
Cutting free without losing anything

James Low

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Transcribed by Jo Féat

Edited by Barbara Terris

Excerpts

...The more we do this practice, the more we become aware of the very subtle thoughts which maintain the sense of a separate self. In the traditional text they are described as being like a water meadow: a very flat meadow which often has a dip in the middle with a soft small river running underneath the ground.



...For dzogchen practice you don't need to make much external renunciation. What you do need to renounce, however, is falling asleep in the process of living. When you are talking you have to know that you are talking, and when you are walking you have to know that you are walking. That is to say, at each moment be present in your existence, really here, not somewhere else, not half here wanting to be somewhere else. Be committed to inhabiting life as it arrives.



...All phenomena arise due to causes and conditions, but what is the truth? The truth is that everything is illusion. You won't find any truth. But then how will I know if people are cheating me? People cheat you when they try to sell you a truth. That is the main point.



...All the things that worry us, confuse us, and make us disheartened—these burdens which can seem so heavy and so real—are just arising and passing mental constructs. So don't try very hard. Your effort is not necessary. In fact, your effort is part of the problem. From the very beginning the mind is pure so just relax in that natural purity and when activity wants to arise and create new patterns allow this to go on like a dance of fireflies in the sky.



...Movement will not illuminate stillness; movement is inseparable from stillness. The reflection in the mirror is in the mirror; you can't take the reflection out of the mirror. The reflection only exists in the mirror, but when you look at the mirror you see only the reflection; you don't see the mirror. When you look at the mirror you don't see a mirror; the mirror shows itself through the reflection. The mirror is not something which has an essence or an entity nature of itself which is why the mirror can show many different things.



...Movement is always seeking other movement. That is not wrong in itself, but the movement in what we call 'samsara' is movement that spins at such a speed that it appears to be solid. So again and again just relax into a slow out breath and be present with whatever occurs.

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It is a great pleasure to be here in a place where CR Lama taught.

This weekend we are going to look at emptiness in relation to awareness, and hopefully gain some sense of the illusory nature of existence, thereby giving us more ease in the world.

Emptiness allows us all the many possibilities of life

In our period of time the understanding is that buddhist teachings began with Buddha Shakyamuni. Buddha Shakyamuni was born into a good family. In the texts he is often referred to as Prince Siddhartha, and he lived his early years with a lot of luxury and privilege. At a certain point, however, he had some experiences which caused him to think about his life in a different way.

One day, when out in his chariot, he saw a sick person, another day he saw a very old person, and later he saw a dead person. He thought, *'If this kind of experience can happen to these beings it can also happen to me.'* That is to say, he saw that being called 'Prince Siddhartha', being wrapped in people's ideas about who he was, was no protection against the movement of life. He then left the palace where he lived and lived for seven years as a wandering yogi. So, somebody who had been a prince became a beggar. If he had really been a prince could he become a beggar? Having been a beggar could he become a buddha? So what is he really? Emptiness.

It is emptiness, or the absence of inherent self-nature, that allows us to show all the many different possibilities of our life. Whenever we feel we are just one thing, whenever we seem to become a particular very defined situation, this is an experience generated out of our own investment and our own identification and attachment.

If we think about our own lives, we have each been many different people. We have done many different things in our lives. Sometimes these things have gone well and we have felt successful, competent, confident. Then things change and life seems to become much more difficult; whatever we try seems to go wrong. Both experiences are illusions. By referring to 'illusion' buddhists do not mean that things don't happen; 'illusion' means that in the very moment that something is happening it has no solid, reliable, substantial definition. Whatever we are experiencing at any time is produced by the interaction of many different circumstances. And as these circumstances change, how we are will change.

As we change we have the memories of who we were but we can't go back in time to where things were before. That is to say, who we are at any moment arises out of the interaction of many different forces; it is dynamic or energetic. The function of the practice is, therefore, to help us work with the circumstances of our existence. These circumstances include our thoughts, feelings, sensations, hopes, fears and so on. They do not only refer to things that are outside.

Becoming a buddhist is not about becoming something

Examining the nature of emptiness helps us understand what is generally called buddhism. This notion of a buddh-*ism* is not one that we find in Eastern languages. Buddh-*ism* seems to be something, in the same way that we have Christian-*ity*. This ending (*-ism, -ity*) of the word seems to create a sealed world. In Sanskrit they use the term 'dharma', and in Tibetan, '*chos*'.

‘Dharma’ and ‘chos’ indicate something about things as they are. The expression ‘becoming a buddhist’ is not an act of me deciding something. I am not making myself into something artificial or joining a particular group; rather the idea is that I am awakening to a more direct experience of how things are. When we look at the history of buddhism there are many different ways of describing this. One could say that there are many, many buddhas. Buddhas have been around for billions and billions of years. Buddhas manifest into the world at different times and they teach according to the situation they find; they teach skilfully according to the different capacities of different beings.

When western scholars look at the history of buddhism they see something very different. They see the gradual development of families of ideas and practices that develop through time according to the internal developments of social groupings and intellectual cultures. For example, buddhist tantra started at a time when hindu and jain tantra was also starting, so we might describe this as a cultural form, as a way of experiencing the world. Inside the Tibetan tradition, however, they say that tantra arose when the Buddha was teaching on Mount Malaya. The Buddha taught first in Sarnath and this is referred to as ‘the first turning of the dharma wheel’. He then taught at Rajgir on the Vulture Peak Mountain, and the teachings of this ‘second turning of the dharma wheel’ are referred to as ‘mahayana’. Then he went to Mount Malaya in the south of India and turned the wheel of the dharma a third time, teaching what we call ‘tantra’.

That is one story, one account, and a western academic interpretation of buddhism is also a story. If you want a job in a western university, in a department of Asian studies, you shouldn't really say that the Buddha taught on Mount Malaya because they will respond that this account is not an academic story. Do you want to keep your job or not? If you want your job, you tell the right kind of story.

An example of the importance of telling the appropriate story was given by the American buddhist scholar, Donald Lopez. He invited the Dalai Lama to come and meet some of his advanced students who had just finished their degrees. The students gave some presentations about the development of buddhist ideas showing the historical interactions of different schools and how through a dialectical process a new synthesis developed. At the end of it the Dalai Lama said, *“This is very, very interesting, but I am the Dalai Lama of Tibet and I cannot think this way. I am the voice of the tradition, so good luck with your study.”*

This is very important to bear in mind: this is the illusory nature of phenomena. All phenomena arise due to causes and conditions, but what is the truth? The truth is that everything is illusion. You won't find any truth. *“How will I know if people are cheating me?”* you might well ask. People cheat on you when they try to sell you a truth. That is the main point.

In our western lineage, through Socrates, we have the tradition of irony. Irony, paradox, and scepticism are our very good friends and companions in dharma practice because faith in the path of liberation is very important. But how do we have faith in emptiness? It is not something substantial to hold on to, rather it's the possibility of relating with a lightness and an openness of being.

In each of these stories some people, at some time, said something. And when they said something, from where did they speak? They spoke out of emptiness. What they said was empty and the relation of speaking and hearing is also empty. I will try to make this clear for you.

The Heart Sutra is one of the foundational texts for understanding emptiness. It begins by describing how the Buddha once was at Vulture Peak Mountain in Rajgir, surrounded by many bodhisattvas, great meditators, monks, nuns and so on, and he was sitting in meditation not doing anything.

Due to the power of the Buddha's meditation, Shariputra, one of his close disciples asks a question: *"How should a son or daughter of a noble family behave in a way which is in harmony with these profound teachings?"* The reply comes from Avalokitesvara¹ speaking out of his own meditation, which is not different from the Buddha's. Shariputra's question comes out of the hinayana understanding and Avalokitesvara's answer comes out of the mahayana understanding. The Buddha is sort of like a father here watching and listening to his two sons who have different viewpoints. The father just sits there and says, *"Okay you guys, sort it out!"* Avalokitesvara begins by saying, *"Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness; emptiness is not other than form."* He then goes on to explore the various traditional deep categories or organising factors of buddhist understanding in relation to this juxtaposition of something and emptiness.

What does emptiness mean to us?

What is emptiness for us here now in this room? If I pick up this cup we all see the form of the cup, and when we see this form or shape we see the cup-ness of the cup sitting in the cup. Generally, our experience is that we see something which is existing in itself outside and this appearance seems to have no need for our definition to make it what it is. But actually, the cup-ness of the cup is dependent upon a projection. *We* say 'cup.' *We* say 'glass.' This is an interpretation and just now I even have an interpreter who is putting my words into German!

I think that this is a glass or a cup, but this is not what you say in German. If you live in English, when you see this you think that this is a cup, but German people don't know that this is a cup and they call it something else (Tasse); and the Polish too call it something different (puchar). That's because they lack the good karma to be born speaking English, because if they had that good karma then they would know that this is a 'cup'! It is just so obvious!

So you can see that these tools of language, inside which we sit and which we use to define something, are only relative. Inside the bubble of our own particular understanding, inside our own way of using language, inside our own belief system, we have this seamless flow of the sense that we are seeing meanings that are already existing in the world. As soon as we move across language we start to see that in different languages people describe things in different ways—not just with different words but also with different conceptual frames.

What we call 'cup' is a relationship, not an entity. There is not a fixed thing here which is defined from inside itself. The cup-ness of the cup is revealed through our relating. If our mind did not say 'cup', or whatever the term would be in one's own language, this could be anything. If you gave this to a baby of nine months they might bang it on something or chew on it, because they are relating to it in terms of their own frame of reference.

Once we come into language, however, we start to have an interpretive framework that we live inside, and so instead of experiencing 'I am calling this a cup' we say and we think that this *is* a cup. My function, my role, my co-creation of this as a cup becomes forgotten and we come to live

¹ Chenrezig, in Tibetan.

in a world of things. This is how the world becomes dead—just a lot of old stuff—and this stuff is then something that we live in relation to. The stuff is there and my connection with this stuff is generally in terms of liking it or not liking it.

When the non-duality, or the co-emergence, of what we call the subject or the object is forgotten, then we are returned to a feeling tone as the function of our lives. That is to say, my work is to either go towards something or away from something which is already established as out there. This creates an anxiety or a fragility in ourselves, since a lot of the stuff that we encounter in life we don't like and yet we are stuck with it. Some people don't like the stuff of their bodies; they think that bits of their bodies are the wrong shape. Some people don't like where they live, some people don't even like their own children. Some people might not like their jobs or their colleagues. This feeling tone becomes a barrier to just being present in the situation as it is. This is how we lose a sense of the dynamic emergence of the field of experience in which what we call 'the subject' and what we call 'the object' are both empty. Empty here means not fixed, not internally defined, that is to say our appearance and the appearance of everything around us depends on circumstances.

Fluid and flowing

We are now sitting in this room in the month of May and the sun is shining outside. Although we have some electric lights on, the light of the sun is coming into the room. If we were here in December it would be very different. The light coming in through the windows would be less intense and that would affect our perception of the room and our experience of ourselves.

We are easily subject to influence and the influence comes from us being fluid and flowing. The fact is that we are in flow. What we call 'I, me, myself,' is a movement or a display or a performance of an ever-changing patterning and re-patterning out of the range of my potential. We are flowing in a world that is also flowing.

Berlin, where we are, is a very good example of a dynamic city; things are always changing. Much building work is going on and the cultural and economic climate is also shifting and changing. If you live in Berlin, new things happen every day. If you walk out of your house into the street, the street may have the same name today as it had yesterday, but the phenomenological experience of being in that street will be different today from yesterday. What is actually happening for you is different. Your feeling is dependent on how your breakfast was, or if the kids got to school okay, or if you had a quarrel with your partner, or if you have a difficult day ahead of you and so on. The weather has changed and there are also different people and different cars outside on the street.

