance is revealed as you dance it. If you are trained in the Laban notation of choreography you can denote the movements of the body, but that's abstract. It's when the music starts and the body is moving that dance is revealed, as when a fish suddenly breaks the surface and you see its shining silvery body and then it's gone. If you're not there you don't see the fish. There's nothing to get, but you get it.

Translator: But you get it? If you are there?

James: Yes, if you are there!

Garab Dorje's second point: stay true to the experience of opening

Thus the second point from Garab Dorje is to stay true to the experience of opening. Probably it's not what you thought it would be. You see all these pictures of buddhas sitting very peacefully, but our life is not like that. We have many, many things to do. So it's very tempting for us to focus our attention onto activity and onto the sense of making things happen. Of course if you are doing an activity like driving a car, you have got to make it happen, you have got to control the steering wheel and so on. But of course you drive your car according to the road, according to the other cars. So again you could say '*I'm driving my car*' or '*I am participating in the traffic*'. When you're participating in the traffic you find that the car is moving according to other cars, according to the curve of the road, whether it's raining or not, whether you are in a hurry or not, whether you are happy or sad... All of these influence in some way how you are driving.

By opening and welcoming life as it is and seeing the impermanence of thoughts, feelings, sensations and experiences we come to see that the only place to be alive is now. The dreams which tempt us—which send us spiralling into a place which is both in time and outside time—these become less interesting.

Translator/Question: In time and out of time too?

James: Yes. So for example, you're sitting here and your mind goes off and you think *'Tomorrow is Monday so now what do I have to?'* Your body is here, the clock is going round, you are in that flow of time but simultaneously you are somewhere else. There is not really another place you have gone to. You're not quite here, but you're not quite somewhere else either. Phenomenologically it can be very interesting to examine what it is like to be caught in a thought. It's a kind of limbo, a kind of dream. Although that state may feel familiar and reassuring to you, the experience is often generated by anxiety. *'If only I think more, if only I prepare more, my life will go better.'* Sometimes that's true, but a lot of the time it's not true at all.

If life is about participation, the most important quality is availability. What is it that stops our availability? All neurosis, all psychosis, and everything else! Any kind of preoccupation is a foreclosure; it closes things down before they have had a chance to open up. Expectations, hopes, fears, all of these create a slight tilt, or a slight turn, which cuts us off from the free open availability of the widest aspect of ourselves.

We arise in relation to other people

So in the practice we come back again and again to being present in the moment, but not just present *in* the moment but present *as* the moment. Our nature is itself the space within which everything occurs. This includes time; we are ourselves time. Everything flows through us. Each person is the centre of the world. It's not that there are some big people and everyone has to turn round them.

There is room for everyone to be the centre. It's quite unique, *your* way of emerging into the world. Imagine a hundred people go to the seaside, then they are all swimming under the sea and suddenly they all pop their heads out of the water! They are all in the centre of the sea! Each one has the sea all around them. It feels like *my* sea, but the sea is big enough for everyone to be at the centre.

It means that when we meet other people we share the similarity of being the energy of the ground and therefore by attending to the particularity of ourselves as we arise in relation to this person—because each person has their own way of embodiment—that embodiment will bring a resonance or a response in other people. That is the actuality. That is what is there. So if we are present in ourselves we also receive the particularity of each person and then we allow ourselves to arise in that situation. So, we say different things to different people..., which makes life interesting. It's dynamic; it's fresh into the situation.

Garab Dorje's third point: simply to continue in this way

Garab Dorje third point is simply to continue in this way, which is to say, to continue integrating every experience into the natural open spaciousness of your presence. In order to do that we are continually deconstructing our habit of reifying personal pronouns.

For example, we might say 'to integrate everything into my presence'. For each person it is 'my presence' but 'my presence' and 'my watch' is not the same kind of thing. We have a long habit of appropriation of things that are the part of the world, including our body, which is a part of the world. So when we say 'my presence' it is mine because of the unique vital experience of being there, but it's not something we can possess or own because the one who says 'my presence', is itself the energy which arises as a quality of the presence.

For example, if a child says ‘my mother’ and a mother says ‘my child’, these are very different statements. The mother can pick up the child but unless the child is called Superman, he can’t pick up the mother. So the mother’s ownership of the child is to know what food to give them, what things they like, what stories to tell them at bedtime and so on. This is a particular kind of possession. For the child, ‘mother’ is just mother...Mum! Mum!

