
Emptiness, equanimity and kindness

When many people are suffering our hearts go out to them and we wish them well. This quality of kindness is vital to extend our connectivity beyond the people of our personal concern. However from the buddhist point of view the power of kindness is greatly increased by merging it with the wisdom of emptiness.

**Zoom Talk given by James Low
at the request of the Kamalashila Institute, Germany.**

9 April 2020

Transcribed by Marijke Acket

Excerpts

Ungraspable presence – everything appears but there is nothing to grasp. This is such a strange idea. Our mind is fixated on grasping and so what we get is graspable absence. That is to say, when you grasp at the idea of the tree your idea of the tree hides the tree from you. But what is in front of you? The tree has no space to show itself. ...

...The empty mind allows the showing of the empty world. When the mind is full of thoughts we get our familiar world. When we look openly on phenomena, and let in the light of the world, we start to see that there is no future; there is only ever now, this present moment, and this moment is always full and always empty. It's full of appearance and it's empty of substance. When you take the substance out of the appearance you have much more space...

...Kindness that is grounded in the equanimity which arises from emptiness is very stable. Why? Because it's kindness which is not seeking for anything. It's not seeking the reward of people thinking we are nice or kind or generous. It's not a kindness which is full of warm emotions that make us feel good about wanting to help others, because that emotion just vanishes. Not only does it vanish but we wouldn't be able to sustain it anyway. We offer ourselves. I'm here, on whatever terms you need. I'm for you...

...Nobody needs die alone if you open yourself to being present with all the suffering in the world. Neither will you be overwhelmed because the pot is very big. The mind is empty. It never gets filled up. The ego, however, is a small pot, and will get filled up, will get burned out. This is why I have taken the sequence in the title of this talk as emptiness, equanimity, and kindness...

Contents

Four Noble Truths	3
Emptiness	4
Three Doors to Liberation	6
Tantra	10
Mahamudra	11
Dzogchen	14
Three kinds of compassion	15
Equanimity	18
Four Brahma Viharas or the Four Immeasurables	23
Kindness	26

Hello everyone and welcome to this strange experience of Zoom. Usually I am in the room with people, and I have the sense of how they are and work with whatever arises between us, and now I'm just looking at a screen. So for me, also, this is something very strange and new but it also highlights the impermanent nature of every situation we're in. I had my diary prepared for teaching all through spring and the summer and now it's closed, it's not possible to travel. So this is a strong reminder for us; when we hear of the people who are dying this can also happen to us. What we think is our life, what we think is our future is really not in the palm of our hand. There are many, many forces operating through us which can change at any time. So we can get some dharma encouragement out of this terrible crisis which is around.

Four Noble Truths

Now with the virus we see there's more understanding in the population about suffering. People are worried about friends, they're worried about their own family, about people they know. They see terrible pictures and suddenly wake up: Oh, Yes! Suffering exists. Coming to this as Buddhists we are very lucky because the first of the Four Noble Truths that the Buddha taught is the truth of suffering. Suffering is not an accident. When we feel this suffering around us, if we are involved in the Buddha's teaching, we have to think that this is the truth. Suffering is not an accident and so why are we surprised? Suffering is everywhere. We know about fighting in the Yemen and in many other places in the Middle East, in Africa; suffering is everywhere. When we don't notice suffering it's usually a sign that we have become a little bit dull: that we tune into our own narrow world, our middle class complacency. The fact that we have safety from mobs and cruel gangs coming out of the forest with machetes does not mean that it is not happening for many other people.

Therefore when we experience our own suffering our task is always to make it a universal suffering: to have more sympathy, more connectivity with the pain which is pervasive everywhere. Suffering is one of the things that unites all sentient beings in all the six realms. Whether it's in the hells or the god realms, there is always some change present, some diminishment in the ease of being, and the capacity to reflect. Suffering is now a very precious thing for us to think about.

The title for today's talk is *Emptiness and equanimity and kindness*. There is a reason for the words being in that order. If we don't have emptiness, as many teachers and in particular the Dalai Lama have pointed out, if you don't have an understanding of emptiness then, although you may develop a good heart and kindness and a sense of responsibility for other people, you won't go deep and you won't have the basis for transforming your own appreciation of the world. You won't go beyond duality and ignorance, and the kindness and good deeds that you set up are there just in the moment. They get dispersed very easily.

Emptiness

So the first thing we do is look at the nature of emptiness. All the different schools of Buddhism have some attention to emptiness. The general Theravadan school is concerned with the three marks of conditioned existence: suffering, impermanence and the absence of inherent self-nature. Or the absence of any self essence-defining phenomena. What does this mean, particularly the third one?

The meaning of suffering is fairly obvious, though we'll return to it. Impermanence we see all around us. We see it in our body, in our breath, in the wind in the trees. But the absence of inherent self-nature or self-essence, existence, is often more difficult to see.

The Buddha explained this in terms of the five skandhas: that we take ourselves to be a person. I am James. I exist. I can tell you my history. So I have a sense that I have always been James and that it feels completely normal, natural for me to be James. But when we look at it in terms of the five skandhas we see, Oh! James is composed out of form. That is to say, there is shape and there is colour. In this shape and colour that I embody there are sensations, positive, negative and neutral. Inside that there are particular kinds of perceptions and experiences in which events arise and I think about them, formulate them, in terms of something happening out there or in here. Then this is fed into and enriched by our associations, by the compounded-ness out of which we generate our sense of who we are. Then finally our consciousness, our capacity to know something, formulates the narrative of ourself. This is linked to the narrative of our parents, our schools, the shops we go to and so on.