These things are important because if you attend to how things are, which also involves attending to how *you* are, you find that the how-ness of your existence arises in relation to many things that are happening. On top of that you layer your fixed interpretations, but bear in mind that everything that you use to make your interpretations is an abstraction. For example, my name is James. My name has been James since I was born. The person who has been referred to by the name James has changed a great deal but I have a birth certificate that says my name is James, and on the basis of the birth certificate I got my passport. My passport guarantees that I am James; it doesn't guarantee that I am happy or that I got any breakfast; it doesn't guarantee anything other than that my name is James. In my life so many things have changed, so many countries, experiences, and different peoples; all of this incredible rich complexity and yet I am still James.

We see that a name is an abstract quality which floats in the air above our head, and somehow seems to be the linking or unifying factor of the many diverse experiences that we have.

The James-ness of James is in the passport. When I came into the airport in Berlin and gave my passport to the policeman, he looked at it very intently to establish that James was James. He did this by looking in his computer. He didn't say, "*Hello, James. Nice to meet you. Welcome to Berlin. What are you going to be doing in Berlin?*" He just put the passport into his machine and typed in a few things, and when he found that the James in the passport and the James in the machine were the same—well, then he indicated that I could go!

In all these interactions we can see how we create the illusion of fixity and continuity by denying, or by not giving attention, to the immediate richness of our ever-changing experience.

Different understandings of emptiness

When Avalokitesvara says that form is emptiness the meaning is that whatever you see is revealed to you, through you. For example, I might look at my watch and you ask me:

—*What's the time, James?*

—*It's five minutes past eleven.*

The watch tells me the time and then I tell you the time, but really I tell the watch the time. If you asked a little child who doesn't how to tell the time then the watch is not telling them anything, because the watch can only tell you the time if you can tell the watch the time. And that is the same for everything. For example, Tibetan paintings sometimes show male and female deities having sex. This male and female aspect is essentially representing the indivisibility of subject and object. Therefore you have the interpenetration of these objects; they are not two separate things; without the unification you wouldn't have the experience. It is the very emptiness of the forms of the world that allow us to have intercourse.

Staying with this metaphor, we are both male and female. From one point of view, all the objects of the world are a kind of vaginal form and our mind moves like a penis into this vaginal form. Our consciousness goes into the object, and from another point of view, our existence—our mind—is a vaginal form and the objects or existences of the world come inside us and impregnate us with reactions. Moment by moment this interaction is occurring all the time. Sometimes we appear active and sometimes we appear passive. Sometimes the object appears active and sometimes the object appears passive but essentially, it is an intercourse; it is not a fixed thing. It is because of emptiness that form can begin. I can move the glass in my hand up and down, but when I put it down the glass hits the table. However, when I pick up the glass it is moving through space. You need a space for the form to manifest itself.

In this you can see different aspects of understanding of emptiness.

In the first case emptiness is like a kind of deconstruction: through thinking about forms in the world we can see that they arise as they are due to the interaction of different factors. For example, I am sitting in a chair woven from willow. You can see very clearly how the different lengths of willow have been bent together to create the form of the chair. At first there were many straight pieces of thin wood and then they were bent by heat and water and woven into this form which we call a chair. Without adding anything magical, by the placing together of these pieces of wood, a chair is created. The concept of 'chair,' which is an abstraction, is then placed

on to the actual physical forming of the moving together of these pieces and then we have our chair. In that sense, 'chair' is an illusion created by the coming together of a form and a concept.

This is exactly what the surrealists were doing. In the 1920's they could have hung this willow chair up as an exhibit in an art gallery. People would have looked at it and said:

—*Oh, it's a chair! What is it doing in an art gallery?*

—*It is art.*

—*But it's a chair.*

The surrealist, Marcel Duchamp, exhibited a urinal, named it 'Fountain' and that was taken to be art. Something appears to be something because of its context. Many artists have taken so-called 'ready-mades', or 'found objects' such as piles of bricks, tin cans, shoe boxes or discarded objects from the streets and displayed them in art galleries. Because they are in an art gallery they are deemed to be art; if they were out on the street they would be rubbish. It is the context and the object together which create the identity, because the context, or situation, allows the attribution of the abstract term.

When I was a child at school I sometimes would get beaten by the teacher. This is not allowed nowadays but in my time it was done a lot. The teacher was allowed to hit me because he was doing teaching; if a stranger in the street outside had hit me that would have been quite serious. In the context of the classroom, however, it was acceptable for the teacher to hit the pupil for bad behaviour or whatever. The same action, hitting a child, is defined according to the situation. It is the same with killing someone. If you kill a stranger you can be arrested for murder, but if you kill Mr Bin Laden or Mr Hitler you have saved the human race!

So, 'form is emptiness; emptiness is form' means that because there is no inherent truth there is no internal self-definition in this willow basket chair. Its existence as a chair can be seen as the continuity of patterns of relationship. After a certain period of time, people may say, '*Why have we got these chairs here? Let's change them for something else.*' Then, because of this change in the mind of the people who run this hall, the chairs may be put outside as rubbish. Someone may walk by and say, '*Hey, that's quite a nice thing*', pick it up and use it for something else. That is the meaning of recycling: one person's rubbish is another person's lucky day!

All of which is to say, from this point of view, that if you look again and again at whatever you see, at whatever you taste, at whatever you hear, and at whatever you touch, is not you as a fixed subject encountering a fixed object, but rather it is a process.

The real message of all this is: '*Don't fall asleep in your life! Don't fall asleep into the realm of assumption! Be surprised! Be delighted moment by moment!*' We are not dead yet. After some time we will be dead but until then things are happening all the time. This is amazing! This is the vitality...the shimmering sense of the movement...this is our participation in the field of co-emergence.

If you apply this analysis to everything you encounter you can come to a general conclusion that everything is empty and that I am also empty. In any interaction, what you have is the interplay of emptiness-es. From this way of seeing it emptiness becomes the ground or the basis of all experience.

Meditating sky-to-sky

My hope is that what I have been saying so far can explain for you how the mahayana critique of substantial entities moves us towards a sense that because no particular fixed things can be discovered outside or inside of ourselves, then the ground, the source, the basis, the field of our existence, is like the open blue sky.

In this open blue sky the mind that is present and all the facets of experience are like two blue skies moving together, hence the Tibetan phrase, 'meditating sky-to-sky'. In this sky, many rainbows appear. Everything that we experience is like a rainbow: it appears, we can see it, but we can't catch it, we can't get it. This is now the nature of our experience.

For example, the glass I am holding contains some water. When I drink the water it goes into my mouth. Before it goes into my mouth there is one taste in my mouth, then I have the taste of the water in my mouth, and once I have swallowed the water the taste of the water vanishes. Even if I were to keep the water in my mouth the sense of the taste of the water would change. This is quite a sad fact since it means that when I have a nice glass of wine and I swirl it around in my mouth to fully experience the taste, but gradually the taste vanishes! The only solution is to have yet another drink, but blow me if the same damn thing doesn't happen again!

This is how life is: nothing is permanent, nothing remains. Thoughts, sensations, and feelings arise and pass. What we call the subject and what we call the object are two forms of energy moving in this open space of emptiness which is the ground nature of the mind. This understanding is the basis of tantra. If we do not have this idea clear then the practice of tantra is not so helpful, because all the different forms of the tantric mandala—the gods, the goddesses, the dakinis, the protectors and so on—are the energy of manifestation. They are the empty forms within this sky; they are like rainbows. There is something quite beautiful about the rainbow and the fact that something is an illusion doesn't mean that it has no impact.

The fact that something has an impact, however, does not mean that it is real. That shift can be quite difficult for us to make. At my school, when we got into trouble, we were called out to the front of the class. The teacher would open their desk and take out their belt. It was called a tawse, or a Lochgelly. We had to put out your hands to 'get the tawse', one...two...three...four...five...six times maybe. Thwack! We would try to use our sleeve to cover our wrist because the teacher wanted to hit you on your wrists. The rationale was that the teachers would make this so real and painful for you that you would learn something; the intensity of the experience would convince you to behave differently.

This is a very important principle. If you take intense experience as being validated solely on the basis of its intensity—regardless of whether it's positive or negative, happy or sad—and as that being the proof of its reality or importance, then this creates a distortion in the topology of the lived field of experience and hence in the welcome we can extend to all variety of experience. When we attribute a super-validity to certain experiences then we start to particularise and to make choices: *'I want more of this because this is really good, and I don't want any of that because it's boring.'* That's how we enter the domain of bias and partiality—we welcome limitation as if it were liberation!

Okay, let's take a short break here.

[Break]

The difference between perception and conception

Experiencing the environment as open and spacious is very important, but we don't often experience our world in this way. When we look around this room we see many different things and all of these things are revealed to us through our experience. Essentially, they *are* our experience. If I look at Olaf then I see Olaf's shirt, and that is revealed to me through my experience of it. Having seen it once I can have the concept and the memory of Olaf's shirt. So now, if I turn to Andreas, I can talk to him about Olaf's shirt and I am now speaking about the mental representation that I have: my memories and my ideas about his shirt. But that is very different from turning, looking, and seeing it because actually I can't see his shirt. What I *can* see from the angle I am at is his right shoulder as presented to me and the curve of the material on that shoulder. I don't see the back of the shirt. I impute the back of the shirt because on the basis of my enormous training in logic I think that if a shirt has a front it will have a back! That, of course, is yet another mental experience. On the basis of thinking in that way, when I look at Olaf it is as if I see the shirt he is wearing yet what I see are certain shapes and colours. I give him a shirt. I give him a shirt in my mind, since I cannot see his shirt.

What I am trying to point out here is the difference between the perception and the conception. The shirt is a concept for me. The perception is of something which is there and the conception is something which is here. When I put the concept from my mind on to what I see, I say, '*Olaf is wearing a shirt*', and that shirt is then a thing out there in the world. But there is no such thing there. What there is, is the immediacy of the perception layered with the concept of the shirt, and that can be quite difficult to get a sense of. Of course, the central point is that although I can't alter what I see—because in a sense that is given to me—I *can* alter what I think.

For tantric practice this distinction is important. If I think 'the shirt' is in what he is wearing—that the shirt-ness of the shirt is in the thing on Olaf's body—then when we imagine that everything is the body of Padmasambhava then we are pretending it to be something which it is not. It's like when a child has a piece of plastic and they imagine it to be a Barbie doll. Barbie is a piece of plastic. The difference between the plastic and the Barbie is the concept. When a little girl goes to playschool with the other little girls she quickly get infected with the concept of Barbie!

We have exactly the same with the shirt; we are adding something and then thinking it is out there. If the shirt was really a shirt then to imagine it is the same as Padmasambhava is to be playing a game. Only when you see the shirt as not something existing in itself—and that actually we are seeing a potential basic colour and shape which ordinarily in samsara we make sense of in terms of strongly dualistic concepts—is it then possible to transform the concept that you have. Instead of seeing this as a fixed shirt—something enduring in space and time which has its own essence—we start to see that it can be transformed. There is no essence; there is a potential which can become many different things.

The dramas of becoming

If you want to be an actor you have to be willing to loosen the sense that you are who everyone believes you to be, because as an actor you want to convince the audience that you are *not* that person. You have to allow the identity of the character in the play to come into you so that you act, you walk, and you sit in the manner of that character. Theatre would be impossible otherwise.

In the theatre the ordinary actor becomes the character in the play whereas in Hollywood the star is a star pretending to be the character in the play. I remember when I saw the film *Edward Scissorhands* and saw Johnny Depp for the first time, I thought that this was an actor doing really interesting things. Then when I next saw *Pirates of the Caribbean* I saw Johnny Depp. Because I saw Johnny Depp, I did not see a pirate. I just thought that this was Johnny Depp making a lot of money!

