
Dzogchen: the natural state

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Excerpts

On the one hand, we need to treat the teaching as something very special and very precious; treat them with respect and really try to use them well. On the other hand, it is not a good idea to make the teaching extra special or something very holy because it is the natural condition; it is just how we are and how things are.



One of the functions of buddhist understanding and practice is to start to see the cocoon of assumptions within which we live. The more we understand the nature of the cocoon, the more we free ourselves from it, and in that way we go from being a little grub to being a lovely butterfly. Beautiful!



I can see another person but I can't see myself very clearly. I can bend and see under the other person's chin, but even if I did yoga for fifty years I would never be able to see under my own chin! This means that other people are more visible to us than ourselves; in fact we need other people to see us, to see who we are.



We are not a fixed thing. We are not a coherent self. What we take to be ourself is this flow of tendencies, traits, memories, which move together creating different patterns like dancers on a stage. Sometimes aspects of ourselves are just moving up and down like the corps de ballet, and then suddenly one of these aspects decides to be the diva and goes out to take centre stage.



If we use the metaphor that our world was like a piece of sculpture, then each of these nine yantras or views would be like a light shining on to that sculpture; when you look down the line of that light the sculpture shows a particular aspect. You can walk around the sculpture looking from these nine different viewpoints, and each view is just what you get from that position. One view is not better or worse than any other view and each reveals something about ourselves.



Thoughts are like politicians. Politicians always say, 'Trust me. I speak the truth. I will work for your benefit.' Watch out for these inner politicians! Simply observe how thoughts arise and pass. Just as politicians say so many sweet things before an election and then afterwards they don't do very much, these thoughts seem very attractive when they are arising, but then they are gone.

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Day one:

Questioning our assumptions

In this time we have together we will explore some of the basic principles of meditation, with particular reference to the school of dzogchen. The most important thing in this is for you to feel relaxed and comfortable. If you feel tired you can lie down, or if your body gets a bit stiff you can get up and move, because it is very important to start to trust one's own experience.

When we were small we were introduced to the world of rules and, in this way, we had to fit in to the world. This means that we developed a kind of overview of ourselves – a sort of super-ego – which organised and controlled our behaviour in accordance with other people. Of course that helps a social articulation – people being together and not banging into each other too much – but one aspect of this is that you can lose a direct relationship with yourself.

In many schools of meditation they think it is very important to sit still for a long time, but the body is actually a moving thing and keeping it still for a long period of time is something artificial. One has to reflect on what is the benefit of being artificial? Particularly when the goal of practice is to become more natural, trusting that if your body needs to move, you can move? The key thing is to move inside a field of awareness.

One problem that can arise in meditation is that the sitting practice gets very fixed and stable, but then when you go into the outside world and it is not like that at all. The world is full of many different rhythms and these impact us in different ways, so instead of trying to impose control, it is perhaps more important to observe how we come into existence moment by moment to internal and external factors; in particular, to start to observe what is the ground or basis out of which our movement occurs, whether the movement is of the body, the speech, or of the mind.

Entering language: a dream, a cocoon of assumptions

One of the issues we have to deal with is that buddhism is full of technical terms which probably don't fit too well into Spanish. The downside of this is that we all have to work a little bit harder in order to understand; the advantage of this is that it helps us to put into question some of the assumptions we have.

Language is both a method of opening things up, of increasing possibilities, and seeing the nuances of situations; and it is also like a net that catches us. Language is like a dream. When you are inside language you are swimming in it like a fish in water; there is a great sense of knowing what is what – knowing how things are – and usually we live with a sense that words and the perceptual world have a direct fit.

This is an idea much criticised in modern philosophy, particularly in the work of Wittgenstein, who points out that language speaks to language, and that what is existing is something which language cannot touch. This is a very helpful idea since it links with a great deal of buddhist understanding, because when people agree on something they agree through language, and that gives a sense of unity that we are in the same world together. This then gives a permission not to examine the world. That is to say that our knowledge, our habit, our previous engagement with the world, has created a form of conditioning and this conditioning becomes the basis of our experience of the world. Resting inside this conditioning we don't seriously engage any more with what is there.

For example, there is a big difference between having thoughts and thinking, because most of the time thought is arising for us, thought formulated in language. Inside this there is a form of clarity, but it is a stupid clarity, because it doesn't allow us to see directly whether this dream form that we believe in is correct or not.

We might have a question here. We are sitting in Bilbao, but are we in Spain? As far as I understand some people who live in this place would say, *'No, you are not in Spain. You are in the Basque country.'* A word can become something reassuring or something very disturbing. In this way, when we see the clash between interpretation, we wake up and think, *'Oh, the word and the world don't quite fit.'*

The more we can start to see how we use language it both opens up possibilities of seeing and at the same time closes them down; we start to experience ourselves as co-creators of the world. Through the five senses experiences are arising all the time. Sensations and perceptions are arising and to meet them are the many internal memories, intentions, likes, dislikes, which have developed as our sense of who we are. Allowing ourselves to be more conscious of language is very useful. From this we can start to observe ourselves; to put the various assumptions that we have about who we are into question. Real thinking requires a perspective, but when we are absorbed in thoughts, when we are just meshed in what is arising in ourselves, this is more like the flat lack of perspective that we have in paintings of icons.

In the orthodox christian tradition and in the Tibetan tradition, an icon like this painting on the wall is regarded as being the thing itself. For instance, in this image of Padma Sambhava, those in the Tibetan tradition would say he is present in the image, just as in Russian and Greek orthodox traditions the presence of the divine figure is in the icon. We know in the history of christianity that there were many debates about the nature of icons, and the transformation of the understanding of the nature of the eucharist. Are we talking about representation or an actual presence, is the wine and blood really the blood and flesh of Christ?

In our ordinary experience of the world, if we look at something like this bottle, this is not the representation of a bottle of water, it *is* a bottle of water. If we take away the representation, what is it? This is the importance of recognising how we are merged in language, and how we take language as the true guide of what is in front of us so we don't have to bother thinking about what is there. It is as if our knowledge arrives before we do. We can get quite a sense of power from that.

If you spend time with small children you will see that they struggle with this a lot. They don't know so many words and their words bang into the world. Big people are always correcting them which becomes very frustrating for little people because they feel this is their world. They feel at home in the world but they keep having to be corrected, *'Hold your knife and fork properly; Close your mouth when you chew your food; Don't make too much noise when big people are talking.'* In all these ways the child is in itself, and then suddenly becomes shocked into something else being there.

If we are lucky we grow up, and we get to a position where not too many people can tell us what to do, and that feels quite nice. *'I know who I am, I know what I like. Leave me alone! This is how I want to live.'* This is a kind of freedom but it's a freedom which is like a kind of prison. Because if I am defining myself and saying, *'keep your mind off my existence'* then I am the limit of myself, and what I have to resource me as I move through time is only what I have in my little rucksack, which was filled in my childhood.

If things go well maybe we can survive but every now and then life gives us a big slap: we get sick; someone we love leaves us or dies; we become unemployed. Many things happen in people's lives. Then the question is: *'How could this have happened to me? I'm not the sort of person this should*

happen to. I'm a nice, good person and bad things happen to other people. The postman has come to the wrong address – please take this letter away!' But, unfortunately, it is our name on the envelope.

One of the functions of buddhist understanding and practice is to start to see the cocoon of assumptions within which we live. The more we understand the nature of the cocoon, the more we free ourselves from it, and in that way we go from being a little grub to being a lovely butterfly. Beautiful!

Shiné practice: letting your attention follow your intention

Maybe now we could do some very basic meditation as a way of arriving. This form is called *shiné* in Tibetan, which means to stay peacefully. We want to sit in a comfortable way. It is regarded that the best way of sitting for this is a way that uses the skeleton very well. Let your skeleton carry your weight so that your muscles are not holding you in place and you can relax a little. In this practice the chin is slightly down; the tongue is resting on the hard, upper palate just behind the teeth; the eyes are not open and staring, they are just slightly open.

Usually, in this practice, we have the left hand on top of the right and the thumbs just touching, and we focus our attention on something simple. We can focus our attention on the flow of the breath coming in and out of the nostrils, and just observe the sensation as the breath goes in and out. Or you can choose some external object, like a mark on the floor, and then simply develop a clear intention that you are going to look at this; *letting your attention follow your intention.*

If your mind wanders off on to something else then you just very gently bring your attention back to the focus without blaming yourself for having got lost, and without being fascinated by where you went. We can try this for a while. Make sure you are sitting comfortably. For some people it is easier to sit in a chair and others are more comfortable on the floor; choose a path that suits you.

We'll just do it for about ten minutes because some people are familiar with this and others are not.

[*Shiné* practice]

Observing how our attention gets caught

In this practice, we can see that many things arise when we try to keep a simple focus. For example, when we take a break a bit later we will go out of this room. We will walk towards the doorway and go through the door out into the passage. It is quite easy to know when we are in the room and when we are in the passage, but when we sit focusing the mind in a simple way we are suddenly aware that our mind is away involved in something else. Whatever the thought is, it didn't arrive and stop at our front door and knock. It didn't say, *'Excuse me, do you want to spend some time with me?'* Yet somehow we are in that thought; it is as if we don't have a choice.

