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# *What is Dzogchen? Saying the unsayable*

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**James Low** interviewed by Guido Ferrari

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*Transcribed by Daniel Beierstettel*

## *Excerpts*

- *The point of view of dzogchen is to recognize the ground of all of our thought, feeling, sensation, activity, is a state of open relaxation, a state of presence – that is to say, to be fully here, fully alive, as an awareness which is not this or that.*
- *Awareness is liberation itself. Awareness means not to be caught up in thinking about things, not trying to make sense of them, but just to offer a relaxed open hospitality, a hospitality towards whatever arises.*
- *'I'm okay as I am without doing anything more than breathing in and out. I am okay' – this is the meaning of dzogchen – 'It's fine. Nothing more to do.'*
- *What continues is this open potential. ... What manifests is always changing. ... Manifestation arises with others and this is the eternal dance of becoming.*
- *Free of all fantasy, here we are at this moment, alive. Nothing is happening, everything is happening. It's very simple.*
- *It is about learning to trust an immediacy of being, to stop being an internal politician.*
- *In seeing you, your face will touch me, so that I can become the one who can meet you where you are. And that is the basis of ethics.*

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## What is dzogchen?

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**Question by Guido Ferrari:** Mr. Low, what is dzogchen?

**James:** Dzogchen is a traditional meditation system which contains a view of life [=view], a profound way of understanding one's own true nature [= meditation] and also a way of being in the world with others [= conduct].

It came into our dimension, into our human domain, a long long time ago – you could say many hundreds of thousands of years ago – but for our particular period it came into the world through the transmission of Garab Dorje about 2000, over 2000, years ago.

**Q:** And what is the content, the meaning, of dzogchen?

**James:** Dzogchen means perfectly complete, without fault, without error. It points to the fact that our own nature, the nature of each being – not just human beings but all living forms – is without fault or limitation. Ordinarily, as human beings we grow up with a very narrow sense of our own identity. We feel constrained when we look at other people: we see they have better qualities than us, maybe more money, more intelligence, more healthy bodies, we feel competitive, we want to do our best... but somehow there is always something wrong. So somehow disappointment gets woven into the texture of our life. From the point of view of dzogchen, this is caused by not recognizing who we really are. Our attention is tilted out too much into an identification with how we manifest – with our physical appearance, with the nature of our voice, with our ideas and so on – rather than relaxing and attending to ourselves in the process by which we manifest.

## Recognizing a state of open relaxation & presence

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**Q:** So we can say that we are not our emotions, we are not our thoughts?

**James:** Well, we can say, I think, not that we are not them but we are not defined by them: we are *not only* them. Thoughts and feelings are energetic formations. They are very unstable, you can't hold on to them, you can't catch them. A thought comes into mind and then it's gone. We have a feeling due to causes and circumstances... then it's vanished.

So, if we try to build on these to build a stable identity, it is like building a house on sand: the foundation will always be weak. And so we have to be working and working and working.

*In the point of view of dzogchen is to recognize the ground of all of our thought, feeling, sensation, activity, is a state of open relaxation, a state of presence* – that is to say, to be fully here,

fully alive, as an awareness which is not this or that. Moment by moment we *become* this or that: If I am talking with my mother, I am a different person than if I am talking with my lover. If I am at work that's different from if I am talking with friends. So in each situation we manifest with different ways of moving our body, different tongues to our voice and so on. But each of these ways of being arises from the same point of view. None of these aspects of ourselves defines who we really are.

So, the people I work with in the hospital they see me in one way, I am Doctor Low, I am like this kind of a person, I do this and that function and they think, 'Oh yes, we know who he is!' – but with my friends I am somebody different, with my children I am somebody different... So, each of these people sees some aspect of myself. But: What is this self? The self is not the sum total of all the aspects. You couldn't go around and interview all the people who know me and take all their accounts of me and put it together and that will somehow tell you who I am. The true quality of our existence slips away, it is ungraspable and yet it's always present. In the language of buddhism that is called *emptiness*. It doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all but it means that the vital quality of existence is not a substance, it is not a thing, it's not an object that you can grasp – and yet it is somehow the basis of all the experiences that we have.

**Q:** So, one of the most important things is to be aware of this reality.

**James:** Indeed. *Awareness is liberation itself. Awareness means not to be caught up in thinking about things, not trying to make sense of them, but just to offer a relaxed open hospitality, a hospitality towards whatever arises.*

Most of the time we have the feeling that our lives belong to us. So we have a sense that the arena of my experience is something private, it belongs to me like a garden. We are very concerned that in our garden we should have nice flowers and not have any weeds. And if the neighbour's child keeps kicking the football into our garden we get annoyed, we say, 'This is my private space!' In the same way we think that our mind is our private concern and so we [feel that we] should be able to have the kind of thoughts we want, the kind of feelings we want. And so we try to control our domain.

