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# Open to Life: The Heart of Awareness

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*Dzogchen (the great perfection) is one of the most beautiful expressions of wisdom that has come from Tibet and India. Its essence points to the inherent freedom and clarity that is our natural state. Free from religious or spiritual dogma, it offers a way of being in the world that allows a deep sense of ease, relaxation and spontaneous awareness. The day will focus on the advantage of trusting relaxed openness, rather than anxious mobilisation. It will be grounded in the dzogchen view and there will be meditation practice and time for questions.*

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## EXCERPTS

*“ ... Mistakes are part of life and are probably best dealt with with calm clarity and a sense of proportion. Nurturing in times of difficulty is vital because when we nurture people we give them resources. The more resources we have the broader the repertoire of possible responses we have, and with the confidence this generates we can allow ourselves to be present in the actual situation and respond into it. This has two main advantages. Firstly, we fit ourselves into the situation and actually meet people where they are, and this is compassion. Secondly, we experience the freshness of our being, and this is wisdom. If you merely have to obey orders and implement something which has been decided by some people somewhere else, you are being denied your creative responsivity, the flowering of your singularity within the web of interconnectivity ...”*

*“ ... In the approach of Dzogchen we leave our thoughts, our feelings and our sensations to do what they do. Not interfering with them nor appropriating them to create a narrative of ‘myself’; not pushing away the ones we don’t like, not trying to hang onto the ones that we do like but just relaxing and letting the movement of our experience move. Staying at peace, at rest, as the one who isn’t moving – what is this presence? ...”*

*“ ... If you stay with how you are, even if it seems terrible, that situation will vanish and you will find yourself to be where you actually are. But if you decide not to be where you are because you feel that there is a better place to be, then the energy that goes into doing that displaces you from where you are and sets you on a never ending task of improvement. So paradoxically doing less gives more, while doing more keeps you feeling the alienation of lack and hunger. The activity of trying to improve the content while ignoring the experiential field, within which the content is occurring, places us in the world of endless construction of our ideal identity. This is something which at best we only ever briefly taste for a short period of time, for the perfect thought is replaced by another and then another thought comes and another thought comes...”*

## INTRODUCTION

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The view and practice of dzogchen enables us to relax into an easier relationship with ourselves. We are returned to where we already are, free of alienation and centred in the stream of our experience.

The focus is on recognising our innate freedom from ignorance. Ignorance in the Buddhist sense is not a cognitive problem. It's not that we are ignorant of a particular kind of knowledge or information which we need to acquire, and that if only we build up a better database we would somehow give a more substantial basis to our individual existence. Rather, ignorance is about not being at home in our spacious openness, not being relaxed and in our own skin. There is a kind of ill-at-easeness, a disgruntlement, which causes agitation to manifest in various ways, sometimes as depressed, sometimes as anxious, sometimes as lots of thoughts and so on. Feeling that something is wrong we try to make sense of our lives – but this leads to endless activity as there are many problems to be addressed, issues to be solved and unravelled. There's no end to this type of conceptualisation.

The root problem is our misapprehension of our situation, that we take ourselves to be an entity living in a world of entities. We have learned how to solve certain problems such as changing a bicycle tyre and then apply this way of thinking to the question of our identity and how to find meaning in life. But life, our experience, our existence is not a problem to be solved. It is important to recognise that trying to solve insolvable problems is a waste of time. So in Dzogchen we simply attend to our existence as it manifests moment by moment by maintaining an openness to what we take to be the subject and what we take to be the object.

Our lives tend to be grounded in basic assumptions, basic presuppositions. Thus we start with the idea *"I am me, this is my body and through my body I engage with the world outside me". Although everything changes in the world, there seems to be some constant factor to my experience and that's 'me'. Wherever I go I'm just me, the one who I know myself to be and the one who has to make sense of what is going on.*" The notion of having a particular, definable, understandable identity is, from the point of view of dzogchen, the basic site of alienation. For our being, our presence, our aliveness, is not something which can be grasped, it's not a thing and is never caught by any meaning or quality we might ascribe to 'it'. Our presence, the immediacy of our awareness is prior to and

beyond concepts, knowledge, memory, judgement, and all the other means of establishing identity. It is neither revealed nor created by effort. Rather it is always already here and available, if only we attend to it. The artificial confectionary of our self-narrative, the stories that we tell about ourselves, all that we wrap ourselves in in order to feel safe, can be let go of without loss or harm. We relax our fixation on our usual sense of the world, not to wipe it away because it's bad or wrong but simply because we've become so hooked onto a particular take on the world so that it's as if everything else goes into the darkness. Not the darkness of being ignored but the darkness of being taken for granted.

Dzogchen is an encouragement to look with fresh eyes, with a fresh heart. We come to see the nature of experience, not by telling our experience what it is, not by layering it over with more storylines, but by simply sitting in open receptivity, allowing experience to reveal itself as it is. So this is not a system of interpretation or a new kind of belief; we're not seeking to add anything onto our lives. It's more like a spring-cleaning, a ceasing to invest our accumulated assumptions and habitual interpretations so that we can directly open to what is.

Thoughts, feelings and sensations are the basic ingredients of our existence as we know it. We pull them together into familiar, habitual patterns and use this construct as our basis of relating to what seems to be going on. As an alternative, we can stay open to what is there. Open is a word much used in the language of dzogchen. Open indicates emptiness, that all the phenomena that we encounter has no fixed, inherent self-nature. Moreover who we take ourselves to be, the structures out of which we construct ourselves, are also not fixed. The outer stories we can tell about ourselves, the inner experiences that we have in terms of the streams of our thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on, all of this actually occurs only in the present. Experience presents itself in the present to our presence. It registers, it has an impact, yet you can't catch or say something definite about it. Even when you describe 'this is how it is' in this moment 'it' has already gone. The truth of our existence is that it is momentary. Each moment there is a unique specific pattern, a particular configuration arising and passing. It is an impactful, concrete appearance devoid of substance. It is what it is, and is both inside and outside our sense of linear time. To locate a moment in the arc of meaning running across time, you have to apply an interpretive structure which disguises the immediate actuality of the moment. The busyness of making sense of what is going on directs our attention so that we do not open to the immediacy of the momentary structure. Moment

by moment life is astonishing, it's very strange, and it's very surprising. If you weave the moments, or at least their echo, into your narrative then you can make them more and more understandable. This brings a reassuring complacency but at the loss of fresh aliveness. Generally speaking, life is easier if you put the blinkers on and just do more of whatever you have found out works for you.

Our life is very much like that, you go to work because it is what you do and you need to get some money and you need to pay a mortgage, and so on. We develop all sorts of rationalisations to keep the show on the road but I would suggest that the particular structure of your life has no innate meaning at all – it's just the happenstance of your existence. For some reason at a certain age you decided to study something or you met someone and you fell in love, or you decided to take a lot of drugs and this took you off in some particular direction. Then we spend a lot of time and energy trying to maintain that structure while visited by thoughts of “Is this how I should be living? What does this mean?” These waves of anxiety, depression and hesitation arise because we can never be quite sure this is enough: “Is this all there is? Is this really who we are?” Our personal narrative describes what we have done, what we may do, opinions we have held, things which have happened to us. We join these in various patterns and create different kinds of stories that we tell to different kinds of people. The stories may seem quite true as we tell them, yet we can't quite escape the knowledge that they are constructs, that in the telling we are creating the ground we are standing on.

Through this process of storytelling, of relating, we can weave ourselves into the social body, we can find a place in the world, we can connect with people who feel similar enough to us that we don't feel strange when we are with them. All of which is quite reassuring, but somehow there's not much substance to it, for the gestures which support it have to be repeated again and again.

The Buddhist idea of emptiness indicates that there is no intrinsic or inherent self-existence in any phenomena. For example, beside me there is a little wooden table. It's quite a loose structured table made of various pieces of wood which are screwed together in a pattern, such that these bits of wood placed together makes what we see into a table. If we have a screwdriver we can take out the screws and lay out all the pieces of wood, and then we wouldn't have a table. When we bring all the pieces of wood together and screw them back into place, we have a table. So what has been added to the pieces of wood to make the table? Nothing material has been added. The same bits of

wood and few screws can be laid on the ground or put together in this pattern. The thing which is added to make the table a table is our belief that there is a table. When you add the concept of the table to this shape formation, the concept, in a very instant and magical move, jumps from inside your head to the piece of wood. It is the seamless union of wood and concept, which generates the experience of seeing 'a table'. You don't see a bunch of bits of wood which you happen to call 'table', you see the table as out there existing in itself. But the table is not existing in itself. Its seeming existence arises due to causes and conditions, and if these are changed the table is also changed. The table is both something in the world and simultaneously an interpretation. If you take the interpretation out of the table, then there are many more possibilities for what you can do with it, but you won't attend to it in the proper way that a 'table' should be attended to. If there was a two year old child in the room and they pulled on the table we would say, "Oh, careful the table's going to fall over, it's not very stable." The child is not thinking about stability but is exploring whether they can make it move. That's their area of interest, how they impact the world. Gradually we induct the child into the world of socially agreed conceptualisation. This is a table and because it's a folding table we say, "Don't put your finger in there, it could get trapped. You could get hurt, and you don't want to get hurt, be careful." Many, many messages of this kind have been massaged into you for years and years and years by your parents, until you are absolutely glowing with this powerful knowledge that you know how the world works, you know what it's all about.

On one level that's very true, very helpful and very useful. Yet what it also does is to make us believe that the world exists out there, in and of itself. When we do that it's as if we have a pair of scissors and we cut the direct connection between ourselves and the world. Then the world is full of self-existing phenomena, I am also a self-existing phenomena, and I wander around on my own two feet a little bit lonely, a little bit insecure, in a world full of stuff. There's an awful lot of stuff and somehow we never know enough about stuff. There's always new stuff to be dealt with and often we have the wrong kind of stuff in ourselves. We have regrets, "If only I had taken the right kind of stuff from outside and put it into myself then I would be ok." It's like the journey to the Wizard of Oz, some of us are looking for more heart stuff and some are looking for more head stuff. Something is missing and it seems to be 'out there' which is why humans have developed many, many different kinds of practices. There are practices for the body, yoga, tai chi and so on, practices for the voice, practices for the mind, all to

develop ourselves because we feel that we are not complete and we want to be complete.

