

ANXIETY AND DOUBT

JAMES LOW

Excerpts

Anxiety is not a personal problem; it is a structural quality of the misapprehension of the nature of existence. So it's not that there's something wrong with us, it's that our attention and our sense of self has been tilted in one direction so that we're off balance. Because we're out of kilter, when we look at the world we don't see it clearly. The purpose of the meditation is to rebalance ourselves.

As we start to look at our own minds it's important to see how we create expectations which generate anxiety. With that, to see that our anxieties and our feelings of hope and fear come about because we start from a false assumption about who we are and about how the world is.

The real quality of ignorance is demonstrated where something which is transient and composite, something which arises in interaction with others, something which is essentially a field factor – in that it's a phenomenon arising in the interpersonal energetic field – ascribes to itself an autonomy which it doesn't possess.

It is really important to see that rather than being passive consumers of reality we are active co-constructors of the world. So how we develop our own existence, the qualities we have in our own minds – the particular take or colouration that we bring into the world – very much influences the world that we live in.

The middle way is: don't be worse than you are, don't be better than you are, just be who you are. If you are really being who you are then, without any manipulation, your way of being will become lighter by itself – it will be self-purifying. Whereas if you try to polish it artificially it is likely that your intentionality will have a bias.

The difference between awakened people and unawakened people is the quality of attention that they bring to the flow of their own experience. This is the basis for understanding that we all have buddha-nature, that we all have the potential for awakening.

Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| What is anxiety?..... | 1 |
| Where we are..... | 2 |
| The root of anxiety..... | 4 |
| Existence as narrative | 8 |
| Our karmic view of the world | 9 |
| Compassion – anxiety caused by others suffering | 11 |
| Wisdom of emptiness | 12 |
| Separating mind from its contents..... | 14 |
| Double ignorance!..... | 16 |
| Actions have consequences | 18 |
| Wisdom counterbalances anxiety..... | 20 |
| Am I self-existent?..... | 21 |
| How to find out who you are | 23 |
| Letting an attachment define us | 25 |
| We affect each other | 26 |
| Rebalance your portfolio! | 27 |
| Worry eats our lives | 30 |
| Does our worry improve the situation? | 32 |
| How not to be a puppet on a string | 35 |
| Formation of fears | 36 |
| Wisdom liberates fear..... | 37 |
| Releasing attachment to constructs | 40 |
| Let the thoughts come... and go | 44 |
| Thoughts don't need an editor | 46 |
| The root of suffering | 48 |
| Karma | 50 |
| Karmic consequences..... | 50 |
| The ego wants a job!..... | 53 |
| World views shaped by karmic attention and intention..... | 54 |
| Tantra hooks attention | 57 |
| Forget the fantasy...nobody has everything sorted!..... | 59 |
| Spaciousness of the sambhogakaya view | 60 |
| Everything is flow | 61 |
| Be kind to yourself | 61 |
| The mirror of the mind..... | 62 |

Today we're meeting in a building which is used for supporting parents in learning the difficult craft of being a parent. All the elaborated spiritual paths act as educational systems to bring about a healthy flowering of the spiritual aspect of ourselves which is already present as a potential. In the Tibetan buddhist tradition as the seed of enlightenment starts to develop it is often seen as being like a young child, or a *gyalwai nyugu* – a spring time shoot that has to be nurtured and taken care of. This spiritual aspect of ourselves has much more capacity and potential than the ego, but unless the ego is willing to take responsibility for its development it cannot flourish.

So as we practice meditation and try to understand something about ourselves we are in the paradoxical position of having to give rise to, develop, and take care of aspects of ourselves which will transcend the one who is doing the care-taking. Like a good parent, we need to develop qualities of discipline, clarity and reliability so that this new opening aspect of ourselves, the basis for awakening, can be given the optimal conditions for development.

The particular focus for our meeting this weekend is the very central experiences of anxiety and worry – most of us have quite a lot of worries and many moments of anxiety in our lives. So I'll explain the traditional Nyingmapa understanding of the nature of anxiety, the structures underpinning its development, and show how meditation can help us cut through the root of that development. We'll also look at the various kinds of moment-by-moment anxieties and confusion that arise for us and how to work with experiences of everyday life by bringing a more open, precise, and present attention into the complex and often chaotic circumstances of daily existence.

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety is a feeling which arises when there is an interruption in our ease of being in the world with others. There is a sense of an impediment to our relatedness and so we feel 'apart'. With these feeling of discordance or lack of attunement we can feel that the external environment holds difficulties which are too much for us, so we feel overwhelmed and unable to cope. Many external circumstances can promote anxiety, usually with some sense of dread that we're going to be exposed as inadequate. Perhaps we have to do something that we don't look forward to, something which may originally have seemed interesting and appealing but now starts to feel persecutory. As the date gets closer it seems to loom larger and we find we've agreed to do something which seems to be robbing of us of ourselves. We feel that we can't be ourselves if we do it; however if we don't do it we will have betrayed ourselves by not going over a limit. So there's a sense of toing and froing, feeling torn by alternate unpleasant possibilities.

We can also have free-floating anxieties, anxieties which seem to be just 'of themselves'. They seem to hover in the ether of our soul as a basic feeling of being ill-at-ease. Even if we're out with other people, we have a sense of not being part of what's going on; we think 'they all seem to know each other and get on with each other but I'm not really part of this.' It's as if there's a barrier and we look out through our eyes at a world that seems more shiny than the one that we actually have access to. This self-referential quality of our anxiety inhibits the kind of forgetfulness which is part of being present. We engage in a self-reflexive, 'self to self' internal conversation, either in the form of words or in terms of feeling that a sensation in the body is giving a true indicator of who we are. This conversation will always return us to ourselves, so we need to let go of this – to find yourself you have to lose yourself!

Many people carry a lot of muscular tension and, because the muscles have cramped and locked over time, their skeleton has become a bit distorted. That lack of ease in embodied being leads to restrictions on the free flow of the breath which leads to a lack of free articulation with the world. Although we might not normally refer to it as such I would suggest that this tension of the body is a major part of anxiety. It arises from a fearful preoccupation that something difficult could happen to me, some situation will arise that will be beyond my capacity to deal with.

So a fear of failure, that 'I will be exposed as somebody who can't do things', is very central to the notion of anxiety. Also a feeling that even if, in the event, nobody sees me as inadequate I can still feel that I have somehow let myself down. So although externally I appear to have got away without being exposed as inadequate, I don't get away with it to myself. Many people who are very successful in life don't feel good about themselves because they have set internal targets which are often way beyond those of many other people. These internal targets can be highly persecutory.