One of the functions of the star system is to give us ordinary people the sense that we are a step ahead of the game because we know that the actor is really a person and that not being taken in by the character is quite good. But if you go to an amateur theatre and the actors don't get into the role properly, then you maybe think this is terrible. It's an interesting double move, the resistance that we have to being captivated by role.

Every day we play many different roles. Parent, worker, manager, colleague, trainer, student... All are forms of experience but none have any essence to them. In the old days, rich people lived in big houses and didn't do any work. It was a high status not to work. Then culture gets transformed and now it is low status not to work. This is the theatre of interpretation. Due to causes and conditions, due to relative circumstances, we believe certain things to be true and other things not to be true, but it is emptiness which allows these different interpretations to be made. If things were truly defined it would be impossible to change them.

In our tantric practice, we might say, '*In an instant, I become Padmasambhava.*' That doesn't mean that now I am pretending to be Padmasambhava. It's not like a child pretending to be superman. It means that the form which I ordinarily show is empty and devoid of inherent self-nature, is held in place primarily by the beliefs that I and others have about who I am. If I loosen the belief I have about myself, I see that the belief creates the illusion of the fact, rather than the belief being something that aligns me with the truth of a pre-existing fact. Once you see the difference between these two you start to have a kind of freedom.

On a psychological level, we can look at the beliefs we have about ourselves: are we attractive, intelligent, capable of doing many things? Or are we unlovable, boring, ineffective? On the relative level of interaction, these beliefs will be very influential in how we behave. In therapy, talking about their childhood, people come to see how they have built up particular images of an identity. Yet beneath that there is an even more basic belief that I am who I think I am. It is as if we might be able to change the adjectives, but the noun remains the same. From the dharma perspective what we have to look at is the belief in the noun: that I am what I am. The given-ness, or the facticity, of this sense of an enduring self is what has to be examined. However, this is the level of enquiry that we need to look at if we are interested in the dharma because otherwise we remain in the realm of duality, that is to say, a fixed subject standing in relation to a world of things.

If that were the case then perhaps I could make myself a better person. I could try to be kinder or more generous. I could force myself to get out of bed in the morning and tidy my house. With some effort and commitment I could even transform my life!

If the basic belief that 'I am me,' exists in the same way as 'this is a glass,' then it appears that there is an irreducible non-negotiable essence: a thingness to who I am. If you have this belief and try to do a tantric transformation practice it will not be successful because it will just be an add-on. You will be pretending to be something which you know you are not. If you believe yourself to be that familiar habitual self with your usual failings, shortcomings, and difficulties etc. then how

could you be Padmasambhava? Padmasambhava is pure from the very beginning: radiant, full of power, compassion and wisdom. We, on the other hand, are actually not doing too well. This is a contradiction because if I am strongly real then dharma is just a dream. In the end you have to decide what to put your money on.

But if I am not real—if what I take myself to be is a construction like the illusion of the reflection of the moon on water—then the way in which I arise depends on the interaction of the constitutive forces. These are the constitutive forces of karma from previous lives and all the experiences we have had in this life. These experiences need to be investigated as conditional. More than that, we have to see what is the basis, or root, of our sense of being the person who is like that? We do some bad things, maybe we hurt someone, and we think, *'Oh, shit! Why did I do that? I am such a bad person.'* The thing that we did wasn't good but the doing is an activity, a process. What we do afterwards is distil the energetic movement into an essence: defining myself as a bad person, a selfish person, a mean person, a greedy person or whatever. This process is referred to in Tibetan as *dag-dzin* (*ahamkara* in Sanskrit) and it means holding onto, or creating, something as a substance on the basis of movements of energy.

What does it mean to say, *'I am a bad person'*? If you say *'I am very angry'*, how many hours a day are you angry? To say *'I am a person who gets very angry sometimes'* is different from saying *'I am an angry person.'* The practice is to examine again and again how we define, objectify, reify and create a sense of enduring essences. Without this any practice of dzogchen and tantra is very difficult. When a thought arises in the mind like *'It's so hopeless. I just can't meditate'* then this is a thought that arises in the mind and then passes away. But if you believe that thought then you start to feel, *'What am I doing? This is a waste of time. I don't know what's going on.'* Many such thoughts can arise.

There are two options. Either we merge into the thought and let it be the limit of our identity or we relax and see the thought for what it is—a transient thought briefly expressing an aspect of our potential.

In the first option it's as if you are a very famous actor and a film company sends you a script for a wonderful new film in which you could have a starring role. This is what the thought is doing: it's offering you a role in the drama of existence. You fall into the thought and it takes you in a particular direction and then you find that you are moving through these dramas of becoming all the time.

In the second option we see that all that occurs is only ever theatre with no essential truth to any of it. Of course, we have to move in the world with other people, but we can develop a different script on the basis of, *'I am relaxed...I am at ease...I am open...I am empty.'* From this point of view there is nothing to protect in myself nor is there any barrier between me and the world. We have the possibility of connecting with a wide range of people and in being connected with different people we become different.

It might be useful now to take a little time to discuss in pairs some of the beliefs you have about yourself and the world around you. That might feel like quite a personal thing to do, but luckily the Buddha has explained that there is no real person!

Starting to examine the assumptions, within which we operate, is the beginning of starting to untie them. We can then move into a state of open acceptance of whatever is arising because we know that it doesn't define who we are. We have behaviours, thoughts, feelings, habits, but no

essence. These are only patterns, and the more we can describe these patterns in a neutral way, without taking up any strong position about them, then the more we can start to see that they are quite empty and that they are not true.

Okay, shall we try that for a bit?

[Discussion in pairs followed by a lunch break]

Dzogchen meditation of non-doing

This meditation is very easy, but being so easy it is also very difficult. The basic meditation instruction is to just sit as you are and be with yourself as you are. Nothing else to do. The most essential teaching in dzogchen is, *'Don't do anything.'* We will just sit in this way and see what happens—what is arising for us and what we find ourselves to be, what we find ourselves doing without doing anything artificial.

Now we will do this for a while.

[Sitting practice]

When the mind is free to come as it comes many different things occur. Sometimes there is some clarity; sometimes there is dullness; sometimes there are interesting thoughts; and sometimes there are tedious thoughts. However, given what we were talking about in the morning, what we are primarily interested in is to try to see the points where we identify with what is going on; identifying either in terms of this is happening to me, or this is something I like or I don't like.

The mind is pure in the way that the mirror is pure

The basic instruction in dzogchen is that from the very beginning the mind is completely pure. It is pure in the way that a mirror is pure. A mirror is not full of good or bad things, and yet a mirror is able to show whatever kind of reflection, be it what we call 'good' or 'bad'. When we sit and practise in this way we are aware that many different experiences are arising, like reflections. Our tendency is to identify with these arisings, in terms of saying 'this is bad', 'this is good'. This naming is a movement in the realm of movement. Movement is always naming another movement.

Looking at the reflection of your face in the morning mirror, picking up your toothbrush and watching the reflection of yourself brushing your teeth—the image of your face changes as the toothbrush goes up, down and sideways. That is to say, the reflection is influencing the other reflections. This is how life is, but the reflection doesn't influence the mirror.

Our basic awareness—our capacity to be present and able to register experience—is not altered by the quality of the experience. It may not feel like that to us. Perhaps after lunch on a hot day you feel a bit tired. Who is the one who is tired? 'I am tired.' That tiredness is something which appears to be filling us, but it fills us in the way that the reflection fills the mirror.

Here are two very important things. Imagine there is a mirror in front of you, and you look at your face in the mirror and you can see your nose. You take your right hand and you put it in front of your nose, and now your nose has vanished. You take your hand away and miraculously

you have a nose again! The movement of the hand as you see it reflected in the mirror is changing the reflection. The mirror itself has no shape. Even with a very small mirror, if you hold it up on a sunny day, you can have the sun shining out of the mirror and you can even dazzle and annoy other people! You can take many, many things into a small mirror because the mirror is empty.

In the same way, the emptiness of the mind allows the arising of the subject and the object. The subject is not the mind itself; the subject is the movement, is the energy of the mind. You might think *'I want to stay alert, but I am very tired.'* The one who is very tired is me, and on an ordinary level that is true, but who is the one who is tired? If we look, we don't find any particular concrete person. The statement *'I am tired'* is a description of a pattern of energy. In the morning we were not so tired, now we are a bit tired, and in the evening maybe we are not so tired. But in the moment when we feel tired, we are tired. However that is an experience which is arising for us; it is not *definitive* of us.

The misidentification of the subject is the root of suffering. The mind itself is not an individual personal subjectivity that defines me. That doesn't mean it has nothing to do with me; it's not some kind of distant object out there.

If we go back to the basic notion in dzogchen: from the very beginning our mind is completely pure. The mind is a clarity. Clarity is the capacity to show, to display, to illuminate, and what is illuminated is not necessarily bright and shiny. When you feel tired and heavy and you want to fall asleep this tiredness and heaviness is the clarity of the mind. That is to say, what is displayed is something which is heavy.

You might say mirrors are amazing since they show everything. If we hold up a big mirror in here and we turn it around, we will see all the amazing colours in the room. But then if we come back at midnight, close all the shutters and put out all the lights and hold up this wonderful mirror, we wouldn't see anything! The mirror is still being clear but what it is showing is darkness.

In the same way when you feel dull and stupid, depressed even, without hope, this is an experience, and if it is an experience the experiencer has the clarity but the experience is dull. If you merge the two you get confused. To have the idea that somehow because our mind is clear then everything should be bright, happy and shiny all the time is a very biased idea of existence. It is to say that dull things are called samsara, and bright happy things are called nirvana.

Again, the essential point is that the answer doesn't lie in the object. Don't look to the object to make you complete. Neither does the problem lie in the object. If bad things are happening in life and difficulties are occurring what causes the distress is our relation to the difficult things that are arising.

Chod: Cutting the object and cutting the subject

In the practice of chod, which means to cut or sever, we cut the root of difficulties. We can focus on cutting the object (i.e. that which seems to trouble us) or we can focus on cutting the subject (i.e. all the feelings thoughts and sensations which constitute being a person who is troubled). It doesn't really matter which one we cut since when you cut the connection between subject and object they both dissolve. Subject and object are mutually validating through their interaction, and when that activity ceases the absence of individual essence and substance in both is revealed and they dissolve or resolve in their own spacious ground.

The ego is a dualistic formation, a sense of self which requires the sense of another to hold it in place and give it shape, albeit a temporary and contingent shape. It functions as a composite of factors governed by self-reflexive consciousness. Consciousness (*rNam-Par Shes-Pa*) indicates that one knows something, that there is a knowable object and a knowing subject. Consciousness also indicates apprehension: getting hold of something in a way which seems to affirm the existence of both the grasper and the grasped.

Mahayana buddhism points to eight consciousnesses². Each of the six senses has its own consciousness and each operates in relation to a class of object. For example, when we are walking down the road, looking around, maybe chatting with a friend, we are probably not very aware of our sense of smell. And then we walk past a garden with a wonderful flowering bush and suddenly the scent comes to us. On the basis of the aroma arising from the bush and the activation of the sense organ for smell, the consciousness of smell arises. These three things operate at the same time: the object, the sense organ, and the consciousness. The sense consciousnesses are taken to include mental consciousness, which is the capacity to organise the richness of phenomena into the patterns of experience that are familiar to us.

The seventh consciousness is linked to our personal habits of the five afflictions: stupidity, pride, jealousy, aversion, and desire. These are invoked in response to mental consciousness. So we might become conscious of this wonderful scent and then think, *'Oh no! Since I have asthma this is going to be a bad day for me. Why do all these people need to have gardens? I live in a city because I want to get away from nature.'*

The eighth consciousness is said to be the ground consciousness and it gives us access to all the varied thoughts and experiences in the entirety of samsara. It is the basis for the many and different thoughts which come into our mind. We may find ourselves with a feeling and we don't know why we have this feeling, it's just there. It has been evoked by the patterning of the contents of the mind unfolding as subject-object experience. Each of these eight consciousnesses is a pattern of relatedness rather than a fixed thing. If there is no scent there is nothing for us to smell, but if the nerve endings in our nose and mouth have gone dead we wouldn't be able to smell anyway. If the consciousness that deals with smell is damaged then even if there are many perfumes around nothing will register for us.

