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# *Letting the mind settle: how to find freedom without searching and striving*

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*James Low*

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*Transcribed by Sanatan*

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## *Extract*

*...Everything which arises, passes. The more we stay with that the more we see that we are grasping only echoes. The sound has already gone, the moment has already gone. This is just some echo or some shadow. That is what concept is. Concept is like a snail on the ground that leaves a little silvery trail behind it. We are always tracking the world after the moment. We are always behind in time when we are following concepts. But, when we are on the point there is nothing to say, and yet we get everything. Everything was freely available. That is the basic way of proceeding in both mahamudra and in dzogchen...*

*... If instead of applying the concept 'flower', we just look and open to it like the Buddha did, simply sitting there. When thoughts and feelings arise we don't enter into them. When we look at the flower, and we don't layer the flower with our interpretations, we find we have less and less to say, and less and less to think. This flower, when we don't fill it with us, shows us our emptiness. The more knowledge we have about flowers and the more we fill its shape with us, the more impossible it is for the flower to fulfill its task of freeing us. The flower is empty of concept and so are we, basically...*

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We have time together here this evening to understand something about mahamudra. This evening and over the coming weekend we will be making use of a short text by Maitripa<sup>1</sup>, a great yogi in the early days in India. Buddhism is full of technical terms and this can sometimes leave us feeling rather stupid when we don't know what they all mean. The mood of mahamudra however is non-technical, so for us this evening simple language is better.

In buddhism, mind is everything. The entire substance of the practice is to understand our own mind. The historical buddha Siddhartha awoke when he understood how the mind functions. Our aim also is such an understanding and it requires nothing more than our own selves to actualize it.

We have a body and we keep our body sitting still while attending to what it offers us. It offers sensation: the movement of the breath, the shifts in posture, and when we are up and moving around we find that our gestures change according to the people we meet. If somebody smiles at us we tend to smile back. We see that our body is part of our response of being in the world with others. So just by observing our body as we move through the course of the day we find that connectivity is how we are.

I may feel that I live inside my skin so that my body seems to be the site of a separation that keeps me in isolation from other people. So, I look out of my eyes; I listen through my ears to that which is other than me. There is 'me' and 'not me'. And 'me' I feel in a particular way, an intimate way. The 'not me' I have to interpret and try to understand, to think about and develop constructs about. But if I actually observe my body it shows very directly that there is no real division between the 'me' and the 'not me'.

The body stays alive by breathing in. The air, that is 'not me', comes into 'me' and when it is inside 'me' it is me and then what is me, this breath in my lungs, the breath which is giving me oxygen into the blood that goes all around my body through the heart and so on, this very intimate me which is my life, is going out of me. So, this movement of 'me'/'not me' is changing all the time. It is the same with drinking and then peeing, eating and then shitting, these are movements of 'not me' into 'me', and then out of "me"/"not-me". We come to see how the divide between what I take to be self and what I take to be other is an interpretation. It is a way in which I make sense of the experience of not knowing what's going on.

I don't know what any of you are thinking. I don't even know what I am going to say next, so in the moment I don't know very much. We can know lots of things, but exactly what will happen here between us we do not know. Our life is some revelation, some showing, some unfolding of the yet-

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<sup>1</sup> This mahamudra text is translated and commented on in Chapter 12 in James' book, *Simply Being*.

to-be. Yet it cannot have that unfolding for each of us unless we are here. Thus we see that our participation is part of the unfolding of the world.

The basic point shared in all the buddhist schools is that when you objectify yourself, when you take yourself to be a thing separate from other things, you are also objectifying everything else, which you conceive as not yourself, as "other". In order for these other objects to function there needs to be a degree of object constancy, that is to say the object cannot change too much otherwise you can't get a handle on it. Just like I am holding myself in place and keeping myself together – "*I am me, I know who I am*" – and on the basis of that I can start to find out who you are. I can learn things about you and can build up an image of you just as I have built up an image of me.

Now, because my image of me has been there for a very long time it feels like my very nature – "*I am who I think I am. I am who I know I am.*" This seems to be as close as the blood in my veins. But if I am who I know I am but I don't know how I will be in the next minute, then it's a strange kind of knowledge, a kind of non-predictive knowledge. The one thing I can predict about myself is that if I don't die, then whoever I am in five minutes' time I will be able to call that person "*me*". How I will be sitting, how I will be breathing, how I will be feeling, I do not know. But, however that is, it will be me, which is quite strange.