If you look in the wrong place for completion you will never find it, and trapped in the delusion that something is missing, you will be kept busy and dissatisfied for a long, long time. When we look outside we can always find things that we don't have, we can see qualities in the personalities of other people we would like to have, we might see how their house is structured or the job that they have or the way that they raise their kids. There's always something that I think I could extend the shape of myself in the direction of, and through which I would be more fulfilled. I would be more like me if I had more of what you have, which is a rather strange notion. Of course, on the level of personality, in the development of our individuality, this is exactly true. In psychological terms we become ourselves through our interaction with other people. We are constituted dialogically, we are constituted in conversation. The kind of parents we have, the kind of school we go to, creates certain possibilities of speaking and certain ways of being silent, and so we find ourselves seeing other people doing things which we can't or are not allowed to do. We look at them and they are not so different from us: they've got two legs, two arms and so on. They walk about in the world and they eat and they drink, yet we are not like them, and often we can't understand how they can do what they do. This is very interesting because it illustrates how we have become identified with a particular patterning of ourselves which we take to be definitive of ourselves. However when we look at it historically, our particular pattern has developed through our interactions with other people in the world; we have become our particular shape through interacting. We have taken on ideas, beliefs and behaviours, for example, how to hold a knife and fork, whether one makes some noise when drinking soup or not. The habitual is felt to be normal, to be how it is, and so when we see someone who has a different behaviour, we say, *"Whoa, why are they doing that? That's wrong, for I have to believe in my rulebook. If anything goes what will I do? In order to be me I have to follow my own rulebook, yet I didn't make the rules in my rulebook."* This is the basis for many conflicts in relationships as our assumptions clash. You might go to psychotherapy to examine your rulebook and decide, *"Ah, this is wrong, it is what my father said. From now on I never follow this rule."* So then you have to have another rule, but where will you get it from? The world is full of people selling rules, and perhaps we also quite like converting others to our rules to ensure that we are not the only one in the world holding our particular belief system.

Enquiring in this way it would appear that our sense of self is a construct although it feels innate. Next to me there is a small table. When we look at it it's obviously a table. In the same way when I consider myself I am obviously me. However the table is just the happenstance of wood being cut in a particular way. When the tree was cut down the wood could have been sliced in many different shapes, it could have gone into making housing beams, bits for ships, all sorts of things. Yet it happened to be cut in these kinds of strips and then for some reason somebody decided that making this kind of table is something people would be willing to buy and so they produced this. Then, for some reason, somebody bought this table and it ends up here. There's a happenstance to this table existing here, and there is a similar happenstance to our being ourselves.

As we get older we have more opportunity to look back and see all the crossroads that we've met in our lives. All the choices and decisions we've made which have taken us on the somewhat random and circuitous route to end up with our particular shape of life. If we feel there is something wrong with this shape we might think, *"Oh, something has to be done. I would be better off, happier, if I was another shape, and in fact other people who know me would be happier if I were another shape too."* So in terms of both wisdom and compassion we had better change. This is a fairly mainstream belief and you see it running through most religions, certainly in mainstream Buddhism.

### Be Careful – Don't Fall Asleep in Assumptions

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Dzogchen is suggesting something slightly different. It suggests that before you proceed into the effortful process of trying to change yourself, maybe you should look at yourself to see whether you have truly seen yourself before you try to change. So in this case the function of meditation is to create an environment in which we can attend to the experience of being and how it stands in relation to the way in which different movements are occurring. We directly open to our presence and then we can see what is going on. We are observing the contents of our experience: perceptions of the external world coming through our senses, sounds, colour, shapes, taste, tactile sensation and so on. We also experience the internal sensations of our body and our feelings, memories, thoughts and conceptualisations. As this stream of experience is arising we can see that we designate some of this as 'self' and some of it as 'other'.

For example, if I look out the window I can see a winter tree with all its leaves gone. I 'here' see the tree 'there'. The sense of here and there, of me and it, is an interpretation. Actually, directly, the whole field of experience is arising at once. When I relax the

interpretive process there is experience, direct ungraspable experience. This creates a space within which the facticity, the actuality, of unfolding experience is revealed – it is what it is. This is always available yet is unattended to when I am focused on telling the world what it is. These two aspects or modes are simultaneously present yet one, the direct, is invisible while the other, the conceptual, is highly visible and seems to be a given.

If someone asks you, “What’s that building over there?” as you answer their question they have very gently wound you into the world of conceptions, a world in which they function and you function. You have the freedom to perform your existence as a human being with other human beings, an interaction mediated through language, but what is the experience prior to the interpretation provided by language, memory and concept? Something occurs; if we don’t conceptualise our experience we still have experience. In conceptualising experience we think about what is happening ‘out there’, and what is happening to me ‘in here’, and this activity confirms to us that I am the one to whom it is happening. These are all conceptual elaborations, interpretations.

The point of view of dzogchen is that we need to be careful not to fall asleep in the assumption that ‘I just am’, ‘I’m just me’, ‘this is who I am and these are the kind of thoughts I have’. It seems to be a common belief that there is nothing to be inspected: “I’m over 21. I’m entitled to lead my own life. I claim autonomy.” Yet no matter how much autonomy we claim, we hear noises, we see appearances, the world intrudes, enters into ‘us’ before we have chance to control it. To be in the world is to have the noise, so where is the autonomy? Experience and our first response occur before we make a conscious choice. To be alive is to be part of the unfolding field – our manifestation is always within the shared field – autonomy and individuality are deluding concepts which help us to ignore the actuality of the non-duality of manifestation. People get to you, they disturb you, they annoy you, why is that? “Why can’t they just leave me alone?” Because you don’t leave them alone. If you can guarantee that you will stop thinking about other people and having judgements and opinions about them, and stop looking at other people when you walk down the street, if you can guarantee to seal yourself completely in a bubble of yourself, then we’ll accept your autonomy.

However, nobody can do that because to be alive is to be related. It’s not that I am related to you as if we were two separate entities which just happen to be linked by

circumstance. Rather what I call 'I' is the vehicle of relating. What I call 'you' is the vehicle of relating. There is an interplay between both of our experiences of being in the world with others. I am constituted out of the stream of experience and everything I encounter through my senses is also a stream of experience. From this point of view there is no firm boundary between self and other. 'Outer' and 'inner' ceaselessly comingle, so how could we not expect to be disturbed by other people? Some people disturb or impact us in ways that we like, and some people disturb us and impact us in ways that we don't like. Either way we are going to be impacted. We are part of the movement of the world, as is everybody else. We are all moving in a field of movement, there is no individual self-substance. This is not in itself frightening. It might feel a little strange but actually it is the guarantor of our freedom: the freedom to relate, the freedom to participate, the freedom to be part of what is going on. We do not live our lives from a clear vantage point, observing, then deciding on the basis of rational choice. No one lives like that, that's just a fantasy. It's an anti-phenomenological story, a story that goes against the direct experience of being alive. We are breathing in and breathing out, we are moving within the world, the world is moving within us. Blood is going round our body, hormones are communicating – many, many kinds of communication are happening all at the same time. In fact we can say that our human body and all living bodies are nothing but communication.

Communication is the energy exchange which maintains the fairly self-regulating forms which constitute our world. We, and everything around us, are patterns of energy manifesting in communication and interaction with other forms. At certain points we get a bit sick, eventually we die, and then some of the regulating factors cease to operate and the body starts to decompose. Being alive is the operation of the factors which maintain a certain patterning of other factors which manifest as our body. The balancing of these dynamic factors is unstable and is always under threat. For example, we get colds like the one I have now. We meet with other people and talk and something comes out of their system and comes into our energetic field and we respond to that and find that we have a cold. It stays for a while, we do certain things because of it, and then it's gone. That is to say we are called into our current pattern of becoming by events in the world. When you walk up the stairs the nature of the stair is determining how you walk. Our sense that, 'I am climbing the stairs' is a statement of individual agency. "I know how to climb stairs, I've been climbing them for years, this is just another set of stairs, watch and I'll show you how to do it." Yes, I am the one who climbs the stairs, but I am climbing

*these* stairs and the particular shape of these stairs determines how I move my legs. So, the stair and our body are in conversation. We can't just climb these stairs as if it was any old stairs, for some stairs have a higher step than others and that will make our body move differently.

If you start to see the world in this way, you get a de-centring of the sense of being an individual agent who is in control. People who drive cars are out on the road with other cars. You can't just drive your car as a first person singular event for you're driving with other people. You're sharing the space of the road, and how they drive will also determine how you drive, how much space you want away from them, whether it seems safe to overtake them or not. If they become a bit erratic you become a bit wary. This sort of event-reaction is going on all the time.

When you're chopping vegetables, how much force you use depends on the kind of vegetable you're chopping. If you're chopping up a turnip then you need more force than with a parsnip, and a tomato needs less force than a parsnip – this is pretty obvious. Who is determining that? Again, you can tell the story, "Oh, I know how to chop tomatoes," but the tomato is making you chop it in a particular way. The tomato is speaking to you, it's saying, "If you hit me hard I'm going to splash you," so we listen to the tomato and we are very careful because the skin can be quite tough and if we cut it at the wrong angle, the knife will slide off. The world is communication. The world is the revelation of shared existence, the shared experience that we have.

This is the particular Dzogchen reading of the general Buddhist notion of the absence of inherent self-nature in phenomena including people. The aspects of our experience are always in communication. For example, some people here are sitting on the floor and are less used to sitting cross legged, so every now and then they move because their knees tell them something is not quite right. Others are sitting on seats which are a little bit hard and so they move around because the back gets sore and the bum gets sore. In this simple way being alive is ceaseless communication.

## **APPROACHING DZOGCHEN**

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### Observing the Nature of our Identity

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The first approach in Dzogchen is to start to listen to yourself in the world as part of the world, rather than listening to yourself about the world. We're very, very good at telling stories about our experience, that's what we do all the time. Someone says, "How are you doing?" and we're off telling a story, "I was here, I was there and then I did this and did that." Whereas in Dzogchen we focus on observing the co-emergence of the energy of openness. The arising of what we take to be outside and what we take to be inside are not two different things. Subject and object exist in non-duality, which simply means there is not just one thing nor are there many different things: the non-dual is the intimate co-emergence or co-presence of all our experience and its ground.

However, our education has pointed us in another direction. What we learned when in school and later indicated that we have to take care of ourselves: *"It's a hard world out there and if you don't look after you, who's going to do it?"* So, we can often become a bit weary, for sometimes we have painful love stories or a painful work experience and then find it difficult to trust people: *"What are you up to? How can I work out who you are? Or what's going on?"* These are the bruises round the heart which can lead to a kind of hyper-vigilance, a sense that the only way to be safe is to be in control. This is very sad especially because actually we can't be in total control, which means there's no way to be safe. Now you can hear this in two ways. One way is, *"There's nowhere to be safe. Shit what am I going to do? This is really not nice and I don't want all this, this is horrible."* Another way is to hear it in a more neutral way, as a simple fact that there is no way to be safe just as it is a fact that today is called Sunday – "This world is not safe." This is not a punishment nor even a sign that we should improve our situation. Rather it is an encouragement to stop looking to the object for the answer. If what is occurring is unsatisfactory perhaps this has something to do with how we experience it. Perhaps we need to observe ourselves instead of focusing on manipulating events.

Who is the one who wants life to be safe? "Me. I've got to protect this body because this is who I am." This seems obvious yet we might benefit from observing the nature of our identity? Who is the one who says, 'I am me'? 'I am me' is a string of words, and when you start swimming in the ocean of language, these gentle, warm waves break over your face like swimming in the Mediterranean on a beautiful summers day. The sky is blue, the sea is warm, "I am me ... I am me ... It's so easy being alive." But we are swimming, which is an activity, and if we stop swimming we drown. You've got to keep language going, you've got to keep thinking. We are keeping ourselves afloat by thinking and speaking. We are the active maintainers of the bubble of ourselves. Just as children have

little water wings on their arms when they learn to swim, so we have the bubble of our self which seems to keep us afloat, maintaining our identity – but only if we keep inflating it.