From a buddhist point of view this is a very important learning, because it shows us directly how we just flow into experiences as they occur. Like a small child kicking a ball on the pavement; the ball shoots out into the road and the child goes after it without thinking of the cars. The thought catches us and we are gone and then after a while the thought leaves us. We don't quite know where we are, maybe another thought comes and catches us, or we might think, *'Oh, I am meditating. Back to my breath.'*

This is the real beginning of practice: to start to observe the very subtle way in which the mind has a capacity to be attentive – to be in touch with what is happening – and with that capacity comes a sense of agency; the ability to accomplish something. This ability is suddenly lost when we are caught up in something which is arising. As each of these formations arise we find ourselves absorbed in them. If the content of our mind is generally quite peaceful and present, this is not so

bad; it is like lying on the beach on a warm day, perhaps you'll read a little bit... The mind wanders here and there while the waves lap on to the beach.

It is not so pleasant, however, if the content of the mind is not so good: if our thoughts are more anxious or confused, if we are blaming ourselves or attacking ourselves, or if we are full of doubts and hesitation. Through this kind of practice we learn that we don't have very much freedom. We think we have freedom because what is arising in our mind allows us to move through the world without too many troubles, but it's a kind of automatic pilot. We are walking down the street and our mind is here, there, and everywhere.

You can say, *'I went walking to the shops.'* but who was walking? **You** were daydreaming. Somehow the body very gently and generously allowed your legs to keep moving and you got to the shop. In meditation, this habit becomes more obvious. Our attention is being caught quickly and easily by whatever is arising, and the things which catch our attention often seem very fascinating and important. But what value do they have?

Maybe when we were young we were very fit and active and able to do many different things, or maybe you were very beautiful and had many different love stories. Where are these things now? Gone like the morning mist on the mountains.

Samsara is like a perpetual-motion machine

In buddhist terms this is called samsara, which means the ceaseless flow of experience like a perpetual motion machine. Each thing that we do involves the outpouring of some energy into the world that creates a charge which causes a further movement.

In Spain do you have this children's toy which is a big flexible metal spiral? You put it at the top of the stairs and it flops down from step to step? In the buddhist view we go from one life to another. . . to another. . . to another. . . and it doesn't stop – sometimes happy, sometimes sad. The question is who is the one who is having this experience?

What we take to be my self is actually constructed out of ephemeral arisings. If you think back through your life and you try to remember the kind of interests you had when you were five, ten, fifteen, or twenty, at each stage there were many things which seemed so very important. As soon as we came into a particular context we were hooked, and yet now these are gone. Each of us can say, *'I used to be very interested in . . . but not now.'*

When you are making jelly you use jelly moulds and you pour the liquid in and it sets in the shape of the mould. It is as if the flowing potential of our life gets poured into a mould for a while and that's our shape, and then it goes back into liquid and becomes some other shape. In each shape it seems that this is who I am; this is me. If you look through your wardrobe you might see some clothes you used to wear and think, *'Oh, how strange! I couldn't wear that now.'*

This is very interesting, the way in which something which is temporary – which in many cases is culturally or situationally determined – is taken by us to be the complete story. Although we live in time which is always moving on and changing, often our fantasy is that we are some fixed thing and that this moment is it. This is both true and false. It is true that in terms of our experience this moment is all we have – the past is gone; it will never come back and the future hasn't yet arrived. This is all there is, but this is also ungraspable; it has no essence. When the Buddha explains that suffering arises from attachment, he is pointing to the way in which we take ourselves too seriously. We overinvest in this moment; it's terribly important for us, but it has no essence.

When a small baby is crying and upset and gets distressed, if the distress is not too big you can keep clicking your fingers and singing, and the baby identifies with the sound and the distress goes. We are not much more sophisticated than a baby. Our attention is being caught all the time by things that seem very real and important. This importance arises from the felt sense: this is me; this is my life; this is true.

Being myself is being in the world with others

From the buddhist point of view, we want to explore how to relax and awaken to a more panoramic vision. For example, each of us is sitting in this room thinking, *'I am here. This is my body. I can look around at these other things, but I am me.'* When I look at someone else I can see their shape. I can see that the other person exists but I can't see myself very clearly. I can bend and see under the other person's chin, but even if I did yoga for fifty years I would never be able to see under my own chin! This means that other people are more visible to us than ourselves; in fact we need other people to see us, to see who we are.

The gaze of the other and experience of the other **is** our world; to be myself is to be in this world with others. I cannot stabilise a personal identity apart from the world and so what I take to be myself – my own experience – is something which is always in an evolving field with others.

Our existence belongs to the world perhaps more than to ourselves. What does this mean? There is not a big wall between self and other, inside and outside. We constantly flow out through our senses and interact with what is there, and the sounds, smells, tastes of the world come into us. Perhaps the centre of our existence is not inside us but in this space in the middle, which means that the perception of others is vital for the maintenance of ourself.

One of the things we are attempting to do in meditation is to relocate the centre of our experience from a seeming fixed point inside us to more like an infinity loop of endless movement between subject and object. It is not as if there is a fixed self here and fixed others outside but, moment by moment, we are moving out to the world and the world is coming into us, and this is a process we cannot stop.

Samsara, in the buddhist understanding, is the attempt to stop this; to make it go in the direction that we want and that often leads to disaster. The nuns, whose building we are in just now, are very intelligent. They understand the nature of impermanence. At one time the catholic faith was very strong and there were many rich sponsors who helped to maintain this place, but times have changed. The nuns want to remain here so they invite us strange, buddhist people to come in and we pay them some money for this. This is a very nice example of working with circumstances, because if the nuns were to be more hardline, they would say, *'No, we are catholics and we not have any other religion here!'*

Life goes on and takes new forms, and this will be the same with what is called *'Tibetan buddhism'* in coming to the west. The heart of the teaching doesn't need to change, but the forms of it will adapt according to the culture.

The central point I have been trying to establish is the dynamic nature of our experience: that there is nothing fixed or solid inside or outside ourselves. The more we can start to experience the world as this flow of energy, and ourselves as an energetic gesture participating in it, the more we can be at ease in ourselves and with the complexity of the world.

I suggest we do another ten minutes of quiet, sitting practice and then we'll take a break? Make sure that your body is comfortable; don't torture yourself.

[*Shiné* practice]

Moving practice – letting the world show us how to be

You can do this moving practice fast or slow, with a lot of intensity or very gently, depending on your own health or inclination.

The basic principle is very simple. You just relax in your body and let your gaze go out, then let your body move into the shape of the first thing which catches your gaze. As you move into that shape your head and your body will be tilted. Because everything has shape – the clouds, the buildings, the trees, the grass, the people – as soon as you see something you take that shape and then the next thing. You just let your body copy whatever it would be and you don't have to think of anything. There is no instruction to follow; the gaze will direct your body. Work with your body, not straining or stressing it, but allowing it to move at the limit of what it can do. We have plenty of space and we can spread out.

Of course there are many different kinds of physical movements that we can learn; many different kinds of yoga, schools of tai chi, chi kung, dancing and so on. However, in the first case, all these systems tend to require an alignment with something learnt and in the case of the improvisational schools, some sense of what it feels like; some sense of being in touch. However, if you move simply in relation to the senses you don't have to have any thoughts at all. The more you do it the more you will find that the qualities of what you are seeing will shift the attention of your body; you tense up with the tree trunk, or you loosen up with the very soft, new leaves and so on.

We are practicing letting the world show us how to be. When you do this for half-an-hour every muscle in your body will be activated. The spine will be bent in all directions, the chest will be open and closed, the breathing rhythms will change; all that you need without having to think or plan anything. It also lets you see how conditioning operates in the body. For some people when they are moving they start to do tai chi, other people start to go into yoga asanas because their body has learnt these particular forms.

Just like the emotions and the cognitions, the body has memory and prediction. By moving in this way you can see how the past and what you have learnt comes to be shaping the future. Although this is useful in some ways, it also acts as a screen to the immediacy of just what is there.

Dzogchen

We will now focus a little bit more on dzogchen. In the nyingma tradition, dzogchen is seen as being on the top of all the other teachings because it is the teaching that is the least elaborated; it is the most simple, but also for that reason the most subtle and difficult to grasp.

In the Tibetan tradition there are general practices like making prostrations where you can see whether you are doing it well or badly, quickly or slowly, with more or less attention. That is to say you have a task and you have the performer of the task, and the performer of the task can do a performance review; they can evaluate how well they are doing the task.

However, in dzogchen, the focus of our attention is whatever arises, not something that we have prepared before, not a formal visualisation of a deity or focusing of the attention on something like the breath or an external object. Simply staying relaxed and open with whatever is arising.

In the tradition it is said that these teachings came into this world through Garab Dorje, who was an enlightened being. Garab Dorje received his instructions from Dorje Sempa, who had the

transmission from Kuntu Zangpo. These names will mean something to some people and nothing to other people. The essential meaning is that it is very lovely!

It is said that when Garab Dorje was leaving this world his body started to dissolve into a rainbow, and as he rose into the sky from this state he gave three brief teachings. The first teaching was to enter into your own state. In Tibetan it means something like *'to be introduced to yourself'*.