WHERE WE ARE

When the ignoring of openness ripens as our habitual sense of being an autonomous self we find ourselves in environments that we are part of. In the traditional Buddhist view there are six possible domains for sentient beings, those who exist in ignorance of how they actually are. We inhabit specific domains for as long as we have the karma to remain there. They are not final destinations but modes of experience for those who are subjects experiencing objects including other subjects.

The highest domain is the god realm which has three levels: desire, form and formless. In the sensual desire domain there is great pleasure with no anxiety until the last seven days of one's stay there when one is rejected and reviled. As a form god everything is pure and simple and free of strife. In

the formless realms one existence is so fine it is like a fine plume of smoke coming from an incense stick. In these two latter realms there is no anxiety, yet abiding in these ways we become so sensitive that when we have to leave we experience overwhelming pain and anxiety. Below the gods are the jealous gods who persecute themselves with the thought that the gods are in a better position than they are. Again and again they try to defeat the gods but have to suffer terrible wounds in great pain. Then there is the animal realm of birds, fish and creatures on and under the land. For most there is the fear of being part of the food chain, suffering being eaten alive. Domesticated animals are possessions to be dealt with as their owner wishes. Next are the hungry ghosts who are agitated by hunger and thirst and never experience satisfaction or contentment. At the lowest level are the hot and cold hells where torment is continuous and we have not a moment of relief, no stillness or ease.

The sixth domain, situated between the animals and the jealous gods is the human one where we find ourselves with a consciousness which separates us from more instinct-based life forms. We can learn, review, compare and contrast and arrange patterns of abstract concepts. These capacities grant us a degree of freedom and autonomy yet they bring us in contact with past suffering and potential future sufferings. We see the sufferings of others and sometimes see that such pains and difficulties could also happen to us.

Due to the propulsive and directive consequence of our past actions we find ourselves in one or other of these domains or fields of experience. Events occur and we move towards them or away from them. Except in the impermanent highest formless realms, movement is the signature mark of our existence. We are in movement, in action and reaction, shifting with the shifting tides of experience. In the Tibetan language a common term for sentient beings is 'drowa' (*sGro-Ba*), travellers, indicating that we wander in samsara, moving with the activity of body, voice and mind, trying to leave somewhere, trying to get somewhere.

Our ego-self is not fixed; it is a shifting patterning of experience arising moment by moment in relation to the shifting patterns around us. We are energy in movement even as we claim to be stable entities and our energy manifests interactively. Sentient beings are movements seeking peace as ego yet it is our identification as a fixed and knowable ego that denies us peace. In ignorance of non-duality each ego-self experiences an apartness, a unique specificity, and it is this individualised mode of participation that keeps one as a process of movement in a field of movement. Due to the dullness (*gTi-Muk*) of the foreclosure arising from self-focusing we do not open to the bright openness of our own unborn ground.

Believing I am myself, this separate existence, I seek to find a home, my true home, where I can rest. Life in human form offers the greatest opportunity in samsara to find our actual source which is not a home, yet even with all our knowledge and capacity we focus on finding somewhere for someone. Blind to our own inalienable openness we go, we make, we take, we construct. This is the effect of dullness: not seeing our intrinsic simplicity we cannot find true contentment as it. Instead we struggle to maintain our false identities and through this we generate more formative karma by our intentions, enactments and reifying conclusions. Dissatisfaction, anxiety, and worry arise not only from our own situation, for our compassion links us affectively to others and their suffering impacts us.

The exit from the entirety of the six domains is already present with each being wandering within them. It is to be found in the mind itself and not in the content of the mind. As long as outer phenomena and inner thoughts, feelings, memories and so on are held to be fundamentally different we will be looking to a better type of object to make us safe and happy. This understandable effort makes the Buddhas weep: the door to liberation is so close! Why do you look away and imagine it to be somewhere else?

THE ROOT OF ANXIETY

In buddhism there is a notion that suffering arises because of ignorance. So to get to the root of anxiety we need to try to understand the nature of both ignorance and its secondary concomitant factor, attachment. Here ignorance does not indicate a lack of particular knowledge; it is a state of not being in awareness. Awareness itself is not a state of hyper-intelligence giving access to some vast data bank of information to resolve all questions; it is not a cognitive state. Rather it's a quality of openness which provides a spacious interface with whatever is happening. Within this spaciousness one is not being limited or corralled by objects, neither those which seem dangerous or aggressive and which one wants to avoid, nor by objects of desire towards which one is moving.

This quality of awareness as a state of open being – of being which is not something which can be grasped as a 'thing' – gets lost in the ignorance of becoming identified with consciousness. Consciousness faces out towards objects and it also deals with itself as an object so in our experience we usually think that 'I' am having this experience. This sense of 'I know who I am', this feeling of being 'me', is always present yet it changes moment by moment. Sometimes 'I' can be mainly bodily sensations; sometimes 'I' can be an emotional feeling. 'I' could be a fantasy, a set of thoughts, or particular memories, or an anxious self-justification. From time to time, some of us imagine that we're in some kind of courtroom scenario with somebody saying to us 'why did you do that?' We

find ourselves explaining why we did something badly to a kind of inner judge who calls us to account and gives us a hard time. These are all aspects of identification of 'self' as something which exists in and of itself – the sense that 'I am what I am.' This sense of self is continually pulling information and events towards it if it thinks they'll be protective, or pushing them away if it feels that they will be harmful. This results in a constraint on our freedom of movement.

The 'self' has a basic anxiety about the status of its own existence; it's grounded in a holding on to 'I' – *ahamkara* in Sanskrit or *dag-dzin* in Tibetan. *Dzin-pa* means to grab or hold and *dag* is a sense that there is an inherent self-existence in the entity offering something that can be taken hold of. *Dag* is used to refer to both the first person singular 'I' and also the 'I-ness' or sense of some real truth in objects. So if we say 'this is a watch' both the word 'watch' and the visual object seem to come together and we can all agree, because we have the experience, that this is a watch. Although the watch is made up of many different parts, when we say 'watch' there seems to be a 'watchness' to the watch – it seems to have some identity which is greater than the sum of its parts. Through viewing all the objects around us in this way we encounter a world of entities, of things which seem to have a factual, separate existence. If they seem benign or helpful this can give us the feeling of expansion and movement and if they seem malign this can give us a sense of compression, attack and danger.

When I was travelling here on the train people were talking on their mobile phones, having conversations that they clearly wanted to have but that I didn't want to hear! I had thought that I would have some peace in which to read but the person next to me was speaking about something which was somehow interesting. My ear was a little bit hooked towards it but I was only getting half the story so I felt like saying 'can I either hear the whole thing or shut-up, one way or the other!' Then I had the thought 'why is my journey being disturbed by other people?' It's in ways like this that we are impacted by and get drawn into the world.