To free ourselves from this on-going action-reaction we can learn to cut loose the entanglement of sense object, sense organ and sense consciousness. When cut in this way these powerful forces which seem to catch us so easily are revealed as being empty of inherent self-nature, and we start to see that samsara is indeed like a dream.

Cutting the four demons

Machig Labdron, the great Tibetan yogini, developed the practice of 'cutting free'³ together with Phadampa Sangye. She said, *"You have to cut the four maras/demons⁴ in the dharmadhatu."* The dharmadhatu is the space of becoming, the infinite empty host which offers hospitality to

² visual (or eye) consciousness; auditory (or ear) consciousness; olfactory (or nose) consciousness; taste (or tongue) consciousness; touch (or body) consciousness; mental (or mind) consciousness; affliction-pervaded consciousness; ground-of-all consciousness

³ Chod (*gChod*)

⁴ The four demons are: *Thogs bCas Kyi bDud*, the tangible demon; *Thogs Med Kyi bDud*, the intangible demon; *dGa' sPro Yi bDud* (or *dGa' Brod bDud*), the demon of excitation; and *sNyems Byed Kyi bDud*, the demon of conceitedness

whatever is occurring. Just as the mirror, through its emptiness, is able to show the reflection of whatever is put in front of it, so the dharmadhatu is the site whose unobstructed openness reveals whatever is occurring.

Mara means demon, something that causes trouble. For example when Buddha Shakyamuni was at the point of awakening he was attacked by many different demons intent on distracting him. There were demons attempting to provoke desire, fear, anger, and so on. Sometimes such demons appear to be substantial objective forces out there in the world and sometimes they appear to be subjective phenomena operating on a psychological level. Object and subject are always moving together and the focal point of attention can rapidly move from the 'thing' that occurs for us to our response to it. To be caught by a demon means to be caught up in something without recognising the nature of involvement. So to free ourselves we have to cut our attachment to, or binding by, seemingly substantial external objects and seemingly insubstantial internal objects. These are the first two demonic modes, the tangible and the intangible.

When we consider the glass of water that I am holding it seems obvious that the glass-ness of the glass is in the glass and that this is an objective fact, the true status of something out there in the world. Looking in this way we don't recognise that this seeming truth is in fact an experience or an interpretation which arises for us in relation to the potential of the appearance. When we close down the potential of the object by cutting it adrift from the interpretation of the subject we fall under the power of the demon of the substantial external object. I am then living in a world of things which are other than me and which impact me. There is only one of me but there are many, many things out there. In fact it is as if I am surrounded by objects and have to work out what is helpful and what is harmful. The on-going need to do this can be overwhelming. Objects arise as distracting and controlling demons and our own subject-formations of habits, expectations, hopes and fears also arise as demons.

The third demon we need to cut is that of exaltation and excitement. It refers to the excited exhilarating relationship that we encourage with our own experience. Essentially it means taking ourself and our situation so seriously that we lose our ground and our balance. The desire to achieve happiness and satisfaction intoxicates us and we get carried away. Rather than trying to control each instance of arousal, we need to cut our availability to be caught by our longing for the buzz of something special happening.

If we think of our experience during the course of a day we probably feel most alive when we feel a true connection with someone else. Maybe a friend phones us and asks, *"Fancy a coffee?"* and suddenly we feel better. We get on our bicycle and off we go and we enjoy this feeling of a positive mood arising in us. We might think, *'Ah ha! This is the real me! This is how I should be all the time. Why is it not? I need to make changes in my life so that I always feel like this!'* But of course this situation and its consequent impulses do not last.

Why would we want to cut something as exciting as this? Because the intoxication hides what is actually happening. Desire for one special thing blinds us to everything else. The object of excitement becomes foreground and everything else becomes invisible. If excited arousal becomes the identifying sign that life is good then most life situations will not be satisfying.

Here in Germany, at anytime day or night, outside the cheap beer shops, you see people who have a particular genetic modification. They are born with a clenching hand. If there is a can inside the hand they feel okay but if the fingers of the hand start to unwind and release a now empty can they start to feel a bit twitchy. When a full can is installed in the welcoming grasp they give a

sigh of relief. *“Ah, now I am fulfilling my fate. I know who I am with my can!”* Well, we all act like this with various objects and habits. We each, for example, have particular rhythms and identifications that feel just right for us. While this familiarity and repetition can feel reassuring it also means that we give a very narrow welcome to the rich potential of the world. We are looking for the things that make us feel the way we want to feel. Cutting loose from the demons of excitation means to cut our fixation on the narrow attitudes that makes much of the world invisible or irrelevant for us.

The fourth demon to be cut is the desire for status and worldly position. This refers to positioning ourselves in the world in such a way that other people will think we are okay, even special. Most of us have some degree of social anxiety. We want people to like us and we worry about what other people think about us. Because we cannot read other people's minds but can only develop our own idea of what they might be thinking or feeling, when we change our behaviour to try and please other people, then the person that we are trying to please is a person in our own head, not the actual person outside. We have a fantasy about how the other person is likely to see us and we adapt our behaviour to our fantasy of what they might think. You can see how this might be, to always imagine the expectations of others! If we can't relax and live in our own skin we end up being false in order to feel accepted. Then we will never be settled or at peace, because a manipulative relationship with the world is very troubling.

This is illustrated by a Tibetan story. A yogi goes into retreat in a cave on a hill. He has a sponsor who is a rich person with a big house down in the valley, and the sponsor says that he will come back in six months time on full moon day. In the intervening time, the yogi does his practice and doesn't think of anything else. But then he remembers that it will soon be the full moon day of the sponsor's return. He looks around his cave and suddenly notices that his altar has fallen in because he has only been doing his meditation. He decides to do some spring-cleaning. He sweeps out all the dirt and lays a new bed of leaves and branches for himself. He cleans the altar and polishes all the cups. Everything looks good! Suddenly it hits him that he is trying to make himself look like a good dharma practitioner, so he grabs handfuls of ash from the fireplace and throws them on the altar and around the cave. He recognises that *“I am the kind of dharma practitioner that I am, and whether the sponsor likes it or not, I am what I am.”*

The demon of image, of conceit, of presentation, can catch us in all sorts of ways: about our physical appearance, about how friendly we are, about how much time and attention we give to other people and so on. We can all be hooked into a fantasy of wanting other people to validate that we are okay.

Going back to the basic principle that the mind itself is pure from the very beginning, what I call 'I, me, myself,' is the manifestation of the energy of that state. Manifestation comes as it comes and goes as it goes. Whatever form it shows does not contradict the intrinsic purity of its own ground nor of its activity. Our sense of self, our ego, is part of this non-dual manifestation. However the ego is not the master of the field of manifestation but arises due to many causes and conditions, most of which it is unaware of. This is why we often find ourselves thinking, saying and acting in ways which surprise both ourselves and others. The eight worldly dharmas⁵ lead us astray and encourage our artificiality. The desire to please everybody is inherently corrupting since the field of experience is unpredictable.

⁵ hope for happiness and fear of suffering, hope for fame and fear of insignificance, hope for praise and fear of blame, hope for gain and fear of loss.

At the moment there are two Karmapas. Some people like one Karmapa and some people like the other Karmapa. One Karmapa is validated by the Dalai Lama and other important lamas, but the people who follow the other Karmapa are not interested in this because they like *their* Karmapa. The point here is not to establish who is the true and who is the untrue Karmapa. It is simply the fact that no one person, no matter how respected can please all the people all the time.

No matter what kind of adaption we make, our manifestation will bring us some friends, some enemies, and most of the time no attention at all. These varying circumstances are just the interplay of the patterns of energy within which our actual agency is rather minimal. Yet if we think, *“Oh, my friends like me therefore I can like myself. Because some people love me, I must be loveable.”* then this is locking the door to freedom. It is saying that I am at the mercy of other people's views about me: when they like me I am happy, and when they don't like me I am sad.

This fourth demon of egotism and self-conceit⁶ refers to the self-referential quality of being absorbed in the story about oneself as being significant. It is concerned with the internal self-reflexive commentary, the on-going narrative, which creates the form of a pseudo-self which we take to be ourselves.

Perhaps you have a childhood memory of being at the seaside on holiday and just running free along the beach. When you see children in that state you see their faces shining and open. They are not evaluating how well they are playing or interacting, they are just completely present in the wholeness of experience. This is a taste of the state that is free of egotism, in which there is a simplicity, a nakedness, and a lack of complication in the full given-ness of this moment and of the next. Much of the time, however, we imagine that there is a need to evaluate how we are getting on: to set goals, to push ourselves a bit harder, to evaluate and then feel guilty and bad or to strive even more. Most people have these kinds of winds blowing across their internal landscape most of the time and these gusts of judgement lift us up and cast us down, keeping us from peace and contentment.

Machig Labdron said that this last demon contains all the others. For example, when you look at what is in my hand the glass that you see is created by your mental activity of identification. However if you relax your mental activity there is simply the immediacy of what occurs, naked and free of your confectionary interpretations. This frees ‘the glass’ from the prison of our concept and lets its potential unfold. The identification that ‘this is a glass’ creates a solidification upon which we express our opinions and so colour the world with our preoccupations and avoidances.

It is the same with the internal contents of the mind. It is not the thoughts themselves that are the problem but rather our notion that they have something personal to do with ‘me’. This is why in the meditation we spend a lot of time just sitting and allowing thoughts to come and go. Through this we start to see that the thought plus my involvement creates the ordinary sense of my experience of ‘this is happening to me’. When we start to relax our belief in what is arising, relaxing our investment and involvement in it, when we no longer relate the thought to ourself, it is just a thought, a transient form of energy

Let's say a thought such as 'I hate myself' arises. Although it can be a very tempting thought if we have developed a pattern of negative identifications of our ‘self’, the actual thought, 'I hate myself' comes up and goes by. That's interesting. The less immediate identification we have with

⁶ *sNyems Byed Kyi bDud*

the thought, the more chance we have of being able to see what it is up to and what *we* might be up to in rushing to get involved with it.

The central concern in cutting free is to cut a gap, to cut off the fusion which appears to occur between open awareness and what arises in, to, and as awareness. The mind is like a mirror. We know that when we look in the mirror reflections come and go; they don't stay. When they go they don't leave any trace. Similarly when the mind is clear thoughts and all the modes of experience come and go without trace. When we *are* the experience, the empty non-duality of awareness and experience, what is there to say afterwards?

On a sunny day like today the children go out to play. When they come home, we ask:

- *What were you doing?*
- *Playing.*
- *Yes, but what did you do?*
- *Just playing!*

When we are playing we are just playing. What else is there to say? When we are alive, when we are present, we are just present with what is happening. When that experience ends, why would we talk about it? Yet we get drawn into commentary, binding our sense of our self and our sense of the world into a narrative that maintains our sense of being a separate individual.

Attachment to, and identification with the moment of arising as something substantial and truly existing leads us to catch the moment and to be caught by it. This is our commitment to the project of creating a substantial enduring sense of self. A lot of effort for nothing!

Phat!: cutting a hole between subject and object

In relation to cutting, the main way of doing this is to utilise the energy of the *semdzin*, *Phat!* *Semdzin* are practices designed to help us see the nature of our mind, and in this one we use this sound of *Phat!* to clear out the entanglement of subject and object.

We allow the sound to come up from deep inside us rising straight up out through the top of our head, with the purpose of cutting off the continuity of the self-referential thoughts which create the cocoon that cuts us off from the non-duality. We want to do it very strongly with the sense that these familiar thoughts which previously we have taken to be our friend, we now recognise to be our enemy.