Meditation helps us to enquire whether we actually need the water wings. Do we need to keep swimming? Who is the one who keeps swimming? Who is the one wearing the water wings? That is to say if I don't make meaning, if I don't make my life meaningful, will it be meaningless? If I have to keep generating meaning, it will be conventional, it will be according to certain shared rules. This is clearly the case because if somebody entirely makes their own world on their own terms, they tend to end up in contact with psychiatric services.

A 'reasonable' life tends to be one which has a degree of conformity with social convention. By aligning ourselves with the patterns of interpretation which organise our in our world, we feel ok. Every now and then something might happen where we meet people with whom we are not quite sure what the deal is. For example, if you have to go into hospital or have contact with lawyers, that can be a bit weird because these situations are very clearly defined worlds, worlds which operate on their own terms. In encountering them you have to leave your thoughts about what's reasonable and what's not reasonable at the door. Generally we prefer to hang out with people where we feel at ease because their assumptions and behaviour confirms our own. But clearly this will keep us in quite a small world, like a little clearing in the dark forest. Uncertainty lurks in the shadows which we avoid. When I get old what will happen to me? Who will look after me? Encountering the unknown our self-construct starts to crumble and we become anxious because it can't be maintained. Once you move into retirement, what's the basis for your identity? As the economy gets worse and many people lose their jobs, anxiety increases. We know that redundancy is a big cause of mental distress, generating depression and anxiety. Why? Well, on an outer level, there's a loss of money and so on, which alters our behaviour. But this is also a loss of identity. The sense of who we are can no longer be maintained. There's a howling space around us. "What will I say to other people?" "How will they think of me if I can't show them the nicely defined little box of my life?"

## Seeing How Lost we Are

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In the practice of Dzogchen we want to look to into 'who am I?' The foundation point of these teachings in this world is a teacher called Garab Dorje who made three simple propositions. The first states that we can meet our actuality, we can be what we already are, which is our presence. This is not about being something in particular but simply being what we are, prior to any constructions about who or what we are.

We live in our flow of experiences, thoughts, memories, structures and so on, out of which we are continuously constructing a sense of our identity. We are always becoming someone new and yet we imagine that we are always just 'ourselves'. So who is the one who is becoming? All the things that we become exist just for a moment and then pass ... and then pass ... and then pass ... all day long, all night long, day after day, and yet there is a continuity of ourselves. There are different strands to this continuity. One is through our memory. For example, somebody might say, "How was it for you when you were 10?" You start to tell them your story, "It was a really bad year, my dad was sick," or "I remember, I got my first bicycle, I was zooming around." We all have some story to tell.

In this way we join the moments of our life together to create patterns, usually through a very selective attention, sometimes a self-aggrandising selective attention and sometimes a self-deprecating one. Some people like to tell stories that shrink them and put themselves down. This may seem strange yet it is a method of generating a reasonably stable sense of self, for it offers me a definition of 'who I am'.

However in the approach of Dzogchen we leave our thoughts, our feelings, our sensations to do what they do. Not interfering with them nor appropriating them to create a narrative of 'myself'; not pushing away the ones we don't like, not trying to hang onto the ones that we do like but just relaxing and letting the movement of our experience move. Staying at peace, at rest, as the one who isn't moving – what is this presence? This is basic facticity of openness, the spacious awareness which is inseparable from what is occurring yet is not the same as what is occurring. They're not two different things, neither are they the same thing. In fact there are no 'things' at all – only luminous space and the ceaseless play of illusory experience.

The traditional metaphor used to illustrate this is that of the mirror and its reflections. The reflection is in the mirror, it's not somewhere apart from the mirror. You can't take the reflection out of the mirror, but you also can't say that the reflection 'is' the mirror. You won't find a mirror that doesn't have a reflection in it, yet because the mirror can show many, many different reflections, each particular reflection is clearly not the

mirror itself. The specific reflections do not define the mirror, though the quality of the mirror is to show reflections endlessly. Similarly, when we look at our lives we probably have some memories that make us happy and some memories that make us feel sad or shameful or regretful. They seem to have a concentrated or distilled quality to them. They could even seem to sum us up: "Oh my God, I hate myself for that. I wish I had never done it." The event itself, good or bad, is gone, yet its impact can still register forcefully in the present moment. The event has been incorporated into our on-going sense of self, expressed through our self-narrative. On the basis of this self-construct our open potential is functionally reduced to a very limited repertoire of behaviours. For example, if I feel that I did some very bad things, I might feel I have to spend the rest of my life in reparation. Or if I feel people have hurt me I now believe I have to be careful all the time.

These are patterns of experience generating the patterns of our individual sense of self. Yet do they really define who we are? Perhaps inside our head, but outside, no. Yet we often live within our beliefs and resist attending to facts that might undermine these beliefs. For example, in my work as a psychotherapist I often have the following strange and rather sad experience. When and I meet people for the first time ... "Hello?" ... anything is possible. Yet within half-an-hour they have convinced me that almost nothing is possible, for they have shown very clearly, 'this is who I am, this is what I do and this is what I don't do'. So now the work has to commence in a very restricted space generated by the person's belief that 'this is who I am'. It's not true but it feels to be true. They are being internally defined by a belief system and this determines their interactions with others.

When we start to practice meditation we get a chance to see the emergence of our own familiar building blocks. We can experience how we, our open potential, gets tapped into them. We start to see how we slide into them, how it seems so obvious that this is who I am. When we merge with a thought, when we believe it to be true, we board it as if it were a train and it takes us on a little journey. Then that journey ends and here is another train with our seat reserved!

One of the useful yet alarming aspects of meditation is that we start to see how lost we are, that day by day, moment by moment, we are merged into identification with transient phenomena. The sun shines in the window and we think, "Hey it's a lovely day." Last week when it was raining and the sky was grey we felt, "Ohh, it's awful, it's

been like this for a long time.” When the weather can make us expand or contract, where is our freedom? We actually do feel better when the sun is shining and worse on a grey day. This is not something added to us or something which influences us – this is us in the moment. There is no self-substance to be added to or subtracted from. Our mind itself is open and spacious and what appears both is and is not ‘us’. There is no castle we can wall ourselves in, in order to protect us from experience. [1]The mirror has the reflection right inside it, right inside it, right inside it. The sun shines and we’re happy. This doesn’t mean we’re stupid or mere puppets. It means we don’t have border guards; we are not a separate country. There is no immigration department stopping the sunshine and saying, “Ah, have you a visa? How long are you going to stay?” The sun comes in our eyes and the heart goes, ‘ooh’ ... it’s free, immediate, just like that. Or you hear your phone ring, you pick it up and somebody starts to tell you a sad story and you feel terrible, “Oh sweetheart, I’m so sorry.” A sad story which you have no defence against; it’s just there immediately, the immediacy of our open being. The empty nature of the mind is like the empty nature of the mirror in offering an instant response to whatever is occurring.

This has major implications for the practice of meditation for rather than try to develop a particular content to our experience we allow whatever is occurring to occur. When an ugly object is placed in front of the mirror, the mirror will show the reflection of the ugly object, and then if the ugly object is taken away and something very beautiful is placed in front of the mirror, it will show that. The mirror is not marked or harmed by the quality of the reflection. Similarly in Dzogchen practice we relax and release our identification with the structure of our personality, our memories, our hopes, our fears, our intentions. Releasing the identification, we see that the mind itself has no shape and so is intrinsically safe. Our thoughts, memories and so on have particular shapes and therefore can be impacted by another shape. This is why the aspects of our personality, our identity, are intrinsically vulnerable. How I am as a person is truly going to be upset if somebody tells me bad news because I’m not made of stone. We’re not aiming for some kind of technical neutrality where everything is just the same known and predictable. That would be a kind of madness, for although you might attain a sense of calm you’d be a pretty poor kind of human being – for compassion means that we’re touched and moved. We laugh when other people are happy and we’re sad when other people are sad. Our body moves to help someone if we see them stumbling in the street. We are part of what is going on, we manifest in the world with others. Yet Dzogchen

indicates that the basic presence which we are is a quality of being, unaffected by our sense of being an individual. Our 'individuality' is a manifestation, a quality of energy; it is not the ground of our being.

So it's not that you have to choose one or the other: that I'm caught up in all this reactivity running hither and thither, driven by events, or that I'm sitting very calm in the meditation and nothing gets to me. That would just be a form of duality, of setting this against that. Rather the spaciousness of our awareness is unchanging, like the mirror it shows whatever is occurring, free of the turbulence of gaining and losing.

This awareness is the ground or basis of all that is manifesting at the moment, including what we take to be 'ourselves'. We are all aware of this room, we see everything here, some people we might know and others we don't. Some people look more interesting to us because we have the particularity of our gaze. The world we inhabit is always, uniquely, 'our' world. This is both the infinite aloneness of presence and the ceaseless interplay and communication of all phenomena. Our sense of loneliness arises from disregarding this non-duality. Within the field of experience, inseparable from the ever-open ground, we manifest in unfolding particular forms. You might be interested in what I'm talking about just now or not. You might be full of memories, you might be thinking about what you're going to do tomorrow. All kinds of experience can arise for us, but they all arise only within the wider field of experience inseparable from emptiness.

When we, as it were, get 'lost' it's through forgetfulness of the field – although we are always within it. For example, say you're sitting here and you suddenly think, 'Oh tomorrow's Monday, I've got to do this, this and this' and you get really wound into the pattern they generate. In that moment you're not here, although you have not gone anywhere else. Through the practice we open to the non-polarised possibility of attending to the arising thought of Monday within the open presence which is always here and now. When caught up in the duality of identification, it is as if we suddenly go into this blinkered caught-up-ness: "I'm here, where am I?" We then are stuck in a pulsation of open and closed, like the tide going in and out. Rather, the actuality of true openness is always here, the dynamic field of experience is always here, and our way of manifesting is always changing. Thus movement and stillness are inseparable; they're not two different things with an either/or structure. All the movement of our existence is within stillness. Basically, we're at peace at and in the ground of our being. With this we are fully in connection with other people in the turbulence of interaction and yet at

peace. When we directly taste that these two are not in opposition, life gets less tiring and no-one can steal your peace. Even when you, as a person, feel disturbed and upset, this is an experience arising within the calm open sky of awareness, your own presence. If you have a relative peace, if you think, "Sunday, a day to myself," and then suddenly the kids want to come home or whatever, it will then be, "Oh no, why can't I just have a little time for me?" In this way, the peace that I have is based on the exclusion of disturbance and difficulty. It is a very relative and vulnerable kind of peace and it can always be undermined. Whereas in Dzogchen our simple practise is to directly rest in the openness of awareness which receives whatever is happening without being conditioned. It doesn't have to protect itself because it's invulnerable. That doesn't mean that you run around without taking care, for our body is vulnerable. On the level of the person many things can go wrong while on the level of awareness everything is perfect just as it is. You can make mistakes at work and lose your job. This will change the structure of your life, the form of your identity. Yet awareness, the experiencer of both the old and new structuring is unchanging, uncontaminated, fresh, naked and hospitable. On the level of manifestation you need to have precision, being in the world with others is the practice of compassion, finely attuned and precise. This is inseparable from wisdom which is to remain open to and with all changing patterns of movement.