We are necessarily in interaction with the world since we depend on air, food and drink for our survival. We are not autonomous entities since we are in ceaseless interaction with what is around us. We respond to what we perceive and we influence the environment, just as we are influenced by it. In Buddhism the term 'dependent co-origination' is used to refer to the way phenomena arise and develop on the basis of other phenomena: on the basis of this, that arises. Since the network of interdependency is often invisible to us reflection on this is an encouragement to be mindful of complexity and not assume that our beliefs are true. We can't live in a bubble of ourselves, for we lack the power to seal ourselves off from the world. In fact the more powerful you are the more

attention you get and the more people form opinions about you. While most of us can hide under a stone and get on with the mess of our lives someone like Prince Charles has nowhere to hide, there's huge marketing of all the stories about him and Camilla.

We imagine that there is somebody called Prince Charles and somebody called Camilla and that these two people do things which can be interesting. What we describe as 'Prince Charles' is a title which can be fitted onto an image, one that we can all recognise from the newspapers, yet from a meditation point of view we might see that the one who is called 'Prince Charles' is a flow of experience. Out of our reflections on our own experience, we can imagine that he too will have sensations, emotions and thoughts which will be changing according to circumstances – that in fact he is a flux, a ceaseless movement of hardly tangible moments.

When we experience ourselves just sitting here, the experience that we have of our body is changing. Sometimes it seems comfortable, then we become a bit stiff so we move around, then maybe we become aware we're a bit cold. People feel a bit thirsty so they drink some water, maybe they have an idea so they write something down – so each of us is moved and impacted by the environment in various ways.

Out of our individualism, we often create a notion or an understanding of what's happening to us in terms of 'I am deciding to do this' or 'I am now turning to look this way.' However I don't know *why* I am turning to look towards the left, I just find myself looking this way. If a policeman were to come in and ask me why I was looking that way I'd have to say 'I don't know why.' This sounds a bit strange, a not very wise behaviour! Imagining that I should be in control of myself I could feel a bit lost. Who is making me do this? How can I justify what I am doing when much of it seems to just happen? We are used to being held to account for our actions. We have probably all experienced blaming and shaming by which our subjective agency is deemed inadequate or inappropriate.

Attacks of this kind turn our subject-self into an object – a thing that can be known, measured and judged. Shame is an emotion that attacks our deepest sense of self and undermines our most fundamental sense of worth. This can leave us with an intangible sense of being wrong or unworthy at the core of our being. From this we easily become wary of others, fearing intimacy since it will lead to exposure of our faults and lack of value. Social avoidance then seems to be the best means of survival, often accompanied by a prickly readiness for defensive aggression. Individualising accusation disguises the fact that the autonomous self is a socially required fiction that is punitive

and misleading in its falsity. In truth, because experience is arising in a non-dual matrix, we *cannot* be in control, we are always part and parcel of the environment around us.

Existence in the body is vulnerable to so many things – to various kinds of diseases, to genetic limitations, to accidents, to the general processes of ageing. We're vulnerable to the impact of the changing of the seasons, to the fact that people have conditions which are communicable – they have colds, they have 'flu and we become infected just by being close to other people.

So how will we establish a locus of control and live life on our terms? How will we be able to fulfil the demand that has been placed on us much of the time to establish the sense that 'I know who I am and I know what I'm going to do'? The truth is that we cannot do this, we cannot secure a territory around us; to exist is to exist with others as part of their world, just as they are part of our world. Asking the ego to secure a territory which is basically insecure generates a huge amount of anxiety which is very difficult to get away from.

Children are trained into the belief that they are conscious, intentional agents (although for much of the time they are very distracted). When you go through a school experience you have to learn to sit at your desk, you have to listen to the teacher, you have to remember what's taught and you have to do your homework. In this way the sense builds up that 'I need to be a secure, reliable person. I need to be able to focus my mind and attend to a task without being distracted'. This is conveyed to us in terms of a dogma, a belief which is not grounded in any kind of true attention to actual lived experience.

Many of our attitudes are non-phenomenological – they are not grounded in attention to how life actually is but are embedded in dogmatic belief systems which have been squeezed into us as though we were a mould. In the plasticity of our youth we have adapted to and internalised many of these beliefs without ever examining them. We can say that this is how culture transmits itself or, in another language, you could say this is how our karma manifests. In this way we find ourselves believing things, about ourselves and also about the world around us, which we have never examined but which we take to be true. In believing lies about ourselves and lies about the world, we come up with the conclusion that we're bad people, that we're not very good at being alive, and that we always make mistakes. This is a reading which causes us much grief. In my clinical practice in the hospital I see large numbers of people who are fundamentally persecuted by things that happened to them, things which they couldn't avoid but for which they have taken responsibility.

The Buddha taught about the middle way, and finding the middle way in terms of accurate responsibility is very hard. We tend to veer between being under-responsible and being over-responsible. However actually to be responsible is to be able to respond... to be able to respond into a situation however it is. If we're under-responsible then we might say, 'Ah, well I don't care. What does it matter?' People can get into very self-destructive states thinking, 'I don't care if I get drunk and fall over' 'I don't care if I drive when I'm drunk' 'I don't care if I behave in a way that alienates everyone around me' 'I just don't care, I want to let rip'. Yet whenever we let rip we're likely to face severe consequences later on.

If we veer to the other extreme and become over-responsible, then we might find ourselves always worrying about how to survive what other people will make of what we do. However these 'other people' who persecute us are not the actual people who are outside us but are largely the images of them that we carry in ourselves. Moment by moment we construct for ourselves images of who other people might be. Hence we can persecute ourselves on the basis of our fear of judgements which, certainly when we're adults, very rarely comes to pass in the inter-personal field. Thus our own hyper-responsibility can maintain the state of anxiety.

EXISTENCE AS NARRATIVE

In brief, from the very beginning our mind's nature – who we really are – is very relaxed and open. This openness of mind is like a large stage or arena in which the experience of manifestation arises. Although we experience ourselves being 'ourselves' in a world with 'others', when we look into ourselves for the one who is experiencing, the one who is sitting here now, the one who is having these thoughts, this 'one' can't be found as a permanent fixed entity. Yet somehow we always come up with an answer – 'I' am sitting here. 'I' am looking at you. 'I' am in Macclesfield. In some ways we are too intelligent for our own good. We've got some kind of spiel, some kind of story, some kind of endless narrative through which we weave a coherence which resists the hiatus, the interruption, the *hedewa*, of 'Weird!... What is this?... Weird!'