When we speak to other people, we are of necessity swimming in the sea of language, and this is a sea formed out of the movement of individual egos trying to define and adjust and relate. So when we speak, it’s very tempting—it’s a strong pull—to identify with our individualised sense of self as if *it* was the centre, and then from that state to experience the moments of presence as some nice things that I have, like having my holiday.

Garab Dorje is describing something very different—relaxed open presence, which continuously integrates everything, including the voice of the individualised person, saying ‘my presence’.

Practice: relaxing into the out-breath

OK, so now we will do a little bit more practice. This time we will start in a very simple way, relaxing into a long deep out-breath and staying present with whatever happens. Now there are advantages and disadvantages of this way of doing things. If you do a lot of chanting first and some mudras and so on you can create the sense of a sacred space and therefore you create a sense of something different which can help you to maintain a particular quality of attention. Of course you then have the problem of how to integrate the kind of experience you have in the sacred space, into daily life which is not at all sacred. But here we just relax into the out-breath it’s not very far from where we have just been. Life is going on as before; the same sort of thoughts in your head; the room looks the same... So there are many hooks to getting distracted and being caught in familiar patterns. This is where we just very gently apply the basic instruction: don’t go after past thoughts; don’t wait expectantly for future thoughts; just here and now in this moment, open to whatever comes letting them go as they go.

Let it come, let it go. OK.

The functions of rituals

In our time together, because it’s not so long and also because it is in harmony with this style of practice, we haven’t done any rituals. That’s not to say there is something wrong with rituals and of course many of you have your own rituals from other traditions you are practicing. Learning new rituals is not necessarily better. The key thing is to discover the function of the ritual. So if we take refuge and develop bodhicitta, this operates on different levels. On the outer level we say, *‘Here I am wandering in samsara, a dangerous place, and I get lost very easily.’*

Translator: When we take refuge, do we say that?

James: Well we *feel* that. Then we think that we want something which is more reliable and that we can hold onto. So we can rely on the Buddha, on the teachings and on the sangha. Similarly, we can think, *‘I’m rather self-obsessed, rather selfish in my approach to life, but I recognise that I have a connection with all beings’*, so I develop a bodhisattva aspiration or intention, that in this and in all my future lives may I help all beings.

Essentially these are ways of shifting our energy. We take refuge because we are very reactive to many things that are happening, and we make an intention to have some kind of

path, some kind of line to follow. When we take the bodhisattva vow, we want to step outside of the enclosure of ourselves, to find ourselves as part of the world.

From the point of view of dzogchen, we are not trying to go anywhere else. We don't *need* to have a path; rather we need to be present. If we are present then *where* we are is revealed to us in terms of what it actually is rather than the fantasies we have about it. When we relax and open, our experience arises as the undivided field of self and other. We see that what I call 'myself' and what I call 'other people' are not two different things. Because immediately, directly I am aware that if I look down, I see my leg and I see the floor. The long black shape I say is 'my leg'; the flat light brown shape I say is 'the floor'. These are names that my own mind is putting. If I don't attend to these names, what there is, is colour and shapes. There is no real separation between the two. All the shapes and colours of the world are organised by my mind according to what's inside.

In term of relating to the details of the world this can be quite useful, but in relating to the actual nature of ourselves, it's not helpful. This is because it creates the sense that the function of naming and dividing is somehow the central point of our existence when in fact, this capacity to put names, to distinguish, to separate things out, is just a function of energy. Energy that arises and passes as movements out of the natural clarity.

All sadhanas are activities. In Tibetan they are often referred to as '*trinlé*', which means 'activity'. An activity is a mobilisation of energy in a particular direction towards a task. When we start to see that, everything we do is a participation in the field of movement and the ground of this movement is not 'I, me, myself' because actually, most of the time we are conscious *after* the fact of our activity. In English we say, '*I found myself doing...*'. That is to say, my activity was preceding my consciousness. The situation *called* me into a kind of response, a gesture, which is not something I planned. Not something arising out of a pot inside me, but what I call 'myself' has somehow being flowing out in this particular shape.