Through the functioning of the five skandhas we take the stories that we tell about ourselves to be the basis of our existence. We essentially inhabit a myth of our individual existence. And when you see, Oh! these five pieces moving together create patterns. Pattern, after pattern, after pattern but when you look you can't find any essence in it. There is nothing secure in it. How you were in the morning is not how you are now. When you wake up tomorrow morning you've no idea what your mood will be, how your body will feel. That is to say; the phenomena, the actual arising of how it is to be me is influenced by many, many forces which are not in my conscious control. I find myself being like this. So, where is my personal essence? 'James' is an idea that I have. An idea I use to interpret this ever-shifting world of experiences. When we investigate ourselves in this way we see that what we call a dog or a fish or a bird is a composite of feathers and fur and so on. That they are breathing in and out, they are a process of connectivity but they don't have any heart essence of their own.

In fact they are arising as an aspect of dependent origination. On the basis of this, that arises. On the basis of someone sending me a friendly email I feel happy. If someone sends me a very sad email that they're in trouble, I feel sad. So I am arising in relation to these events, and how I respond to the event will depend on the factors: do I know the person well? What is my history with them? And so on. So many factors are gathering all the time to create this particular shaping of myself.

What is the enduring essence of it? Well in our ordinary life we think, Oh, it's just the felt sense of me being me. But when we examine it moment by moment, when we start to do our basic meditation - *shamatha* to calm the mind so that we're less distracted and *vipassana* so we can investigate the flow of phenomena - we find that everything is just passing through. There is no "I feel that I'm a bit like a building; I'm this stable construct that was constructed a long time ago." Actually I'm more like a river. There are movements, movements. In Tibetan they call this *rang gyud*, this self flow strung together moment after moment. There is no self-essence but yet here I am. So what does this all mean?

Three Doors to Liberation

When the Mahayana teachings developed, when the Buddha was teaching on the Vulture Peak Mountain in Rajgir, his teachings started to point out what are called the Three Doors to Liberation.

The first is signless-ness. When we investigate how we think about the world, how we talk about the world, how we relate to other people we find that we are using language. I take words that I have learned and bringing them into a pattern; you hear them and they create certain patterns for you. These are signs of what? If I talk about the UK death rate from COVID-19 it sounds as if that's some kind of statistical fact. But people die in different ways. Each of these people will have died with their own particular kind of sadness, in an insulation tent, cut off from their family and friends. Their dying was a unique moment, a constellation of their factors. So when we use signs to say, "I am a man" or "I am a woman", "this is my work", "I like oranges" then these signs create a picture which seems to be pointing to something. Like a traffic sign that says take this road if you want to get to Berlin. So now I know where I'm going. But when you look at the sign there's nothing there before the sign arises. The sign is the basis out of which we generate the sense of something truly existing.

So every time we speak, every time we think, this is like a meeting place of potentials which generate a pattern that we inhabit. Some of the signs which arise seem to refer to the past. We can talk about what we did last year. But the past is gone. What are we talking about? We're bringing together the illusion that there is a past there that we can talk about. Anamnesis developed as a theory of remembrance by Socrates, Plato and Christianity. Alternatively we might think about the summer. We might have a hope; Oh, maybe this isolation policy will be lifted by the summer, and we can go to the sea and swim. That's a construct. That's a set of ideas in our mind. There is actually no future. It is a pattern, an imagining.

I imagine the past, I imagine the future and indeed I imagine the present. I am imagining sitting here in a room looking at a computer screen. Not my favourite object to imagine but that's what I'm imagining at the moment. Because signs are out there in the world which I am interpreting.

Signless-ness an encouragement to pay attention to two factors. One is our interactive play of reading the signs of the world as a flow of shape and co-dependence, inter-dependence. The second is to see the sign as indicative of true essence as if I am talking about something which exists out there. When, in the Mahayana tradition, when we say that existence is signless, as it says also in the *Heart Sutra* this means: don't trust signs. Signs arise in the moment as a shaping, as a kind of massage that allows you to move in different patterns in this moment. They are not indicating something out there. It is the absence of thingness in here, and out there, that is the heart of Mahayana understanding.

The second of these Three Doors of Liberation is to be without hope or without aim, *Moe-pa Med-pa* Instead of projecting out some future plan of what I'm going to do, instead of filling the space of the mind in a subject-object dialogue, instead of me thinking my thoughts about this and that, which is in fact the fuel which keeps this deluded sense of an individual self alive, I'm going to be without aim.

When we sit in the meditation practice, in the general *shamatha* you focus on your breath or on a small statue or pebble so there is nothing much to hope for there. You're just resting your mind on a fairly boring object because what you actually want is to have focused attention. You're not trying to achieve anything. You're not going anywhere.

But most of our life we are going places. We are trying to achieve things. Being without hope doesn't mean a despairing, helpless, collapsing depressed hopelessness. Rather, it means not to project away from the moment; to stay present in the moment. Because when we project it is the mind that moves. We are going someplace. We are wandering in samsara. We are people who go from here to there. We go from birth to death. We go from the morning to the evening. We go from our bed to the bathroom. We travel this place and that place. This movement gives me the sense that I am the moving person. It creates sense of agency and power. I am the one that makes this happen. But is this true? Because when we start to sit more we find, Oh! thoughts arise and pass. Feelings arise and pass. Memories arise and pass. Plans arise and pass. Everything is moving. I can leap into that movement and become part of it by thinking about the thought that has just happened or I can be simply present. Thoughts are coming and

moving, and going through the mind. The mind is the space of the revelation of now. When we do that we return more to the present moment.