We don't want to feel the weirdness of life, in fact we find it so difficult that we become like tailors doing invisible mending – we're always sewing up the fragile tearing fabric of our existence, trying to bring in a coherence which isn't there. We fear that if we don't do the pulling together it will fall apart. However, the central teaching in the meditation lineages, certainly in the nyingmapa school, is that neither of these two extremes of incoherence and over-coherence is correct. Manifestation occurs ceaselessly, providing this world of form and order. Yet this manifestation is itself unborn, it has no inherent self-existence . It's like a theatre performance, like the reflection of the moon on

water, like a dream. Sitting here we look around and we see colours and shapes. Some people here know other people who are sitting here, so they can put a name onto the shapes that they see; then they collect together memories and some kind of expectation or intention. This is the way in which we build up complex representations of other people.

However, what we actually see is movement. When you look around the room you see somebody yawning, somebody stretching, somebody slouching. What is that? That is a shape and a movement. Somebody was sitting straight then they're slouching; somebody had their eyes open, now their eyes are closed. So we say '*somebody* is sitting there and has closed their eyes'. The notion of '*somebody*' is an imputation – *somebody* becomes a hook onto which you put the perception. We imagine that 'that is a person' 'that is a man' 'that is a woman' 'they are young' 'they are old', but all of these are concepts that arise in our mind. We are so used to relying on these habitual concepts that we take what we see to be something 'out there' rather than 'in here' and then we take the image that we see to be a true account of something existing in itself.

However, we know that when we go to see a film with friends and discuss it afterwards, it can often seem as if we have each seen a different film. We've seen a character in one way, maybe as a very frightened person yet they may have seen that character as very aggressive and cruel. This difference arises because of the kinds of associations that we have with the form depicted by that character. It is enormously important to realise that what we see is 'our drama' rather than a true reality.

OUR KARMIC VIEW OF THE WORLD

Although we can say that we're all sitting in this room together, are we all having the same experience? Some people here may be very used to buddhist ideals, others are not. Some people may be very familiar with what I'm saying while other people may be thinking 'this is a bit strange.'

So perhaps we can see that we are living in an interpreted world; we are using 'that which we carry with us' to make sense of what is going on. In traditional language 'that which we carry with us' is called karma, it's the fruit of previous actions. All of our actions arise out of a field of intention; they are not just the movements of the body. So each time we act with an intention that intention takes on a kind of energisation, it becomes potentiated. It will then lead us to a particular kind of connection with a future moment. For example, some people are very interested in motorcars and they read magazines about motoring. When they hear that a new model of a car is coming out they become excited, they may even want to travel hundreds of miles to a big hall to look at all the new

cars, and dream about buying one. For other people this is unbelievable and they just think ‘how completely boring, what a waste of a human existence to be interested in such a stupid thing.’

Other people may be interested in football, rugby, cricket, fishing, train spotting, or wine tasting, and the more attention they give to this interest the more connection they have with it. So, on an outer level, we see that giving attention to something is rather like pumping up a balloon. We blow the ‘inspiration’, the energy of our existence, into the object which is ‘out there.’ As we put our spirit into the object and it starts to glow and shine, it becomes fascinating for us. Then of course the more the object starts to shine, the more it feels like a good idea to put more energy into it and so its value gets built up. However as that object gets bigger, it starts to displace the space available for other objects, so the more we get into something the more our life narrows down. We can’t be into everything all the time and as soon as we choose, as soon as our life takes on a shape, we have to say goodbye to all the other shapes that our life could have potentially taken on.

Phenomenologically – in terms of the flow of experience – the object is a brief and evanescent appearance, but through our identification with it we invest it with an importance. Then we want to return to it again and again and through this repeated investment the object now carries some of the value of our life. For example, maybe you have a favourite pub which is taken over by new management who put in large screens for football matches. You’re sitting there having your pint and thinking ‘what is this? They have spoiled it! This place used to be...!’ Or you go to your favourite restaurant but the chef has changed and you’re thinking ‘This doesn’t taste right. Why am I coming here? They’ve changed the chef but they’ve kept the same price on the menu. This is outrageous!’ In this way the representation we hold in mind becomes a hook for taking value, which is our personal attribution – the energy of our mind – and locating this value outside, in the object. So by making the defensible space of our life infinite, by putting the identifications which constitute us ‘out there’, we become a hostage to fortune.

Attachment – the traditional term for the attribution of value and meaning – flows through the pathway of attention, so attention and attachment move together. If you believe in a football team then your happiness, and for some people it’s the happiness of the whole week, is now dependent on a bunch of strangers running up and down a football pitch. In this way you’ve given a lot of the value of your life to people over whom you have no power and no control. As there is essentially no separation between self and other the effect of this involvement is that if your team loses you will feel despondent!

It's not that we have something inside ourselves that we take out and measure, thinking, 'how much of myself will I give to this other person?' Our attachment flows as soon as our attention is focused. As soon as our attention is caught by the object there's a kind of lock-on. It's like a rubber sucker sticking onto something, and in that moment of adherence there is a kind of fusion. Through putting my energy into it, the object becomes more distinct and as it stands out more I experience it as becoming more real and separate from me. Yet at the same time, through my attention the object becomes part and parcel of me – we appear to belong together.

As soon as my fate, my luck, my happiness, is linked to objects that I can't control I'm bound to feel anxious, for anxiety is inherent in this way of existence. It's very difficult to be able to feel relaxed in a situation where 'how things are' is about to be interfered with by other people.

COMPASSION – ANXIETY CAUSED BY OTHERS SUFFERING

Anxiety is the feeling tone of dis-ease, of not being rested, of not being at peace with oneself and one's situation. It's a feeling that something is not quite right, that things don't quite fit. This happens to us directly through feeling persecuted but also because we have compassion. Part of com-compassion – of suffering with others – is that we feel a resonance with other people. Last night I came up on the train from London to Manchester. The train wasn't announced until the last moment and then there were hundreds of people running with their little trolleys behind them, banging into each other, rushing to get on. They are looking at the seats because it's not clear whether or not they are reserved, other people are trying to push past and as the train starts there are still people without a seat. The train's going from London to Manchester and some people will have to stand. Luckily I have my seat and I feel old enough not to have to stand and give my seat to other people. It's quite nice, I just rub my bald head, but I'm disturbed. My mind goes into thoughts of justice– how can they take all this money from people and leave them standing? Why are there not enough seats? So I'm disturbed about other peoples' situation although I'm not able to do anything for them – well I am, but I'm not willing to stand!

In this case my compassion is completely impractical and only disturbs me but it does illustrate how our minds are linked with other people and how the world gets to us. Underlying this compassion, this concern for the other, is a kind of anxiety – the thought that when I go back to London maybe I'll have to stand! It's a fear that, in as much as bad things happen to other people, they could happen to me. It would be easier if I could just think that bad things will happen to 'other people' and there is a separated 'me' to whom only good things will happen. If that's not the case then anyone's suffering

becomes a sort of 'crack in the mirror' which lets us see that there are fault lines, insecurities, and that our world can fall apart.