So, the constancy of the object lies in the concept of the object. When you stay close to yourself the phenomenal actuality, the *how-it-isness* of me, is moving and changing. It moves in relation to what's around me. To the temperature, for example, to the time of day, whether I am healthy or unhealthy, who I am with, where I am – all of these are factors that could be said in the ordinary sense to act on me. I am influenced by these factors, but where is the object which is acted on?

Say we have a flower and if we were to bend it at a certain point, the stem would break because it can only take so much pressure. So, we have a flower and because we like flowers we take care of them. We believe we can have some sense of them being an enduring object – *the flowers are here* – and they're here because not too long ago they were cut. There is also some water in the pot through which we deceive the poor flowers into believing they are somehow sort of alive. The water in the pot is a life support machine like in the hospital when you are wired into the bed and they are pumping you. So, these poor plants with artificial life at a certain point think, "*This is not right. I am not growing!*" and they start to fall over. What we call a flower is a flower plus water. Normally we think it is just a flower, but if the water was not there the flower would be doing less well. It is the same with us – 'Me' plus some degree of comfort, or food, or drink, and I feel okay. However, If I am very very thirsty I will not feel so good.

I think I am me. I think I am an independent phenomena existing in my own skin on my own terms. However, through observation I find I am profoundly relational in that I arise due to causes and circumstances. The *how-I-am* of me is inseparable from the *how-I-am* of the environment. This is fundamental to a buddhist understanding and deepens with one's practice of mahamudra and dzogchen.

The biggest obstacle to finding out who we are is to think that we are someone, some separate one, some individual who can be known as something. It is this *somethingness* of the person which is the fruit of ignorance from the buddhist point of view. Ignorance doesn't mean that there is some syllabus or some agenda that we haven't memorized. We are not ignorant of particular kinds of knowledge. It means that we are ignoring how we are. The object of ignorance is not something out there.

We don't need more information about things. We have plenty of ideas about everything we encounter such as politics, economics, the kind of work we do, the friends we have, our family history. We can talk a lot about things, making patterns, seeing relations. What we *are* ignorant of is when I am talking, *who* is talking? When I am walking, *who* is walking? If you come to the dojo and engage in exercises, working with other people – *who* is here in the dojo? *Who* is learning to make different moves? *Who is this? Oh, It is me! Who are you? Who am I?*

This is the beginning of the dissolving of the false tension or dichotomy between subject and object. How I am and how the environment is are co-emergent, they are moving together. I am part of what is arising. I am talking with you just now because we are here in this room in this situation. How I am talking depends on the event. This public talk has a particular title, we meet here for a particular purpose, and so I am talking like this. In another situation I wouldn't talk this way. If I was doing group therapy I wouldn't be saying as much; I would be waiting for other people to speak. I am not doing that here. Therefore, *how-I-am* is part of this, or in other words, I am on the inside of this. We are creating this together. I will probably talk more than you but if you have no attention and look completely bored and fall asleep, then *how-I-am* is going to be different. Your staying awake is really good for me. It is like that. Our freedom to talk and relate is part of how we give ourselves to each other. This is very important.

The basic idea of sangha is that we are not isolated individuals. Through relaxing and easing out of our self-consciousness—out of our fears of being judged, of making mistakes, from all such anxieties that pull us into isolation—we find we are already on the inside. Inclusion is the truth, the simplicity of our lives. When we feel lonely, depressed, isolated or that other people don't understand us, that isolation is generated by certain kinds of thoughts, certain interpretive concepts which evoke different feelings. We may feel, *"Oh, I don't understand why people spend their lives doing this and that. Why can't they be more like me?"* That kind of thought is itself the force of the isolation. When we start with a strong sense of, *"This is who I am. This is how I am,"* and then look at others and think, *"Well, you are not me and you are not me. There is nobody here but me because you are all something else",* then we are going to feel really isolated.

#### Siddhartha's progress

In the historical story of Siddhartha we find a pampered young man who grew up in luxury free of troubles. He was protected from the difficulties of the world due to his father's desire that he continue the family business of clan-leadership and not take to a religious life which was a possible alternative indicated by a family astrologer. Hence, the boy grew up developing a lot of assumptions, *"I am rich. I am powerful. I can get whatever I want. I can do whatever I want."* He had horses and chariots and was trained in the arts of war. He had lots of girlfriends and the best of food. He had everything he wanted. So, this gave a sense of power the way in which children of rich people can have a sense of power. Their dad gives them a nice car and they feel they have become someone even if they are actually no-one.