And the third of These Doors to Liberation is emptiness, *sunyata*. It means that the phenomena we see are not full of themselves. Something is there. There is appearance. The appearance is undeniable. We look around. I can lift my eyes and look out of the window, I see trees, I see the house on the other side of the road. The house seems to be there. It seems, in the moment of my seeing, to be full of house-ness, and the tree seems to be full of tree-ness. The tree seems to be an example of the generic category of tree. A bit like Plato's idea of a pure idea that exists in a perfect form and everything that we see is some kind of replica of that. But actually what I see is shape and colour. What I *imagine* is tree. The tree is created in the mind. Of course if I run outside and punch the tree I'll get a sore hand. *Sunyata* does not mean that the tree is an empty illusion and nothing is there. Form is there. But the form has no essence to it, of itself. The tree arises from the seed; it grows according to the conditions in a city, with pollution and so on. It gets cut from time to time according to the desire of the local council who worry about the number of leaves that will fall off in the autumn and maybe block the drains. The life of the trees is in dependent origination with many factors. There is no essence to the tree. So emptiness means there is appearance but it is inseparable from emptiness.

Form is empty, emptiness is form or appearance, *Nang-tong*, everything that appears is here, all the sensations that we have through the senses but there is nothing to grasp. This is such a strange idea. Ungraspable presence. Because our mind is fixated on grasping what we get is *graspable absence*. That is to say when you grasp at the idea of the tree you start to think about the tree. Into your mind come memories of trees. A favourite tree you climbed when you were a young girl, and then you could sit on the branches and look around. You have thoughts of trees, memories of trees. But what is in front of you? Your idea of the tree hides the tree from you. The tree has no space to show itself.

So emptiness is the invitation to allow the mind to be more peaceful so that we become more receptive. The empty mind allows the showing of the empty world. When the mind is full of thoughts we get our familiar

world. We find ourselves a human being. That is to say in one of the six realms of samsara, at our particular age in our particular body. We have the specificity of my world but when we look openly at phenomena, and we let the light of the world in, the sounds of the world in, the tastes, the smells, the sensation. These are moments of appearance, and we start to see: there is no future; there's only ever now, this present moment, and this moment is always full and always empty. It's full of appearance and it's empty of substance. So when you take the substance out of the appearance you have much more space. Everything is moving in space, moving in space.

Emptiness means that when we see other people, especially people who suffer, they tell us a story about their bereavement or their fear or their anxiety.

We can access that on two levels. On one level we can hear a person who is troubled, and when we do that we give them the sympathy of our heart, we feel a kindness for them, which may be comforting to them in some way but we're also confirming the truth of their true essence, that they really exist as who they think they are. However from the Mahayana point of view that's not very helpful since its aim is to awaken our buddha-nature. If you keep confirming that Paul is Paul then whatever Paul exists as, this composite of memories and plans, of echoes of his mother's voice calling him to come in to eat his evening meal, the Paul-ness fills Paul and hides his buddha-nature.

The more sense we have of emptiness the more we allow the space in which we can see something new. We can see the freshness of the arising of ourselves as we move in interaction in the world. That is to say the knowledge that we have about things – while it's the ticket to get a job and to function in the world, that is to say to function in samsara, the realm of confusion – this kind of knowledge is toxic for meditators because you're developing concepts about concepts about concepts... Each layer of concepts creates an ever-thickening veil which hides the basic luminosity of all phenomena.

What we need is to find a way to unite the truth or the wisdom of emptiness and the connectivity of the non-duality of the co-emergence of ourselves and the environment around us.

In order to do that we have to awaken to emptiness, not as an idea, not as an analytic tool that opens up a bit more space but as a method which brings us into the truth of this.

Tantra

Many of you will know that there are different pathways in tantra, where we visualise ourselves as a deity. At first it's as if I'm James and I'm just pretending to be Padmasambhava but if I go into the practice and do it more I realise that I am Padmasambhava who sometimes forgets who I am and imagines wrongly that I am James. We start to see these are multiple possibilities of identity, that there is no fixed essence anywhere and that we can be like this or we can be like that. I can be Padmasambhava in peaceful form or in wrathful form. I can be Tara. With every kind of deity that you identify with and whose mandala you enter what you are doing is very subtly cleaning away the dross, the heaviness, the build up silt. We are covered in this mud, the accretion of all the things we have believed in, and thought about and concentrated on. There's a density to it, and when you visualise yourself as Tara that falls away. You're just in the freshness. You're present, reciting the mantra, open, alive. Sound and emptiness. Gesture and emptiness. You do your mudras, you do your chanting and you see, *"Oh! Where does Tara come from? She comes from the dharmadatu."* Then you do practice on Padmasambhava. Where does he come from? Again and always, from the dharmadatu. The dharmadatu shows itself as Zangdopalri, the pure land where he is living now, and he manifests in that way when you pray. So everything arises from emptiness.

So emptiness is not a theory for thinning out the world, for removing the hooks whereby you would grasp onto phenomena. Rather emptiness is the undefinedness which is the basis of my potential to become so many different things. If I were not empty, if I were not without a defining substance, it would be impossible to be Tara because I would just be James. I would be like a bad actor pretending to be someone else on a stage. It would be a performance. Nothing would be transformed. But when we see that out of emptiness the form of James arises, out of emptiness the form of Tara arises and both are the same. The texts say that there is no difference between Buddhas and sentient beings. Both are the appearances of emptiness.

Mahamudra

In the Mahamudra tradition although we have many different stages and styles of practice the central focus also is to see that everything has one taste. One taste means that when the mind is peaceful and calm, whatever arises when you're in your sitting practice just comes and goes, comes and goes. It has this quality of *sahaj*, effortlessly arising, spontaneously arising and vanishing. You are not the maker of your existence. You don't exist as a thing. You are the flow of the luminosity, the ungraspable luminosity which is Mahamudra itself. So when we do that kind of practice the instruction is very clear: don't create yourself out of thought. When you try to do that it is the excess of your energy, your own enthusiasm and your own wish to secure this territory that you find yourself occupying which leads to the veiling of the ever-open ground, the natural purity of the mind. You are hiding yourself from yourself in your effort to find yourself.