WISDOM OF EMPTINESS

In buddhism the key notions are wisdom and compassion. Compassion takes us out of ourselves into connection, into identification with other people, but if we make this movement from a state of egoism, from a state of attachment and longing, we're going to get agitated and our limited resources are likely to lead to a sort of burn-out. Also, whilst our heart or our intention to help others may be very big, our capacity or our actual resources in terms of our time and energy may be quite small. If from our limited position we make grand gestures that we can't fulfil then we betray other people. Then, despite the fact that our initial intention was good, we end up with a diminished sense of ourselves. This is why wisdom is very important.

Wisdom is essentially the recognition of the ground out of which all manifestation occurs. Everything which occurs – our bodies, our voices, the thoughts in our head, our feelings, our sensations, the carpet, the room, the electric light, the factory from which the electricity comes – everything has the nature of emptiness. That is to say, there is no true self-substance in any manifestation. All phenomena arise together in interdependence, in a matrix of contributing factors. So although looked at from one perspective each of these factors appears to be a separate thing, when you look from another perspective you see it as just a moment of co-emergence with many other factors.

Our meeting here together at this time on a Saturday morning is dependent on so many factors: the availability of this room, some people's thoughtfulness or connections in being able to find this room and book it. Also that people are willing to think that such an event might be a good idea and are willing to advertise it; that people are willing to do the arrangements and so on. Beyond that: an idea that buddhism is alive in the west in some way and that it's a good idea to come and think together and practise together, to try to get more understanding about our actual existence.

This situation is quite rare, not many people do this kind of thing. What is it that brings us, as probably rather a disparate bunch of people with very different lifestyles, hopes and ambitions, into the same place to engage in such an unlikely activity? This is not part of somebody's master plan, it's not foretold in some big book, this situation arises from moments and gestures of connection. We can have very different reactions to events, for example, for some people coming here will lead to a sense of connection and for others it may lead to more alienation. They may think, 'Well I don't know

what that was all about, but anyway, I don't think I'll do it again!' Perhaps it's when we start to see that we are participating in something which is greater than ourselves that our perspective changes.

Externally, the way our bodies are in relation to others, how we breathe, how we speak, all of this is influenced by other people. If somebody tells you something awful like, 'my brother was hit by a car' you say 'Oh God!' and your breathing immediately shifts. This impacts your metabolism and as the biochemical pattern in the body changes you have a chemical wash shifting your mood. So this piece of information, which maybe has nothing really to do with you, has affected the most intimate parts of your existence. Your heart rate has changed, chemical changes in your brain have occurred because, as part of the world you will always be impacted by what's going on.

We don't actually go towards the world from a pre-established position although our self-narrative may tell us that we do. Defining who we are does not cut us off from the impact of events. Moment by moment it's a matter of finding ourselves in the world with others. This experience precedes naming and categorisation; what we tell ourselves always comes after the experience. The sense that we make of an event always comes after the event itself. The actuality of our life is the experience: here we are... here we are... here we are... If we want to know *where* we are that will be a story which takes us away from where we actually are.

We need to have a good look at the nature of the one who is having the experience. I can give myself a commentary about my own experience which appears to be coherent and understandable so that it appears that 'I' am having the experience. However if I start to look further at who is the one who calls himself 'I', what is this 'I'? Who is this 'I' that says 'I'm sitting in a yellow chair', who is the one who is having that experience? The quick answer is, 'I am' but this is the 'ego' or 'self' making a false claim. This self is a quality of energy, a quality of manifestation which falsely purports to be its own individual ground. With the assertion, 'I just am what I am – I am me' our sense of self claims to be self-existing. This gives a feeling of entitlement for me just to be me, and any challenge to this assumption produces resistance: 'Have you got a problem with that? That's just me. What's wrong with me being me?'

The ego takes on a facticity or givenness which says, 'This is not up for discussion!' It says that the sense of certainty of self-existence cannot be unpacked, it cannot be deconstructed, it cannot be examined, it is an ultimate! This is the real quality of ignorance –where something which is transient and composite, which arises in interaction with others, something which is essentially a field factor (in that it's a phenomenon arising in the interpersonal energetic field) ascribes to itself an autonomy

which it doesn't possess. Then in order to protect the illusion of the autonomy and create a sense of self-definition and self-existence, it takes on a hegemonic gesture towards the other. With this gesture of appropriation and incorporation I take into, towards and for myself, things with actually belong out there. For example the relationship I have with the watch I'm wearing is that I purchased it, so it is a thing that I have, but if I put value into it then the watch is no longer just a utilitarian thing. As 'my' watch it is also carrying a symbolic value for me and as I become used to this valuation I feel entitled to have a particular relationship with the watch.

As we start to look at our own minds it's important to see how we create expectations which generate anxiety. With that, to see that our anxieties and our feelings of hope and fear come about because we start from a false assumption about who we are and about how the world is. In order to resolve anxiety we have to examine the root of our own identity – what is the mind? What is the basis of my own self-definition? Then to take that examination out further and see, 'what is the nature of the world as it presents itself to us?' We can then start to see the patterns whereby subject and object, having become real and separate in our experience, become sticky and start to lock onto each other, creating our own particular patterns of hopes and fears.

Although we can see that someone else can carry out an activity and it doesn't cause them any trouble when we think of doing the same we think, 'that's impossible. I couldn't do that.' Although I can see that in itself it's not a very difficult thing to do, nevertheless I feel that, 'I can't do it.' This delineation of the self is a closing down of potential and it is one of the fundamental functions of anxiety. Anxiety tells us that certain things are off limits, that you will not have access to them, so it creates an encapsulation of the subject and of the object. This foreclosure, this closing down, occurs before the moment of experience of our access to the infinite realm of being – a realm in which many things are possible.

As we get older we can look back and think how many things we've missed out on because we were too shy. How many doors could have opened to us? How many interesting things could we have done but didn't? That's very tragic because life is the movement of time, and these doors will not open for us again. What we didn't do yesterday we will never be able to do. Moment by moment the world is opening, things are there, they're bright and shiny. We could make a gesture towards another and show some friendship or interest but maybe out of our shyness and fear we don't do that.

SEPARATING MIND FROM ITS CONTENTS

In buddhism the many different methods of meditation all have a similar intention – to help us separate the mind itself from the contents of the mind. Usually the ego becomes identified with the mind and the mind is usually identified with its contents. So it's as if the ego is the experiencer and has qualities like, 'I am intelligent' or 'I am stupid' 'I can understand this' or 'I can't understand this'. Meditation is designed to put into question in various ways this notion that 'I, as this or that, am the central point of experience'.