### Practice: Meeting our Actuality

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In order to directly taste this we enter the practice. So just sit in a comfortable way, you can sit in an uncomfortable way as well, that means you just get a bit more sensation. Either way something will be happening. Whatever's happening we allow it to happen. Our awareness is open, relaxed and balanced without bias to subject or object. If we stay in the familiar conceptualisation, 'I am me having this experience, my familiar sense of myself is the experiencer', you're starting with a prejudice, with a limiting identification. We relax into our basic state of open hospitality. We're hospitable to whatever is occurring including all that we would normally take to being ourselves. That may sound a bit strange: "I'm going to be hospitable to myself." Who is the one offering this hospitality? This is awareness itself. It is by being simply hospitable to everything that we awaken the actuality of existence: existence which cannot be defined or grasped; existence which is beyond existence and non-existence; beyond both existing and non-existing; beyond neither existing nor non-existing. When we hold on to a particular definition of ourselves we lose the infinity of ourselves, for how can the small contain

the large? [2] It's only the infinite, the awareness that we are, the presence that we are, that is able to contain everything – it does it all the time.

So, we sit. Usually we sit with our gaze resting in the space in front of us. You can try sitting with your eyes closed as well. The main point is to relax into the spaciousness of presence. There is no fixed technique to follow, for each of us has to find our way of relaxing, releasing our habitual preoccupations and settling into the spaciousness. In Buddhism there are hundreds, indeed thousands and thousands, of methods of meditation. The problem is that each method has been developed by someone for whom it worked. This doesn't necessarily mean that it will work for everyone else. The practice is very tender, very intimate: you are letting go of identification with all that you have taken to be you. We simply observe how we get tied in knots, how we lose ourselves. Observe without judgement. Don't blame yourself or worry about what is occurring. Just see where you slip into thoughts and remain present without attempting to alter the situation. Everything that occurs is impermanent: it will go free by itself, so leave it alone. Whatever comes, comes, whatever goes. Just stay present with that.

This simple practice is one you can do several times today. It may seem that there's nothing to it, but actually it is a kind of laboratory where you can actually see the very origin of samsara. You relax and open. There is only space. Then interpretations, thoughts, sensations start to arise. They are moving in the space. Then suddenly you're caught up in something for a while. That's where you can see the nature of attachment. Attachment is often said to be the cause of samsara, the cause of our limited experience of birth after birth. It doesn't merely mean attachment in the sense that I'm attached to my watch. The main attachment of is that I'm attached to the process of taking the aspects of the flow of experience to be something I need or don't need.

As we follow a thought we get caught up in it. We become the thought and with this there is a forgetfulness of the openness of our awareness. The practice is to allow the thought to be there in the field of awareness without interference. When we are focussed on one thing, we tend to lose the field, and when we have the field then we are not connected with anything. This openness allows us to see that there is only the mind which is space. This is the source and field of all appearance. If we are going to function in the world while maintaining meditative space, we need relaxed openness and the precision of engaging with and as different forms, moment by moment. Otherwise you

always want to be in retreat in some way, in a quiet place where you can maintain things the way you want them. There's not so much benefit in that.

When you get caught in experience, who is the one who gets caught? It's as if there is a forgetfulness of the ground of being, of the openness of our awareness and then our consciousness and its object seem to be two separate entities. For example, I might find myself thinking about the heat of the sun shining on me, 'oh it's getting quite hot'. The thought arises in this room on the basis of the sunlight coming in through the window. Within the open field of experience some aspects are being privileged to the forgetfulness of others. There is a de-contextualisation and an over-specificity and over-investment in one or two things that are happening and a forgetfulness of everything else. We are ignoring both the source and the field of experience and therefore are being trapped in the process of identification with a few aspects which are taken to be either subject or object. 'This is happening to me ... I like it ... I don't like it', and so on, is how our normal sense of our identity tumbles on.

We can be walking down the street while wrapped up in our own thoughts and feelings so we don't see much that's going on. There's lots of different kinds of people, changes in the architecture, there's shadows, there's colours, there's noises but we are lost in our thoughts. Even if we are attending to the world it tends to be a very selective attention where we select and comment, telling the world, 'I like this', 'I don't like that', 'that's a terrible building, how could they even build that, look at these all beautiful buildings, this is ugly'. Our minds fill with opinions, judgements, and opinions. This creates a particular quality of experience where one thought is following another, creating the illusion of the continuity of object as entity and the subject as entity.

In the practice, when we find ourselves caught up in judgement, we just relax and give it space. We don't have to push it away, because all life is movement, no experience lasts more than a moment. **[3] There is the external movement of our body. When we speak with each other there is the movement of the voice. Sound is movement, the body is movement and the mind is movement as well.** Subject and object are dynamic and ungraspable. We are the openness of presence offering hospitality to the shifting patterns we take to be identity. No particular pattern of movement is the truth or provides all the answers.

Therefore, you don't have to catch anything, or try to hold onto it, for there'll be another and another. It's not as if you're ever going to get just one thought a day and if you don't

catch that thought you won't get any more. It's not like that, is it? Experience is endless, endless appearance. We are part of it, and awakening to this fact allows us to participate without being either in control or out of control.

When we're sitting in meditation we tend to get drawn into something because it seems important. An arising thought might generate an understanding which is valuable. This is the point where we have to let go. Openness itself is the key point and it is always available. Whereas these fleeting thoughts become distracting temptations if we imagine they have enduring importance. Due to our selective attention it is as if the content has been separated off from the source or ground from which it is occurring. For example, when you look in the mirror when you're cleaning your teeth, you just see your face. It is unlikely that you will enter into contemplation about the nature of mirrors. You simply observe yourself cleaning your teeth. You take it for granted that this is me in the mirror. The invisibility of the mirror itself means that we don't see the reflection as a reflection. When you look at yourself in the mirror you see yourself in the mirror as yourself. Of course you know it's not you it's a reflection, yet you see you as you because that's the immediate sense that we have. We fall into the reflection, we identify with it – and this is exactly what happens with our thoughts. We fall into the thought and this seals it as something which is inherently true. Yet the thought is just a moment in the ceaseless chain of becoming which is manifesting as the body, the voice and the mind within the field.

In the traditional Buddhist view, when our manifestation is cut off from its own ground we become a sentient being wandering in samsara. We become an individual, somebody who is travelling, going here, there, looking for this, trying to avoid that. However when you rest in the ground of your own being, then manifestation is clearly linked to the field, and the field is clearly linked to openness, the space within which the field of experience occurs. Openness is called the Dharmakaya, the field is called the Sambhogakaya and manifestation moment by moment is called the Nirmanakaya. These three aspects are inseparable, and this is the Buddha. It's not something high and transcendent and far away, it is the actuality of our life. Yet we don't get it because we're getting something else, we're getting caught up in our stuff, in our habits, our interpretations.

Actuality can't reveal itself to you if you're caught up in telling yourself who you are and the world what it is. You have to allow yourself to receive. It's the very richness and

fecundity of our own creativity that stops us registering that we are part of what is going on. That is to say we talk and think ourselves into our individual existence but we're just part of what is going on, the illusory display of the heart of the Buddha.

### Connected to openness, working with circumstance

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Each of us can tell the story of our lives: our family was like this, we went to our particular school, we did this, and we did that. In these stories 90% is the same for everyone. We have to go to school, we like some teachers, we don't like other teachers, we have a favourite food, we have a best friend. This is normal; in fact we make our individuality out of what we actually share. Why do we share so much? This is because we inhabit the shared field of experience – we walk, we talk – and this requires an environment and language we share with others. The uniqueness of our individual experience is something we have in common with all other beings. Our existence is pulsatory; it is part of a movement, a dialogue of communication. We are not things, not entities, not a self sealed in a bubble. We are participants in the unfolding movement which is the world. Our own mode of participation is unique and specific to each of us but our individuality manifests in relation to other people. Our individuality is not the sign or product of an unchanging inner essence – rather it is the manifestation of the interplay of our potential with the potential of the situation. It is a field phenomena rather than a 'personal' quality. This is obvious once we start to look rather than assume. In the course of a day we have many different kinds of conversation as we talk to different people. What you can say to one person is not the same as what you can say to another person, and of course the manner of **[saying]**? also varies greatly.

We tell of an event in different ways, so what is the truth of the event? Memories and their recounting are situationally evoked rather than 'objectively' true. Someone asks how we are and we say, "Aah I'm fine," yet with another person we say, "Ooh, it's a bit like this and that." Why do we say more or less? It is because the person we address will seem to us to be a big door or a little door. If they look like a little door to us we will not want to reveal much of ourselves, for it seems there is not enough room to let more of us pass through. Yet maybe to someone else they look like a big door! This is the dynamic nature of the unfolding of our becoming; we are becoming ourselves in relation with others. Yet our being itself is unchanging, for being is not the personality. Rather being is the quality of mirror-like emptiness, the openness and clarity which reveals the ceaseless movement of becoming.

This view indicates that it is both fine and inevitable that we are unreliable. It is gorgeous to be unpredictable for we are not machines. However, being unreliable and unpredictable is not the same as being self-indulgent because then you'd be reliably self-indulgent, you'd just be doing your own stuff. Rather it's to see that we are co-emerging with the environment. The environment changes and we change and this co-emergence is mutual interaction. Unpredictability is not created by whimsy – it is the actuality of the interactive field. The infinity of our being opens us to see that what we call 'other people' is inseparable from ourselves. Self and other are movements in the fields of experience. The movement of our body and the shape of the stairs as we walk down them are not two different things. I am not the master, as in 'I am' walking down the stairs'. Rather the stairs and our body are in a conversation as I was suggesting earlier. I think you will find that this is true with everything you encounter. If we go to a café to get a cup of tea our body, voice and mind are all manifesting patterns that fit with what we encounter. If we are not able to do that, it is a sign that we are lost in a limitation.

From the Buddhist point of view this mutual influencing is compassion itself. The more you see how you are is part of the world and let go of holding yourself apart in some separate domain of your own thought, there is less and less barrier to being open to other people. With this empathic attunement you are able to tune in to and be as close to their profile as possible, and this reception of their actual presentation in the moment allows your response to express both the immediacy of the other and your own actual situational capacity. There is no map or template that can show us the 'right' way to be, for 'right' is not a moral judgement but the quality of 'fit'.

Every situation we are part of invites us to taste the plasticity of our identity, our capacity to be moulded and shaped by events since we too are but a series of events. Conversation evokes our body, our voice and our mind to move. Flexibility is part of communication, for you cannot be fully connected with other people and be rigid – it is impossible.