Our true nature

The basic transmission of this state is that our nature is pure from the very beginning; our nature is unborn. Although we have come into the world out of our mother's belly and you have a name and passport and so on, the ground nature of our self – our true identity – is like space. Space is everywhere: it is the generous support and host for all phenomena and yet it cannot be grasped as some particular thing.

In the same way, when we look at ourselves and we try to find exactly who we are, we find many thoughts, emotions, and sensations. Some of these we don't like, and some of these we do like and want to hold on to, but even if we want to keep them, they always go. Even when we try to push the thoughts and feelings away that we don't like, they come back. When we identify these thoughts, feelings and sensations as our true identity, thinking that this is who I really am, then we imprison ourselves in an impossible task because these manifestations are ceaseless and beyond our control. The one who tries to control themselves, is itself a thought.

Let's say, for example, you have a problem with anger. You might think, *'I hate the way I am so angry.'* After the event you might think, *'I wish I hadn't done that.'* But who is this one who feels *'I am angry'*? This is an impermanent thought. I say, *'Oh, I am so sorry I shouted at you yesterday, I really won't do that again.'* The one who is angry and the one who is sorry are not the same.

We are not a fixed thing. We are not a coherent self. What we take to be ourself is this flow of tendencies, traits, memories, hopes and fears, which move together creating different patterns like dancers on a stage. Sometimes aspects of ourselves are just moving up and down like the *corps de ballet*, and then suddenly one of these aspects decides to be the diva and goes out to take centre stage. For a while you are very jealous, until the choreographer says, *'Get back in line!'*

In that way we are pulsing in and out in relation to circumstances, an endless flow of energy, of possibility, of manifestation. It never comes to an end. If we take ourselves as being generated out of these movements, whenever we make a definite statement about ourselves we find that we are lying and cheating.

If we say, *'I am lazy,'* or *'I am hardworking,'* these statements are always just half a sentence. *'I am lazy when I feel like this or that . . .'* or *'I am hardworking because I fear that... other people will see me as lazy,'* or *... I am still trying to impress my father even though he has been dead for many years.'* In that way, every aspect of ourselves is part of a communication.

A rich potentiality

In the dzogchen teaching it says our true nature is naked: an open, spacious awareness with no particular defining content. But it is not a nihilistic void – it is not a dead emptiness – but a rich potentiality out of which many different forms can manifest. This is the energy that naturally arises from this open spacious nature. Just as rays of light ceaselessly come out from the sun, so energy arises from our own openness.

It is also said that our nature is raw; it hasn't been cooked by any particular process; it has had no spices nor ingredients added to it. No matter what our own history has been or whatever we have

encountered in life, whether good or bad, nothing has changed or transformed this basic nature. In the Tibetan tradition this is said to be *vajra* or *dorje*, which simply means indestructible, not marked nor changed by anything.

Now, clearly, if you are with someone sitting in a café and they tell you something you will be impacted by what they say and your mood will change. Who is the one who is changed? We have to say, '*I am.*' But this ordinary sense of 'I' is the energy of the unborn state.

If you see a litter of puppies that have just been born, they clamber over each other and push each other out of the way; subject and object – self and other – are the same. You influence me and I influence you, and this keeps tumbling over. We were outside in the sunshine and now the clouds have come, so we close the window and put on more clothing. This is the nature of energy. This body is energetic; it performs well within a certain band of temperature, but when it is too hot or too cold we don't do so well. In that way, we are situated in an environment, and this is what we can call the flow of experience.

Now, clearly, if you are sitting in a café with someone and they tell you something you will be impacted by what they say and your mood will change. Who is the one who is changed? Who is the one having this experience? In the experience there seems to be a continuing fixed person – a point of reference – this is happening to me. But what is this 'I'? It is a movement of energy. It is a statement: I am happy. I am sad. Sensation arises, it hooks a thought, then this thought might express itself out of our mouth or in terms of behaviour.

Like a mirror

In the tradition of dzogchen it says that our nature is like a mirror. When you look in the mirror you see your face. When you look in the mirror you don't see the mirror, what you see is a reflection. As soon as there is light the mirror is showing something. We cannot see the mirror itself; it doesn't have an identity in itself that you can see.

In the same way thoughts, feelings, and sensations are ceaselessly arising and these are the basis for constructing ourself. These things are there and it is undeniable, whether we say something is good or bad, that it is happening. All of this is like a reflection in the mirror or like the reflection of the moon on water; it can be seen and yet you can't grasp anything. What we call time is just this ceaseless flow of moments; all of them ungraspable in themselves. And yet, there is some stability in ourselves which is not grounded in the particular shape or form of manifestation. None of the forms which arise produce anything definite and yet they are there, so what is the ground of our experience moment by moment? It is something stable but ungraspable.

Normally things which are stable seem very graspable. The stones of this building are big, powerful, and heavy, and we can imagine they will be here for a long time but in time this building will change with age; recently we had earthquakes here which show that things which look stable are often unstable. All the things that people think are fixed, reliable and secure, change.

However in the dzogchen teaching it says our nature – who we really are – is **unchanging**. This is a state of relaxed, open awareness like an empty stage on which all the different dramas of existence are enacted. Many different dramas come and go but this stage stays the same. No matter what performance goes on, the stage itself is not changed. This is a very important point for meditation because if you can recognise directly what is moving and changing and not try to stabilise it, the very movement itself will reveal the space within which it moves.

This space is not something you can find as a definite object. This natural condition – this open state of awareness – is never an object which can be caught by thought. When we talk about it these are just gestures, evocations, and metaphors to bring some sense of the flavour. In order to get a more direct experience of it we have to enter into the practice of meditation.

If we stay with this image of the mirror, the reflections arise and pass and the mirror is neutral to all the different kinds of reflection. The mirror doesn't feel happy if a beautiful person appears in front of it, and it doesn't feel upset if a very ugly object is placed in front of it, because the reflection is in the mirror yet doesn't touch the mirror. This is a very important point to see. It's not that we are separate from the world observing it from a distance. Our true nature is not way up in a helicopter, nor is it locked away protected by closed-circuit cameras! Our state – this natural condition – is unconditioned, meaning it has no limit.

For example, here is a table and the table has a shape. If I put a glass on the table that is fine, but if I am not looking carefully and I miss the table the glass will fall and break. We are used to this. Things have a shape and a limit, an inside and an outside; they are finite. They have a beginning and an end, a top and a bottom, and they stand in relation to something else.

But when we look at our own nature it is not a thing; it is not resting on anything else. It's not created by our mother and father, it's not created by any god, it's not created by good things that we do, and it's not harmed by bad things that we do. It is an indestructible infinity like space within which everything is manifesting. This doesn't mean we can say, *'Oh, I am the whole universe.'* As soon as you become narcissistic in that way you have not understood the teaching at all.

The mirror shows the reflection, but it doesn't *own* the reflection. If I am holding a mirror and I turn it around all of the room will appear and disappear as the mirror turns. In the same way the mind is constantly revealing what is here but it has no need to be the owner, the master, or the controller. It is not looking for profit like a businessman who wants 10%.

In that way, whatever is arising – good or bad – we can offer space to it. What we find is that we don't become crazy or chaotic because we are not controlling the situation. Things arise and pass, each in their own place and time and when they pass they leave no trace, so the next moment is again an open, empty stage in which new possibilities can arise.

On an outer level you can understand this very clearly by watching the development of "disturbed children". When young children start to create problems at school people generally worry about them. They say, *'Oh, this child has real problems. This child is a problem because their behaviour is disturbing other children.'* What the child hears is that they are no good; that they have to become like somebody else in order to be accepted.

Generally, when you look into that child's situation, you find that the one thing they are saying is *'Love me and accept me as I am'*. For the child to become what the big person wants would be to lose itself. If the child is accepted and finds someone to be really interested in the form that that particular child has, even when that shape seems very distorted, the attention and acceptance allows the child to untie itself and to come back into a more normal way of relating. There is a lot of research to show that this is the case.

In the same way when thoughts, feelings and sensations arise in our mind they are just passing through; all they want is a little tap on the head and then they go. This is impermanence. But when we say, *'What are you doing here in my head? I don't want you. You are a very bad kind of thought; you just do graffiti spray all over my lovely clean self!'* you can be sure that that child will come back

at night and spray you even more! In the same way we try to control ourselves by saying: '*I like this and I don't like that.*'

There are two important aspects here. One aspect is that the quality of ourself which is the dynamic flowing energy – our body, posture, gesture, personality and so on – is always moving and strongly influenced by the environment. This is one aspect of who we are but not the whole story, because on a daily level there are so many external and internal events to think about and to do. Day after day and year after year we can be preoccupied with events, and this gives us no time to pay attention to the other aspect of ourself which is the unborn, unchanging, open spaciousness within which all movement is occurring.

When we bring these two aspects together – the spaciousness and the movement – the movement is no longer having to carry the burden of a total identity and so we can enjoy it for what it is. The spaciousness is the unchanging state in which awareness rests. That is to say that the openness or emptiness of the mind has a natural clarity like the surface of the mirror; the potentiality for revealing manifestation. *The potential of the mirror to show all reflection is like the potential of the mind to show all phenomena.*

As we sit in this room we are aware of ourselves, the room, and other people. What is occurring in the room is changing. As part of being in the room we have our thoughts, our feelings and our reactions to what is going on, but we also have the openness within which everything is occurring. If we over identify with the aspect of form, then we make a split between myself and others and then the only way of understanding what is going on is to think about it.