Also we find ourselves caught up in relating to the world through habitual patterns of relationship which seem to be given and absolutely real. So we need to insert a wedge between ourselves and these habitual behaviours. We do this by taking refuge in the Buddha, the teachings, and the people who sincerely follow these teachings. We hold in mind the idea that there is a Buddha, that the Buddha has come into existence in the world, and that the Buddha has had experiences which are not unique to him. It's not that the Buddha had a buddha's experience because he is a buddha, it's rather that he had the experience of enlightenment because he attended to his experience in a particular way. The difference between awakened people and unawakened people is the quality of attention that they bring to the flow of their own experience. This is the basis for understanding that we all have buddha-nature, that we all have the potential for awakening.

As we start to do meditation we see that weird stuff comes into our mind, all sorts of funny ideas are going on that we're not very conscious of. When we sit and try to calm ourselves we're suddenly aware that our mind is very disturbed – we have hateful thoughts, selfish thoughts, crazy daydreams that go nowhere. Like the little stream trickling below the surface of the grass in a summertime water meadow there is an on-going continuum of ideas and relationships. This continuum is fundamentally illusory yet it is the moving matrix within which we experience ourselves and the world. It is similar to the Freudian notion of the unconscious. In Sanskrit it's called *santana* and in Tibetan it's called *rang gyud*– *gyud* means continuity and *rang gyud* means the continuity of who I take myself to be.

Within this we can then see that the narrative, the story about who I am, is only partly conscious and this is why we often find ourselves reacting in a way that is unexpected for us. We might have decided, 'I'm not going to do that' and then suddenly we do it! Maybe we're not so sure why we feel irritated by something or why we did something. What happens is that as we fuse with our own experience we are blown hither and thither by whatever is arising in our mind.

Where does all this stuff, the contents of our mind, come from? In the buddhist way of thinking our mind, or the stream of our existence, is like a river after a big storm. It is full of things like trees, dead animals, leaves and mud... all sorts of stuff is being swept along so if you look into the river at different points you will see different contents. Our mind is unpredictable and unreliable in the same way because it's not a thing which we have and we can make no guarantees regarding its contents. Rather it's that ordinarily we come into consciousness out of the content which is already manifesting in our mind.

Thus some people who are suffering from depression wake up in the morning in a state of fear or hopelessness. People who have more anxiety can wake up in the morning feeling ill at ease or with a kind of nameless dread; their muscles might be very tense because they've been having anxious dreams in the night. That experience prefigures their movement into the world – they awake in this particular state and it is from this state that they approach the world.

When this is very intense we start to recognise what's going on, but a lot of the time it's present but unrecognised. Many people are not aware that they are anxious, their parents were probably anxious and so anxiety feels normal for them. Some people are a bit manic and often their parents have been a bit over the top. So they've grown up in a family where people shout or maybe throw things; for them that's normal behaviour. Whereas in someone else's house everything is so choreographed and pre-determined that it would be impossible to shout, or even to raise your voice.

DOUBLE IGNORANCE!

Assumptions exist in two modes. One mode consists of the energetic patterns embodied in our muscle tension, in how we hold our body and how we breathe, the other mode is that of thoughts, feelings and sensations. These assumptions are exhibited in our freedom or lack of freedom to make gestures towards the world and whether or not we can allow ourselves to be impacted by what other people do. All of this is part of the continuum of our being and as long as we don't attend to it, whilst we just allow it to be the case, taking it to be something 'given', then we have ignorance operating in two modes. There is the ignorance of imagining that we're in control of our lives and simultaneously the ignorance embedded in all the factors which are actually influencing the decisions that we make.

The key point for freedom from this apparently serious situation is to realise that this energy is manifesting from a state of openness. To use the traditional example of a mirror, each time you look in the mirror you see something. It's the nature of a mirror to reflect something, to show what is in

front of it, so mirrors always have something in them. This capacity is grounded in the fact that, unlike a picture, the mirror itself has no content. The purpose of all meditation and all purification is to open to the mystery of the simultaneous separation and integration of the content and the ground of the content.

Clearly, each of us manifests in many different ways, so what is this plurality of selves that we are? How can I be me when I am so many things? We subsume this on-going stream of very diverse experience under the notion that 'This is me, this is how I exist'. But how can one thing be so many things? It is very strange! Well, the many 'things' that we are don't actually endure for long. We might say, 'I'm happy' but then I get sad, 'I'm hungry' but then we eat and the hunger goes away. We might say, 'I'm young' and then if we stay alive for long enough we get old; or, 'I'm lazy' but then necessity demands and we become quite busy. Each definition that we use to describe ourselves is transient; there are no permanent features to our self-identity. Moment by moment, who we are is changing, yet in each of these moments, we *are* that thing – when we're happy, we're happy, when we're sad, we're sad.

Part of our problem is that we often find it difficult to be fully present just in the moment, staying in the manifesting and expansive experience of a subjectivity that is inseparable from the world. We don't allow ourselves to be fully in what is going on because we are looking out towards other people and wondering what they think of what is happening. We expect to be judged so we are both subject and object at the same time – 'I feel like this but what will you think of me when I feel like this? Thinking, 'What will you think of me?' is my experience of being an object, of feeling that I am 'somebody' you can think about. This un-integrated juxtaposing of and tension between self as subject and self as object, creates a great deal of our confusion. The more we recognise that each of the states that arise for us is impermanent the more we realise that we don't need to be so frightened of them for no transient state can define our being.

For example, perhaps you find yourself being quite angry. If you just stay present with the anger, the anger will pass. The danger comes if you cook up an identity and start to think, 'I am an angry person'. By thinking – 'I have been hard done by, people have cheated me or betrayed me so I am entitled to be angry.' 'They don't understand so I'm going to make them understand' – we can create an identity for ourselves. This compounded identity is made by glueing or sticking together momentary experiences so that they appear to be more coherent and more real than they actually are. The composite whole appears greater than the sum of the parts.

Most of us have probably got het up about something we feel strongly about and acted unthinkingly. You want to give someone a bit of your mind and usually the bit you want to give them is a rather sharp and bitter bit. You want to hack right into them and say, 'Listen! You hear what I'm saying!' and as you do this you can feel yourself heating up and closing down at the same time. In that moment we have lost the sense of how we interact with the other. We have forgotten that the other is a person and that if we want to be in connection with them we will have to modulate how we are. As manifestations of wisdom and compassion, truth and relatedness have to be together.

If somebody gets too much into truth and wants to tell other people the truth, it will destroy relatedness. However, if you go to the other extreme and go too much into relationship, you always bite your tongue and you can never tell the truth. Finding the balance between these two can be very difficult but it is the on-going work of life. It can be seen as the balancing of wisdom and compassion because wisdom needs to understand how things are but compassion has to cook the truth of how things are in ways that other people will find palatable. There's no point in shouting at people and trying to blame them in order to get them to do something. We have to speak sweetly and gently because the other is not the enemy – other people are ourselves, everyone we meet is our world. We're sitting here with a group of other people who constitute, certainly for this moment, our direct world. We are not strangers to each other, your moods affect me and we affect each other, we are connected. So our gestures, how we move towards the other, are enormously important because they influence how the other receives and responds to us.