Some time went by and then he had some experiences – he saw a sick person, he saw an old person, he saw a corpse and then he saw a sadhu, a wandering holy man. He thought, *"What is life? If this person is sick maybe I will get sick. If this person is old maybe I will get old. If they die, probably I am going to die. So, what am I doing with my life?"* In that moment the definition of himself which he'd held to started to crumble away. Where previously he'd thought, *"I am this incredibly fortunate handsome guy. I can do whatever I want,"* now he reflected, *"But, I am going to die!"* The security of his self-definition started to break down opening the door whereby he could inquire into, *"How I am?"* He moved from the *what-I-am* as told by all the people around him saying, *"You're the man, the special one,"* to the inquiries, *"How is this? What is this body? What do I need?"*

On this basis he started eating very little food and undertook many kinds of extreme ascetic practices such as standing in the heat of the sun and so on. Such asceticism, *tapasya*, was well established in India and thus he became a yogi. Yet, after six years of practice at Naranjala river in Bihar, he considered, *"This is not going anywhere. I have gone from being a rich young man to being an ascetic yogi. I know how to be an ascetic yogi in the same way I knew how to be an indulged, rich, young person. But, how am I?"*

To be either a rich young person or a yogi, both are kinds of roles like those in the theatre. You have a script which you follow and you see what the other yogis do. You see them standing for hours with their arms up in the sky so you also do that. Then when your arms are sore you say, *"Shiva is blessing me. This is a sign that Shiva loves me."* and so you continue to keep your arms up in the air. In that way you learn all these cultural stories that give you the sense that you are doing something useful.

Then we may ponder, *"How is this? How do I feel? How am I? I am full of things I have learnt – I have taken something from outside and put it inside."* Then we may wonder if this is authentic or rather, is this an introject? Something which was not me, now is me. However, if it is not me but only temporarily me at a certain point it will fade away. If we observe the old yogis today we see they can no longer perform such austerities due to having arthritis of the shoulder from having slept on the rocks for years. They will say, *"When I was young, if you could have seen me then. I was amazing! But now it's not possible."* So even being a yogi starts to collapse. All phenomena are impermanent. Every created thing will dissolve in time.

Thus Sidhartha contemplated: *"How am I?"* or alternatively, *"Who am I?"* and on that point he decided to rest making a seat from soft kusha grass, determined not to move. He called the earth as his witness, touching her saying, *"I am not going to move. I am not going to do anything. I have been acting all my life, acting at being a rich man, acting at being a yogi. I don't want to pretend, I don't want to be artificial. I am just going to be here and not do anything."* So then, of course, thoughts arose in his mind, feelings, sensations in the body, and he just noted them. Sensation arising and passing. Emotion arising and passing. Pleasant, unpleasant – arising and passing, arising and passing. The longer through the night he sat in that way he achieved equanimity, balance. He wasn't in reactivity anymore. He wasn't building up a picture of himself on the basis of selectivity, pulling in the aspects that he liked, how he wanted to be, and pushing away the aspects he didn't like, that he didn't want to be. There is this and there is this, and they are inseparable. What he experienced was the non-duality of subject and object.

When a thought arises in the mind, if you don't grasp it, if you don't enter into it, you are aware of it. The sight of subjectivity, what in buddhism we normally call consciousness (Skt.: *abhijñana*; Tib.: *nampar shepa*), i.e. the aspect of consciousness that takes hold of what is arising, that grasps it, that does something with it—that relaxed and he was just open and aware. He could feel subject aspects arising and passing, and object aspects arising and passing. That was the basis of his awakening. He realized that doing less is more.

#### About teaching

In the morning he decided, *"That was pretty good, I am okay. I don't need to do very much now. I am certainly not going to talk about it to anyone else because that will just be a big headache."* However, according to the story, all the gods came, prayed, pleaded with him to teach and threw flowers all over him. He then started to teach, knowing well that whenever anybody teaches it all becomes much more complicated because people respond, *"Yes, that is all very well, that's what you*

*say, but for me it is different.*" Thus, he had to explain a bit more, and then more and again more. Eventually he gave many teachings, according to the tradition 84,000 teachings corresponding to the dispositions and tendencies of different people. Thus arose many different teachings. They were all the same but people heard them as different.

Later, buddhist scholars started to write commentaries on all the different teachings and when you gradually accumulate all the works of the buddha, the tripitaka, there are many books, many pages and many ideas. Then the different schools became established – sarvastivadins, mahasanghikas, etc – many different groups all with slightly different points of view. Dharma became something you could know *about*. This is very sad. The buddha started by knowing about himself; found liberation by no longer knowing anything about anything but rather just being there; tried to help others but found he'd ended up created fields of "knowing-about" due to the conditioned tendency to always give a conceptual elaboration, to keep adding in ideas, building up pictures.