This is why in the Mahamudra tradition as in dzogchen the encouragement is always: don't engage in effortful meditation. Trust. Trust the teaching, stay relaxed and open. Let the mind arise as it arises. Sometimes our mind is very dull, sometimes it's heavy, sometimes we're so bored with ourselves we can't bear it. Sometimes we're sleepy or angry. The mind fills with all kinds of things, just let it come, let it go. If you focus on the content, and you believe there is some value in this transient content that is arising then you're going to be pulled towards wanting more of what you take to be good and wanting less of what you take to be bad. You're pulling some things in, in the fashion of desire and you're pushing other aspects away in the fashion of aversion or anger or dislike. This means that you're very active. This is why we all get so tired. We're tired of ourselves. From morning to night thinking and planning and working things out and being the boss, and it all leads to this sense of lonely desperation. *"If I don't work out how my life is going to be it's going to collapse."* So we have no trust in the ground. We have no trust in the mandala. We're just trusting in the ego which is trying desperately, day after day, to fashion itself in a way that feels okay to ourselves and seems to work in the world.

When you practice tantra, and dzogchen, Mahamudra you don't want to go in that direction. When we're sitting, whatever comes, comes. Not judging, not building, not selecting but just let it come and go. Why do we

react? Why do we get in involved? Because we feel we're not enough. *"I'm vulnerable, I'm not safe. If only I had more money, or if only more people loved me I might feel safe. If only I was more powerful at work and didn't have a horrible boss I would be safe. I need to get more of the things which please me, and less of the things which disturb me."* Who is the one who feels this? This is our ego self. This ego self has no ground of its own, no existence of its own. It's a habit formation. The more we sit the more we see that form is forming all the time. There are no fixed forms but if we have habit formations, if we have tendencies, then through repetition-compulsion, working again, and again, and again, we compact, we compound and we deepen the sense being someone.

The gurus and teachers have explained many times and in so many texts that the mind is empty. The mind is ungraspable. The mind is not a thing. Just try that and sit with it. Thoughts come and go, feelings come and go. We want them in terms of their content, and when we grab the content we don't see the impermanence. We lose the flow. So move from limitation, move from the state of being an ordinary person under the power of desire, bombarded by events. If we want to move out of that the path is to allow the mind to be as it is. That is to say, realise that I, as my ego self, am an imposter. I imagine I am the king of my life, or the queen of my life, I am the ruler, I am the one who is in charge and therefore I have to select the good and reject the bad.

There is no end to this work. Lifetime, after lifetime, after lifetime it goes on. From my bedroom window I can see starlings building their nests, always bringing in bits of straw. They're busy all the time, and they're always looking around for danger. I see the little robins, really quite paranoid, anxious. They quite like it if a big human being stands near them because they trust us more than they trust the cats. But their world is a world of fear. They're constantly having to look for food, to find a place to be. You don't see birds sitting still for very long. Some birds manage it like storks and cranes and so on but most small birds are moving and moving and moving. Why? Because they're anxious, like us.

We sit in the meditation, we realise; Ah! I don't have any peace. I am anxious, and moving, and desperate. I'm trying to get more of what I want and less of what I don't want, and I've been doing it a long time, and it's

never brought me to a place of peace. There's always more to be done. Always more. Something to be sorted, something to be developed. Dissatisfaction is built into the very texture of the ego. Not because we are bad people but because we are *not* people. There is no such thing as a truly existing human being. We are aspects of this environment. We are inseparable from our environment. We are non-dual with our environment. We breathe in we breathe out, we need food and drink, we walk, we sit. We are always in relation with the environment. We, as a separate autonomous person and the environment, are co-emergent.

It's only by entering into the meditation practice, and giving ourselves a rest from active engagement with all these tempting phenomena which are passing through that we start to see the possibility of tranquility. Of being present, quiescent, peaceful, uninvolved, and yet life is flowing through. So it's not that in order for me to have peace I have to stop the world since the flow doesn't disturb the mind itself. Our mind itself, which has many names in Tibetan – sometimes the ordinary mind, or ordinary knowing, sometimes called *rigpa*, awareness – is our capacity simply to be present without doing anything. Not hiding, not jumping out engaged in phenomena, but like a mirror revealing the flow of experience. On and on and on moment by moment. It's not tiring for the mirror. It's not tiring for awareness. It's just flowing through. Just flowing through. The less involvement you have the more clarity you find you inhabit. The more desperately you try to sort our mind out, to purify yourself, the more difficult it is.

That's why they say if you follow this general Mahayana practice of reading the sutras, and developing compassion for beings and developing the two accumulations of wisdom and compassion, it will take many millions and millions of lifetimes to awaken, to gain enlightenment. That's because you're engaged in activity, and although the activity is generating some value it is simultaneously hiding from you, moment by moment, the absolute tranquility and unchanging nature of the mind itself.

The Mahamudra texts say you can get enlightened in one or two lifetimes. How is this possible? Because we do less. When you do less you get more, because you are not filling the space of possibility. This is the heart of emptiness. The emptiness of the ego is revealed through non-

grasping. In Tibetan they say *dag-dzin*. *Dag* means, I or essence, a truly existing something and *dzin-pa* means to grasp. The problem is in the grasping. Now why would you grasp at something? If something were precious, if you were going out to a party and you had a beautiful necklace round your neck and suddenly you felt the clasp had gone loose and it was falling down then you grasp it because you don't want to lose it. That's what we do all the time, we grasp, and grasp and grasp. This is our activity. If we don't grasp what will we have? Nothing. Oh. But I don't want nothing, I want something. But according to the texts, we are nothing. "*Oh, but I want to be something.*" It's not that if you are nothing you don't have any something. Something is available all the time. Nothing and something are inseparable. Non-dual. Form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. All the movement of your mind, when you see the ground of the mind itself, is the display of emptiness. The showing of emptiness, the radiance of emptiness. Whether the thought is terrible, and boring, cruel, mean, jealous, very disturbing or very peaceful, very ethical, very life-enhancing, whatever kind of thought is arising it is empty.