We know that when we get a bit scared, frightened or worried, we become more fixed and rigid. We might want to avoid others for our pre-occupation has rendered us unavailable. Availability is flexibility because it calls forth a fresh response. In this state you have the freedom to access and reveal the whole range of your potential. Thus in Dzogchen we offer ourselves into the flow of becoming rather than holding ourselves apart.

Being alive can be quite a complicated business for there are many, many different demands that we have to face, many uncertainties, many unpredictabilities. This uncertainty easily produces anxiety and anxiety easily turns us in the direction of wanting to impose control. Control can be very useful for a while in some areas of life but a lot of the time and in many situations it is not, for it evokes a sense of personal agency that blocks our easy participation. Meditation practice is the presence, which offers responsiveness to and within the situation. It is not something that we prepared earlier. This requires relaxing our reliance on knowledge, patterns, and habits. We discard our recipe books and pay more attention to the rich potential of the ingredients we and the situation are composed of. We can do many things on automatic pilot, and often do them simply because we know how to do them. Habits are quick and in some ways efficient. They can make us feel competent. The problem is that often they don't fit the actual situation. So in order to comfort myself by doing more of what I know how to do I end up enacting a subtle or gross violence on the other – and this increases my sense of duality.

This tendency to over-activity is increasing in all public walks of life in Britain. Whether it's medicine, teaching, or anything that is connected with the state, there is more and more regulation coming in. This is driven by a fantasy that 'bad' things just shouldn't happen. A risk assessment is made, structures are set in place, and then if something bad has happens it's obviously because people have not followed the rules. Social work departments can be paralysed by this kind of thinking, school teachers are imprisoned inside narrow notions of the syllabus and so on. Fear is probably not an ally of competence, and if staff are not supported and trusted to be themselves while staying in role they are likely to lose their motivation.

Of course, the anxiety arising from a mistake can easily lead to the imposition of anxious controlling as the best way to keep people efficient and unharmed. However, mistakes are part of life and are probably best dealt with with calm clarity and a sense of proportion. Nurturing in times of difficulty is vital because when we nurture people we give them resources. The more resources we have the broader the repertoire of possible responses we have, and with the confidence this generates we can allow ourselves to be present in the actual situation and respond into it. This has two main advantages. Firstly, we fit ourselves into the situation and actually meet people where they are, and this is compassion. Secondly, we experience the freshness of our being, and this is wisdom. If you merely have to obey orders and implement something which has been

decided by some people somewhere else, you are being denied your creative responsivity, the flowering of your singularity within the web of interconnectivity.

Central planning may be useful with commodities but not with people. Human beings are particular, they are unique. Each one needs to be responded to in their unique individuality. If you don't offer that how can you help people? The standardisation of people is the attempt to make them machines. Human beings have been doing this to other human beings for a very long time. It used to be in the form of slavery but nowadays it manifests as the need for efficiency and its consequent demand for conformity to a program.

Dzogchen proposes that the best way to bring about richness and fulfilment in life is to work with the unique specificity of your own and others situation. This brings genuine contact between people and also highlights the many ways in which this can be sabotaged. The deepest sabotage is not to be our own openness. The next level is the avoidance of the richness of our potential. The surface level is our tendency to hide ourselves in identification with pre-existing structures, generating a sense of belonging which is actually a forgetfulness of being. We can find belonging in a sport, a family, a religion – but the relief these offer is often short-lived. We have to find our way from loneliness – which seeks a rescuing other – to relaxed aloneness which is open to all.

Nothing you can say about yourself can sum you up. If you tell a friend about how you've been in the summer or what you might do at Christmas, you create a little structure, a little shape. It's a gesture of friendliness but is it the truth about your life? Does it really show who you are? I would suggest not. In that way when we communicate, there is linking, connecting, co-emerging, joint production of value – but not the establishing of an enduring truth. This offers us the freedom to not take ourselves too seriously. We cannot establish what we are, only describe how we are, the current patterning of our manifesting. Moreover how we are is contingent, we arise in communication with the circumstances of the wider field.

So in Dzogchen we are not trying to align ourselves with some perfect form, we are not attempting to manifest in a particular, pre-determined pattern. Rather we work with circumstances, experiencing what it is to be alive at this precise moment. If you are in touch with your life, with all the turbulences, the expansions and contractions of your own existence, you realise that you are a dynamic potential of patterning. As part of the non-dual field of experience our patterns arise in relation to those of the field. Hence we

collaborate with the world rather than attempting to dominate it. Flexibility, changeability is inevitable, therefore why would we get very upset when other people are unreliable? This view tends to make us a little softer, more tolerant, and less judgemental as we relax our assumptions and expectations of ourselves and others. We often get disappointed and let down by other people because they don't do what they said they would do, but when we look at ourselves we also find we're not very reliable.

So, maybe prediction is simply a reassuring fantasy, a way of keeping our head above the water: "My life's fine, and five years from now I'm going to do this, I'll be ok." However if I think I don't know what is going to happen, then it's upsetting, it's alarming. We can't tolerate the uncertainty and so we reassure ourselves with fantasies – fantasies which help us to avoid the actual nature of our situation. Dzogchen points in the opposite direction: relax, open, and integrate with all circumstances without relying on conceptual elaboration. Anxiety, fear, and not knowing are all part of life rather than limits to it. This is a much more reliable refuge than trying to achieve total control.

### The Empty and Open Indeterminacy of 'I am'

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The water in a cup could be contaminated by adding something to it, and then it would no longer be pure water. Something can be spoiled in its simplicity by coming in contact with something else, that's obvious. But what could contaminate nothing? How would you put something in relation to nothing? Actually something and nothing are not in opposition. Ice cream and doughnuts are in opposition because they are different things; you can put them on a plate and you can look at them and you can say this looks like a doughnut and that looks like ice-cream. There are different kinds of cars, clothes, houses and so on. What about nothing? How would you hold nothing in one hand and something in the other hand and compare them? Nothing dissolves the game of compare and contrast.

Logically you might think that they are opposites, but because nothing cannot be established, cannot be found, it deconstructs the binary oppositions out of which we construct the narratives of our lives. Thus we have male/female, young/old, good/bad, England/not England, tea/coffee and all the rest of the mutually exclusive signs and categories. Comparing and contrasting brings 'things' close enough together so that you can see sameness and difference. For example, if you go into a clothes shop you can look at two different coats. One is really gorgeous but wow it's a lot of money, whilst the other is not quite so nice and it's £100 cheaper. You have to make your own decision

about whether you want the quality or the money and that depends on your immediate budget, where you might wear the coat and all the other pertinent factors.

This kind of comparison depends on reification; we need to first establish that there are two separate entities. We see shapes and colours, we hear sounds – the raw has to be interpreted before it is cognitively meaningful. To do this we rely on our thoughts and feelings which are transient – and the moments of perception they comment on are also transient. Subject and object arise and pass – the continuity of our sense of self seems to be built up of an accumulation of memories, assumptions, plans and so on. Yet our mind itself is different. It is not a thing among things – it is the experiencer, the clarity which reveals the ever-changing field of experience. This is not our usual way of identifying the experiencer. For example, if I ask ‘Who am I? What am I as the experiencer?’ I might say that I like being here with you and I’ve got a bit of a cold and I’m a bit tired. The basic experience is that I’m here and that is coloured by me being a bit tired and having a bit of a cold. Thus the subject, me as I take myself to be, has a certain situational shape and that influences the kind of experiences I have. But who is the one who has the cold? “I am!” That’s a statement. Ok, so who is the one who says ‘I have the cold?’ *“I am the one who says, I am the one who says I am the one who has the cold”* – but who is that one? We have an infinite regress here because the answer to each of these questions is formulated by employing another statement. All of these statements have the same form, ‘I am’ – I am the one who is this, that and the other. Who is the one who says ‘I am?’ *“Please Miss, it’s ‘me’, I am, I know the answer, I am me’.*” Oh good boy, you are clever. So clever as to be completely stupid! For this is a process of self-seduction. The question is not truly being asked because we already have the answer: “The one who looks is me.” Who is looking? “Me.” Are you sure? “Yes, of course I’m sure.” And so we are blinded by the easy option, the ready-made answer.

This is our main problem, that we are on a well-oiled track which hides the door to truly, directly seeing our nature. Paradoxically the factors which hide us from ourselves are precisely the tools which we rely on to make sense of ourselves and our world. Our knowledge, assumptions, fantasies – the rich variety of our mental creativity is exactly the display of the mind which hides the mind. For example, those of you who live here in Brighton can name the streets, can indicate that if you go down that street there’s a really nice café. You are introducing the visitor to Brighton, yes, but actually it is to ‘your Brighton’. You are putting your Brighton onto the potential of this town. If the newcomer was to wander around the streets they might find another Brighton, but you’ve been

living here a long time so you know Brighton, and so you direct people according to your personal map. We do exactly the same with ourselves. We put forward our version of ourselves as if we were describing something truly existing, when in fact what we're doing is creating a temporary constellation. These are quite different. So, for example, I can say 'I am a man'. It's kind of difficult to know precisely what it is to be a man. I used to be in a men's group and would sit in a circle and discuss what it means to be a man. We would talk and talk and there was no end to the discussion, no final agreed description. This is because 'man' is an empty signifier; like a sausage skin you can stuff it with anything. It's like asking what is love? You can talk for thousand years about what love is because you can put almost any content into the signifier. Who am I? This is the best sausage skin of all. Any idea you have can be applied here: 'I'm hot', 'I'm cold', 'I'm young', 'I'm old' and so on. Whatever is arising and passing will momentarily fill the sausage skin and appear to be true and right. Before lunch you say 'I'm hungry' and after lunch you say 'I'm sleepy'. You're always something, but something that is on the point of vanishing.

How is it that 'I am' can be filled with so many seeming truths? Because it is nothing. 'I' is how we refer to our presence. It is not an entity, not a thing or a substance. The openness or emptiness of 'I' is the quick way to see the openness and emptiness of the mind. The mind, our mind, our awareness, our un-mediated presence here and now is like a mirror. A mirror can fill with any reflection because it doesn't have any content of its own. If we look at the painting on the wall behind me, it has a content. When you look at it again and again you see the same pattern of colours, it is announcing itself as something in particular – but our mind is not like that. Our mind, the basis of our experience, is the openness which reveals our becoming, our manifesting as a ceaseless flow of change. We, the presenting subject, change according to circumstances all the time. It is our very non-defined quality, our beyond definition quality, which allows us to manifest in responsiveness to other situations. Self-knowledge as an accumulation of information about oneself is a red herring and a cul-de-sac. To truly know yourself is to know that you are unknowable, ungraspable yet always present. Our truth is not established by knowledge; it is already present as the actuality of our being. When you are at home in and as yourself, you don't know how you are going to be, how you will become in the next five minutes. Nobody can predict how they are going to be, for being is open and ungraspable, and becoming, manifesting, is always a complex momentary event.