#### Concepts: talking into a story

Consequently, at various times in the history of buddhism groups of people have called for a return to the first principles: Who is the one sitting here? Who is the one who is walking and talking?

When the various answers arose they were able to recognize, *"I am speaking to myself as if I am an object. Now there are two of me – There is me as the subject and me as the object."* For example, if I say, *"Let me tell you about me. I was born in Scotland. I feel like this..etc,"* there is the subject aspect – the one talking and describing – and the object aspect, the one being talked about or described.

We all exist within this duality – a duality internally which also manifests in our duality externally. In terms of you, I am me. Yet, when I look at me, I am all over the place with many different feelings, thoughts and so on, and thus there is a concern to find what is beneath.

In early buddhism this was examined in terms of the five skandhas<sup>2</sup>. From this point of view one looks at the person, the pudgala, in terms of form; in terms of the feeling tone of positive, neutral, or negative arising in relation to any experience; and from the identificatory perception which allows us to hear, see, taste, and touch things – *"Oh, this is a flower."* Even without having any thought, simply by naming it as a flower we have already brought it into our cultural mode of interpretation. It appears we are looking at a flower out there – the flower and we are not the same. That seems obvious. It seems that we sit here and look at the flower. We all see the flower so we cannot be imagining it, and yet from our different positions in the room we don't quite see the same flower. We see different angles, different shadings according to how the light is coming down from the ceiling into your eyes. We each have our precise, unique experience of the phenomenon here called flower with it's different petals and so on. But of the precision of detail, we cannot speak. How could we possibly use language to describe this? It is so incredibly complicated. There are so many subtle shadings from the pink on the tips down in through the white, into some kind of yellowy-green at the base. It is very difficult to describe, yet we get it in an instance. This, whatever this is, has already given itself to us, and if we open to it we receive it. However, when we call it a flower and try to pull it into our frame of reference, and we all agree this is a flower, the concept of flower disguises the detail.

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<sup>2</sup>The five aggregates or skandhas are the components of what we take to be a person. They are form, feeling, apprehension/perception, volitional formation and comprehension/consciousness.

We all enjoy how the concept of flower gives us some degree of power, of mastery or knowledge, which enables us to do something with it. We can take hold of it, even just within our mind.

If, instead of applying the concept 'flower', we just look and open to it like the Buddha did, simply sitting there. When thoughts and feelings arise we don't enter into them. When we look at the flower, and we don't layer the flower with our interpretations, we find we have less and less to say, and less and less to think. This flower, when we don't fill it with us, shows us our emptiness. The more knowledge we have about flowers and the more we fill its shape with us, the more impossible it is for the flower to fulfill its task of freeing us. The flower is empty of concept and so are we, basically.

We also are basically empty of concept. Everything I say about myself, "*I am James. I was born in Scotland. I live in London. I do this. I do that,*" is myself creating a story, an image, an interpretation. You also can tell us your story. Then we are living in this field of stories and some of these stories will have points of similarity and familiarity, yet it is a cover-up. For example, experiencing the freshness of our existence when we wake up early in the morning with the air cool at dawn and maybe the light on the hills, we don't need anything. Coffee would be nice, but this is enough. Still, *Who* is there? *Who* is experiencing? A story can be told in response but that then extracts us from the non-dual, the un-separated togetherness, of what we take to be the object. The hills, the light, the shading of the tree, the softness of the breeze, remains uninterpreted as we are not telling a story, yet nonetheless we are getting everything. As soon as we start to tell the story we are forced into selectivity because language is linear coming out of our mouths one word, then another and then another as we endeavour to get a handle on it all. However, when we simply openly look, as does buddha, we find all comes at once. This is the big difference. This is why the meditation schools of buddhism are against concepts.

In daily life we use concepts to communicate. It is not that concepts are inherently bad. The reason for the distrust in concepts is because they are always presented serially. One sets out an argument or some logic trying to prove something is this because of that, this because of that, which ever proceeding along. However, pre-conceptual experience comes all at once. Dawn light is all at once. When one goes outside and looks at the forest a hundred trees, a thousand trees are given all at once. Only after does one start to name them pulling them into one's frame of reference, through one's culturally determined attributions of value. Because we have a human body we say this is so and so, whereas the birds in the forest don't. The ants in the forest also don't say that. The ants climb up the tree and some of the birds will try to eat the ants. They all have their own relationship. However, we human beings mediate or transform our experience through concepts, and the reason we do so is that we can agree on concepts.