Our experience is direct and immediate; it is not constructed out of interpretations. The interpretation comes after the experience, and an interpretation is just another kind of experience. The interpretation may take on a parental voice and or any other kind of voice. Voices show what voices do; they talk and we have very big ears. We love stories so when these voices in our heads start to tell us a story, we think, '*Oh, my bedtime. . .*' and we fall asleep into that kind of dream, but it is an illusion.

Illusions arise and pass and this is the nature of this world: it is the play of the imagination. You cannot sort out the illusion by trying to correct it, but if you recognise an illusion is an illusion, you can leave it alone. A reflection in the mirror is just a reflection; nothing is there but it is *as if* something is there. In the same way when we come to realise our own nature is open, unborn, infinite, naked, fresh, then in this open state we can be tolerant of whatever occurs.

It is said we should allow the mind to be like a waterfall. When you are in the hills and you see a waterfall, it moves and tumbles and sudden splashes break. Allowing the mind to be as it is, and to show itself as it is, is very important because the more we can do this the more we can allow the ego to take early retirement.

This ego is like the child of an alcoholic mother. The child cannot hope that the mother shops or cooks or cleans, or helps with their homework. The child has to be the parent of the parent, thinking, '*What shopping do I need to do? Can I hide the bottles so mum won't find them?*' In the same way, our ego is actually quite small; it can do some things quite well but it can't take care of all of us. Our ego is always having to pretend to be more grown up than it is because it can't find its mother. The purpose of the meditation is to find mother and to take her to the detox centre to clear away all the obscurations. As the mother remembers she is the mum, the child can relax and start to play again, and then the mother and child can come together. This is the way of the teaching.

See if you have any questions or thoughts about this.

Comment: In certain buddhist teachings, they tell you at the beginning that you need to accept good thoughts and reject bad thoughts. I understand from what you are saying that in this case you neither accept nor reject any thoughts; just let them go.

James: That is correct because the paths which are concerned with doing good things and not doing bad things are speaking to the ego. They are saying *'You must try to be a better person, and if you become a better person then one day you will ripen and mature and you will be able to understand this.'* The idea is that there is some kind of reward for good thoughts; but the Buddha nature, or the natural condition, is not constructed out of anything. If you take a piece of coal and you wash it for fifty years it won't become chalk. You try and try to be better but you will keep making *'mistakes'*.

Question about karma

Question: How does this sit with the idea of karma, that how you behave in this life will affect your future lives?

James: If I try to pour all the water from this jug into this glass it will overflow. Therefore, I could try to spend this life trying to make a very small nozzle so that I never pour too much water into the cup. This is the path of good behaviour. However, in dzogchen, we say, *'Have a big cup.'* This is what I meant when I said the ego is a small cup, and as long as we are identified with this we are worried about what other people think of us and how we are going to be judged. These thoughts make us very small.

There are four aspects in relation to karma. The first aspect is called the ground. The ground of all karma is the belief in real objects: I exist and this world exists. The second aspect is to have an intention; a thought, which is directed towards an object. For example, here is a very nice recording machine and let's say I think about stealing it. The third step is joining myself with the object and carrying through my action: now I have stolen this. The fourth stage is to be completely satisfied with the action: I am glad I have done this and rejoice in my skill as a thief.

With this four stage model, if on the fourth stage I think, *'Oh, what have I done? I shouldn't have taken it,'* then the karma goes down a little bit. If on the third step, the point where I am actually taking it, I think, *'What am I doing? It's not mine,'* then I block the karma. If on the second step, when the thought is arising on my mind, I can transform the negative thought of stealing it and make a positive thought; the karma also goes down.

Of course many tempting thoughts arise in our mind, not always as obvious or as gross as stealing something, and so one has to be keeping an eye on oneself and control oneself from morning to night. However, if you can work with the first aspect of karma, the basis, then all possibilities of karma accumulation are removed. If we can see directly that there is no real self-existing subject and there are no real self-existing objects – there is simply the luminous movement of experience within the state of the mirror – then there is no accumulation of karma.

I think one of the things we can probably know about ourselves is it costs quite a lot of effort to be bad. For example, if you are cheating on a lover, or your boss, or you try to cheat the tax man, then you have to think a lot and worry about being found out. The more relaxed we become then the more we realise that making that sort of effort seems a bit pointless. You don't have to try to be good; you just recognise that it is quite a lot of hassle to be bad!

[Break]

The Yanas or views

We will continue a little with the background explanation and then start the practice. In the nyingma system they have nine different levels of practice called *yanas*, and each of these can be understood in terms of its *view*, its *meditation*, its *activity* and its *result*. It is very important when practising one of these vehicles to attend to its own view.

For example, in the view of dzogchen, that we have been looking at, from the very beginning our nature is perfect. In the first level or yana, the *hinayana*, the view is we are lost, wandering in samsara, full of confusion and obscuration, and out of control.

If we use the metaphor that our world was like a piece of sculpture, then each of these nine yanas or views would be like a light shining on to that sculpture; when you look down the line of that light the sculpture shows a particular aspect. You can walk around the sculpture looking from these nine different viewpoints, and each view is just what you get from that position. One view is not better or worse than any other view and each reveals something about ourselves.

Sometimes it is very important to reflect that we are indeed lost and confused because that allows us to be in touch with these hurt, vulnerable aspects of ourselves. From that point of view, the main practice is to take refuge. Taking refuge means that there is the possibility of having protection from the difficult situation we find ourselves in, and also the hope that we can come to be in a different situation where life is better; where enlightenment is seen as liberation from this world of complexity.

In the mahayana view we say we have been born many, many times and in each life we have had a mother. The mother has done many things for us and so we have a debt of gratitude towards that mother; that is to say a debt of gratitude to all beings. This means that when we move out into the world and we encounter other beings – humans, animals, birds, fish and so on – we start from a position of obligation. Therefore, we do the practice to gain enlightenment for the sake of all beings. This is a powerful method for weakening the boundary around ourselves, and coming to see that because we are already linked to all beings, it is important to develop compassion towards them.

We don't have time to go through the views of all the different yanas, but from the point of view of dzogchen everything has been pure from the very beginning. That means there is nothing to do. Don't do anything. Sounds easy, doesn't it? But actually, it is much easier to do *some* thing, because all of our energy is directed towards doing things.

I had a little interaction downstairs with one of the nuns from this convent where we are staying. Our kind translator told them that I found them very warm and goodhearted, and that there is something quite beautiful here. The nun replied, *'Oh well, when people are good and behave well, we also feel good and behave well and this is the rule of life.'* This is exactly the rule of ordinary life, but in dzogchen we are trying to move into another dimension.

In relaxing into the open state, activity continues. Where is the activity coming from? If there is no limit to the mind then there is no outside or inside. If there is no outside, nothing can be imported from anywhere else, which means everything comes from the same source. All thoughts and all actions arise from this open potential. But, of course, many thoughts arise in the first person: *'I need to do this,'* or *'Why did I do that?'* or *'Why did he speak to me that way?'* Our mind starts turning one thought into another.

In the meditation what is very important is to leave these thoughts where they are; don't believe them, just take them to be politicians. Politicians always say, *'Trust me. I speak the truth. I will work for your benefit.'* Watch out for these inner politicians! Just observe how thoughts arise and pass. Just as politicians say so many sweet things before an election and then afterwards they don't do

very much, these thoughts seem very attractive as they arise, full of meaning, but then they are gone. See them more for what they are: little chains of meaning, little lines flying across the sky.

Three Aa practice: sounding Aa

We can do the basic dzogchen practice now. It is very simple. You sit in a relaxed way. The gaze is open, the eyes are open. We try to focus about one and a half arm's length in the space in front of us, not staring in a strong way but just letting the gaze rest in the space. This outer space is inseparable from the inner space in the heart.

We recite aloud the sound of *Aa* three times. In the Sanskrit and Tibetan alphabets 'A' is the most basic sound. All the consonants take 'A' as their basic vowel. It is like with babies; the first sound they make is often *Aa* and then gradually the plosive and the labial movements produce *Pa* and *Ma* and so on. When people have sex they say *Aa* and when people die they go *Aa*, so this sound is at the beginning, the middle, and the end!

Aa is seen as representing emptiness, so when we make this sound we try to dissolve all the tensions of our body and the busyness of the mind into *Aa*, this basic bedrock out of which it comes. In the spring gardener plant seeds in the ground. In the summer, most plants will come out and flower and then in the autumn the remains will be ploughed back into the ground to rot and fertilise the earth. All things arise out of emptiness – as *Aa* into the world – and they can also go back through *Aa* into this open spaciousness.

Having said the sound of *Aa* we just rest in this open space. Thoughts, feelings, sensations, noises from outside, movements of people's bodies – everything is going on as before – but resting in the spaciousness, allow these movements to come and go without joining into or identifying with them. We just stay in this state.

If you find yourself getting caught up in different thoughts and feelings, just relax into a slow out-breath and that again releases the tension of thought. At first we will do this practice for quite a short period of time and then we can do it for a longer period.