The more at home we are in our actual self rather than in our self-narrative, the more freed we are to respond. Then our response is situationally evoked and its basis is the openness of indeterminacy. It's not a lost indeterminacy as in a psychological depersonalisation where a person doesn't feel like themselves, or can't recognise themselves. This is not about a cognitive feedback loop that reassures me 'I'm still me' because I can recognise that this pattern is 'me'. Usually we have a template of how we normally are, the habitual feeling of being me, and this becomes the guarantor that I am myself. If there's any variation away from this felt sense and its associated memories, we feel, 'Oh, I don't feel so well today' or 'Oh, I feel really excited, I haven't felt like this for a while', and we notice that we are veering away from what has become the standardised version of ourselves. These movements then generate hopes and fears.

In Dzogchen we relax out of this familiar matrix of identity for there is no end to the work of making micro adjustments of the temporary content of the flow of our experience. The more we're trying to rectify ourselves, to bring ourselves back into alignment with our template, we find ourselves struggling against the fact of impermanence, the actual dynamic nature of existence. In the field of experience there is no enduring structure to align with. All such seeming structures are installed through our own interpretation.

For example, when our body is balanced we are aligned with the force of gravity. We then feel centred, our skeleton supports our weight, our muscles can relax, and our breath is easy as the diaphragm is free to move. This balance occurs due to our harmony with our environment – when we walk we have to find our balance in each movement. Balance is not a 'thing' that we have but a sensibility, the optimal way of opening in all directions. The fact that we 'find' our balance through sensing it means that our sense can lead us astray – as ballet students find when they observe their actual posture in the mirror and see that internally it feels different.

In that example at least you have something that can be clearly observed – but when it comes to mental and emotional experience, balance is much more difficult. We become used to our habitual attitudes and that 'normality' gives them the feel of being balanced even when we are fused in attitudes and behaviours that are well off kilter. Being lost in familiar places is difficult to recognise as the familiarity hides the lostness.

The relative balance of left and right that allows us to feel centred is different from the profound balance of resting in the simplicity of the mind itself. Experiences of objects

and one's subjectivity needs constant re-balancing, yet the actual experiencer, the mind itself, is not an entity and is beyond relativisation and is always relaxed and balanced whatever is happening. We can look at this directly, for we are here, experiencing something, then something else, and so on. A stream of experience is occurring. Who is the experiencer? Each of us is the experiencer. What is the direct taste of that experiencer? What is registering for the experiencer seems to have two aspects, what we take to be the object and what we take to be the subject.

This is what we stay with in meditation, not going to the subject side, not going to the object side, but staying with our own presence itself, the clarity which reveals the co-emergence of the subject and the object. So, we're sitting here, you can hear at least some of the words I'm saying, if you're not drifting off completely, and you have your own thoughts and feelings. From the 'object' side, words are coming out of my mouth and going to your ear, something is coming to you, some object, and you have your subjective reaction. You experience my voice, is this true? You experience your thoughts, is that true? Is it the same experiencer for my voice and your thoughts?

When you attend directly to your experience in this way you see that what I'm saying and your thoughts about what I'm saying are both experiences for you. Now this 'you' who is open in all directions is not composed of the ingredients of your self-narrative – it is the experiencer of that self-narrative without being caught up in it or defined by it. The content of what I'm saying and the tone of my voice and so on, is the object side presentation. The subject side is your response to that with feelings and thoughts. You are experiencing both, but you *feel* like the subject side. So there is a double move, in that sense you are existing on two planes simultaneously. You are both the empty experiencer which is simply revealing the subject and object interplay and you are also the particular thoughts and feelings that you have, and which seem to constitute who you are. Most of the time we are so caught up in identification with our thoughts and feelings that this more open, empty sense of the experiencer is disregarded or rather made invisible by being taken for granted. It's always there, and it is open, empty, ungraspable – yet because we fixate on the manifest it is as if the unmanifest is not present at all.

The experiencer is the ground of our existence. It is our awareness, our presence. In Tibetan it is called *rigpa*. It is not something mystical or fantastical, but the ordinary everyday luminous presence that is the basis of all our experiences. It's not our

personality and it's not generated out of our history or our thoughts. It's the revealer of everything including the interpretations by which 'we' respond to the rest of the field. When we look around the room we see people's faces and from the look on their faces we can imagine a little of how they might be feeling. But we will never know. My experience of me seems so much more intimate than my experience of you. I'm having the full me-ness of me and just some sense of you. I'm getting a lot more me than you. It is this which gives us the sense 'it all starts with me'. I have to work hard to try to work out what's happening for you, but the me-ness of me comes first, it seems to be a given. This is how duality reveals itself. In taking myself to be this individual subjectivity, with all the work that entails, I focus on the details and ignore the intrinsic clarity which illuminates the non-dual field.

This is a bias, the prejudice of over emphasis on the content of our own 'personal' experience. Due to this we live our lives as if life is a problem to be solved and so we have to think very hard, "What am I going to do?" "How am I going to relate to this person?" "What's the whole deal?" We are busy, busy, busy all day long thinking, planning, making adjustments trying to get it right. All this activity blinds us to the fact that how you are is just as much a part of my experience as how I am. It's different from my experience of 'myself', but then if I take a bite of an apple and then I take a bite of an orange, they are different and we'd say these are different kinds of experience. The experience of me being me and my experience of looking at you are different experiences. But maybe they are different in the way that an apple is different from an orange. The habitual interpretations embedded in our everyday use of language makes it difficult to see what we are up to. The terms 'I', 'me', 'myself' seem to be so self-evident in their meaning that we are taken in by their illusion of finality.

This view suggests that there isn't an essential personal truth or core inside ourselves. Rather, our subjectivity is part of the stream of experience. But the experience of subjectivity is taken to be the hallmark of the experience, and then there is confusion as the transient is taken to define the 'self' as something enduring. It is normal for us to feel that I am here inside my head looking out at the world: "I am having my experience of the world." Yet actually the world presents as experience and I present as experience. These two streams of experience are criss-crossing all the time. They are not two separate things but are like little pulsations of water within a big river. They are moving within the wider movement. It is by disinvesting our subjectivity of the burden of being the totality of 'who we are' that we start to experience the space of our being. So rather

than feeling that *'it's all up to me, I've got to think, I've got to go back inside me, and I'll tell you when I'm clear, just don't disturb me'*, we can let go of the transient constructs and stop building our illusory individual isolated self out of them. Conflicts often arise from the sense that *'you being you is robbing me of me being me, so leave me alone!'* This is very strange! For in this view, myself is now something I have to protect like a little egg and carefully carry around with me for it's very fragile. Yet the fact is that me being me is me being me with you. So how can I, on my own, sort out how I am if the self that I'm trying to sort out is the self that I am with you? *"Listen, I think we have to have a trial separation. I'm going to go away and when I'm clear about who I am, I'll come back and see you."* In this way 'you' and 'I' remain separate and the 'we-ness' of life is ignored. We can also retreat inside of ourselves in the search for clarity – yet this simply further separates 'I' from 'me'.

Thus in my interactions with the world, I experience myself and I experience the environment. The self-experience or the subjective-experience is an experience, it is not the experiencer. But it is the experience of an experience and implicitly claims to be the experiencer. This is truly tricky territory. When you formulate an experience as, for example, 'I am tired', it seems that the experiencer is talking, and by means of that talking is defining themselves. Yet by making the next statement with a similar grammatical structure and a different semantic content, this 'I' is redefining itself. Such vagaries of identification point directly to the illusory status of 'I' as denoting a self-substance. Observing this directly for oneself is extremely useful.

### [The Energy of Openness is Mis-apprehended](#)

The root of all these transient moments of identity is our basic being which is beyond totalisation – you can't sum yourself up. This is the basic freedom of all human beings, and it is why totalitarian states are so dreadful, so terrifying. There are still many countries in the world where human beings are given a number, they are summed up in a simplifying definition, they are seen as terrorists or the enemy. When that occurs the availability of other people's minds to see the infinity of the potential of that person collapses into a very narrow, dogmatic reading of the person, which is then taken to be a true account of who they 'really' are.

We also do this, though in more subtle ways. We reify other people, treating them as knowable entities, and we also see ourselves as existing as things. We objectify others and we objectify ourselves. We judge others and we judge ourselves. This limiting,

narrowing, imprisoning structure has infected our own mind. Its rigidity and predictive force gives us a sense of power yet it is itself just movement. We can probably all remember coming home from school one day and saying to our mum, *"Oh I hate Johnny, I'm not going to play with him anymore."* *"Why not – I thought he was your best friend?"* *"Ahh, well he did that to me....."* When you are a kid such events are really terrible and seem so completely real and final. *"Oh don't take it so seriously."* *"No, I'm never going to be his friend again."* Something has happened that has generated a definite knowledge that 'he's horrible'. Some movement has happened between you and your friend and suddenly it's as if there's a tear, there's an event which you can't integrate, which you can't incorporate into the flow of experience and so there is division, splitting. We know this nowadays in terms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder where there is a trauma or powerful event, which cannot be integrated into the continuum of the person's psychological life. And so there is a lesion, a tear that feeds into repetitions and so on: *"The world has changed, I cannot put up with this."*

In order to free ourselves from the many forms of limitation we encounter in meditation practice we listen to the solidity of the way in which these thought formations arise. We're not trying to stop the thoughts coming or trying to push them away, nor are we falling into them. Rather see that they are enticing, sticky, full of an energy that makes us want to throw ourselves onto them. This is like the story from *The Odyssey* where the Sirens are singing on the rocks and whoever hears these marvellous women singing will want to go directly towards them but then their boats are smashed to pieces on the rocks.

What is this incredible glue that binds us into temporary situations, both 'internal' and 'external' and makes them seem completely true? Why is something which is arising due to causes and conditions, and is clearly contingent and contextual, taken to exemplify an essence? Once the sense of an essence catches us there is a clarity which is the clarity of stupidity. I remember when I was about 11, I saved up some money and sent away for a transistor radio that you had to partly build for yourself. I asked my dad to help me and he looked at it and then he said, *"This is made in Japan."* I said, *"Ok."* And he said, *"Ah, I fought the Japanese in Burma and I won't have anything Japanese in the house."* I said, *"Dad, the war's over."* And he said, *"I don't want anything Japanese in this house, I don't like the Japanese."* We didn't know any Japanese people, we were living in Scotland and there were not many of them there, but he felt that, in his mind 'I know what the Japanese are – they are this and this and this, and I will never forget.'

He had his experience of the world and there was some truth, some painful basis for his belief but it became a huge global identification which can be layered again and again in new situations. We know that there are many prejudices about racial and religious groups and so on, that go on generation after generation. It is exactly this sort of structure which we experience in meditation. We get a chance to see directly our over-investment in certain ideas as being absolutely true. If you just stay present with the thought, the thought will go. Thoughts, feelings and sensations are always passing. They are impermanent but when we think that 'this is a terrible thought and so I want it out', or that 'this is a wonderful thought and so I need to have more thoughts like it', then the glue is working and we are stuck on the treadmill, working hard but getting nowhere.