*When we come to an understanding of awareness, we relax and open and we realize that our existence is more like a public park.* We are entitled to walk in the public park, we can sit on the bench and observe all the things that are going on, but we can't blow a whistle if people are doing things we don't like. To be aware is to be tolerant and to recognize that we don't control the world – but at the same time we are not the slave of the world. It's about participating, taking a place, which means finding the rhythm, finding ways in which you can connect in a dynamic and meaningful way with other people.

**Q:** So this ground-reality is more like a space and not a thing?

**James:** Yes indeed. And because it is a space you can't grasp it and yet it never vanishes. It is always there when you allow yourself to become aware of it, but most of the time we are preoccupied by the things which fill the space: Just as if you live in an apartment you get used to the furniture that's there and then maybe after some years you say, 'Oh, I am tired of this!' and we need to redecorate, you decide to paint the walls. You take the furniture out and suddenly you think, 'Oh, this is an interesting space!' But when all the furniture was in the room you didn't see the room, you just saw the furniture. So the *purpose of meditation* is to do a big spring-cleaning: Take the furniture out, strip the walls down: 'Ahhh.' So in this space many many things are possible, many many things can occur.

**Q:** Sometimes we think that this ground basis, this space, is full of love and compassion and of beautiful emotions. Is it true or is it just a desire?

**James:** I think when people gain a realization, a direct experience, of that open nature, it has a subtle purifying and refining influence on their being. So, to realize that your own nature is spacious, is infinite, allows you... [deep outbreath]... just to relax. You feel: 'Oh, I'm okay. *I'm okay as I am without doing anything more than breathing in and out. I am okay* – this is the meaning of *dzogchen* – 'It's fine. Nothing more to do.' On the basis of that, what shall I come into the world for? If I am already filled, if I am already complete, I'm not hungry for things. So why would I be jealous, why would I be greedy, why would I be full of hate? It's fine.

However, through meditation we also recognize that this spaciousness of the mind gives rise to everything: good things and bad things have the same ground nature. They are all empty. They are like a dream. Except, if you recognize the nature, it is like a happy dream. If you don't recognize your own nature, it is like a nightmare. Both, dreams and nightmares, have the same nature, they are illusion, they are just manifestation. Like when you look in the mirror, you see the reflection of your face, you look at it and think, 'Ah, that's me!' You look at your teeth and you think, 'Oh, I have to go to the dentist.' But what you see in the mirror is not you – it is a reflection.

So, recognizing that moment by moment all the events of our life manifest, yet without substantial reality. It is like a theatre, like a drama. The stage is an open space and on the stage of a big theatre many many dramas are enacted in the course of a year. In the same way, the dramas of our mind are without limit. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are sad, these changes are occurring on and on and on.

**Q:** When we are able to live in this ground reality, is it correct to think that death is finished, death don't exist? Because this ground basis is eternal.

**James:** That is correct. It is infinite. So, finite moments arise and in these finite moments of being awake in the day, going to sleep at night, gradually some clarity can come into your state of sleeping so that you have more sense of an on-going unbroken awareness whatever is occurring: when you are happy, when you are sad... *what continues is this open potential*. So when you come to the moment of death, death is another kind of experience, an experience which is being enacted on the same stage, the stage of emptiness, of openness. However, if you think, 'my life belongs to me, in my flesh and blood body, this is my true basis. I, this [James claps on his body] person born from my mother and father, I am me, myself'. If you think this is the basis of your existence, death will hit you very hard. You will feel very sad, very disturbed and upset. But if you recognize that we manifest in this world because of many different factors and *the one stable continuity is this empty awareness* which pervades all things, then death is just another chapter opening.

**Q:** So we are not our body?

**James:** We are not our body, we are not our thoughts – and yet of course we are our body and our thoughts. There is a double edge to this: If you say, 'We are not it', we go to an extreme of nihilism. And if we say, 'I am fully my body', we go to an extreme of eternalism. And the teaching of the Buddha is the *middle way* between the extreme points.

### Learning to trust this immediacy of being

**Q:** But then how to live according with this ground reality?

**James:** The key point is to not interrupt the line between the openness of the heart – which is the site of awareness – and the senses. Our senses connect us with all things. If – instead of processing the information through our thoughts, feelings, habits and assumptions – we open and respond directly, spontaneously, we will find that the correct activity arises in the world. *So it is about learning to trust an immediacy of being, to stop being an internal politician, to stop being*

concerned with winning and losing, with fame and **authority [?? 15:20]**, and just to be at home in ourselves as we show ourselves.

**Q:** So, it is a kind of dance.

**James:** The whole world is nothing but a dance – but the dance of illusion in which subject and object ceaselessly interweave. Some people imagine that a state of enlightenment would be a state that would be completely protected, it would be a stasis, a stability... and once you achieve the safety, nothing would ever disturb you again. This is, I think, a false understanding. The one thing which is stable and unchanging is our awareness, but because it is empty, you cannot grasp it. ***What manifests is always changing:*** our body changes, we get older, our voice changes, our thoughts, our feelings change, and these manifestations are happening in a world with others. We are always in communication with others. So, contact, mutual aliveness, co-emergence – this is happening inseparable from the ground nature. At this very moment as I am talking with you, we are together in one world manifesting at the same time. I am only speaking because you ask me these questions. If I was walking down the road, I wouldn't be talking to myself. So, in my words I am showing you something of myself but that happens for you. If I now go and have a cup of tea with someone, I'll talk in a different way. So, in that way, ***manifestation arises with others and this is the eternal dance of becoming*** – that who-I-am is determined by the other as much as by myself.