We can call something a flower and all agree what is a flower. Of course, flower is an English word. In French or German one doesn't say flower, but in English we say flower. So we are already cooking it, we are already putting a little turn on it. Each language brings a particular flavour to it, the flavour of interpretation. How could we speak to the flower about its floweriness, the truth of its being a flower, without cooking it? We have the raw flower, the naked flower, of which we cannot speak. Everything we say about the flower is a violence to the naked flower.

At certain periods in time the naked female form was seen as an invitation to rape. In many stories, for example, a naked woman is bathing in the river when a knight rides along and dismounts wanting to have the woman. It's a sad story but it happens. We see nakedness as unprotectedness. We learn to protect ourself as we grow up through our teenage years when we

don't really know how to work out men and women. We learn somehow that we can go forward or back in certain situations. I think that is the truth of our learning. But naked? That is vulnerable. So if we impose our concept of flower onto the flower, what is it going to say? So, to call it a flower, even to say that it's a beautiful flower, is to pull it into my world. This is a kind of violence because I am saying if I can pull you into my world I am using you to validate my intelligence, my learning, my sense that I know about the world. But if I go into the flower's world and I look and look and look, I may appear like the village idiot. Therefore, I want to tell the flower that it's a flower because it returns me to my power. This is the difference between the formation of the ego and the quality of awareness.

Awareness is the quality of the mind that simply shows or illuminates without distortion. Awareness has no violence to what is there as it does not apprehend it, it doesn't take it in any way. It is just with it. Once we start to comment on it and pull it into our world then we have our ego structure: *'I like these flowers'* or *'I don't like them.'* *'I remember my mum liked them and because I didn't like mum I never have these flowers in the house.'* Or, *'I miss my mum so I always buy these flowers.'* We can see how our cultural movement influences this and how by forcing the flower to be part of our world we never see what it is in herself. The gift of the beauty of how it truly is remains hidden by our own insistence on pumping out our ideas, our projections. We then take our projection to be intrinsic.

The flowers, les fleurs. When we have two languages we have two different identifications. These words have different moods and connotations in the different languages. But if we don't call it something what will we do with it? We won't do anything. Say, for example, we come into a room and look around noticing things hanging on the wall we may think, *"What do they do with that? Why would they have that?"* This is our mind, it is quite active. We are trying to work it out. We want to know what is going on, what's the deal, *"Is there any place in this for me?"* These are the basic concerns of the separated individual. Understanding this is fundamental for meditation practice because the task is not to have no concepts, but rather to become less reliant on them. If we had no concepts we wouldn't be able to function in the world and communicate with other people. I am using a lot of concepts right now. However, when we meditate we want to ease our way out of reliance on concept, so that any concept is free to arise, to come and go. Free to be self-arising and self-liberating.

What appears through the senses as sound, as light, and so on, arises and passes. Light is movement – it comes in through our eyes – it is not a thing. Sound also is vibration, it doesn't rest anywhere. If the movement stops the sound stops. If the movement stops the light stops. These are evanescent, transient, changing, but also they are revelatory. There are showings, but not the showing of something. They are just showing. In meditation the aim is to move from grasping at things, filling them with our ideas about them, to the place where we experience the freshness of the space of the emerging of whatever is arising and passing, however it is. Good thoughts, or at least what we take to be good thoughts, come and go. We get a pain in our back and it comes and it goes. Our neck feels a bit tight and then the sensation changes and goes.

#### Mahamudra approach

Everything which arises, passes. The more we stay with that the more we see that we are grasping only echoes. The sound has already gone, the moment has already gone. This is just some echo or some shadow. That is what the concept is. The concept is like a snail on the ground that leaves a little silvery trail behind it. We are always tracking the world after the moment. We are always behind in time when we are thinking about it. But, when we are on the point there is nothing

to say, and yet we get everything. Everything was freely available. That is the basic way of proceeding in both mahamudra and in dzogchen.

The term *mahamudra* is translated in different ways. *Maha* means big in Sanskrit, while *mudra* means a gesture. *Maha* also means shunyata, emptiness, because there is nothing bigger than emptiness. *Mudra*, as gesture, is the gesture of emptiness. In the traditional example we have the mirror and the reflection. When we look in the mirror we do not see the mirror but we see a reflection. The mirror shows itself as reflection. Similarly, emptiness shows itself as the gesture and that gesture is all that we see, all that we hear, all that we taste, every experience is the gesture of emptiness. The Heart Sutra is an early text dealing with the nature of emptiness wherein it is stated that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. Emptiness here means that form shows itself and therefore is undeniable.