Dzogchen

So in the teachings of Dzogpa Chenpo we say it has the same ground. Samsara and nirvana have the same ground. Rigpa, awareness and non-awareness or ignoring, they have the same ground. Everything arises from emptiness. When you open to seeing emptiness, ignoring the ground of emptiness stops because now you are aware of emptiness. When you are aware of emptiness you are aware of all the resources of emptiness, the potential which gives rise to everything, and this now becomes a potential you are part of. And so your life becomes softer, and easier and you can move in all directions. All the different moods, all the different possibilities arise because you are not a fixed thing but you are the energy of manifestation which is inseparable from the ground.

The ground is pure from the very beginning. What arises from the ground arises effortlessly, just like an intuitive thought arising in the mind, a seamless display. It's not a construct. It's not created. There is no-one creating it but it reveals itself. So, when we sit in the practice, relaxed, at ease we feel the movement of the creativity of the ground passing through

and we separate ourselves from the delusion that I am the one who is in charge, who has to shape and select and mould. We see that the shaper, the seemingly limited bit of me, my egoic self, is also part of the flow of the ground. Then without entering into judgement, without saying this is good, this is bad, every form is the display of the buddha's mind. This is compassion. It is the clarity of seeing that there is nothing which is apart from the mind, that everything is the radiance of the mind.

It is compassion because it is free of any reification, objectification. We're not creating any solid substances.

Three kinds of compassion

In the general teachings on compassion we have compassion which arises from thinking about sentient beings, considering their suffering in each of the six realms and so on. We feel emotions of sadness and sympathetic anxiety. We consider people in the hot hells or cold hells who are dying alone covered in a plastic screen in a hospital where nobody can touch them. We think about how awful that would be and then we have a feeling. That is useful, but as we looked earlier, this is person to person, and it consolidates a sense of being a person.

Secondly we have compassion arising from consideration of the dharma. We start to find out about how the world is actually structured. We start to see our own mind and on the basis of this we find relief and clarity and then spontaneously compassion arises for all the sentient beings who don't know anything about this. Sentient beings who live in a world of consumerist capitalism who see everything as a commodity. Who see power over other people as a wonderful thing. To be rich and to be in control this is the highest level of achievement. We see people with many selfish, self serving ideas. You think, oh, the door to lasting happiness is in front of you but you turn away to choose this small, nasty little orientation. Because now you're going to get a big car and have people salute you when you come into the office. This is very, very sad. So we feel real compassion. Oh, you're lost, you're lost in the forest, you're lost in the jungle. There is no space for you to see the bigger picture. You've just got your blinkers on and you're chasing your dreams, and what your dad said you should do with your life and your neighbours have got a new

lawnmower and they can cut the grass much quicker than you. Wow! The whole of life going by in this dreamworld. So the more we reflect on dharma and do the practice we link ourselves up to all sentient beings. Because we start to see, oh, the ground of me, this mind has no shape or colour, it has no shape or size, it has no dimension. It's not fixed anywhere. It has no beginning and no end. The mind is not a thing. And similarly for all sentient beings the mind is not a thing.

When things come into contact. If you take a lemon and an orange, and you put them on the table you see one is yellow and the other is orange in colour. Ah! They're different they're touching but they're different. So whenever there is boundary we say there is this and there is that and they're not the same. But when you see the ground everything has the same root. Everything is a manifestation of the same ground. That is the truth of it. The surface phenomena, the colour, the shape. These are secondary and transient. Thoughts arise and pass. You look out of the window you see a particular pattern of clouds then it changes. Or your eye goes in another direction and you see something else. The mind is moving. The world is moving. This ever changing patterning is the display of the potential of the mind itself. We are not a thing among things, and there are no things.

So this is the third level of compassion called compassion that has no object. Not concerned with grasping hold of a definite sense of something. It is the field arises together, the non-dual field. Non-dual simply means not two. Not one, it's not homogenised into one truth but nor is it split into two different things. So in the Heart Sutra when it says that form is emptiness and that emptiness is form it's saying that although it looks as if there are two things, emptiness and form, in fact they are not two. They're not exactly the same but neither are they different. This is non-duality. They are together. Not either/or but both/and. So this is both a form and emptiness and they come together.

We see here a statue of Dorje Chang, the originating Buddha in the Kagyupa lineage system. He has his hands crossed over his chest with a vajra and a bell. This is a symbol of the non-duality of wisdom and compassion. Of emptiness and skilful means. Which is exactly this. The movement of the mind is only a problem if you don't see the ground of the

mind. If you see the emptiness of the mind then the movement is wonderful, beautiful, shiny. However it is, it is radiance.

But when there is no sense of this open, empty ground, the mind grasps at this huge problem of sorting out all the different experiences of life. What do I like, what do I not like? I used to like that but I don't like it now, how can that be? You fall in love with someone and after a while you get bored with them. How could it be? How could it be? Because of impermanence, everything is unstable. It is very very difficult to try to stabilise phenomena. You can waste lifetime after lifetime after lifetime trying to do this..

So the content of the mind is moving always whereas the mind itself is never moving. But what we take to be our mind is usually a particular patterning of the content of the mind and this is our primary confusion: that we think 'my mind' is 'mine'. It's about 'me' and the thoughts that arise from 'me' are defining who 'I' am.

The sitting practice that we do is very simple. Sit in a simple erect way, skeleton carrying your weight, muscles relaxed, relaxing into the open space. Eyes open, looking out. Not looking at anything but just open to receive whatever is arising. Whatever arises that we take to be inside, whatever arises that we take to be outside, let it come, let it go. Don't interfere. Don't build pictures.