This activity of yes and no, editing and adjusting, although it appears to be overtly a good thing to do, becomes the basis of not being able to be at home with who you actually are. Energy, which is by its very nature is connectivity, is directed towards the endless task of self-maintenance. The energy of openness is mis-apprehended as being 'our energy' and directed towards the activities of adjusting, shaping, and defining. This is so familiar that we easily take it to be just how it is, yet who is doing it? Who is the thinker of the thought? Who is the experiencer? These questions are subtle and the answer is unhidden yet allusive so we readily return to our habitual pre-occupations: *"Ah, never mind that, let's get the content of the experience right and when all the experiences are lined up in a row and they're all very nice and they're all wearing clean underpants, then you'll know that life's completely sorted."* And it never happens. By focussing on correcting the shape of our thoughts and feelings, our life quickly passes as we try our best with an impossible task.

Actually we live at the crossroads: if you stay with how you are, even if it seems terrible, that situation will vanish and you will find yourself to be where you actually are. But if you decide not to be where you are because you feel that there is a better place to be, then the energy that goes into doing that displaces you from where you are and sets you on a never ending task of improvement. So paradoxically doing less gives more, while doing more keeps you feeling the alienation of lack and hunger. The activity of trying to improve the content while ignoring the experiential field, within which the content is occurring, places us in the world of endless construction of our ideal identity. This is something which at best we only ever briefly taste for a short period of time, for the perfect thought is replaced by another and then another thought comes and another thought comes.

Our identity is not something which can be sorted because it is part of the web of connectivity: if you have friends, or if you know people, or if you are political or if you have children, if you worry, then these are signs that you are concerned. Other people affect you; other people impact your life! So how could you be stable? Being alive means being unstable. Unstable doesn't mean being out of control, it means dynamic, it means moving as part of the world.

### **OPENNESS AND BECOMING – EXPLORING KADAG AND LHUNDRUB**

With this orientation we can now look at two key aspects of the Dzogchen view and practice. These are Kadag, the natural purity of the mind, and Lhundrup, spontaneous display or manifestation. Primordial purity indicates that the mind is empty like a mirror. My subjectivity, what I take to be 'I', 'me', 'myself', is part of the moving content of my mind. It is like a reflection in the mirror, it's not the mirror itself. If I confuse the reflection with the mirror itself I'm going to have a problem. The mirror is reliably a mirror because it never shows itself directly. It shows itself through the manifesting of reflections. The clarity of the mind, our presence, our capacity to know rather than knowledge itself, is always open, empty and available. Whereas reflections are much less predictable because they arise in situations, that is, they are an aspect of communication, of identity, of showing, not of being. Whatever comes in front of the mirror brings about a different reflection. Similarly our experience is situational, influenced by the weather, by the kind of food we eat, by our health, the menstrual cycle, by whether we're getting on well at work, and so on. All sorts of things influence how we are in our experience of the world. This unfolding never stops, it is constantly moving.

Now, if you place an object in front of a mirror and leave it there it may appear that the reflection is stable, is something reliably there, is something which can be returned to again and again. But the reflection as object requires the subject in order to reveal itself – and their intercourse is the flow of experience. The question then is, where will I find stability? Only in the state of the mirror, for awareness itself is stable in its inseparability from space. The experiences which arise are not stable. So if you think that your subjectivity is stabilisable, is something you can make fixed and predictable, that you can gain enduring self-knowledge, then you take the wrong road at the crossroads, and condemned yourself to trying to make movement stop. But movement is always moving the mind is always moving.

It's not the movement of the mind that is the problem. It's our difficulty in allowing the mind to move as it moves. And there is another paradox here: the more tightly you try to control the mind, the more jumpy it becomes, and the more space you give to the mind, the more its flow is harmonious. Trusting the actuality of existence, believing all will be ok, allows the diaphragm to relax, anxiety to diminish, and then the free flow of self and other plays without disruption. This is what is referred to as Lhundrup, spontaneous manifestation which is direct and effortless. The open purity and simplicity of our mind reveals itself as the ever-changing field of complex illusory manifestation.

As we look around the room, everything is here immediately – this is our experience. Wherever we go, there is a world. We don't get half a world, we get this world, the fullness of this moment of experience. Our concepts of other places arise within the field of experience which is me in this room. Each moment is complete and 'perfect' as it is – this is just this, then this, then this.

So, you can look at this room here in two ways. One way is to come into your skin. You can do this now: feel your own skin, feel your own body. *"I'm here, this is 'me' and I'm looking out at the world. You're there and I'm here – we are not the same."* You can look around at all these people sitting over there: *"I'm sitting here, you're sitting there. This is where I am, this is 'me' and this is 'you' – I am me and you are you."* It feels very separate doesn't it? Another way is to relax and release our interpretations, to allow the actuality of the simultaneous presenting of 'subject' and 'object'. They present to our presence which is immediate, infinite, intimate – but not personal, and certainly not a personal possession or quality. Thus there is the experience of your body in that your body is revealed as certain sensations in the feet, the legs, the torso and so on, and this is arising at the same time as the perception of everything around you. These are two areas of perception and they are fundamentally the same. Similarly, we see people and we hear sounds. The visual perception and the sound are not the same in their forms of manifesting but they are both experiences devoid of substance.

I am my experience of me just as you are your experience of you. The experience is infinite, the hospitable host of all the myriad transient experiences which arise – some of which we take to/use to constitute ourselves and some of which we take to/use to constitute our world and all that is in it. This is radically different from our normal way of thinking because it indicates that my home base is not this material form, the fleshy castle that I inhabit. I am in the world, with the world, the world and I have the same

status as appearances in the flow of experience. We are the eyes of the world, we are the way the world experiences itself, as display rather than as substance. This is the mandala of all the Buddhas.

Actually we live in this field of lucid clarity all the time; we are an inalienable part of it. The body is clarity and the experience around us is clarity. The clarity of experience is instant. The emptiness of the mind and the fullness of the mind are inseparable, non-dual, without contradiction. We are the playful richness of the mind's display. Our body for us is special, but it's special within the world, it's not special apart from the world. We are moving in the world the way fish are swimming in the sea. We don't move towards the world, we don't have a separate domain, 'my private self', 'my internal world' out of which I go towards you. My movement towards you is always my movement with you within the infinite indivisible field of experience. If I'm in my own head, in my thoughts, then of course I can construct a thousand forms of alienation and imagine games of manipulating and controlling. Yet all of these are experiences revealed in the mirror of the experiencer. They are not separate 'things' but aspects of experience. The feeling of being 'within myself', being apart, is an experience non-dually, not actually separate from the ceaseless displaying field of experience. In the simplicity of direct presence, I am revealed to myself within the same field of experience as you are revealed to me. This is the non-duality of self and other, and hence how I am is part of how you are. There is no need for the paranoid feeling that I have to ring-fence a private domain to keep out the foreigners, the strangers, in order to protect the purity of my own vision. We don't need to each establish an Aryan personal people's party – membership, only myself: *"I am the chairman and the life president, keep out."* It's amazing how easy it is for us as individuals or small groups with a dogmatic sense of sameness to succumb to that belief and then imagine that everybody else is a potential contaminator of the purity of yourself.

The pristine purity that we all have and are is the purity of awareness, not the purity of personality. The purity of awareness can never be destroyed but the purity of the personality is an illusion because we are co-emerging with the world. Identity is dialogue, not individual essence.

## Practice

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Let's do some practice. We sit with our eyes open, gazing into the space about two arms length in front of us. We are not staring at the distant wall but just letting our gaze relax

into the space. This means that our gaze is open and panoramic so we have a sense of this large space. Just relax into the out breath and be present with whatever is occurring. Sometimes this is predominantly object-phenomena, and sometimes subject-phenomena – experience how both are movements without essence and in this there is no real difference between them.

With this kind of practice we sit for quite short periods of time at first, five minutes, then ten minutes and so on, because it is subtle and we are used to something more crude. We have a strong habit to identify with the subjective form as being ourselves and of course as soon as you do that, because subject and object are born together, you can get caught up in the object flow as well, and they mutually reinforce.

So relax into open presence, which reveals both aspects as the movement of the mind, as the energy of the mind. We are not trying to do anything at all but simply to be with how things are. If we are given a task where we can mobilise ourselves, whether it's weeding the garden or doing the dishes, even if we don't want to do it, we can do it and can get a sense of personal empowerment through the activity. It's the same with thinking: the personality, the spiral of self-reference, has sucked into itself such a lot of importance that it feels as if it is the centre of the world. However in this practice the personality, our individual sense of self is de-centred and allowed to take its actual place as a series of momentary events. It's not that there is no self, clearly we have a self, but the self is an energetic formation which is moving and changing. It's not the centre. It's part of the pulsation of our display and it arises in communication. In the practice we relax and release the pull of our habitual over-identification with a form of energy as if it were the source of activity.

### Wisdom and compassion

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A lot of our emotions are generated by people rather than things, so how can we relate to the people who become fixtures of our lives. Situations of familiarity are where we are most likely to develop an interpretive story about the other person, some sense of the patterns and predictabilities of the other person's behaviour and with that the arising of irritation if they change their pattern.

Truly seeing someone, receiving them as they are, is not the same as knowing about them. Being with someone is an allowing of their existence, as it is now, to be as it is without judgement . Yet as we gather information about someone we build up a map that seems to describe them and then when they 'stray' from that, as they inevitably do,

we become irritated and may feel betrayed. It was their reliability that was keeping us safe – as if how we had taken them to be was providing us with a secure foundation for our life. In this way we privilege the map in our head over the other persons current actuality. We are saying, *“I know how you should be and therefore if you want me to be happy with you, you should be the you that I know you to be, rather than the you that you currently are. I know you better than you know yourself.”* It is we who have created this essentialised view of the other. But this essence is an abstraction while the actual person is a flow of co-emergent patterning.

We do this in order to try to establish the stability of our identity. The fact is that both you and I ‘emerge’ as ‘ourselves’ moment-by-moment according to events. Yet this can be ignored if we focus on the images and narratives that we have developed about self and other. If I see you and see myself in terms of my pre-constructed maps and descriptions then this reliance on abstractions helps me to feel safe and stable and predictable in the face of the actuality of ceaseless change. We gain a sense of continuity which is reassuring but limiting, for a kind of sclerosis occurs, a sealing over, a rigidity which blinds us to the potential of the non-dual field.

However, if we trust the world as it directly reveals itself to us, then instead of interpreting it according to maps and fantasies and memories, we work with how it is. If we can work with how it is then the other person will be accepted as they are. It is a good though perhaps unsettling experience to be accepted as one is; it’s not all that common in life. We accumulate a lot of knowledge about people and items in the course of our lives. The question is, what does the knowledge pertain to, what function do we employ it for?