Within this room we see all around, but what do we see? There is some heavy black punchbag that one could punch, kick, headbut or whatever – there is something there. That looks obvious. Yet, is the somethingness of the punchbag in the object? Because this room seems like a sports room we impute the idea that this bag is probably used for hitting, for strengthening one's arms. This is our mental process. We have gone from trying to work out what it is, to formulating our interpretation, and then to projecting it into what is there. We then feel satisfied with the marriage of our projection and the object – *"May they live long and happy together!"* From now on we take for granted that it is what we say it is.

This is very important to recognise in our meditation, because in that moment we are intelligently stupid. Our intelligence, in being able to work out what it is, has brought us to our definite conclusion and now we can fall ignorantly asleep! *"It is a punchbag. It is what I say it is."* The mind collapses on the object and subject and object are separated. But if we just stay with it we find that it is unfathomable, that we never get to the bottom of it. It is shining. Thoughts fall off it, they slip away. It is beyond thought in its facticity, just as this so-called flower is beyond thought in its givenness.

I put the flower into the flower and then I know it is a flower. But if I don't tell it so, then what is it? When the mind moves the 10,000 things arise. When the mind doesn't move, nothing moves. What is it? Many hundreds of koans are exactly on this point. Then we start to see all the knowledge we have, all that we have accumulated in school, in university, through our working life, through relationships and so on, all of this incredibly varied information and skill and technique which can be very useful, can also be toxic. Where is it coming from? The floweriness of the flower is in my mind. Without being omnipotent or narcissistic I can say there is no flower without me. It is not that I am the king of the flower, *"Dear flower, I will take care of you. Don't worry."* It's that the flower arises with me. Self and other arise together – we are co-emergent. The dead world, the world of the walls, the ceiling, the neon light, the wooden floor, the punchbag – the world of *things* that exist out there as things in themselves – we start to see this is our delusion. There is no world without me.

#### Concepts are an aspect of compassion

When we rely on concepts then we agree that we are in Geneva. We can agree about where we are in Geneva. When we sit within our conceptual interpretation we have communality. When we look at what we call a flower we do not know what each other sees. We can imagine and talk about, and in the talking about it we can agree something about the colours and so on. Concept is meeting concept. But is direct experience meeting direct experience? We cannot say. There we start to see social life, human culture, is always mediated through concepts.

That is to say concepts are part of compassion in buddhism. Concepts allow us to relate to each other. To have some sense of intimacy. We can say, *"How did you sleep last night? Do you feel fresh today?"* It is something quite nice, quite sweet that gives us a sense of proximity so that we can come in some way close to another person's experience. That is what it does. It doesn't establish truth. If, however, we want to establish the truth, concepts are not the path.

We have the two aspects of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom means awakening to emptiness. If we want the emptiness of the flower to reveal itself, leave it alone. Don't tell it what it is, don't think about it. Befriend it, be with it, let it show itself and in that receptivity emptiness will be revealed. There we can see the nature of samsara or this revolving world of limitation. Because we confuse the method of compassion with the method of wisdom we think we can talk our way towards the truth. We think that by refining and polishing our concepts we will somehow get a true account. But all we will ever have is a moment of sharing.

There are so many paintings of flowers. Incredible French painters like Fantin-Latour have painted with such detail a bowl of roses that it's hard to believe it's just a painting. A painting is an interpretation, an idea giving the mind something to turn on. Whereas this flower requires nothing from us. We are totally irrelevant, redundant, not required. This flower doesn't need us, but we need her. She will lead us home to our essence, and yet we will cover her (with concepts). Very interesting. The object strips the subject revealing awareness, whereas the subject covers the object obscuring awareness.

### Eyes open

This is why in the practices of mahamudra and dzogchen we meditate with our eyes open, with our senses open. We are not going into ourselves. We are not finding some inner secret truth about ourselves. We are allowing the unimpeded flow of experience arising and changing, ever-moving, just like this, as it is. Then we start to feel a bit light and free, the body becomes light and pliable. We don't need to do any exercise at all. If we just stay open to the world it will soften us, our spine will bend. What makes us rigid is concept and especially the power that goes with concept, of being someone who knows something. Then at work you take on responsibilities, you have a responsible post, people expect you to know, expect you to do. That seeming gift of power makes you sclerotic, you develop a shell, you cannot move, you become rigid with power. Mr Putin is like that. He does plenty of martial arts and yet it looks to me that he has got a frozen body. Just see how he walks.

Mahamudra, the gesture of emptiness, means the empty phenomena of the world will show you everything if you don't overinterpret. The world doesn't need interpretation. In the course of the following two days we have together we can look at the nature of ignorance and how it arises. But in particular we will be looking at the mind a lot in terms of meditation so that we start to see how to be present in the world of phenomena – external phenomena and internal phenomena – without blocking them and without relying on them. We don't take refuge in things or concepts about things.