[*Three Aa practice*]

We will do this practice several times with certain variations. At first you might find that your eyes run with water and you can just let the water come. Sometimes you might feel that this is nothing at all, it's just you sitting in a room. Who says you are sitting in the room? You are saying this to yourself. This is called taking refuge in thoughts. As long as we rely on the thought and we believe the thought is telling us the truth, the world keeps its familiar shape. Whatever arises, whether it is happy or sad, familiar or strange, just allow it to come and go.

In the tradition it says that if you find that your mind is getting caught up in thoughts, don't try to push them away because when you push something away, you also push energy into it. You confirm to yourself the power and the danger of what you are trying to get rid of.

What we want to do is to just stay closely to whatever is arising; not falling back away from it and not falling forward into it.

Gently pulling a hair from a pat of butter

In Tibet there were herdsman who kept cattle for milk and butter. The women made the butter in a wooden churn. They would lean over the churn, put their hand in and scrape out the butter, then

pat it into a ball. Tibetan women didn't cut their hair and sometimes a long hair would fall into the butter, so they would have a lovely ball of butter but a strand of hair sticking out of it. If you pulled the hair too hard it would break off and leave the rest of the hair inside the pat of butter, so you had to hold the hair and very gently pull it out very gently. This example is used by lamas for when your mind gets caught up in thoughts: pull your attention very gently like a hair out off the butter.

This *Three Aa* practice is not fancy complicated dramatic practice. In Tibet there are many pujas with a lot of cymbals, noise, horns, and big voices making big sounds; the *Three Aa* practice is something much more gentle and tender. We are not trying to force anything into being, but simply to progressively relax more and more through the various levels in which we are caught up with arisings.

Gently untying knots

In the old days if you walked down to the fishing harbour you would see fishermen repairing their nets. The first thing that sailors have to learn is how to tie and untie knots. What we do in dzogchen is to untie knots. This is why we have to examine ourselves again and again, because there are so many different kinds of knots in the mind. If you get wool or string knotted the one thing you mustn't do is pull it very hard as this just makes the knot tighter.

The view in the tantric systems is very different. When people do *pujas* – *puja* means a kind of worship – it is linked with four particular kinds of activity which relate to the four directions of the mandala: pacifying, increasing, overpowering, and destroying. These are activities, and that kind of meditation practice uses energy to bring about changes in the world. For example, you might focus on Chenresig or Tara, who are both very peaceful in their usual forms, in order to pacify circumstances. We might pray for all suffering to decline and all sickness and illness to vanish, in order that all the things that disturb people vanish into space, leaving only calmness and peace. There is nothing wrong with that sort of practice; these are very good practices for certain kinds of things. For example if you want to change your energy level, or the environment, then doing pujas can be very effective. However, if you want to recognise your own nature, pujas are not particularly useful. A screwdriver is not the same as a hammer; both are very useful but they are useful for different things.

In dzogchen what we are concerned about is relaxation, about moving away from activity so that we open more and more into a state of infinite spaciousness, and resting in that state, offering infinite hospitality to whatever arises.

If one of your friends had a difficulty in their life and asked if they could come and stay with you for a while, you might say, '*Sure*' but after five years you might find yourself getting a bit tired of this. The good news is: everything is impermanent! In the meditation, we say, '*Come! Welcome!*' We are so openhearted, the thought comes straight in through the front door – but the back door is also open! This is the practice – open space. Gradually, you start to see that this space is not some dull nothing, but is quite bright and shining within which all the thoughts and memories of who you are and what you want, come and go. You don't cease to exist, but you see that this existence is in the manner of a dream.

Three Aa practice: visualising Aa

This time when we do the practice, resting the attention in the space in front of us, imagine that there is a letter 'A'. If you know what the Tibetan letter 'A' looks like you can imagine that, or you can just imagine a capital 'A'. The Tibetan alphabet is not more holy than our own alphabet. This letter 'A' is surrounded by a ball of rainbow-coloured light, similar to the bubbles children blow with

soapy liquid. It is transparent and the letter 'A' is also transparent. Some people can visualise easily whereas for others it is very difficult. If you don't see very much, just have the sense of it being there.

We hold the sense that this letter 'A' embodies the presence of all the teachers, from Kuntu Zangpo, through Dorje Sempa, down to Padma Sambhava and right to our present time, including your mother, your father, and your school teachers. You must have learnt *something* at school! The reason for this is not to make it holy and special because the path of dzogchen is the path of integration; all phenomena come into this natural state. Seeing some people as very special sitting on a very high throne and other people as very ordinary, doesn't help the practice of integration. The buddha nature of all beings is the same. If some people are more in touch with that Buddha nature, good luck.

I have a big brother and when I was a child he was always bigger than me. I used to have to wear his old sweaters. My first bicycle was his old bicycle. I was always looking to see when I might get bigger than him. My mother would say, *Big or not so big, you are both my sons.* but when she wasn't around he wanted to be the king. It is like that; everybody has the same nature. When he was fourteen, I was twelve. I also became fourteen but then he was sixteen!

It's not so important where other people are, high or low. The main thing is to focus on this moment, where your own buddha nature is completely there. Nobody but your self stands between you and your own nature. This is not just an idea in dzogchen. In the **Dhammapada**, Buddha Sakyamuni says:

'Not father, not mother, not brother, not sister; nobody can harm you more than yourself. And also not father, not mother, not brother, not sister; nobody can help you more than yourself.'

The key thing is to see that it is our own attachment to our thoughts and to our familiar sense of self that keeps us small. When a fear or an anxiety arises inside us it's an impermanent phenomenon. But when we fuse into that – when we feel the anxiety and we become anxious – then we have been caught and are limited and small.

All our teachers, all those who have benefited us, all the great masters of the lineage – the essence of all of these, realised or not yet realised – is in this letter 'A'. We can also sound *Aa* and the space of our heart integrates with the realisation of the masters.

We rest in that state and then this letter 'A' just dissolves in space.

[*Three Aa practice*]

One of the reasons we don't do this for too long until we get used to it, is that it is not about making effort. Usually, when we first do the *Aa* there is some sense of openness and relaxation, but later the more you do that, the more wrapped into the arisings you become.

Question about visualising

Comment: I find it very difficult to visualise. Also, when I try to keep my vision in the space in front of me my eyes go all the way back to the trees on the horizon.

James: In the Tibetan system they talk of eight consciousnesses. In the heart centre the chakra is a lotus with eight petals. The heart is the site of the mind or awareness in the Tibetan tradition. Of these eight consciousnesses, five are the sense consciousnesses: seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling.

There is a mental consciousness which organises the information that comes from the sense consciousnesses, and there is a consciousness that contains the afflicted tendencies: stupidity,

aversion, attachment, jealousy, pride, and so on. This particular consciousness brings into the moment the ego's emotional reaction to what is happening. For example, you might be walking in the garden and suddenly you smell some delightful scent. The smell coming into your nose has activated the nasal consciousness. The mental consciousness identifies this as a wonderful smell, but then the afflicted consciousness says, *'Oh, I need to smell that again because it smells very good.'*

The eighth consciousness is the consciousness which acts as a kind of vast memory store of past experiences. It is called 'the consciousness which is the ground of everything', and it means whatever we have encountered gets stored there and can be evoked. It is the root of dreams, daydreams, fantasies, and so on.

The most important thing about these eight consciousnesses is that they always take an object; we are always conscious of some *thing*. If we are sitting practising and a motorbike goes along the road, the sound comes in through the ear and gets registered; the mental consciousness identifies it as a motor bike. Consciousness is seen as something dynamic and situational; it doesn't come into existence unless there is an evoking object.

For example, you may be sitting here quite peacefully and suddenly you get a pain in your knee. Up to that moment your attention might have been on what was being said. When you are attending to what is being said in an immediate way you don't really have a body, but then this pain arises in your knee and you become conscious of your knee and your body, and if the pain is intense you are no longer conscious of what is being said. If you move a little then the muscle relaxes and the consciousness goes back; it is not activated.

This is a long answer to your question but we are getting there!

Therefore, when you are looking out into the space in front of you and your attention goes on to the back of the room, the object there catches the visual consciousness. This helps to stabilise your ordinary sense of self and becomes an organising point.

Do you know a sweet we call candy floss? Spun sugar wrapped around a wooden stick? When you get this perception, you have the 'stick' and everything gets wrapped around it, like the spun sugar, because now what is happening is happening to *you*.

If visualising the 'A' is difficult don't even think about that. Just try to let the gaze settle in the space in front of you and whatever is around – what we call 'walls', 'windows', and so on – just have it as a vague background thing. Not focusing strongly, but relaxing and opening the gaze into the peripheral vision, like a big arc of space.

Although there is appearance in that state it doesn't take on the concrete form of an object on to which we can lock. There is an open spaciousness around which phenomena are moving, a bit like a child's bubble. We have a sense of this body, this shape, this colour, but we are not turning it into *'this is me'*. It is more like a circular mirror: we are seeing the edge of reflections everywhere, with this empty centre. As much as possible, try to open into the space and just relax in that.

If you find yourself developing a strong focus, either internally with thoughts or externally with perception, just take a deep breath from the diaphragm and relax very slowly into the out-breath, because in the out-breath mental activity declines. If you focus on the in-breath you get more mental turbulence.