ACTIONS HAVE CONSEQUENCES

Generally speaking, the more intense an emotion the more difficult it is to stay with it in a state of relaxed, open awareness. This is why the beginning teachings in buddhism are all about morality, about not becoming too excited or too crazy or too drunk, not becoming out of control, not doing bad things, not lying, not cheating. The more extreme your behaviour the greater the impact it will have on the environment, and although you may feel a kind of magnificent freedom in having a go at someone else, when in turn they retaliate or just walk away, you are likely to feel diminished. Following that moment of orgiastic expression which feels so wonderful and liberating there is the next moment, in which you have to deal with the consequences!

Buddhism points to the power of karma and suggests that we realise that actions have consequences and try to think about the consequences before they arise. Karma is predicated on the idea of many different lives and that the lives which we have led in the past have an influence on how we are in this life. Also that what we do in this life will influence the future – the consequences of our past and

present actions will manifest in an unpredictable way. Whilst I think there is no secure way of proving the truth of karma, in the sense that you can't investigate it in an objective scientific way, the idea that ethics is at the basis of existence does make a lot of sense.

In terms of ecology we can see that an activity which was carried out thirty or forty years ago and which was not thought to have long term consequences, is later found to have consequences, unpredicted and unintended. People are shocked and surprised to find that the impact of the pollution that we've been pumping into the environment, and which seemed manageable at the time, no longer seems to be so. We used to think that you could just dump rubbish all over the place with no repercussions, thinking that if we performed an activity and there were no bad consequence at the time, then that was the end of it. Yet actions always have consequences. Not understanding that there is a time delay in their manifestation has been at the root of a lot of ecological disasters.

If we believe that we can get away with things and that there is no real consequence to our actions, then we have to believe that the universe is simply a random bunch of accidents and that there is nothing ethical woven into the structure of existence. Most religions however say that ethics is central to existence. Theistic religions say that God will, in some way, act as the judge and that he will evaluate you and that you will be rewarded accordingly. With this view the reward or the punishment will be given by someone else according to certain criteria that they hold.

The buddhist view of karma indicates that we manifest patterns of energy which flow through death and take on new forms in future lives. So we become reborn in some other place, at some other time – there are many different possibilities. Some of the seeds, some of the attitudes and positions we've taken up, will manifest in this new form. Nobody is punishing us, there is no external punishment, it is simply that patterns insist. If somebody has strong, negative energy moving out towards others then sooner or later something strong and negative will be experienced as coming back towards that person in a kind of boomerang effect. This is because, when we live in duality, subject and object always arise together. So either subject is going toward object, or object is coming toward subject – there are not so many moves available in that scenario!

It is very common for human beings to act badly; part of our human condition is that we can turn other human beings into nothing. All over the world individuals and ethnic groups and nation states declare things like, 'I don't like you. I believe there's something wrong with you and so I am going to kill you.' Then once the killing has all been done, 'That was a very good thing. I'm glad. The world is better off without you'. White settlers were satisfied once they had hunted down and killed the

last of the indigenous Tasmanians since, 'What were they anyway? They were not even really human.' That is the way people can talk, turning other human beings into dust.

From a buddhist point of view this attitude has a real consequence because if I'm willing to say, 'your existence means nothing' then a world picture is set up in which existences can mean nothing. Then, as a consequence of being connected with that view, I'm going to encounter a situation where somebody takes *my* existence to mean nothing. This happens in abattoirs throughout Britain where sheep and cows and goats come in and get their heads cut off. Chickens, millions every day, chop! chop! chop! Ducks – chop! chop! chop! Pheasants – Bang! Bang! Bang! Killing is very popular. Fishermen with hooks and nets trap the riches of the sea. Your death is my dinner!

From the traditional buddhist point of view, animals are born into an over-determined or instinctual state because they are dominated by stupidity. A particular issue for human beings is that as we have more choices. Perhaps we can control the powerful impulses to which we, like animals, are subject. For me, the basic principle in thinking of karma is to orient my attention out of my immediate moment of activity, to keep me in relation both to others and to the consequences of my actions and to help me see that I cannot live my life just on my terms.

To be alive is to impact others, so the impact of my action on others has to be held in mind at the same time as my desire to have that action. When both are held together they can generate and sustain a self-rectifying balance. When we forget others, when we turn them into nothing, the ego has taken on a kind of omnipotent position and feels free to do whatever it wants. This ignoring of dependent co-origination causes grief for others now, and grief for oneself later.

WISDOM COUNTERBALANCES ANXIETY

However if you grasp the view of karma too strongly you can frighten yourself, 'Oh my God, everything I do has such enormous consequences that I'll have to spend the rest of my life walking on eggshells!' and you're likely to become quite burdened and a bit paranoid. The counterbalance to this anxiety is wisdom, where life is seen as being like a dream in which activity occurs yet without any inherent self-substance. Although we do need to be very precise and careful in what we do, there is no inner substance to anything; there is no final moment and new possibilities will manifest in which new beginning can occur.

Our bodies have no inherent fixed self-substance – each 'part' of the body is in communication with other parts. So the brain is in connection with the stomach and the back, the muscles, the nervous system, the fluid in the spinal cord. The body is nothing but a huge communicative system which is

also communicating with the environment. You can't find a solid separate thing in it, it keeps regenerating and moving and changing.

I can say, 'this is my body' because I'm familiar with my body and it seems to be a kind of reliable basis for my identity. However, because we actually know that the body manifests as and from processes of change, there is a double move –there is a continuity of patterns but the continuity of the pattern is a dynamic flow of new moments. So it's not that there is a stable thing which is enduring through time, but rather that you have a flow of replicated patterns which, falsely taken, can be appropriated to show the existence of something real – 'I am me' or 'this is a cup.'

Both modern physics and ancient buddhist analysis show that show that a cup exists as a movement of energy. The fact that a cup is 'processing' doesn't mean that it doesn't have a shape and a form which reiterates through time. Part of the process of unfolding of the 'cup-ness' of the cup is the continuity of the pattern of the internal molecular structure that keeps it in shape but another part of the maintenance of the 'cup-ness' of the cup depends on the external factors. If I drop the cup it will break and then it won't be a cup any more, unless we glue it together. Because the simplicity and integrity of the cup is held in place by the care of the people in the environment you cannot separate the cup from the environment in which it operates.