We take refuge by relaxing into the open presence of emptiness, what's called the ground, the base or the source. By being relaxed and open we find everything moves freely through it and therefore we do not have to struggle so hard.

Everything which arises, passes. The more we stay with that the more we see that we are grasping only echoes. The sound has already gone, the moment has already gone. This is just some

echo or some shadow. That is what the concept is. The concept is like a snail on the ground that leaves a little silvery trail behind it. We are always tracking the world after the moment. We are always behind in time when we are thinking about it. But, when we are on the point there is nothing to say, and yet we get everything. Everything was freely available. That is the basic way of proceeding in both mahamudra and in dzogchen.

### Spontaneity and intuition

Then we find that these two wonderful features of existence – spontaneity and intuition – start to ripen in us more and more. We don't have to prepare for life because we are with life and life will speak through us. There is nothing more deluded than to imagine you are the one who is speaking, the one who is talking. Talking is talking. Walking is walking. Who is doing it? No one is doing it. When you come to the stairs you go up. When you go out in the countryside and walk up the hill you don't walk in the same way as you walk on the pavement in Geneva. You don't have to decide, *"Now body, let's have a little talk before we arrive at the hill."* You look at the hill and your hips open up a little bit because now you are going to have a lot more pelvic shifting. You have to be more aware of your ankles and your knees. They can be quite challenged on the hill. The quality of the stone whether it is stable or not is something you need to be able to identify in a microsecond because if you put more of your weight on a stone that wobbles you may damage your ankle and if you are on a hill that's not good. You have to be there through the body.

Who is being there? Not anxiety. Anxiety will not help you. Trying to do it is impossible because the hill is showing itself to you. You feel it coming up through your feet. If you think about it you will be too slow to shift your body. You trust, and you find the hill is walking you. You give yourself to the hill and the hill shows you how to be with her. It is very intimate.

It is like going to bed with someone for the first time. You don't want to say, *"Excuse me, can we have a checklist of what you like and what you don't like... Oh okay, after five minutes of this I should change and move onto the next thing."* That would not be called romantic or even erotic. You feel it. The other person shows you.

Or if you are preparing food then the quality of the tomato or the hardness of the skin on the aubergine will show you what to do. Should you make a ratatouille? Could you put it in the oven? It depends how fresh the vegetable is. Clearly the world is showing you how to cook it. This is everything, unmediated. You have a little bit of background knowledge but that is not the leading thing, that is the assistant in the kitchen. The main thing in the kitchen is what is there in your hand. You pick up the tomato and you feel the skin, *"Ok, put that aside for some sauce later."*

This is the real meaning of mahamudra. It is not that we are gesturing towards the world but the whole world is nothing but gestures, shapes arising, forming, moving towards us invitationally. For example, when meeting different people we interact in different ways. With some people we shake hands, with some we give a kiss on the cheek, with others we give a hug. It arises as you go towards the person. Your body can feel how to be in that moment with that person because their embodiment is giving you permission or not. You have to be there. If you have got a thought in your head that will get in the way.

It is not that thoughts or memories or plans for the future are negative in themselves, it is that they are not able to be the leading movement of life. They are assistants, ancillary, supportive factors which can be entrained into the task. In order to do that we have to allow the free movement of experience to arise. That means that we have to get close to our own neurotic shaping, our anxiety, our closure, our depressive tendencies, our social anxieties, avoidances, our rigidity,

our obsessionality, *"It has to be done this way. If you don't do it this way it is wrong, wrong. It really is. It is wrong."* There are many people who feel like that. You find it amongst practitioners of dharma. I'm sure you get it in martial arts too. You get it everywhere. Somebody always knows 'the right way to do something'. Actually, the only right way to do something is so that it doesn't hurt you or someone else.

Maitripa gets his name from this quality of compassion and love. It means a kind of loving connectivity, maitri. It's a connectivity free of judgement, free of bias, free of saying, *'This is my friend, this is my enemy, I want to help this person more than that person.'* Maitripa's name itself is showing an openness and a connectivity free of bias. He lived in India in the 9th century AD when there were many many yogis moving around. The yogis belonged to different buddhist groupings but, of course, they were hanging out with hindu yogis of various kinds too. They would go to the same kind of cemeteries, the same kind of tantric pithas in Orissa, Bengal, and so on.