OK, let's do another brief practice and then break for tea.

[*Three Aa practice*]

Cheating ourselves in our meditation

One of the things that my teacher, C R Lama, used to say about himself was that he was *'liar number one and cheater number one'*. When we sit in meditation we realise in how many ways we cheat ourself. There are many, many thoughts which catch us, many ways in which we abandon ourselves into whatever is arising. So an important part of the practice is to become honest about ourselves.

One of the problems about temples is that they have very shiny statues, and that can give us the sense that our buddha nature is something very bright and shiny. The very first thing my guru said to me was that the Buddha is not a nice man. He is not made out of sugar, in fact he is maybe made out of quite a lot of shit! As long as we think sugar and shit are very different we have a problem, we think we have to get rid of the shit before we have enough sugar. For meditators, however, the shit *is* the sugar: the problems, the difficulties, the fantasies, are what we have to work with.

A common way we persecute ourselves is to imagine that everyone else meditates better than we do. In my book, ***Simply Being***, you will find several chapters on the problems of meditation. For example, Patrul Rinpoche says in his text that some great meditators start to cry and say, *'I have been trying for many years but I still can't meditate.'* His advice is not to rest in the belief that you can't meditate, but rather 'to stay on the one who knows he can't meditate'. You may think, *'What am I doing here? This is a waste of time. Everyone else seems to be meditating all right but I'm not.'*

When you find yourself in that state don't go anywhere else, don't try to develop a better thought in your mind; stay on the one who thinks he/she doesn't know what he/she is doing. To 'stay on it' means not falling into it, not being merged in it; not being far back from it but just open to it. When you do that the thought will move and change. Another thought will come and similarly we start to get lost. Don't do anything and the thought will go just by itself.

Movement and stillness

The most important thing is calmness. If you move, experience yourself as the movement. Our nature is both infinite stillness and movement, the specificity of whatever is occurring moment by moment. When we are following the movement, we lose the stillness. There is nothing wrong with movement, but movement will only tell us about movement. There is nothing wrong with cooking, but it won't teach you about music. You can play a lot of music but your stomach will not get full, so knowing how to cook as well is helpful!

Observe what is movement and what is stillness. All of us in this room are addicts, and we are addicted to the strongest drug, which is thought. This makes it difficult to meditate because we keep thinking the answer lies in the thought. The thought is not the enemy but neither is it the answer. Thought does what thought does; it creates stuff, like children playing when they don't tidy up their toys afterwards. When we are in our thoughts all the time we don't get to clarity. If we want to have clarity we have to stop falling into the thought.

What then about being with our friends and other people? If we want to be with other people we have to fall into the thought, otherwise our friend is telling us some story about their love life and at the end they look at us to see what we think, but if for us the story is like the clear, blue sky, they might say, *'Hey! Weren't you listening to me? Don't you have anything to say? I have just told you that my heart is broken!'* In that way ordinary life is impossible, since ordinary life is theatre. To act in the play you have to believe in the role, but you also need to know you are an actor.

In recognising this open, empty nature of the mind you come to see that everything you do is like an actor. Life is not real, it is not serious, but the play must go on. You have to talk to people; you have

to pay your taxes; you have to remember what side of the road to drive on.... The fact that things are an illusion doesn't mean that they don't have shape and form So, we have these two aspects of ourselves: relaxed, open spaciousness and the movement of coming into form.

An exercise: the narratives we have about ourselves

What I would suggest you do now is to take a little time to reflect on what you know about yourself. What are the particular kinds of positive and negative thoughts which catch you? What are the core negative beliefs that you have about yourself that seem to squeeze you down to a fixed point? What is your ordinary sense of self built on?

These thoughts form a kind of screen, so that when we meditate we come down to this base level of belief and identification and it can be difficult to go beyond that. These are patterns of conditioning which we have built up over a long period of time and which we keep stored in our fridge-freezer. When we take these thoughts out of the freezer and put them into the microwave, we have an instant hot, delicious meal of I, me, myself!

These streams of remembrances and beliefs appear to have a kind of clarity in clarifying who I am, and they are exactly what buddhism calls 'stupidity'. *Stupidity* in this instance means lack of insight into the true nature. This lack of insight often takes the form of very sophisticated ideas about who we are. Psychotherapy is not helpful for meditators if it encourages more fascination with these narratives about self.

Take some time now reflecting on these familiar thoughts and feelings out of which you construct this sense of self. Then describe them to a neighbour. You may think, '*But this is very private and personal,*' but part of our work is to make what appears private and personal, impersonal. It is just stuff. Everybody has a mind full of funny things, don't worry about being the worst or the best in the room.

[Practice and discussion]

Prayer in praise of Prajnaparamita

There is a verse in praise of Prajnaparamita, the goddess of wisdom. She is seen in the Mahayana tradition as the embodiment of the perfection of wisdom. There is a four line verse about her, or as a prayer to her, and it goes:

MA SAM JO ME SHE RAB PA ROL CHIN
MA KYE MI GAG NAM KHAI NGO WO NYID
SO SOR RANG RIG YE SHE CHO YUL WA
DU SUM GYAL WAI YUM LA CHAG TSAL LO

*Beyond thought, speech, and expression is this great wisdom.
Unborn and unceasing in nature like the sky, with a precise
clarity which illuminates each thing just as it is. We pay
homage to the mother of all the buddhas.*

She is seen as being the mother of all the buddhas because we each have to be reborn in her womb to become awakened. Her womb is emptiness, so we have to enter into emptiness – this fertile womb of the great mother – and out of it we are reborn and reconnected to the ground of our

existence. If we think about it, we are something which came from something; our parents had sex and from that we came out of our mother's belly, and each of our mothers and fathers had sex giving rise to each of them. From generation to generation, someone meets someone, they have sex, and someone else comes, so here you have the chain of continuity of entities.

However, from the point of view of buddhism, all of this has been like an illusion – a fairytale. When we do the meditation practice and we enter into this state of emptiness we leave all our history behind. All our limitations, all the negative beliefs, all the self-hatred; everything that we have that makes us ourselves, we leave behind.

As we looked earlier, the mind itself is naked, raw. We awaken into that state when we ourselves become naked. We take off the coat of self-hatred; we take off the hat of 'I can't'; we take off the shoes of 'I am stupid'. We even have to take off the underpants of 'I am wonderful'! And then in this naked state, open and clear, thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise. Where do they come from? Only from space; they are inseparable from space.

As it says in the Heart Sutra: form is emptiness and emptiness is not other than form. We rest in that state and experience the flow of the radiant clarity of emptiness or the open nature. As we move into the world with others, because other people are arising from the same condition as ourselves, because everything is arising from this state of emptiness, our fear about other people diminishes. Our anxiety about what they might think of us goes away and we find that just by being with others we come into this endless display of whatever is required. Life gets much easier.

To let go is at the heart of the practice. In the practice we were just doing we recited the *Three Aas* and in that we relax and open. When Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden they were naked. When they left they wore a covering. If we want to go back into the Garden of Eden we have to become naked again. Most of us don't have the perfect body, so to be naked means really accepting yourself as you are. Whatever thoughts are arising – happy or sad – just allow them to be there, and in that way there is a freedom because you are not conditioned by how you manifest. If you are looking at its content the manifestation tells you about the nature of manifestation, but if you allow the manifestation to dissolve, its self-liberation will take your awareness back to its own ground.

For example, if in the meditation a thought like "I am stupid" or "I am unlovable" comes, we have two possibilities. One is to believe the content of the thought, and the other is to let it just be itself. The thought will vanish back into the open state the way sometimes you can see these small, wispy clouds dissolving back into the sky. If you stay present with the thought in that moment when it dissolves you are back in open spaciousness. This is why it often says in the texts that, "the things that bind ordinary people set the yogi free", because we learn how to make use of whatever form arises from our karma; to stay with it, and to observe the openness beneath it.

OK, so maybe we will do a short meditation to bring this day of practice to an end.

[*Three Aa* practice]

Day Two:

This morning we will do quite a lot of different kinds of meditation. I think it is perhaps more helpful to think of meditation as a chance to be with yourself; to find out who you are and how you are, rather than as something that you do. When we are trying to do something we immediately have in the background an evaluation or a judgement. "Am I doing it well or badly?" From the point of view of dharma, judgement is very dangerous because a judgement is a strong opinion about something: "this is not good", or "this is terrible". It doesn't really matter whether our opinion is right, wrong,

good or bad. What it is saying is that there is some definite object in the world and we can put something on to it.

Nouns and verbs

This objectification creates nouns out of everything when, actually, there are only verbs. For example, here is a chair but actually what we have is chair-*ing*. The chair is dynamic – impermanent through time – revealing itself in different ways. When we see it in that way, we have to look at it again and again to see how it is chair-*ing*. If we have the fixed view that it is just a chair, then we don't attend to the transformation of its manifestation through time and through the changes in light.

Perhaps many of you had a strict catholic education and are rather tired of holy images, but it is can be helpful to look at them to examine their function. Somebody being nailed to a piece of wood is the image of sacrifice, and sacrifice is a dominant idea in many cultures. In many cultures young people were sacrificed to ensure old people lived longer; they were sacrificed to keep the cosmology running. People's freedom is sacrificed to keep monarchical systems in power. There are noble sacrifices like in *La Traviata*: it is very beautiful and I cry every time I hear it because I am very sentimental. You also have the sacrifice of a mother for a child.