Resting in our knowledge about someone is a violence to the actuality of their current presentation. We actually cannot know how they are until they disclose this and this disclosure is relational; it is influenced by how we are in that situation. Some of what we know about the person may be relevant to this new moment – but which aspects? That will be determined by the moment and not by our plan or intention. Knowing about people and knowing them in the sense of being with them are very different. The former mode is cognitive while the latter is immediate, the receptivity of awareness which reveals the complicated, unpredictable richness of the situation and is more authentic than trying to organise on the basis of predictions and maps.

Being itself doesn't change because it is open, empty of any defining content of its own. Becoming, which is our experience of being in the world with others moment-by-moment is the arising of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories, expectations, etc., etc., in specific transient patterns. Becoming is contextually evolving – so how could we have accurate information about another person as they actually are in this moment? How could we have accurate understanding predictive of ourselves? Only by aligning ourselves with a pre-established template and by privileging this over the openness of presence.

This view would indicate that a lot of our mental activity is redundant, that we do a lot of planning and sorting things out which is not actually useful or necessary. Our mind can be empty and contented, and it can be full and contented; the contentedness of the mind is not dependent on the content of the mind. Our mind itself, our awareness, our presence is intrinsically contented, at peace, satisfied – this is the great completion, dzog pa chen po.

All of us have huge creativity; to be alive, especially as a human being, is to be endlessly creative. Our creativity reveals the open potential of the world, of the field of experience. It is our own limitation which fixes 'things' in their 'place', defining them as 'this' or 'that' as if the definition related to a truly existing essence.

When we meet the world and ourselves through the veil, the screen of our knowledge, what we see is the veil and not the actuality. Our knowledge doesn't improve our sight, in fact it makes us blind while we think we are seeing better. This is the nature of ignorance according to the Buddhist view.

From this point of view compassion is linked with not knowing rather than with knowledge. Compassion is to open ourselves to receive the other as they are – and this is both their openness and their precise configuration at this moment. Our receptivity is part of the pulsation of co-emergence, and from it our response arises as a gesture of contact, of connectivity. It is the naked openness of our presence which offers this compassionate or attuned connectivity. We dispense with the protection and cladding that makes us feel safe, yet we are safe since open presence is invulnerable. We are more vibrant, more alive and this invites others into their vibrant aliveness.

When we bring our knowledge about another person into the present moment, we might consider how big, how strong, how stable is this moment is. Can it support a feather or a tonne of assumption? It is normal human practice to bring a lot of ballast

into each moment in the hope of stabilising it and making it understandable. The gravity this brings may be reassuring to us and support our sense of personal agency yet we are also encumbered and burdened by it and lose touch with the lightness of our open presence. We have to trust that all is well and open to the situation, however it is. You meet a friend for a coffee and the conversation goes wherever it goes, because toing and froing in an unpredictable is what a conversation is. In these moments you have a good time, a good conversation, you were really there. This is being alive, it's not esoteric or magical or transcendent, it's just, *"Oh! I could have more of that. I could have that all the time."*

Having trusted this why do I let it be something rare and special in my life rather than being the flavour of everyday life? Why is it that I abandon being fresh, alive and connected? What do I think is better than this? What is so frightening about being connected? That's a very central question to look into: where am I better off than being here now with you? Part of the function of meditation practice is simply sitting with whatever's here. This is all there is, this is it, as it is. Funny sounds arise in the room, people move about, memories come, sensations in the body – it's a bit higgledy-piggledy. Shouldn't we have some spring-cleaning, a bit of order? No! This is how it is, the disorderly unpredictability of the emergent field. We're still alive. Life is like this, however 'this' is. There is no designer, no pre-existing plan. Patterns emerge and interact. If we relax then there is space for contact free of the conflict that arises from defensiveness.

Actually not quite knowing is a very friendly space. If we say someone is a know-all, it's not really a compliment for it usually means they're pretty closed. It's difficult to relate to them because they're always hitting you with the answer. Whereas not knowing is friendly and inviting. Keats is famous for his notion of negative capability, the capacity to not know what is going on, to not have to make sense of things, to allow the unfolding of possibilities. In order to make sense of what is happening we tend to lose contact with ourselves – we give ourselves over to the domain of concepts. Whereas, if you stay in your senses you remain part of the immediacy of the situation.

This immediacy is the inseparability of primordial purity and spontaneous emergence. The purity of the mind is its intrinsic lack of a fixed content. Whatever content is arising, including the interplay of subject and object, can be accepted as ok, because it's not going to cause any harm. The purity of the openness of awareness is indestructible. It is

not an entity among entities. Therefore, we don't have to protect ourselves against the world. Self and world are transient experiences devoid of substantial essence. Thus naked engagement, trusting, spontaneity, improvisation, is the simple way in which we can be vital and alive and connected with other people, open to change in all directions.

Wisdom is to recognise the fundamental openness of our situation in which you can't grasp any fixed content as to who or where you are. When we look back over the years we've been so many people, we've had so many emotions, moods and hopes and fears...all gone. I can't define who I am, but I'm here. This being-here-ness is the being here-ness of an openness which is ungraspable and simultaneously of a potential which can manifest in infinite ways according to the particularities of each situation.

This is the non-duality of primordial purity and spontaneous manifestation, or wisdom and compassion, and this is the heart of the practice. The function of meditation is to relax unnecessary effort and thereby allow our controlling tendencies to go free by themselves. Releasing our habit of employing the patterns that we are familiar with we are free to find ourselves anew in the new situation. Of course that can feel a bit scary: "How will I know what to do?" Our anxiety promotes the sense that we need to know what will happen so that we can prepare. Yet actually we simply have to trust the practice, open and relax, and the creativity of the ground will flow through us.

The mind itself is open. Open means free of foreclosure, no shape, no colour, no form. The mind is not a thing yet how can I be somebody who doesn't have a shape? The mind, my mind, is not the content of the mind, not the patterning of thoughts, feelings, tendencies etc., which constitute our personality. The mind is our presence not the transient experiences of our subjectivity. Our body has a shape but it's a shape that changes but the mind itself has no shape or colour.

You can investigate this for yourself. When a thought arises, it may seem to have a shape, a colour and an intensity. Emotions have an impact, then they're gone. Actually whatever has shape and form is moving and changing; the only thing that doesn't move or change is our being, and it has no shape. This is weird! Our existence is very, very strange. We are not what we think we are. We are what we are, but because we don't recognise what we are, we create what we think we are. But we are not what we think we are, we are what we are and this is a given, it is there without any effort on the part of our subjectivity. To find this natural freedom all we have to do is to stop asking thought to do work it can't do. Thought can do many, many things but thinking cannot give you a

stable personal identity and thinking cannot tell you who other people are. It can help you remember somebody's name but it can't define the person, because human beings are beyond definition. Whatever you think about yourself, however you define yourself, this is not who or what you actually are. We are, we just are, we are present prior to and throughout all the myriad experiences which occur.

### Whatever Comes, Comes; Whatever Goes, Goes

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In this meditation tradition the basic principle is ... whatever comes, comes, whatever goes, goes. While you are sitting the key point is to not interfere with the flow of experience, not try to improve it or make it fit your template. All kinds of thoughts and feelings arise yet we're not clinging onto any of them, nor are we trying to push them away. Simply be the openness which is the mind itself and allow the energy of the mind to manifest freely however it is. Sometimes the mind feels very sad and depressed. If that happens it may seem like a heavy mood that's pervading you, like morning mist that fills a valley. Everything is opaque and you've no idea what's going on. Don't worry, don't try to do anything, just sit with the one who knows nothing: "I'm lost and confused, I feel hopeless." Ok, that's a feeling, that's a mood. Who is the one who is experiencing this? The storyteller is here, yet so is the immediacy of the presence which is revealing the movement which is the storyteller.

Without changing the story simply be present with the unfolding of the story – however it comes. However, this infinite hospitality will not be available if you have a predetermined notion of how your meditation should be. Whatever comes let it come, even if it is harsh, judgemental, toxic, dreary. Meditation is not about getting a better kind of thought, it's about seeing, really seeing that thoughts are empty and leave no trace. You only need to try to grasp a good thought if you can keep it. What's the point of working very, very hard to get good thoughts in your mind if the buggers keep vanishing? When you look in your mind thoughts are always vanishing, even if they are very lovely thoughts, they're always going to be going.

Don't worry about the content of the thought. In fact, when you get self hating thoughts, when you get hopeless thoughts, crazy thoughts, destructive, cruel thoughts or any kind of thought, feeling, sensation in the mind, don't fall into seeing it as being inherently meaningful, as something telling you the truth about your situation. Just observe without involvement: whatever comes, comes, whatever goes, goes. Let it come and it go – and be the unchanging presence.

In this way we're not like a nightclub with a bouncer on the door, we're not trying to keep the bad guys out. We're living in a house which has no front wall and no back wall, and so the good guys come in and they go out, and the bad guys come in and they go out. There are only side walls on the house and then they start to fall down and everything's space. So, coming and going, coming and going, that's the heart of the practice.

In the Tibetan tradition the mind of the Buddha is said to be like the sky. It's like space, it's infinite. Storms arise in the sky – thunder and lightning – then next day it clears. There are no scratches in the sky, just beautiful sunshine and rainbows, it looks gorgeous. Then it changes and clouds come again. Then the clouds go. This is the sky. The sky shows many, many different forms yet the sky is still the sky. We say, "I don't like the clouds." We say, "I don't want to have a mind like this." We say, "This is no good, this isn't the real meditation, this can't be it because I know what it should be like." With this attitude our narrow prejudice is already filling the space of possibility.

I imagine I'm not alone in the fact that when I was a teenager I often told lies about myself, pretending I was more sorted than I was for it felt to confusing and shameful to say have to admit that I don't know how to do this and I don't know what that is. This was a terrible state to be in, full of anxiety. Moreover, in pretending, you miss direct contact with others and miss out on their normalising reassurance. It often takes us a while to start to offer ourselves, warts and all – "This is how I am." Meditation takes this truthfulness to a deeper more open level, revealing the richness of our potential as we start to see that all the possible forms of samsara and nirvana are nothing other than our own mind at play. The infinity of my mind opens me to the infinity of other people's minds, so that however other people are I can find space for them in my mind, in my heart, with compassion because I'm not entering into judgement about what is occurring, simply seeing it as it is and working directly with that.

With meditation we relax judgement, relax the will to power, the need to control. We allow the mind to be as it is and remain open as we enter into daily life. This is how it is and this is what we start from, not how I would like it to be, how it should be.

Our starting point is always this moment, this event – not ideas about it or plans for it. With this approach we can truly see that the thoughts that constitute me are a potential for communication rather than a definition of who I am. This releases us from the fear that if other people knew what I thought or how I felt they wouldn't like me. The maps we have developed are allowed to be part of the territory and non-duality is pervasive.

From the point of view of Dzogchen, meditation and ordinary life are not two separate domains. It's not that you go on a meditation retreat and create some particular structure of clarity and then bring that back into daily life, where due to the friction of events the clarity gradually fades like a melting ice cube. Rather sitting and moving are interpenetrating as we open to being with how things are. This is the willingness of the Buddha to enter every situation.