Cigarette packets in Britain now say 'Smoking kills' on the packet. Many people, when they were learning to smoke, thought that smoking made them look sophisticated. They built up an association in which smoking was good. All the anti-smoking campaigns are designed to reframe or re-identify the nature of the activity of smoking. We are doing something similar here. We are saying that these thoughts which weave together my sense of identity—which create the field of known experience within which I live and which are actually very good for that function—are hopeless for this other function. I want to see the clarity of my mind but that is going to be hidden by my intoxication with thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on.

When we do the practice it is very important to remember the view. The view comes first. The view means how we are looking—what we want to see revealed. It says that the mind is pure from the very beginning; it never changes, it is naked, not covered by anything, it is raw and it is fresh; it's not conditioned or prepared in any way.

Getting wrapped up in a familiar thought is not like that. The familiar thought is cosy, reassuring, affirming, even if it is unpleasant, because it is saying this is me...this is how I am.

The practice is to sit in just a very easy way and whenever any thoughts or feelings are arising which fit the description we had before of the four maras or demons—it could be something you see, or a sound you hear from outside or some thought or reflection inside—by making this sound of *Phat!* we cut a hole in the line of connection between the subject, the object, and the bind.

In the elaborated practice of Machig Labdron's chod you first of all leave your own body. You become a dakini. You cut up your own usual body, chopping it into pieces, and make a kind of stew inside your skull. You invite guests of different kinds from the highest buddhas to the most frightened local demons to come and partake of this, until there is nothing left. Now you have no body so you have nothing to go back to. There is no possibility of a return. At the end of the meditation you are now in this form, but this form cannot be the same body that you had before because everybody has eaten what you had before.

The function of this is to empty your body of its assumptions. The body itself is not a problem; what we fill our body with is the problem. All these thoughts, habits and associations become the narrow patterns of repetition which get in the way of us having freedom to be in many different ways.

If you become very aware of your body you can just keep making this sound of *Phat!* until you eliminate any sense of contact with your embodied being. You become like a completely open space. Of course, after a while the patterns of manifestation will return. However, if you are currently experiencing dissociation, depersonalisation, or psychotic episodes, it is not the best practice to do because this is essentially a practice of disruption. That is to say, we are interrupting the continuity of our familiar sense of self. There are other practices that we will do later that can take you in the same direction but are more gentle.

If you have time you can go out in the countryside and spend a whole day just doing *Phat!* If you do that your body will become very light and you will be able to get up and dance and move around very freely; everything becomes very easy. You may look very strange to other people so better to do it in an isolated place, because what you are having is in an unimpeded relationship between the infinity of your heart and the infinity of the world.

[Phat! practice]

Well, maybe after all the bursts of laughter as you were doing that practice you'll understand why it is better to do on your own! But it is also good to laugh because it loosens up the diaphragm. You have found that there may be a barrier of self-consciousness that you have to go through. This kind of practice belongs in the category of fearlessness. What we are particularly cutting is the sense that 'I am an object'. What will people say or think about me if I make a funny noise? Instead of trying to think your way out of that or analyse it or reassure yourself, you cut the very structure of the accumulation of the thought. This kind of practice has the most power if we have a sense that something is at stake.

Our rare and precious human birth

Buddhism says we have been born many, many times in the past and we will be born many, many times in the future. There are many different kinds of birth we can have. We can be born in hot hells, in cold hells, as hungry ghosts, as animals, as humans, as jealous gods, and as gods. The realm of the animals includes fish and insects and all the thousands of different beetles, scorpions, worms... Not particularly happy kinds of life. Tibetans say that even if we recite *Om Mani Padme Hum* to a cow, what is it going to do?

From this viewpoint, samsara, this revolving potential of rebirth, has a very small door. The traditional example is: imagine a yoke floating in the ocean. The likelihood of a turtle arising out of the ocean and popping its head through that yoke is the same likelihood as us having a human rebirth. Having achieved a human rebirth, then think of all the places in the world where we could be reborn. There are many many places where we would not choose to be reborn, places with wars, cruelty, poverty, extreme climates and so on. The number of buddhist people in the world goes down every year. The buddhist culture in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand is going down and down. Mainly its only the old people go to the temples or do practice.

With the recognition of all this develops the notion that a human birth is rare and having a so-called 'precious human birth' is even rarer. A 'precious human body' is a body where you have all your senses and intelligence working, where you are not too damaged by early experiences, where you live in a country with the possibility of hearing the Buddha's teaching and that you have the wherewithal to practise.

Reflecting on all this we appreciate that our present opportunity is very rare and precious. Since I have met the dharma how much time have I actually spent studying and practising? My mind gets distracted by so many other things, so that even when I come and sit to do the meditation my mind wanders off somewhere else. The more I think about this the more it reminds me of old black and white horror movies made by a not very good director, called Karma! It's a frightening thought.

How do we spend our lives? What do we do? Are we making the basis for having good times in the future? When we look around the world at human beings we see stupid people squandering lots of money and resources on wars and destroying the environment. That's why having the intention to cut ego identification with one's own projects, with the worldly concerns that seem so important to us, is an idea that needs a lot of support. The hooks and temptations just to spend one's life in a normal easy way are very strong. Today is Saturday and the sun is shining. So why are we stuck inside sitting here? We could go in the park, eat an ice-cream and wander around. Very nice. But then on Monday morning you go to the doctor and your test results have come in. You have cancer, so now you are very sad. In fact, we are too sad to do any dharma. We just want to cry.

When I am happy I eat ice-cream and when I am sad, I cry. So when am I going to do any dharma? This is why when we read the words of someone like Machig Ladrön, we should remember all the many sacrifices she made to do dharma practice. If you go travelling in the Himalayas or in Tibet, you will come across caves or little stone houses where yogis have many years in retreat. What kind of a life did they have? No ice-cream, no chocolate biscuits, no movies. How small and narrow their life was! But if every day you are imagining rays of light coming out from your heart and connecting you to all sentient beings, if you are imagining all the buddhas

filling all the dimensions of space sending their blessings to all beings, then maybe that is not such a small life.

This is the big question for each of us: how do you find value in the meaning of life?

For dzogchen practice you don't need to make much external renunciation. What you do need to renounce, however, is falling asleep in the process of living. When you are talking you have to know that you are talking, and when you are walking you have to know that you are walking. That is to say, at each moment be present in your existence, be really here, not somewhere else, not half here wanting to be somewhere else. Be really committed to inhabiting life as it arrives. The essential point that you are cutting when you go off and do Phat! practice are the habitual twists and turns that take you off on your own private head trips.

In our preparation for death all that we cling to in this life becomes a barrier to being open to what is happening. The traditional advice for the dying is not to be looking over our shoulder at everything we are leaving, and secondly and most importantly, be able to recognise what is occurring. From the point of view of dzogchen everything that arises is our own mind. If we understand this then when we die, regardless of whether we see gods, demons, or our mother-in-law, this is our own mind.

These are important things that we have been looking at today and understanding them is truly important. Whatever we do is experience—nothing more than that—and experience is revealed through participation. For example, today I had a pizza for lunch. The pizza arrived on a big round plate. I looked at my pizza and my pizza looked back at me. I knew it was going to be a meaningful and intimate relationship! But I had to cut into the pizza in order to eat it, and the more pizza I ate, the less pizza there was to eat! That is the nature of participation: when you engage with the world you change the world. One of the big shifts in modern science occurred when it was realised that the people carrying out the experiments are also implicated in the result of the experiment. The world is what is revealed to us out of how we are. That is why the purpose of all the purificatory and transformatory practices is to shift our enclosure, or imprisonment, in our restrictive ways of manifesting.

Aa practice

Now we will do a simple process of releasing. Many of you know this practice. It uses releasing, with the sound of Aa. The practice works because there is no real difference between the subject inside the skin bag and the world outside the skin bag. If they were truly separate—truly internally defined—then merely saying *Aa* wouldn't make any difference. The *Aa* works because there is an *illusion* of separation, and the illusion is maintained by mental activity. When we recite the *Aa* we are not making something happen, but it's a releasing or an undoing, or a deactivating of the forces of obscuration.

There is a traditional example to illustrate this. On a dark night a fire is burning. You take a burning stick from the fire and turn it rapidly round and round your head, thereby creating the illusion of a circle of fire. There is one burning point but because it is going rapidly your eyes interpret it as a circle of flame. If you stop rotating your arm the circle of fire ceases. There *was* no circle of fire, so what has ceased? There is another example used in India. You are walking home on a dark night and suddenly you are shocked to see a snake, and then you are relieved to recognise that it is a piece of old rope. When you see the rope the illusion of the snake vanishes. But where does the illusion go and where was the illusion when it was there? There never was a

snake, so if you tried to kill the snake would you be guilty of murder? That which doesn't exist cannot be destroyed.

That is at the heart of it. When we struggle we are struggling with ourselves. The struggle is one thought struggling with another thought, but neither thought is truly real. When I studied a little bit with Chatral Rinpoche he said it was like two brothers lying in bed. One brother is asleep and having a nightmare and the other brother is awake. The brother who is awake is trying to wake up the sleeping brother. When he wakens him up he is not in any danger, but when he was dreaming in the nightmare he wasn't in any danger either. This is the central point. This is why emptiness is important: everything is an illusion.

All the things which worry us, confuse us, and make us disheartened—these burdens which can seem so heavy and so real—are just arising and passing mental constructs. So don't try too hard. Your effort is not necessary. In fact, your effort is part of the problem! From the very beginning the mind is pure, so just relax in that natural purity and when activity wants to arise and create new patterns allow this to go on like a dance of fireflies in the sky.

Okay, so we will do the practice now. We will just sit in a relaxed way. For this purpose you don't need to visualise anything, you just release out in the sound of *Aa* and then we sit present and open with whatever comes.

[Aa practice]

In that state you can see many different things occur, and everything that occurs is your own interpretation. You can think this is good or bad, or right or wrong. This is the activity of your own mind and if the activity of your own mind is not located or integrated in its own ground which is emptiness then you go into conclusions, judgements and opinions. Samsara just keeps rolling along.

Whatever occurs is a co-emergence of the arising experience and the subjective reaction. Whatever occurs is the arising together of factors in the field of experience and some of these factors we call subject and some we call object. In any circumstances, whatever is happening, everything is a moment where you can see what you are up to.

The main function of the meditation is observe the way in which we develop story lines through which we seem to be establishing clarity although actually it is obscuring the clarity. The clarity achieved through rational or interpretive thought is not a real clarity because it is always woven into the semantic web: the endless build up of ideas, associations, memories and interpretations.

If something happens that seems strange or not what you expected, just stay present with that and observe how your own thoughts seek to clarify the situation. This is the false clarity of assumption. *'When I know what is going on, then I feel clear.'* This is the clarity of the ego. The clarity of the basic state of awareness, or *rigpa*, is a clarity based not on cognitive accumulation but on the immediacy of allowing space for things to be as they are.

It's a beautiful evening so there are many possible experiences you can have out in Berlin. All of these experiences are your experience so try to observe the arising of 'I like', 'I don't like', 'I want', 'I don't want' Try to listen to your own mind as it tells its stories. The stories are not bad or wrong, they are just not true. If you listen to them as stories you become aware that these are the karmic repertoire of stories you habitually tell, and the more I bind myself into the story,

the more I create the small world I inhabit. The more I see that these are just story lines and that other people are also involved in their own story lines. Then you can be interested in how stories play together and allow your stories to be changed by other people's stories.

This is the basis of developing compassion: that we are taken out of ourselves towards the other. If we are hanging onto ourselves trying to protect ourselves we are not going to be available for the other. Wisdom is to see that what you take to be yourself is an illusion which then frees you to act in an open way of illusory compassion towards illusory others. In Tibetan this is called *migme nyinje*. It means compassion which doesn't take an object. That is to say, our compassion is not *me* being compassionate towards *you* as another separate person. Because self and other are not over-invested the natural interplay of the entire energy of the field continues as it does.