This we can observe all day long: that we are essentially a flow within a flow. Some of the flows you can call 'religious' and some you can say are 'not religious'. Some are called 'helpful', some are called 'not helpful'. If you have a bottle of wine for breakfast and spend the day just falling about, that's one way to spend time. If you cook some food, and give some to your sick neighbour, that's another way of passing the day. We say that the second way is better than the first way. But that's from a relative, conventional point of view. Both are activities. The person who is helping the neighbour could be quite proud and so their mental state would be undoing the virtue of what their body was performing.

Generally speaking in buddhism there is the idea that the value of an action lies in its intention, not in its outcome. Particularly, in dzogchen we say that the nature of the action lies in its ground, because all activity is the energy of this open dimension. So integrating your activity into the ground is—at least while you are learning the path—more important than trying to do good things. This is a very big world and many situations arise; sometimes our behaviour needs to be quite radical, and if you develop a strong notion of what is 'good behaviour' or 'proper behaviour' you might not be able to help people very much. For example, trainee therapists are generally very good nice people. So when they sit in a room with a patient who is quite tricky they can sit, week after week, and the patient is just dancing on their head. Eventually they have to learn how to say to the patient, in a very nice way, 'Don't mess with me' because if they can't say that, then there is no therapy. At first they think this is very rude, '*I just have to give some space to this lost person, and then they will find themselves*'. Why would they want to find themselves, when they are playing with you, the way a cat plays with a mouse?

So in that way, every kind of behaviour can be useful according to particular circumstances. Very often formal, ethical maps don't help us sort this out. In order to help people, we have to be willing to let our activity flow into the situation and that involves taking a risk.

Rituals are useful as a way of observing yourself when you do something quite artificial. When we do this *namaste* gesture and we bow this create a particular kind of feeling. If you do a full-length prostration on the ground, this creates a different kind of feeling. Then when we learn to chant you have a different kind of feeling. The function is to observe what happens to yourself. It's not so much about saying these holy words but about seeing how the situation acts as a stimulus, calling you forth to allow you to express your energy.

So in whatever situation you are—if you are working with friendly supportive people or working with difficult people, if you are caring for sick relatives or if you yourself become sick—whatever happens, just observe yourself. Don't stand apart from the situation thinking *'I like this. I don't like that'*. It is **your** life and since you are in this situation, don't protect yourself from your own experience. Just open to it and see what it is. See what it does to your breathing, your posture, what feelings arise, what thoughts arise... Then something changes and you will find yourself manifesting in a different way. And **you** become different, open, free, spacious. This is very important. Then you will discover that no situation ever catches you. Even if something is horrible, it's there for a moment and then it's gone.

The moment leaves no trace if the one who experiences it is integrated in space. But if you turn the event into the beginning of a story—*'Why did they say that? I hate this person...'*—then you start to get scratches all over you and next thing is that you're bleeding. So who has harmed us in that situation? Is it the other person? Or is it our own mental activity? The *Dhammapada* records the Buddha as saying,

*Not father, not mother,
not brother, not sister,
not friend, not enemy,
no one can harm me more than myself.*

and it continues,

*'Not father, not mother,
not brother, not sister,
not friend, not enemy,
no one can help me more than myself'.*

This is why our main practice is to observe ourselves. What am I up to? And in particular *how* am I up to it, how do I do myself? What is the process of becoming myself? What is the pattern I habitually bend myself into? What are the expectations and beliefs behind the movement into that pattern? And particularly from the view of dzogchen, what is the **ground** of myself and why am I drifting away from it?

Our expectations and beliefs are the pseudo-ground. As long as we are caught up in them they seem like the true basis of our existence. So we might say *'I am angry', 'I don't like people who behave in this way.'* *'I don't like that.'* *'This is just how I am.'* *'This is what I believe, enough!'* *'Don't talk to me anymore.'* *'I don't want to change my mind. This is me.'* But actually it is an illusion; it is just a habit. And what we bring from the practice of meditation is the capacity to just observe this place which seems so definite so secure. Observing again and again that it is here and then it is gone.

OK so now is the time to do some final practice together. Just sitting in a nice relaxed way. Relax into the out-breath and remain just open. [Practice]

So our short time together comes to an end. It has been very nice for me to come here and be amongst such warm and friendly people. In particular I would like to thank Marta for all her organisation and hard work.

Meeting and parting is part of our lives. Nothing lasts for long, but everything reveals itself when you are most free and present with it. So if we bring the quality of attention and openness and presence that we have here—if we bring this out into every aspect of our lives—then I believe we will all have more and more richness and depth. So it's been a pleasure, thank you.