We can see how sacrifice can be something direct and simple, or it can be fixed with a set of abstract ideas. In a poor family where a mother feeds all her children and goes hungry herself, that is a very direct and connected sacrifice. To take someone's life in order to keep the sun turning around the earth is very different; it is a sacrifice which is fixed into some metaphysical interpretation.

From the buddhist point of view, the main thing is to be curious and to see how every aspect of our existence has a particular function. When we look from the outside many of these functions seem crazy, but when you are inside them they seem to make sense.

When I was at university I used to like to smoke a lot of drugs. In the early hours of the morning when we ran out of cigarettes, I would make a noble sacrifice by walking for miles into Edinburgh in the middle of winter to a vending machine to get more cigarettes to make my little joints. At the time that seemed very important, because inside the bubble of believing whatever it is we believe in, everything makes sense. People who believe in football travel long distances to see men running around kicking a ball. They think this is completely meaningful and they think that the meaning is already established; the meaning is just there, it's obvious.

Part of observing the world is to see the way any object can be given great meaning. When we see that the meaning that other people give to objects seems a bit crazy, we should also use that to look at ourselves. Many of the things that we have put a lot of time and energy into are perhaps just our own private preference constructed out of the patterns of our conditioning. We can then start to examine how within that, it just seems real and necessary. We can start to see the nature of attachment, of identification, which takes something quite ordinary and suddenly makes it sing and become more alive.

OK, we will now do this basic meditation focusing on the breath as we did yesterday. Find a way that you are comfortable, and if you need to move then just move. We focus on the breath or on some external object, and if you find your mind moving away from this you just gently bring it back.

[*Shiné* practice]

Questions about practice

Question: Are there any particular times of the day when you should do this practice?

James: It is better to do a calming practice when you have time. If you do it just before you dash off for work, you will always be thinking about being late so that is not useful. If you are doing a practice like the *Three Aa* practice which is about space; it is not a good idea to then immediately get into a car and to drive, because you are not focused so much on the interactive energy.

The main thing is to do the practices and see what impact they have on you, and then to look at the structure of your life and see when is the best place to fit them in. Many of the general guidelines for doing practice six-times-a-day at particular times were developed in countries without clocks, without computers, and without cars. All of us are quite connected to busyness; we can't really escape the sense of many things to do.

There is also an important aspect in this, which is: how can we come to trust ourselves? People sometimes say, *'I am lost and confused and I can't possibly trust myself. Instead I trust what the teacher says.'* Trusting the teacher and trusting yourself is the same thing. I trust bananas are good to eat. I trust the lama. I trust my mother. I trust myself. The first part of the sentence, *'I trust'*, is the same, so what does it mean to trust? It means I have to know it is OK.

You trust the lama, but you don't see the lama very often; you don't know very much about the lama, so you just have to trust him. You spend most of your life with yourself yet you decide not to trust yourself. Learning to trust ourselves means learning to use the understanding of how and when we get confused as a basis for trust; not through harsh judgement, but through a tender, felt sense of how we are.

If you know that when you wake up in the morning you are very slow and it takes you time to get going, but that in the evening you have a lot of energy, what will you trust when you hear that many people do their practice first thing in the morning? Trusting yourself is a good idea.

Comment: I understand from what you are sharing that it is like the ocean and that we need to be like corks floating on the waves, but I feel more like a surfer who grabs all the waves! What can I do because I find it very difficult to change this behaviour?

James: OK. Imagine you have a house with a garden where the neighbour's cat keeps coming into your garden to shit. This is very annoying because it is impossible to keep the cat out. You think, *'Why is that cat coming into my garden?'* For you, this is your garden, but for the cat, it's a good toilet. On the other hand, if you go into a public park and you see some children shouting and screaming, you might think that it's not very nice behaviour but anyway you let them do what they do because it is a public space. In the same way, if you think this is your mind and whatever is coming into your mind has something to do with you, you tend to react to it more directly.

This analogy with the mirror of infinite spaciousness is that it has no division between self and other –between inside and outside – so that when thoughts arise these are just thoughts. I say, *'This is my thought and I know it's my thought because it is coming into my mind, and because of this I have to do something about it.'* But the central question is where do thoughts come from? Is there a private factory creating our own thoughts?

Let's say, for example, you have a problem at work. You sit down maybe with a pen and some paper and you try to think and solve the problem. In that way, you can think these thoughts are your thoughts because you are doing them, but a lot of the time it is just thoughts coming and going. I take my pencil and draw a circle around it claiming it is mine, but now I am stuck with it and that creates the hook.

Part of the *Three Aa* practice we were doing yesterday is that when we relax into the spaciousness we go from living in my body, with my thoughts, my life, my self, to the sense of a spaciousness within which many things arise. The more we allow thoughts to be themselves, they come and they go. Gradually, the velcro quality which immediately binds the subject and the object relaxes, and these little hooks get straightened and slip past each other.

Yesterday we were talking about how we have to go from some thing to no thing. Part of this means facing the boredom that comes when we let go of the auto-intoxication with our own ideas. This gives us a kind of litmus test to see if we are actually doing the practice or not, when we can allow all the thoughts to go. It is a bit like sitting on a park bench watching people coming and going; just observing them. You don't need to say hello or goodbye. You don't hate them – they are not your enemy – but there is no reason to be engaged. If we can gain that, then we have this open state of spaciousness.

Out of this arises energy like the wave of the subject and the wave of the object, and these waves tumble together. However, as long as we are identified with the thought that needs another thought to make it complete, we will find no rest.

The Roman writer, Ovid, in *The Metamorphoses* describes the history of Eros. He describes how at one time all human beings were both male and female. Because of some behaviour that disturbed the gods, these two parts got split as a punishment hence the sense of looking for completion, looking for the missing part. Subject and object are not essentially separate; they are born together, but the subject part has become split off from the object part so we always have a sense that something is missing. When thoughts come they seem quite good because for a moment they seem to complete us, and this provides a kind of instant gratification. When we can't really relax a state of chronic distress arises because we are always ready to go for the next thing.

The state of rigpa, or unchanging awareness, is not like that; it is not the same as the waves, neither does it block the waves. The more we have this sense of deep relaxation, we can allow all the thoughts to come and from time to time when something is necessary we can circle that thought. But if we rely on every thought that comes, we are actually in a state of distraction. When an alcoholic has many bottles to drink from he doesn't feel alcoholic; he just thinks. *'I enjoy drinking and luckily for me I have so many bottles that I never run out.'* Part of the meditation is to try to do a detox and allow these thoughts to sit where they are.

In *The Odyssey*, Homer described what happened when a ship sailed close to the rocks where the sirens were singing. Odysseus says to his crew, *'You must bind me to the mast. You must take this beeswax and put it in your ears, and no matter what I say, you must just keep rowing in a straight line.'* As they get closer to the rocks and Odysseus hears the sirens, he says, *'No! No! You must keep going,'* so they keep rowing and rowing. This is similar to the meditation because the thoughts are so interesting and so tempting that a bit of us is desperate to go on the rocks, but we have to be intelligently stupid and just keep rowing!

Questions about experiences (nyam) in meditation

Question: In the meditation practice I feel good and my mind is centred, warm and concentrated, with no arisings. Is it useful to stay hooked in on that?

James: This is similar to Odysseus when he goes to the land of the lotus eaters where everything is easy and nice. In the Tibetan language this kind of state is called a *'nyam'*. Nyam simply means an experience. There are three main kinds of nyam: one is the absence of thought; one is emptiness; and the other is happiness. Sometimes they become mixed together, but you can have them separately.

You can enter a state where nothing much is happening and it's a very peaceful state. This is the result of practice but it doesn't go anywhere; you have to keep travelling beyond it; it's a useful sign but to spend a lot of time in it creates a false sense of security. Sometimes there is the experience of a lot of joy and feeling very light with everything feeling warm and fresh inside. There is no problem at all with that but it is also just a temporary phenomenon; it seems to last so in that sense it's more like a kind of pervasive mood, but it will change in time.

In these states – not pushing them away – not trying to do anything different – just very gently ease yourself into being present **with** the situation, and if possible to be present **as** the situation. Because when you look in the mirror, the reflection is in the mirror; it's not like in the cinema where the image is projected out on to a screen. In the cinema you have the separation – this perspective – but the mirror and the reflection are inseparable, and yet the reflection is changing and going.

If you place a crystal ball on a piece of red cloth, it will appear red because of the translucence; the red light goes through it and it takes on that colour; if you put it on a blue cloth it will appear blue and so on. The more we experience the openness of the mind, the more we can allow it to be full of things. As soon as the crystal ball is taken off the red cloth it is no longer red; it looked red; it was red, but it was not red. The more we have the confidence that the mind is open and empty, then whatever state arises we can just be present with that instead of developing a thought like, '*Oh, I have arrived here in my meditation,*' or '*This is my experience.*' ... not making it solid in any way but just allowing it be there.

Question: The meditation practices felt a bit short for me and I would like to practise these for longer. Is there a reason why these particular practices are so short?