You might feel anxious that if you are not in control, not directing yourself, then maybe you will do some very bad things. But being aware—being present—carries its own inherent ethics, an aesthetic ethics. By attending to the particularities of each situation as they occur, just as they are, you find that your manifestation—your behaviour—is in harmony with the other. It's like when you are dancing with someone and you experience their body and how it moves; your body moves with their body without you having to think about it.

Even if we seem to be caught up in ourselves, when other people are available their availability allows us to reveal more of ourselves. This is the ethics of the middle way. The two extremes are invasion and abandonment. In trying to help people we can go too close by interfering with them and try to sort them out in terms of our own understanding. Or we might think *'Mmm, I don't want to get involved. I am not sure what I should do anyway?'* Then we become anxious and don't find a way to become close to the other person.

In the meditation practice, in the state of openness, we experience the non-duality of subject and object. Out of the meditation practice our interactions with others come to be effortlessly pitched at just the right level, and not as a result of conscious effort, but because we have the same ground of manifestation. Relaxation into the state of non-duality, into the natural unborn wisdom, reveals the ceaseless movement of non-conceptual compassion.

As we are sitting here now we are not separate from the people out on the streets, and these people out on the streets are not so different from the people in the next city and the next city... In that sense, even just sitting here, we are automatically connected with all sentient beings.

So whatever merit is generated by our study and practice together we offer out, just by breathing into the field of all beings.

[Day 2]

The intention behind different yantras and our karmic habits

All of us have different habits that often we only become aware of after they have occurred; we find that once again we have done something. There is an intentionality embedded in the procedural movement rather than in the open consciousness that is aware of what is going on. This shows that from the point of view of the ego, habitual action is not intentional. For example,

you might plan to read a book this evening. After work you go and have a drink with a colleague and the whole evening is gone. It's not that you've done something wrong, but by getting into the conversation with your friend an ambience, a mood, was created which redefined your sense of how things are. The situation you find yourself in has a logic of its own which when you are absorbed in it makes you forget your earlier intention to go home and read your book. In buddhism this is understood in terms of karma: due to events in the past tendencies are established which you find yourself caught up in. They follow you and determine the shaping of your experience.

Dharma practices often say that in order not to go under the power of these experiences you have to become much more intentional. Instead of being mindlessly at the mercy of circumstances you become mindful of where you are, what you are doing, and what your intention is.

The various yantras or vehicles of buddhist practice have different kinds of intention. In the hinayana practices we have an intention to develop renunciation in order to avoid proximity to problematic situations. Avoidance and distance is considered the best protection. Because of my attachment, it is as if the surface of my body is covered with honey, and every time I go near something it will stick on to the honey. I haven't yet realised that I could have a bath, so I walk around with a stick in my hand pushing everything away. *'I don't do this. I don't do that. Oh no, it's quite dangerous.'* That is an intention. It is a particular reading of the world that there are hooks from the world and hooks from myself, and if these two hook together, then old habits will start to run. This is based on the view that samsara is like a swamp and if you get too close you will fall in and start to drown.

In the mahayana tradition we develop the intention to help all sentient beings on the basis that we have been born very many times before, and have been benefitted by all sentient beings who have at one time been our mother. Our task now is to repay that kindness by being thoughtful about others and doing our best to help them. In order to support this intention to help other beings we develop different flavours of support. The flavour of duty and responsibility is one such. Every sentient being I meet has already done something for me: the birds in the sky, the worms in the ground; all of them have already helped me. Therefore, I have a duty to return this. I am in debt to all creatures even if I feel I have never met them. Motivation is another flavour: I want to develop love and openness in my heart towards helping all beings. In that way we use many different props and supports to maintain the general intention.

The traditional teachings describe two stages, developing the intention to help beings, and then doing the actual practice that helps beings. These stages are compared to planning to go on a journey and then actually going on the journey. For example, during this retreat we begin each morning with some practice, rather than with reciting refuge and bodhicitta prayers. If we calm our mind that is helpful for us and helpful for everyone else. In that way, we enter into the meditation practice itself and the refuge and bodhicitta is contained within that.

Tantra is a development of the mahayana understanding and it is intensified through the use of symbolic support. For example, yesterday we looked at The Heart Sutra which says that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Using a glass, we looked at how we have to analyse the glass in order to see the way our habitual interpretation hides from us the emptiness of the glass as a glass.

When you do a sadhana practice such as Padmasambhava, we visualise the shape of his body and the different clothes he wears. Each aspect of his clothing has a symbolic meaning and when we visualise him we visualise his body and all of his clothing as translucent like a rainbow in the sky.

You can see through a rainbow, and yet the rainbow is there. In that sense, Padmasambhava is showing form and emptiness, emptiness and form, as inseparable, and by doing that practice with faith and devotion you get the direct realisation of the meaning of The Heart Sutra.

The intention of that practice is to open up or deconstruct the solidity and intensity of our normal sense of self-reference. As many of you will know, in that kind of practice you may imagine the deity in front of you and when you recite the mantra light flows into you from the deity. But you can also imagine yourself as the deity, and as you recite the mantra rays of light go out from you up to all the buddhas and back down. In some practices you imagine yourself as a deity with another deity inside your heart, and another deity inside it...and inside it...and inside it...like a series of Russian dolls.

The function of all of these practices is to give you so many things to do that you forget to do the things you would normally do. You are so busy being good you forget to be bad! Of course, that requires energy and focused attention. It requires faith and it requires a commitment to keep doing the practice even if you are not in the mood. The intention to do the practice is supported by different sorts of factors. It is supported by the pride of being the deity, *ngagyal* in Tibetan. It is also supported by the fear that if I don't do the practice as I promised I would then the dharma protectors will come and kick my ass! It is also supported by the thought that if I don't do it now this rare and precious chance to gain awakening will pass. These supports are all useful skilful means since the motivation of my own individual, ego-based, intention is actually quite weak. Our moods fluctuate. One day we are very enthusiastic and we want to meditate for a long time, and then the next day we are not really in the mood anymore. Therefore if you put the intention into these thoughts which you then surround yourself with, they are a way of making sure that somehow you don't fall away from the practice too much.

Understand the view

In dzogchen it's slightly different. Dzogchen is not really a path, and it's not really a system of intention. It is not designed to take us anywhere else, but it is focused on seeing the actual nature of what it is to be present now. Dzogchen is based on a particular understanding that things can only become themselves. The traditional example is coal. No matter how many times you wash it, it won't become chalk; it will remain black because blackness is the quality of the coal. If you are an ordinary human being, full of the five poisons, no amount of spiritual practice will make you a buddha. You can rub and you can scrub and you can use Dorje Sempa like a big loofah, but it won't make any difference.

That is why the key point is to understand the view. The view here is not an idea or a method that you can take up but rather the view is itself like a mirror in which you can see yourself—that we have been hidden from ourselves by our own effort.

Imagine that when you leave this building you need to turn right to get home but for some reason you turn left. You walk to the end of the road and you think that it doesn't look so familiar but you keep on walking. After three hours you are on the outskirts of Berlin. Night is coming so you sleep under a tree, and the next morning you keep walking.

—It's a long way home. I'd better walk a bit faster.

Then you see someone on a tractor and you say:

—*Can you take me along this road?*

—*No, but I'll take you that direction.*

—*Okay, that's good.*

After twenty years you have made a grand tour of Germany. Finally, you get back home but it's full of squatters!

This is what happens when we come into samsara: one thing happens, then another thing, then another thing; there is always something to do. You learn some meditation and you are sitting for quite some time. You then think your back is getting very sore from this so you need to do yoga. You do some yoga and then you think this is a little bit strict, so maybe you will do some t'ai chi as it's more fluid...

It's the same way with all the dharma practices. There are many, many practices to do. Why are we doing these practices? There is always something to do on the level of doing but who is the one who is doing this? If the focus of your intention is on improving or changing, or making more powerful, or making more compassionate, this is all in the realm of activity.

From the point of view of dzogchen, the key thing is to think and to discover who is the one who is present in this moment? We are all sitting here. We are alive. There is in each of us the manifestation of the flow of experience. The experience is registering with someone and this someone is us, but who is the us?

In the teaching this is pointed out to us. It is explained or shown that this presence in this very moment is an openness. Since we came into this room this morning many things have happened. Each of these things has arisen as an aspect of our experience: noises, shapes, the sight of people's bodies moving, birds singing outside, and so on. Each of these moments has three aspects: the subject, the object, and the sphere within which this occurs.

Sometimes it looks like our mind is like the sun, illuminating what is going on. Then we can feel that as a person, we—through our intellect or intelligence—are giving meaning to what is going on whereas actually both the subject and the object are like the moon. The moon shines at night and it is bright on the night of the full moon, but it is not bright with its own light, it is bright with the light of the sun. The nature or the presence of your own mind, what is called *rigpa* or *vidya*, is itself the sun and this illuminates the subject and the object. Therefore, the purpose of the practice, when we sit and we just allow whatever comes to come and go, is to experience that phenomena come into being in the moment of experience as they pass into the field of lucidity.

Since we have been sitting here many experiences have been occurring. Some seem external, others seem internal. These experiences occur for us because they enter our sphere of experience. At this moment people are sitting outside in cafés and someone will have a lovely cup of cappuccino going to their lips. Unfortunately, due to my karmic limitations, my field of experience doesn't extend that far so I am drinking water! This is what is arising for me; this is the actuality of my existence. Whilst I am talking, the cup of water is not in my experiential field and then for some reason I lean over and pick up the cup. So the cup, the movement of my body, the sense of the drinking, and the experience of the taste, is arising and passing.

The luminosity, or the fact of the registering of this as experience, rests on the quality of the mind itself. When the mind is open too then that experience becomes continuous, but when it is obscured it doesn't seem that way.

We need to have some understanding of what is obscuration and ignorance. Here is my shirtsleeve. Here is my arm. I can roll down my shirtsleeve and hide my arm and expose my shirt. Now I am rolling up my shirtsleeve and exposing my arm; it is like that. The cloth is

continuous—up and down. There are no zips or cuts in this cloth, it is very good quality, but as soon as I fold it, it becomes hidden. It is as if something has really happened, but in fact nothing has really happened, because it is just folded. There is no damage. No tear. Nothing is destroyed. In the same way, the activity of the mind—the movement of our energy—folds in on itself in a kind of auto-intoxication.

The one who is ignorant and the one who is clear are the same. The difference is that the one who is ignorant is immersed in a fixation on the manifestation of experience as if it were the complete situation. Who then is the one who is lost? The one who thinks he is lost. By thinking I am lost I think I have to free myself, and the effort of trying to free myself makes me even more lost.

We have this term ‘dzogchen’ or ‘dzog-pa chen-po’. ‘Dzog-pa’ means complete but it also means finished. To have nothing left at all, that is ‘dzog-pa’, gone. It is gone in the sense that there is nothing more to be done, and it's complete also in the sense there is nothing more to be done. This is pointing to the fact of these two aspects of our existence which have always been there but which are disguised by the fact of not attending to both simultaneously.

A traditional example is the man who goes out looking for his cow on the mountain when all the time the cow is in the byre.

Stillness and movement

Now we will talk a little bit about stillness and movement. If you look for stillness in movement you will always have a problem. Movement is moving, it is not still. Things are what they are.

So what am I doing when I follow my thoughts? I am developing movement. There is nothing wrong with developing movement if you want to have more movement. Who is the one who is developing the movement? I am. Who are you? *“My name is James. I was born in Scotland. I live in London.”* That is to say, the description of myself is itself movement. The movement of my self-narrative, my self-story, my self-construction, is a movement that is now chasing other movement in the hope of finding itself as something stable.