There are many shrines of the goddess Parvati, Shiva's wife. When she died Shiva would not let go of her body so he held it and danced and danced and danced and gradually her body started to corrupt and bits started to fall off. Eight major parts of her body became the eight major cemeteries and then small parts became little secondary shrines and so on. Buddhists went to meditate in these places as did the hindu yogis so there was a lot of interaction.

Nowadays people ask are you hindu or buddhist? You could be both. Why could you not be both? What's the difference? *"Oh, we buddhist have shunyata."* But hindus also have shunyata. Everybody has everything if you go deep enough. If you meditate you'll find it's there. If you go down through the veils of culture, of learnt internalized interpretation and just stay with what is – everyone gets the same thing whether you are a jesuit, hindu, buddhist or jain. You get the same thing because you're taking the self construct out of the picture. Atman is unified with brahman when the individualizing personal constructs are dissolved and then it is just open.

Maitrupa is from a time when there was little hierarchy, people were sleeping under trees however they wanted. They placed themselves outside the capturing of social demand, of family demands, of the local king's demands, of monastery demands, and so on. In order to be free to express what was arising. In Bengal you can still see many sadhus who live that way.

The quality that will come through in the text that we will start to look at tomorrow is one which is very simple, very direct, and relates to ourselves as we actually are. It is an invitation to give yourself a holiday from the work of self and world construction. It is not all up to you – you are not the lonely hero. You can let go and if you let go everything will not collapse. It's the same with every aspect of life. Whether you are working in an organization or whether you work for yourself – whatever you do, whether you sit at home – however you spend your time – if you lessen the commentary about your existence and give yourself more space, more time to be present with your life as it shows itself radiating out of you, shining through you moment by moment, you will not get less. In fact you will get more by doing less.

This is the great paradox – in our lonely ego-self, so conditioned by our time at school and in the family, maybe a rivalist relationship with a sibling, maybe being competitive at school, wanting to be in the football team, wanting to be good at mathematics, whatever caught you. Will I get to be in the choir? Will I be able to play basketball? Will I be on the inside? You try hard to privilege this aspect of your life and you let other potentials recede. There are many things that we could have done with our life that we never did because we did the things we were good at and if we do the

things we are good at people say, *"You're good at that!"* And then we think, *"Alright then."* In this way we abandon much of ourselves in order to get some kind of validation and this is very sad.

One of the functions of the practice is to relax these developed, artificial, incidental structures of interpretation and patterning of activity and then we find that we have wider potential – we can do more because when we find that the root of our being is empty and open, then who is going to be self-conscious? Who is going to be worried about making mistakes? If you make a mistake you change. It is always pulsing, always moving. Nothing is fixed. *"Ah, I shouldn't have done that. Why did I do that? What will you think of me?"* We freeze inside and get so solid and the moment is gone. You wake up in the middle of the night, *"Oh god, How can I go to work tomorrow? I shouldn't have said that."* You can say, *"I'm sorry. I was a bit much yesterday. I am like that sometimes."* You do not have to pretend you are not like that, you can just say, *"I am like that sometimes and if I am you can laugh at me."* It is how I am. It bubbles up and goes.

When you see you're empty you can do that. But when you are a thing then the moments of the world are inscribed on you like in a tattoo shop. All your sins, all of your failings that you could have been kinder, more generous – it is all marked on you for ever and ever and ever. Then, you don't want other people to see these horrible tattoos. So, you better wear a big coat even in the summertime. We cover ourselves in a false presentation imagining how I have to be in order to have you like me?

Part of meditation is this kind of reflection where we see we are artificial because Mairtripa is pointing us to being uncontrived, spontaneous, trusting the immediacy of the emergent moment. That is what we will get into tomorrow when we look into the text. We will do a lot of meditation that goes with it, because without meditation you will not that very far.

How is this way of talking tonight? Is it useful for you? As I said at the beginning if you want me to repeat something or say it in a different way, I am happy to do that. Just ask. I am here for you. I am not here to just blablabla. It is really important. I can make it more simple or use different language. So please, let's do it together and make a field of learning in which we find a way. Shame is such a terrible thing. A lot of Tibetan buddhism is suffused with hierarchy and patriarchy and people pretend to know things when they do not know them. Mairtripa would be very sad at that. He would say, *"Brothers and sisters, come on, we are all in it together."*

If we are close to the texture of our own existence then we find out something authentic about ourselves. The most important thing my main teacher CR Lama used to say is that you have to know how you cheat yourself. You have to know how you betray yourself, how you make yourself false. We become false when we are not in the deepest ground of ourselves, the fundamental source of our emergence. When we cover that up and just pump it out according to some recipe then we betray this life. When we do this we are moving towards death without ever getting any freshness.

Let's end now for the day.