James: The reason we keep the practice short here is that some people are not used to sitting. When I get the sense that there are lots of bodies moving in the room then it is time to end the practice. In your own place you can sit for longer periods.

If you are at work and you have to shift your attention to a different task, maybe make an important phone call, without even changing your posture you can just relax into the out-breath. You relax, open, and let go of the chains and webs of thoughts you have been wrapping around you, preparing what you will say and do. In that way you can go fresh into a new situation.

Question: Which would you suggest is the best practice for this?

James: The *Three Aa* practice is the best because it is quick.

In my work as a therapist I see many people in the course of a day, and many of the people are very disturbed. There are big waves of emotion. One session ends and after a few minutes someone else comes in. The next person deserves some open space as well, so it is very important for me to be able to let go of whatever was there.

If we really want to be connected and available for other people then we have to be fresh, and the *Three Aa* practice is very useful for that. You can do it silently, or you can do it by just visualising the letter 'A' in space.

If you are a teacher and you work with lots of noisy, difficult children, you can just relax into the out-breath, into this state of the mirror. All this turbulence is going on but just in the manner of a reflection. Otherwise, all the difficulties and busyness of the world become like a stream, which instead of falling free like a waterfall, become directed down into the waterwheel of your mind and start turning all the machinery. The stress then builds up and you get caught up with what is going on.

Question: Is most of this 'acting out' because we are searching for love?

James: Yes, because love is a validation of our existence.

The Buddha in his first teaching described these four truths: the truth of suffering; the origin of suffering; the cessation of suffering; and how to get free. We live in a time where there is a strong sense of entitlement. The American constitution guarantees the right of its citizens to freedom and the pursuit of happiness, but we don't really have any *rights* at all. According to the traditional buddhist idea, we have *karma*, which is to say there are many habits and tendencies from the past which manifest in our experience. If we think, *'I should be happy. I should be healthy. I should be loved. I am a valuable person. I exist.'* These thoughts create an expectation which is sure to be frustrated. The Buddha said that the origin of suffering is attachment and, primarily it's attachment to the idea of oneself as a kind of thing which exists and which can be filled up with good things.

A story about black and white stones

There is a story from the early kadampa school where one monk went to his teacher and said, *'My mind is always full of bad thoughts. What can I do?'* His teacher said, *'You have to collect a hundred white stones and a hundred black stones. When you sit in the practice, every time you have a bad thought you put a black stone in front of you, and when you have a good thought you put a white stone in front of you.'*

At the beginning he only collected black stones, but he kept going and gradually he collected more and more white stones, so that eventually he only had white stones. He went to his teacher and he said, *'Now I only have white stones.'* And the teacher said, *'Now go back and keep practicing until you have no stones at all!'*

There is something here about attachment and suffering. When we have an idea that we need a particular state to make us complete, whether it's an external state, such as a job, or a relationship – whatever the fantasy is we have to examine that. This is one of these fulcrum points where we can turn towards samsara or towards nirvana, because as long as we have this idea of what we need, we are still primarily identified with the map that we have in our conditioning: *'I wouldn't be complete without that.'*

The point of view from buddhism is completely different. Our personality is just this impermanent, ever-changing positioning in reaction with the world. It is said very clearly that friends become enemies and enemies become friends. Sometimes we will feel warm and safe and sometimes we will feel cold and afraid; these are aspects of our existence.

Children's toys are usually very bright colours, but a painter's palette will have many browns, grays, and murky colours on it. In the same way we have to learn to inhabit and work with sadness, anxiety, loneliness, feeling unloved ... because as well as bright colours these are also the colours of our world. By allowing all these colours to be there, we see that this is just the human condition; this is what happens to everyone. Therefore, if we don't take it too personally, we can say that in life everybody gets one slice of shitty cake and today might just be your day!

All of these things are in the dharma and we are very lucky to encounter these teachings. These teachings have been around for a very long time. Everything we have looked at over these two days is completely in the tradition. Some of the examples are new and linked to our culture, but the ideas are all from the tradition, and so it is very helpful to develop real faith in the dharma.

That doesn't mean that you don't need to connect with the world. You can go to the movies and to the opera, but you can go with a dharma understanding. Every novel and every popular song is

teaching the dharma. You walk on the beach in the summertime; you watch different people behaving in different ways, and each of them is showing the dharma.

Protecting the teachings

The reason for studying the more abstract parts of the dharma – the more seemingly intellectual or theoretical parts – is to give us the resources to illuminate ordinary experience, so that eventually everyday life becomes the guru. The practice of dzogchen is something which in many Tibetan traditions is kept quite secret and people have to do a lot of preparation first. However, it is rather strange that the quick way to understand your own nature should be treated as something that has to be held back from you.

The story of Matram Rudra

There is a traditional story in relation to this. In its brief form, the son of a rich man heard that there was a buddhist teacher coming to his country, so he decided to go to meet him and he took along his servant. The teacher said, *'Your mind is pure from the very beginning; it is open like the sky. It cannot be destroyed or contaminated by anything.'*

They went home and the young man took up meditation practice thinking, *'Oh, everything is pure. I can do what I like.'* He ran around on his horse causing trouble, whipping and beating the people he didn't like, and chasing the village girls. His servant, however, thought, *'My mind is pure from the very beginning,'* so he relaxed and became very peaceful and didn't cause any trouble at all.

The rich, young man became annoyed with his servant, and said, *'You are no fun anymore.'* And the servant replied, *'Well, I tried to do what the teacher said.'* The rich, young man replied, *'So did I. Let's go back to the teacher and ask who is right.'* They went to the teacher and each explained what they were doing and why. The teacher then said to the rich, young man, *'What you are doing is completely wrong.'* The young man became very angry and killed the teacher. He became more and more powerful and continued doing whatever he wanted, including travelling around killing many people.

The text then says that when the young man died he was reborn as a dung beetle, and as a kind of worm, and as all kinds of insects and so on. He was born to a prostitute who had sex with three kinds of demons in the same night. She became pregnant from these three demons and the son's consciousness came into her womb. He began to grow, but then she died. The people in the village dragged her body and dumped it in a cemetery because she was of very low status, but the baby still inside her started to eat his way out. He crawled onto her breast to try to find some milk, but there was no milk so he drank her blood and ate her body instead. From this he gained the name Matram Rudra, meaning 'mother-eating demon'.

This baby developed wings on his back from his father, and he crawled and flew around the cemetery finding new bodies to eat. A tiger came into the cemetery and he killed it and wrapped it around his waist. Then an elephant came into the cemetery, so he killed it too wrapping it around his shoulders. He dusted his body with human ash and beautified his face with human fat, and for rouge he used some blood. Then he set out into the world and killing every man he met, and raping every woman he met. In this way he dominated the world and gathered around him many other demons and rough people.

In the traditional buddhist cosmology, in the middle of the world is Mount Meru. All the demons started climbing up Mount Meru destroying all the lower gods and then the higher gods, and destroying all the religions, the buddhist monasteries, and so on.

At this point, the buddhas met together to discuss what was to be done with this person – it took a long time for the bureaucracy to kick in! They decided to send out a force, which was an emanation of Dorje Sempa, and this being went into the mandala of the central demon. He went up to the demon, Matram Rudra, and into his penis and right up through his body boiling the fat and everything inside of his body. He came out of the top of his head in the form of a horse's head, and this was the birth of Hayagriva. Another emanation of the buddhas went into the palace and into the vagina of Matram Rudra's wife, boiling everything up inside her body and coming out through her neck in the form of a sow's head. This was the birth of Dorje Palmo, and the birth of the wrathful deities of the Indian tantra system.

People sometimes ask why there are angry buddhas. Why are the buddhas not all peaceful? What is wrong with them? They took on this form in order to transform the evil that was already in the world.

How to treat the teachings

The main point for us now is the first part, where the teaching can be given but somebody hears it with their ego and uses the dharma to justify their own will to power. This is one of the reasons why traditionally people were careful about teaching dzogchen. The right way is to take the teaching and to massage it into yourself so that you become softer and softer. If instead you use the dharma as something strong and hard like a weapon to get yourself somewhere in the world, you can get very lost.

The prediction both from Buddha Sakyamuni and from Padma Sambhava, is that the dharma will be destroyed from inside, not from outside. That is to say, when people misunderstand the teachings and use them as a means to have money or fame or power, then it is no longer doing its job.

On the one hand, we need to treat the teaching as something very special and very precious; treat it with respect and really try to use it well. On the other hand, it is not a good idea to make the teaching extra special or something very holy because it is the natural condition. It is just how we are and how things are.

OK, so maybe we will do some final practice. We will do the *Three Aa* practice, and then at the end we can dedicate the merit for all beings.

Dedication of Merit

GE WA DI YI NYUR DU DAG

OR GYAN LA MA DRUB GYU NAE

DRO WA CHIG KYANG MA LU PA

DE YI SA LA GO PAR SHO

*By this virtue may I quickly attain the glorious Guru's stage,
then may I put all beings without even one exception, on that
same stage!*

We come to the end of our brief time together. In particular, I would like to thank Marta for the organization, translating what I have been saying and for translating my book, Simplemente Ser.

Also, to thank you all for coming and for being attentive and engaging, because it can take quite an effort to feel at home in these ideas. This has made my time here very easy and joyful, so I am very happy.