What you take yourself to be is a construct. All that you can say about who you are is a series of narratives. *“I am hungry. I am thirsty. I am tired. I am British. I am male.”* Whatever you can say about yourself is a story and all stories are movement. The

Translator: The?

James: The. You want more?

Translator: Yes. Why not?

James: Because one word is not enough. One word is the beginning: ‘The.’ You need more words. This is thought. One thought follows another thought and one feeling follows another. You have to see that even when you define yourself very solidly, very concretely, that this is a movement.

Movement will not illuminate stillness; movement is inseparable from stillness. The reflection in the mirror is *in* the mirror; you can't take the reflection out of the mirror. The reflection only exists in the mirror, but when you look at the mirror you see only the reflection; you don't see the mirror. When you look at the mirror you don't see a mirror; the mirror shows itself through the reflection. The mirror is not something which has an essence or an entity nature of itself which is why the mirror can show many different things.

A piece of paper can only show what is written on it. But if this surface were a mirror then each time we turned it we would have new reflections. Paper is marked by the ink that is written on it. You could say that now the ink and the paper are inseparable, which is very different from saying that the mirror and the reflection are inseparable. In the case of the paper, the ink has gone into the paper and they are merged together whereas the reflection is in the mirror but it's not marking the mirror; it's not limiting or contaminating the mirror in any way.

This is the basic instruction on the nature of your mind: it is like the mirror in that nothing which has ever occurred has limited or contaminated or defiled the mind. That is why it is described as *kadag*, which means 'primordially pure from the very beginning'. Nothing which can happen can in any way diminish the mind, yet we often feel diminished. We feel troubled, unhappy, unloved, unseen... We feel we haven't fulfilled our potential. These are stories, passing experiences, energetic qualities. Any definitions you make of yourself are movement. When you feel depressed and hopeless this is an experience that is arising. Before you didn't feel depressed and hopeless, later you won't feel depressed and hopeless, but now you feel depressed and hopeless.

Let's say the experience of depression is arising in me and it seems to write itself deeply into me like the writing on the paper. If someone says "*Come on, James, let's go for a walk in the park.*" I reply "*No, I just want to stay at home.*" This feeling seems to be defining who I am in this moment. I can't just switch on some other new state in myself; it is written on to me.

So what is happening when we have experiences like the writing on paper? An attachment is occurring. Who is attaching to what? The subject is attaching to the object, however both the subject and the object are movement. Therefore, the illusion—the point of stupidity for each of us—is that we imagine that 'I, me, myself' is a fixed substance. In that situation, the I, the individual self, is like the paper, and the event of life writes on it like ink. "*I have to tell you that what you said yesterday really upset me.*" You said something yesterday and unfortunately it wasn't written on water, it was written in permanent ink on the paper of my heart, which is why I now feel terrible. And because I feel terrible I think it is only fair to tell you that you have made me feel terrible!

This is how our human life goes on: something happens and then it's gone but it leaves a trace.

I remember at school when we were learning to write we always had three important things on our desk: the paper, the pencil and the rubber. If we made a mistake we rubbed it out, and then we made a mistake again. By the time we had finished rubbing we had a hole in the paper.

What is important is to see how we experience the register of events. The mirror shows everything but doesn't get marked. The ego itself selects certain things to hang onto and creates these hurt or happy stories. But just as the object situation vanishes, so the subject situation also vanishes.

I become the curator of the Museum of Horror. I am keeping all my exhibits safe and nicely polished in a glass case! People come to therapy and they say, “*When I was four years old this happened. Would you like to see inside my secret cabinet? I have never told this to anyone before.*” What they describe is very sad and painful, but it has been preserved in formaldehyde for many years. For example, let's say your mother didn't love you. This is a painful feeling of rejection and leads to many particular experiences, but each of these is a dynamic moment of unfolding. The capacity of the person to have new experiences is still there as a potential, but the more the narrative of ‘I was unloved’, ‘I didn't get what I needed’, ‘There is something wrong with me’ ‘I keep making mistakes’, the more this story gets tightened and squeezed, the less capacity there is to do something new.

We each can observe this in ourselves. How is it that certain experiences of our lives become deeply invested with meaning, and yet other events that happened just vanish? A mirror shows everything that is put in front of it whereas our ego-consciousness has a selective attention; it is editing and privileging certain features and denying other features.

The semantic seduction of the reality of thoughts

It is important to remember this in your meditation. The basic meditation of dzogchen is not very difficult—it is simply to be present with whatever is arising—but when we do this we find that we are closing down. Instead of an openness which is merely recording the coming and going of experience, we enter into judgement. An experience happens and we jump on top of it. We say, ‘*Well, that shouldn't happen,*’ or ‘*That's not very good.*’ or ‘*I want to change that.*’

In the terminology of tantra this is referred to as ‘co-emergent ignorance’, meaning that wisdom (or the natural awareness) and obscuration are completely present simultaneously. The open spaciousness of the mind within which a thought has come is then host to another thought, which tells the first thought that it's a bad thought. This second thought is the momentary house of the entire energy of our existence. We commit ourselves into that thought, and say, ‘*Oh, that's awful!*’ This thought, like the first thought, is a movement in the space of the mind. If we simply open we see that the second is a commentarial thought on the first thought and it also is passing through. But the message of the second thought—the quality of the thought—creates a feeling like the bundling up of a piece of cloth: I am wrapping myself, huddling myself, into this thought.

The sense of basic presence—of ‘I’ as an open awareness allowing the free movement of everything—is now being disguised by the intense experience of ‘I don't like this thought’. This is the basic identification or dualistic attachment whereby I now stand in relation to something: this thought was bad, and I don't like it.

However there is a kind of semantic seduction in which falling into the interpretation binds us to the sense that something real and important has happened, creating a concentrated centripetal movement of affirmation of an individual self. In Tibetan this is called *dagdzin*. ‘*Dag*’ means ‘I’ or the first person, and ‘*dzin*’ means to hold. The holding indicates an activity, for example I am holding up my watch, and if I don't hold on to it my watch will drop. That is to say, this ‘*dag*’ is held in place by our own activity.

All that you take yourself to be is a production; this is the performativity of self. In postmodern sociology there is a lot of discussion of the self as a performative phenomenon, not so different from this understanding, but there they talk more about role identification and how we take on different identities in different circumstances. Here, we are focussing more on the basic sense of

your own individual self-existence being an activity. Therefore when we say 'I', or 'me', or 'myself', this is a gesture of communication out to the other but also a self-reflexive communication.

The mind never moves but the energy of the mind is always moving

There is nothing wrong with activity. Activity is not substance; activity is movement. Our identity, our existence, is movement yet we speak of it as if it were a substance. This is the confusion. If you have a substance you can build on top of it and it seems to build up a definition and a solidity.

We might think, '*Oh, here I go again. I've done this before.*' 'I', the same me, has built up this experience before. Why do I always do it? This is a statement. This something I am saying now is a narrative construction which is emphasising a particular quality of the self which I am creating in the moment of saying it.

This is at the heart of the dzogchen understanding. The mirror-like mind never moves; the energy of the mind is always moving. The energy of the mind pervades the dharmadhatu; it goes everywhere. All that we take to be object and all that we take to be subject is the energy of our mind. To put it in another language, everything is our experience, or in Tibetan *rigpa pai rang nang*.

Once you see this you don't have to change your behaviour. It is not about improving your behaviour, trying to be better at this or that, but to see that all you take to be stable is actually the dynamic energetic movement of the mind.

Early dawn before the sun rises

In the dark of the night, especially when there is no moon in the sky, it is very dark, and out of the dark comes the dawn. This dawn is a subtle light. Kuntuzangpo is dark blue in colour, a dark blue that is very close to black. He is like the dawn. He is not like midday, all bright and shiny. The natural state is not presenting itself like a children's drawing with lots of different bright colours. It is something which is ungraspable and yet present. In the first light of the dawn you can't read and you can't see clearly; it is not a time for activity. There is just that subtle shift from dark into a soft light.

If we go looking to find our mind as if we will find something definite or something bright or clear then this is a confusion. It is getting to know this quality of ungraspable presence that is not a thing, that has no qualities, and yet is deeply, infinitely present. Out of the energy of this state is displayed the many things of the world.

In the early dawn we start to hear the first birds; a sound arises and then a thought arises in relation to the sound. In that way, subject and object weave together all the activity of the day. The day is revealed through our participation in it. In the Tibetan language this is called *lhundrup*. The *khadag*, or primordial purity of the mind, is the open spaciousness within which everything occurs effortlessly. This is the effortlessness of experience.

If you are sitting in a nice place and you see dawn on the mountains, you may see light shining on rock. If you are a geologist you may know the name of this type of rock and how old it is but if you just relax a little bit, the mountain is there. The thought is coming—everything is coming.

Lhundrub means something like ‘spontaneous’, formed in and of itself, not created by something else. It is like the way the rays of the sun come out of the sun. They just flow out.

This natural radiance of the mind has two aspects: one is its given-ness, and the second is the experience that we have within it of being an individual self who is moving, standing, doing this and that. Whenever you stand up you are standing up *somewhere*. Whenever you sit down you are sitting down *somewhere*. The subject, the self, is always already in the world. It is not that I start inside me and then I come into the world.

This is one reason why we meditate with the eyes open. If you are doing a mandala visualisation, the mandala is there before the god. When the special guest arrives the seat should be waiting for them. When you came out of your mother's body you came into the world. For the baby it is all very new, but for the mother it is not so new. The mother has to know how to wash the baby's bottle and so on. The field of experience is the field in which our individual movement occurs.

We eat and sleep, we wear clothes, and when we are small we go to school. When we are big we get into difficulties in relationship. This is what happens to human beings. Yet, for each of us, our individual story seems so important because we are often trying to make sense of it: ‘*Why did that happen?*’ ‘*Why did I do that?*’ ‘*Why did they do that?*’ Generally speaking, ‘why’ questions are a waste of time. It is more useful to ask the ‘how’ question because the ‘why’ is seeking something esoteric and hidden somewhere else. ‘How’ questions allow us to stay with the phenomenology of shared experience.

When we see people we see their embodiment. We can see if their shoulders are high and tight. We can hear if the breath is shallow, and we can see whether the gaze is in contact or not. This is a lot of useful information. If we see people they will show us even without speaking a great deal of how they are. Who they are and why they are, we don't know, but *how* they are is something we can work with.

If you are at work and you see that someone is very busy then you shouldn't interrupt them, especially if they are in a more powerful position than you, as they will not be happy. What advantage is there to interrupt someone else? “*Oh, I just need to tell you this.*” “*You might need to tell me, but go away!*” They are showing they are unavailable. But I don't want to see that because I am living inside me and I really need to say this. “*I need to speak to you, and I need you to be the one I need to speak to, so you need to become the one I need you to be.*” This is the basic violence of human interaction.

Ethics and compassion in dzogchen

Ethics and compassion in dzogchen is located in the quality of presence. It doesn't mean that we have elaborate rules of behaviour and behave in prescribed ways. We are an energy of manifestation manifesting in a field of experience we share with others. Sometimes we can go forward and sometimes we should go back; sometimes we win and sometimes we lose; sometimes we are active and sometimes we are passive. Nobody outside can tell us how to do this, it is revealed through the experience of participation.

If musicians are playing together or dancers are sharing an improvisation class, they have to feel the field of experience. That is to say, my individual agenda—what feels true to me—cannot be

the determinant of what is useful activity. Our activity is directed by the movement of the entire situation.

Our western culture is dominated by images of the lonely hero. Jesus, Moses, Abraham, Paul, Martin Luther—these are all lonely heroes: people who live their truth, and in living their truth give rise to a lot of conflict. The truth of Martin Luther led to the deaths of millions of people. The religious wars that swept across Europe leading to the murder of children and innocent people; that is arising from truth.