When you build a picture you're under the power of the law of exclusion because if it's this, it's not that. If it's that, it's not this. And these barriers create conflict and then we try to sort the conflict by a hierarchy of views. *"This is more important than that. Gold is more important than copper."* Well if you want to run an electric current probably copper is better than gold. It depends on the situation. But we project abstract value into something as if, somehow, under all conditions gold is best then that is not true. Gold has a function. Copper has function. Food has a function. That is to say. Each is situationally important, or not. There is no inherent value, the value arises from the function, and the function is secondary to the ground.

The primary value is the value of openness, of emptiness. The secondary value is its participation in, or on, the field of disclosure. The

field of becoming, that you're sitting at the moment in a room with your laptop and you have the walls and the windows and around you the streets and so on. This is, you are enworlded. You are a part of that environment. There is nowhere that you can go to be truly alone. You are always someone somewhere. Even if you go and live in a cave in isolation you're there with your memories, and your plans and hopes and fears, and so on.

This is why we say that subject and object arise together. If you try to get rid of the bad object or the bad thought and have only good thoughts you're still stuck with the fact that subject and object are not the same. Phenomena change and have their particular rhythms and patterns and subjective phenomena also change and have their particular rhythms and patterns. It's very rare that subject and object align in a way that is really harmonious – and then it's gone.

Equanimity

So what is subject and what is object? Both are the energy of the mind. This is the basis for understanding equanimity. As long as we believe that I am a subject, a person with my mouth and my eyes and my experience and you are somebody different, then we start with a conceptual assumption based on the idea of myself and the idea of the other person.

When we relax a little in our practice then what is arising is everything all at once. What seems to be outside, registers, what seems to be inside, registers. They are equally registering as transient phenomena. It's only in the concept that we take the scissors and cut the line and say inside is inside and outside is outside. That's a thought. That's a naming which takes us back to the economy of signs: applying signs to things and thinking that they point to a true entity. So if I say, "*But this is me!*" then what is stable about me? 'Me' is a flow of experiences. Outside is a flow of experiences. The wind in the sky. The clouds moving. People walking in the street, dogs, birds, everything moving. Movement of the field. Non-dual with the open empty ground. And inside that field, moment by moment, we are moving.

We are this unique expression in the moment but we're moving in the field we don't move out of the field, only within the field. So me, 'I, me,

myself', is a movement in the field and the field is inseparable from the ground. This is the heart of Mahamudra. Everything has one taste. This is the taste of emptiness. What it shows is not defining the truth of it. What it shows becomes an interpretation. As soon as you start to extract this particular form from the other forms in the field, this form becomes figural, or foregrounded, and the rest recedes into the background. So what's happening? What is in front of you is getting your attention. What's going into the background is not getting your attention. It becomes less clear, less insistent. The nuances and details of it become invisible. Thus is very important.

As we pulse in and out of the world, in and out of relation to how things are, as we find ourselves opening and closing, opening and closing, some things become important and then not so important, and then we see that, *"Oh! that importance was momentary."* I really wanted a cup of coffee. I got the coffee. I didn't want tea. I don't want the tea I want the coffee. Now I have the coffee. Ah I don't want any more coffee. I've had my coffee. What was figural had been really important: I needed a coffee. It vanishes, it recedes. Phenomena are pulsing in and out, in and out. I am pulsing, they are pulsing. The interplay of subject and object is an ever-changing dance. A non-dual display. This is how the world is. And this is how it has been going on for ever and for ever. The more we relax into that the more we find the freedom of being with phenomena however they are because this feeling arises, passes, arises and passes. I realise that it's not permanent and that this feeling or experience doesn't define who I am, that it's just a moment and that none of these forms, none of these shapings, are reliable as defining images of who I am. That is to say, the surface doesn't indicate the depth.

The traditional example of this is the well known one of the mirror. In the mirror you see the reflection. This is like the surface clarity of the mirror; many different images arise. The depth of the mirror is nothing. There is no image of the mirror in the mirror. The mirror shows the image of something else. So the image is part of the mirror but it doesn't tell you the truth of the mirror.

When you sit and meditate and thoughts arise, maybe some depressed thoughts or angry thoughts, then you have another thought,

"Oh I don't like to be like this." then you try to make some correction, some improvement. Maybe I should do some Dorje Sempa practice? Maybe I should purify myself because I don't like to have these thoughts? At that point then notice how although you have studied and heard that there is no fixed self, you are now relating to yourself in your meditation as if you were a fixed self that was being spoiled by a depressed thought. This is to say; the reflection is defining the mirror.

If we look at our reflection in the mirror and decide it's not very attractive and declare that this is a terrible mirror – What an ugly mirror! What a stupid mirror! – well that would be a crazy thing to say but it's what we do to ourself all the time. Some transient pattern is arising. *"Ah! I don't want this to be me. I don't want anyone to know I'm like this. Huh! I'd better pretend I'm better at meditating."* Why? You cheat yourself because you're trying to come to a stable definition of who you are. Emptiness means there's nothing to grasp and yet here you are – emptiness, no essence. No deep truth to be found that you can put in your pocket.

On the other side is endless display. The texts say 'unborn and unceasing'. Unceasing means some new form, some new form, some new form... So when you really taste non-duality, or the inseparability of emptiness and experience, directly and deeply then emptiness and walking, emptiness and talking, emptiness and eating and so on is all ungraspable yet it is just this. It's just this and it's so light. It's like the reflection in the mirror that you can't catch and yet it's there. So grasping, catching, owning, mastery, is all irrelevant. It is the neurotic structure of the lonely ego.