**Q:** This is non-action.

**James:** Yes, it is a kind of non-action in which the centre of gravity of my existence is not deep inside me but it is in the interactive point between us.

**Q:** What is very important is not to stop this dance.

**James:** Absolutely. And you cannot stop it, it is an illusion. That's the false narcissist position of mastery: 'I am in charge of the world. I can make things happen on my terms.' But the world is a revelation, it is happening all the time, and we are part of the revelation. We are not sitting in the audience looking at something on a screen. We are actors. And we are this peculiar combination: ***We are both the empty stage, and the actor on the stage, and the director of the drama, and we are in the audience.*** And all these aspects of our existence are happening at the same time. And the path of dzogchen is to find an integration or balance – so that you are not just empty and open, you are not just very participative, you are not just trying to control things, and you are not just amazed at the wonder of everything, but these four aspects move and dance together.

**Q:** Is it correct then to say that we are not the chief of our life?

**James:** That's correct. The Buddha said, 'The mind is the chief. The mind is the creator of all things.' But that mind is not our ego-consciousness, it's not the bit of ourselves which is holding all our memories, and our hopes and fears and desires. That mind is a mind which cannot be grasped as an entity, but like a cornucopia, like a rich ground, gives rise to everything. It is like the ocean.

**Q:** So the most important thing is to be with the life, with the other people.

**James:** Absolutely. It is about participation, taking a place that evolves and moves. ***It is about openness, responsiveness, not fearfulness, but to have a spontaneity, a lightness of being, not to take things too seriously.*** One of the central teachings of buddhism which is also in dzogchen is that everything is an illusion. It's like a dream. So, if you take it too seriously, it will become very heavy

and you will feel ground-down and oppressed. But if you make it too light, you'll say, 'Oh, it doesn't matter.' Again, it is the middle way between these two.

**Q:** But we are responsible in our life.

**James:** We are responsible. But sometimes we can take responsibility as a notion of burden, as if there is some judge who is going to call us to account and say, 'Oh, what are doing? Why did you do that?' That's a very harsh and dualistic notion of responsibility. Or *we could take the word responsibility to mean 'the ability to respond'*. And so that means to be flexible, to be present, to be willing to see, to be willing to hear. No blockage on the senses and the heart.

**Q:** This is life from the point of view of dzogchen.

**James:** Indeed.

**Q:** What is the meaning of dzogchen about *shambala*?

**James:** Well, shambala is a notion of a magical kingdom, an ideal ground where everything is perfect. And this is an idea which belongs really in the family of *tantra* which is concerned with transformation. Tantra seeks to take our ordinary day to day life and to transform it by finding points of identification with pure realms, with the realms of the gods, the gods of meditation. And shambala belongs in that domain. Although in some understandings it is also a realm hidden on this earth and is concerned with an apocalyptic vision of future time. That one day the armies of shambala will arise and bring about a new regime. Many many cultures have these kind of notions.

Generally, dzogchen is not concerned with that. It is concerned with the immediacy of being present in this moment without any interruption, an actuality – what is here is always much better than fantasy. Because a positive fantasy, that is a dream. A negative fantasy, that's a nightmare. *Free of all fantasy, here we are at this moment, alive. Nothing is happening, everything is happening. It's very simple.*

**Q:** So to be human is to be aware with this kind of reality.

**James:** Yes. That's the way we awaken to our infinite potential. That rather than defining ourselves by the cultural ideas, and the ideas from our family and schooling which we have become cramped inside, living in the house of all the inheritance that we have, we open the walls of this house: And we realize that we actually inhabit an infinite mansion of many many possibilities – and through that we can engage with more kinds of people, we can find everything interesting, because we are willing to look. *We look before we come to a conclusion. And the main way to limit your life is to come to a conclusion before you look.*

### The basis of ethics: In seeing you, your face will touch me

**Q:** I have one last question. What is the meaning of dzogchen about ethic, about moral?

**James:** I think dzogchen ethics are grounded in the face of the other. That when you attend to another person, when you see their face, the light shining in their eyes, it calls for from your own heart the very best of your possibility for them. We don't turn our face away from the other. So, in order to do that, you have to inhabit your own body and your own face. I think it would be reasonable to say that many of the worst things that happen in the world is because people don't see the face of the other, and they don't live in their own face. They are living in a mental sphere where they think, 'This is a terrorist', or 'This is a Jew...', or this is whatever the category would be,

and they would say, 'I know what these people are!' – without looking at them, without seeing them – 'I know who they are. And on the basis of my knowledge I will act.'

*But in dzogchen we stay in the body, in the senses. And first I want to see you, and in seeing you, your face will touch me, so that I can become the one who can meet you where you are. And that is the basis of ethics.*

**Q:** Thank you very much.