Dzogchen is non-dogmatic. There is no holy banner to hold up and to march forward with into the world. The benefit of our practice is to be invisible in the world.

That is why it is helpful to have an ordinary life. If you have an ordinary life you have to stand in a queue like everyone else. You suffer all the frustrations of other people. Why wouldn't you want to do that? If you have a special life that's another level of difficulty. The queen doesn't go to the supermarket. If she did go to the supermarket everyone else would be asked to leave and someone would push her trolley and of course she never carries any money. That doesn't happen for us.

When frustration arises who is the one who is feeling frustrated? The one who is off balance. We have arrived with an agenda, with a position: *'I am entitled to whatever it is... This shouldn't be happening... I now decree this should not happen!'* But no-one is listening.

We know this story ourselves. We get into these positions and we think, *'How can people do that? I don't understand.'* Why *would* we be able to understand the minds of other people? The first thing to learn is we are very weird and so is everyone else. This is a strange world with strange people in it. Therefore, we should be curious, and start with a question: *"How will I be?" "How is this situation?"* The more you have a fixed position inside yourself, the more you hit the situation with force.

The furniture of our minds

This is important in relation to meditation practice because when you sit to practise you can see directly the fixed positions, the habits, the tendencies, which form the furniture of your mind. The more fixed and heavy the furniture the more difficult it is to move. Perhaps have inherited some furniture and it's been in your family for a long time. Then it is very difficult to get rid of. *"This is the chair I got from my grandmother, and when I sit in it I feel close to her."* We also sit in the psychological furniture from our grandmother. This has two functions: in terms of wisdom it make us blind to the other aspects of ourself, and in relation to compassion it means we have very few moves or gestures that we can make towards the other person.

If we do the *Three Aa* practice and we are just sitting, experience is occurring. When you stand in relation to that experience, when you start telling yourself what it is— running a commentary or an interpretation about what is happening—you have ceased taking refuge in the natural ground of your being and you are taking refuge in movement. Movement is always seeking other movement.

That is not wrong in itself, but the movement in what we call ‘samsara’ is movement that spins at such a speed that it appears to be solid. Again and again just relax into a slow out breath and be present with whatever occurs.

3 *Aa* practice

Put your gaze into the space in front of you. We can make this slightly more emotionally invested in order to help us to focus the mind, by linking it to guru yoga practice. In the Tibetan system yoga, *naljor*, means relaxed, staying easy. In relation to the guru, this means we imagine in the space in front of us, about two arms length ahead of us, a white letter 'A' which represents the mind, the body, and speech; all the attributes of all the buddhas including all the teachers that we have ever had, and all those who have helped us to awaken and see something.

When we recite these 3 *Aas* we can also imagine a white *Aa* in our own heart that is inseparable from the *Aa* in front of us. We can see this in relation to what we looked at before: that the subject, the object, and the relation between all three are *Aa*. The *Aa* primordially represents emptiness. It is the ungraspability of experience; it is both the openness and the luminosity.

We recite the *Aa* three times, and then after a short period of time this *Aa* in front of us, and the *Aa* in the heart dissolve, and we stay integrated now in the state of all the buddhas. Whatever comes, comes; whatever goes, goes. Not trying to hold on to anything or edit or adapt or control. Whenever you find yourself being caught up in some swirl of associations or memory, just physically release the out breath. This is quite tricky, because without making effort—without trying to *do* something—we still have to release our investment in the thought that we are getting wrapped up in. We do this not by trying to do something; we are not trying to push the thought away but to stay present with the thought without either separating from it or collapsing into it.

Once again, this is like the example of the mirror. The reflection is in the mirror but the mirror is not changed or touched or moved by the reflection. Therefore, when you feel that you are being caught up in the thought, the one who feels they are being caught up in the thought is another thought. To take that thought to be your true self is to have already misplaced the ground of your being. The ground of being is open, empty, and never moves. Thoughts are often moving. Some thoughts say, “*Just stay present and observe what happens.*” But who are they addressing? Who is the one who will do this? It is not an instruction to our awareness, our awareness doesn't need any instruction. It is an instruction to our ego, “*Take a rest, have a holiday, don't interfere!*”

Simply, don't wind up the energy through investment of more energy. The only way to really understand this is to do a lot of practice. Okay, so now we will do the *Three Aa* and sit in this state for some time.

[*Three Aa* practice]

The more we do this practice, the more we become aware of the very subtle thoughts which maintain the sense of a separate self. In the traditional text they are described as being like a water meadow: a very flat meadow which often has a dip in the middle with a soft small river running underneath the ground.

Clearly, when we are sitting in the practice and big strong thoughts come, they register; you see what they are. But while we are sitting here with our eyes open there is also the maintenance of

activity going on and this is an activity we have been doing for a very long time. Just as before, when we were looking at the nature of the glass, we discussed how the glass-ness of the glass is not in the glass; it's in the relation between our mind which assigns the term and what is there.

When you look, sitting here with your eyes open, you see pillars, paintings, plants, people. You don't actually see these; what you see is shape and colour. We interpret these and this interpretation is done in a subtle way. It is so habitual and automatic, just flowing underneath the surface and creating this felt sense of *'I am in this room, and the room isn't changing. I am just here.'* This is a very important point for releasing or unlocking, because the more we recognise the movement of our own mind, the more we can see how interpretation and the arising of the visual plane merge together very quickly.

At first it is very useful to do this practice just for short periods, maybe ten or fifteen minutes, but then when you have time you can do it in longer sessions. You can link it with a practice of gazing at the sky.

You do this outside in a place where you can see the clear blue sky with the sun behind you so that it is not shining in your eyes. Just allow the gaze to rest into the open space. When you do that for some time you start to see many phenomena, small balls and points of white light, little black dots, and so on. There are many such kinds of moving-energy experiences, because with the openness of the sky there is no basis for our habitual organising thoughts to grasp on to. We want to keep the awareness fresh, but not intense, and to watch what your mind is resting on.

There are famous questions which we ask to help us establish the nature of the mind. These are: What does the mind rest on? Where does the mind stay? Where does the mind come from? Where does the mind go to? What shape is the mind? What colour is the mind? These are questions which you can take up in this open practice. Again and again we use them to separate the mind itself as lucid clarity, as the state of the mirror, from the content of the mind which is the thought.

Detox, deconstruction and dependent-co-origination

From the traditional point of view, for many lifetimes we have been intoxicated by thoughts. We have used thought as the guarantor of our existence. We use our thoughts and feelings to help us make sense of what is going on and so we come to trust our thoughts. From the point of view of this practice, however, thoughts are untrustworthy, because thoughts are about a particular kind of discourse in which the meaning of experience is determined by the qualities that are attributed to it.

For example, it's another beautiful day. It's a hot day and we have the feeling that summer is coming. This brings all kinds of associations of summer: relaxing, wandering around, wearing different clothes, a feeling of expansion. There is nothing wrong with any of these feelings. We can all hope to have a pleasant summer. It is hot today, so we feel a bit hot and that maybe makes us feel a little bit sleepy. On the basis of the warmth of the weather a sleepy feeling arises. There is the dependent co-origination of the experience of being sleepy arising on the basis of these energising factors. Inside the thought *'Oh, summer is coming'* there are many hooks that go out to all the other thoughts and the places they can take us. But what is the experience of the heat itself? How is it to be hot?

When we pay attention to the mere facticity and emergence of the first level of experience this has a smoothness and a simplicity which has very few hooks. The naked quality of awareness experiences the raw potential of the manifestation of the world. In the tradition this potential is described in terms of sound, light, points of light and flashes of light. The emergence of energy into the world before it is caught in habitual conceptualisation has a form which doesn't fit within our categories of interpretation. This experience of the raw ingredient is the untying, or the unbinding, or the deconstructing, of the edifice of samsara as a familiar realm of conceptual elaboration.

There is a buddhist text, the Milindapanha, possibly from as far back as 100 BCE in which the Kashmiri monk Nagasena responds to questions from King Milinda and illustrates the truth of dependent co-origination by deconstructing and reconstructing the king's chariot.¹

What did the king's servants add to the individual parts to reassemble them as a chariot? When you have the sum of the parts, when you have the bits put together, there is a joining linking formation—a gestalt formation—which creates the sense of something existing in itself. This is what is happening all the time for us: the raw potentiality—the energetic vibration of experience—is being sealed into fixed categories of our perception.

In the Second World War my father was in the army. At one time he was billeted in a big country house with his soldiers to undergo training. It was the middle of winter and very cold. The soldiers started going around the house pulling off the wooden shelving and gathering up old furniture and burning it. My father, who was supposed to be in charge of the soldiers, said to them, *"You can't do this. This is not your house."* And what one soldier said back to him was, *"It's not our war either."* On that basis he had to let them burn the wood. From one point of view this was very beautiful antique furniture. From another point of view it was fuel to put on the fire to keep yourself warm. Dependent co-origination points out how the context, the situation, defines how something is revealed to you.

In our meditation practice, we are observing and trying to release and loosen our habitual associations through which we construct the world according to whatever patterns we have inherited.

So now we will sit together again in meditation and then we will bring our brief time together to an end.

[Sitting practice]

We dedicate the merit of whatever has been virtuous in our study and practice together. We imagine rays of light spreading out from us to all beings and making the connection of sharing.

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!

ⁱ Thereupon, the Venerable Nagasena said to King Milinda:

—As a king you have been brought up in great refinement and you avoid roughness of any kind. If you would walk at midday on this hot, burning, and sandy ground, then your feet would have to tread on the rough and gritty gravel and pebbles, and they would hurt you, your body would get tired, your mind impaired, and your awareness of your body would be associated with pain. How then did you come on foot, or on a mount?

—I did not come, Sir, on foot, but on a chariot.

—Since you have come on a chariot, please explain to me what a chariot is. Is the pole the chariot?

—No, Reverend Sir!

—Is then the axle the chariot?

—No, Reverend Sir!

—Is it then the wheels, or the framework, of the flag-staff, or the yoke, or the reins, or the goad-stick?

—No, Reverend Sir!

—Then is it the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins, and goad which is the "chariot"?

—No, Reverend Sir!

—Then, is this "chariot" outside the combination of pole, axle, wheels, framework, flag-staff, yoke, reins and goad?

—No, Reverend Sir!

—Then, ask as I may, I can discover no chariot at all. This "chariot" is just a mere sound. But what is the real chariot? Your Majesty has told a lie, has spoken a falsehood! There is really no chariot! Your Majesty is the greatest king in the whole of India. Of whom then are you afraid, that you do not speak the truth?

And Nagasena exclaimed:

—Now listen, you 500 Greeks and 80,000 monks, this King Milinda tells me that he has come on a chariot. But when asked to explain to me what a chariot is, he cannot establish its existence. How can one possibly approve of that?

The 500 Greeks thereupon applauded the Venerable Nagasena and said to King Milinda:

—Now let You Majesty get out of that if you can!

But King Milinda said to Nagasena:

—I have not, Nagasena, spoken a falsehood. For it is in dependence on the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flag-staff, etc, there takes place this denomination "chariot", this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name.

—Your Majesty has spoken well about the chariot. It is just so with me. In dependence on the thirty-two parts of the body and the five Skandhas, there takes place this denomination "Nagasena", this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name. In ultimate reality, however, this person cannot be apprehended. And this has been said by our sister Vajira when she was face to face with the Lord Buddha: Where all constituent parts are present, the word "a chariot" is applied. So, likewise, where the skandhas are, the term a "being" commonly is used.

—It is wonderful, Nagasena, it is astonishing, Nagasena! Most brilliantly have these questions been answered! Were the Lord Buddha Himself here, He would approve what you have said. Well spoken, Nagasena! Well spoken!

www.usna.edu/Users/history/abels/hh205/milinda.html