Now we start to see what equanimity might be. If the manifesting forms as manifestation are not the truth of what is appearing then they're just playing, they're just playing. When you are by the sea and the wind's blowing and you see the different patterns of the waves you might say that one wave is bigger than another wave. That could be a reasonably objective fact but to you say that one wave is better than the other... ? Maybe it was better but now it's gone! It's like that with everything in your life, it's a vanishing thing. The wave rises and falls back into the sea, the wave arises, falls back into the sea... Nothing to grasp.

On one level it doesn't matter. On the level of emptiness it doesn't matter. All one taste. On the level of connectivity, of relating to other people, how you manifest matters a lot. So, we need to bring the unification of wisdom and compassion, of emptiness and skilful means. If our manifestation is arising out of emptiness in a field which is arising out of emptiness then the emptiness and the field is the mother of our arising with the context. So rather than being an individual agent acting on circumstances, making particular patterns happen which can then be judged as good or bad, likeable or disliked, it's simply a pulsation of movement, beyond judgement, beyond grasping, beyond being an object of thought.

This is the third level of compassion, *Mig-pa Me-pa Nyin-je*. There is nothing for your thoughts to grasp. The texts say that it's like being a thief in an empty house. The thief has got their bag ready to take something but when they go into the house there's nothing there to steal! The people have left and taken everything with them – it's just empty rooms.

As your meditation strengthens then when your ego self comes in, trying to get hold of something, it doesn't actually need anything. Everything is equal. This is profound equanimity. Equanimity has always these two aspects; equanimity in the object and equanimity in the subject. Both are aspects of having the same ground. Equanimity of the object means there is no true, permanent value in any phenomena. It is situational. When we invest in something, we believe in it, it becomes important for us. It's like the Tibetan story about the trader returning from India who gave his mother a dog's tooth, telling her it was a tooth of the Buddha. She placed it on her altar believing it to be a holy relic and honoured it and prayed to it. It began to give out light, showing that even a dog's tooth, if it is worshipped, it will start to give out light. It is the mind that has the quality. The mind is clear light. The mind is luminosity. The mind is brilliant. Your mind is brilliance. It's not in the objects of the world that are brilliant. They shine because you make them shine by how you give them your attention. So then you see the object world is completely even. There is no phenomenon more important than any other.

The year before last I sold off many of my psychotherapy and philosophy and literature books. These books had cost me quite a lot of

money but when I took them to the second hand book person they didn't give me nearly as much money as I had paid for them. I wondered why I was selling these books. Maybe I should keep them but I don't need them and I don't have the space to have them but I want them because they are important. But to the guy buying the books he's thinking, *"Who is ever going to buy these things? I'm being kind to this dodderly old man. I'm giving him one euro for a book, come on, I'm being nice guy."*

Where is the value? It's not in the pages; it's in my thought about the meaning of the book because I remember reading the book, teaching from it and so on. Now these chapters of my life are closing and the meaning of these events in my life is going, shrinking back into me. What once was really shining, is not shining now. Oh! The mind moved, and the patterns and the shapes of the world arose and changed. From the very beginning everything is equal but it will shine according to how we participate.

That's why we always have our most open level of compassion, all-pervading compassion, compassion for every living thing. May all sentient beings be happy! Not making any of them special but seeing that all beings have equal buddha nature, and all beings have their particular patterns of obscurations, but that this obscurations is itself is the radiance of the ground. We offer ourselves equally to everyone, under all circumstances, however it arises. It doesn't mean that you are an evangelist, stopping people in the street and asking them if they have heard the good news of the buddha? We're not trying to convert people to anything but we *are* available. We're not hidden inside; we're not making choices on the basis liking or not liking but we're working with the potential or the energy of the situation. That is the equanimity of the object side.

The equanimity of the subject side is when you feel liking or not liking arising. However you don't over-identify with it. Of course there is a flavour of that because otherwise you could spend ten hours in a restaurant trying to read the menu and never come to any conclusion about what to order. Something takes your fancy in the moment but it's momentary; it's not saying the truth of this. We have our pulsations but within equanimity.

Four Brahma Viharas or the Four Immeasurables

So, I imagine we are all familiar with the Four Brahma Viharas or the Four Immeasurables, when we say:

May all beings be happy and have the root of happiness.

May all beings be free of suffering and the root of suffering

May all beings experience the joy which is not mixed with any suffering, and

May all beings experience equanimity which is free of bias in favour of friends and relatives and against enemies and people we dislike.

These are foundational thoughts that we get in the various buddhist paths. What I would suggest to you, particularly at this time when there are many disturbing views and bits of information about suffering arising from the virus, is to read these Four Immeasurables and reflect on them.

At this time it's maybe more useful to start with the fourth one, equanimity. *"May all beings, and probably, especially me because I have to work on myself, may all beings be free of the partiality or bias or prejudice which is towards friends and away from enemies, that privileges one group of people over another group of people."* If I'm going to be even towards everyone how will I do that? I have to recognise when bias arises in my mind, when I think that something is really, really important, and because this is important, then that is less important.

Equanimity means calm, really profound calm. Start with the calm you get from doing your basic shiné, shamata sitting practice through to the depth of calm that you have when you awaken to the unborn nature of the mind. Rest in that openness. Everything is equal. All thoughts, feelings and memories are essentially empty, and equal in emptiness. All phenomena are equal in emptiness. The emptiness of all phenomena is called dharmata, *Chö-nyid*. It means that there is no individual essence to any phenomena; it's just dharma-ness, thing-ness, which is emptiness. The same for the mind. Mind in Sanskrit is *citta*, and *cittata* is mind-ness. The essence of the mind, of everyone's mind, is emptiness. Mind-side, object-side. Equally empty. Everything is equal, peaceful.

In dzogchen we talk about contentment, *Zim-ba*, just at peace, however it is. They say – and of course this is very difficult – *"If you go to heaven, go to heaven, if you go to hell, go to hell."* However it is, is just how it is. If your body gets sick you stay present with the sickness. If your body is healthy and happy you can stay with that. The thing is not to make a big story about it, not to invest in it some defining truth about yourself. These are transient movements of experience. They arise and pass. You've already had millions of them in this lifetime already. Arising and passing.

If we have equanimity then the third of these Four Immeasurables makes more sense. *"May all beings have the joy or happiness which has no suffering mixed in it at all."* Usually our happiness is surrounded by potentials for unhappiness. You go out to have a picnic, and it starts to rain. There are so many secondary factors which can somehow spoil the experience. But if we have equanimity then the basis for the joy is to be settled in the unborn openness of the mind. That is the true basis of happiness, and this cannot be spoiled. In the buddhist tradition this is referred to as *vajra*. Vajra means indestructible. Nothing can alter it or change it. The mind itself is not a thing. You can't buy it. You can't lose it. You can't improve it, nothing can harm it. Understanding this is the basis of equanimity, and it is also the basis of joy. It is beyond alteration, beyond contamination.

The second of the Four Immeasurables is, *"May all beings be free from suffering and the cause of suffering."* The cause of suffering is ignorance, not recognising the ground. I may say that this is the ground and it's always been here but when I look around I see that all these other people don't get it! They just don't get it! They think that cleaning their car and having people commenting on their new car is a real source of happiness. You might get three seconds of that happiness and then it's over. Then something else happens and you might get ten seconds of happiness, or two minutes of happiness or even one hour of happiness! But then, gone! Moreover the attempt to find happiness often leads to suffering. The root of suffering is not seeing the ground. *"May all beings find the ground of their own nature. May they awaken to their own, unchanging buddha nature. And through that may all their suffering dissolve because suffering arises from a cause, and the cause is not knowing who you are."*

The first of the Four Immeasurables is, "*May all beings be happy and have the root of happiness.*" The root of happiness is the mind itself. On a hot day icecream can make you feel happy for a while. On a wet day having an umbrella can make you feel happy. There are many kinds of situational happinesses but again, they're very short-lived. If you want true happiness which endures it has to be connected to the unchanging. Obviously. Carrying a big umbrella on a hot day when you don't need it to shade you from the sun... you are way out in the country and you're carrying this big umbrella... it's heavy... Why? "I thought it was going to rain." Everything changes. So, *May all beings be happy. Good, and have the root of happiness,* which is the mind itself. It's not a healthy body. It's not having money. It's not having access to political power. None of the things which get people excited is the true basis of happiness.

The mind is the truth of everything. The mind is empty and it's full. It's empty in, and of itself, like the mirror and it's also full, like the mirror. The mirror always has reflections. The mind always has thoughts, feelings, memories and so on. These are the display of the potential of emptiness. We encounter these rising waves of anxiety;

- Will I die from this virus?
- Will people I love die from the virus?
- What will happen to the economy?
- Will I lose my job?
- There are so many people who work in restaurants and bars and so on, if they are closed for many months maybe they'll have to close down.
- People get out of the habit of going out and maybe the whole culture will shift.

The patterns of interaction which were generating a sense of identity, a sense of competence and a sense of meaning can all be shifted and there will be suffering because people will wake up to the fact that "I'm not who I think I am. I thought that was my life but now it's like this. How can that be?"

We have the great advantage of opening ourselves to the buddha's teachings and starting to see that grasping at the transient, the impermanent, the constructed, and cheating ourselves by pretending that it is stable, that it's reliable and that it's permanent, is how we create

suffering. This is what we see all around: people being shocked because their world that they were used to is starting to crumble.

So, relaxed, open, connected, able to respond in whatever situation is there. Of course, different emotions arise and pass in us, and they have a flavour. That flavour is informative; it gives us access to how the other person is. There is some kind of impact but it's transient. Don't build up an image of who the other person is because otherwise that image of them will become like a barrier between you and them since they are changing and you are changing. You don't know how you're going to be tomorrow.

So that's a different way of living. It's a way of being open to how it is, and how it is, is simply how it is, we don't know.

Kindness

Emptiness, equanimity, and kindness. Kindness that is grounded in the equanimity which arises from emptiness is very stable. Why? Because it's kindness which is not seeking for anything. It's not seeking the reward of people thinking we are nice or kind or generous. It's not a kindness which is full of warm emotions that make us feel good about wanting to help others because that emotion just vanishes. Not only does it vanish but anyway we wouldn't be able to sustain it because in this body with our emotional structure we get tired. We offer ourselves. I'm here, on whatever terms you need. I'm for you.

As the great Namkhai Norbu used to ask many, many times: what is your capacity? What is your capacity? Your capacity is infinite; as the open ground, it's wide and generous as the field of experience, but, if, as a manifestation, you become wrapped around in the cocoon of your familiar self-definitions you won't be able to let the light of the ground shine through you, as you, because you narrow down to a self-referential point.

Emptiness purifies habit formations. And then we see the equality of what is outside, and the equality of what is inside, and from that kindness arises moment by moment in interactions with whatever we encounter. That means we can imagine the beings in the six realms. We can imagine the people in the hospitals. We can imagine all kind of things. We can be

present in a non-dual way, open to it. The mind has no limit. The mind is not something stuck inside your body. It's not a thing. Your body is in your mind. The people dying in hospital are in your mind, if you open your mind to them.

Nobody need die alone if you open yourself to being present with all the suffering in the world, and you won't be overwhelmed either because the pot is very big. The mind is empty. It never gets filled up. However the ego is a small pot, and will get filled up and will get burned out. This is why I have taken the sequence as emptiness, equanimity, and kindness.

Now we've come to the end. I hope this is in some way useful to you. And thank you for your attention, and thanks again to Kamalashila for hosting this event.