I think this is really important. Our gaze seems to show us entities and we tend to see objects as self-enclosed, as being 'the thing itself', but actually this 'thing' is existing in a field of relationships with many other 'things. This is the basic premise of the idea of dependent co-origination: because each phenomenon manifests in a field of relationship with all other phenomena, you cannot separate things out – when we see the cup, we see it in context, we see it in the world. Entities are a construct, a projection, an interpretation – they are not 'out there', existing in themselves.

Am I self-existent?

When we enter into our habitual individualised subject and object splitting we experience the sense that we stand apart from the environment. We feel that, from this position of apartness, we go towards the environment and then we step back from the environment. That's particularly the case at night time when you lie in your bed and you close your eyes and you go off, and then you come back and in the morning and think, 'Oh, I'm me again!'

So where did we go? We may have the idea on waking of a 'return to myself', that I am the same person who lay down to sleep last night. Of course if you've had a good night's sleep, you feel less tired in the morning than you did at night so you're not quite the same person. Although you cleaned

your teeth at night you have to clean them again in the morning. Why? Did you eat anything while you were sleeping? No, but you still need to clean your teeth because all sorts of bacterial changes have been going on in the mouth. Maybe you had a pee before you went to sleep but in the morning you have to get up and have another pee. Why? Did you drink anything while you were sleeping? Maybe not, but the body has been moving. What we have is the continuity of processes and these processes are always connected with the environment.

This connectivity with the environment involves constant interchange. For example, the body has to both take forms of energy in from the environment, and put forms of energy out into the environment. For example, if we don't drink enough we start to get rather faded and if the fluid intake is severely limited the body starts to die off. The body also starts to get sick if you can't release the liquid from your body – if you have a bladder infection and can't urinate you would be in some pain and have to be catheterised. Not much fun but that's the reality! We also have to breathe air in and out. How long can you hold your breath? One minute? Two minutes? If you hold your breath for a long time most people start to get dizzy. Some yogis can learn to hold their breath for maybe an hour, but not for days. Likewise, if you wrap someone's body in cling-film they will die because the skin needs to have a relationship with the world around it.

Yet despite knowing all this, we still act as if 'I am a self existing person; I can be true to myself and I'm going to make decisions about my life.' It's because we have held this belief in the illusion of a separate individual existence for such a very long time that we need a lot of analytic reflection and meditation to keep putting the seeming truth of this assumption into question. As long as we function as if we were in this bubble of 'self' we are likely to make decisions which are against the interests of others and against the interests of ourselves.

How can I know my own true interests? Well, I have to find out who I am. If I assume my own true interest is to get a good job, that assumption may not be correct. Whilst you will certainly have problems if you don't earn enough money to feed and clothe yourself, having a job that gives you social identity or social respect is not necessarily going to secure your identity. A good job means that you earn enough money to pay for a therapist like me! I see many people in their thirties who've made a lot of money and yet they still don't know who they are and who are very unhappy.

When we're young we get introduced to many beliefs such as 'As long as you're clean and tidy that's all that matters' but of course that is not the whole matter. 'As long as you get a secure job with a pension that's all that matters' but nowadays who's going to get a secure job with a pension?

Because the world keeps changing these stories we're told about how we should live and what we should do end up being untrue. This is not because the people telling us want to cheat us but because, when we construe the world from the point of view of individual identity, of a position fixed in time and place, we're fabricating stories, creating reassuring fantasies. These beliefs do not indicate that we truly know what is best.

Many people think buying a house is a good idea because house prices will go up but who can know whether house prices will continue to go up. If you look at graphs over the last hundred years you get enormous movements in house prices. For a short period of time they seem to be doing well but, when you look at the statistical analyses, equities do better than house prices in the long run. However, in a particular mood, people want to sell all their equities and buy a house. If they try to sell their house later on at a time when the market's going down it will be very difficult – who's going to want to buy it?

We're caught up in a fantasy that this or that will make us safe and secure. We have to put into question, 'Who is the one who needs to be made safe?' If we don't know who we are we will keep buying things we don't need. If we don't know who we really are, how shall we know how we live? Usually we start with a false proposition: my school or my parents or the newspaper or moneybox on the radio has told me this, therefore I need to do that. But do we? Why do we need to do these things? All of these things are generalised dogmatic formulations for how to be a happy person. But who is this person? If we don't know ourselves then it's very difficult to make the right decision.

HOW TO FIND OUT WHO YOU ARE

So, how do we come to know ourselves? Well, the first thing is to simplify the field, to limit the variables in our lives, so that we're not in states of chaos and turbulence all the time. If too much is going on, we're going to be overwhelmed and if we are overwhelmed, it's very difficult to look clearly. It's very difficult to be calm and collected in a war zone so the first thing is just to try to simplify our lives and not be so busy.

Once we have some space within which to reflect, we can examine our actual capacity. Very often we don't know what our true capacity is because we have beliefs inside us which act as drivers. So we think, 'I must work hard' or 'I must get this finished' or, 'If I don't do this, it's not going to be good' or, 'I'll lose promotion at work' and each of these thoughts causes little fuses inside us to blow. We react to this by pressing the reset button of duty, obligation, fearful striving. This makes us go

further than we can and so we lose touch with ourselves. Many people nowadays do too much work and are very stressed.

Many of us were encouraged to rise above difficult situations, to carry on and find some new way of agreeing to personal martyrdom. Actually this is outrageous, this is a violence. Yet if we stop and look and see what we are doing to ourselves through denying the actual condition of our situation, we are likely to feel helpless and overwhelmed. So it seems better to soldier on. If you're too engaged or too cut off it is difficult to meditate because meditation involves looking at how you actually are, rather than relying on concepts. We are disturbed, conflicted, divided against ourselves, and we need to open to find a deeper clarity that can tolerate the turbulence without getting lost in it. What is at stake is getting to know who you are and what it means to have an embodied existence. The only way we can do that is by starting to really examine our unfolding experience.

The basic method of meditation is very simple and straightforward. You can do it for the rest of your life and I think it will give some benefit. It is a practice of relaxing body, voice and mind. We rest our gaze in the space in front of us. The eyes are open but we're not looking at a distant wall, we're letting our gaze rest in space. As we relax our objectifying focus we integrate with the openness of awareness; we are simply present with whatever is occurring. Sometimes what manifests feels like the subject, like 'me', and sometimes it feels like the object, like 'stuff'. Either way, it is the flow of our experience and we open to it, without judgement or selectivity. To support this, we start by making the sound 'A' three times and release the tension which is in our body, voice and mind into our basic natural spaciousness. Within this presence of openness, thoughts will arise, feelings will arise and perhaps the sounds of something going on outside. Just allow whatever comes to come. Don't correct your experience. Don't try to improve it. Just be with whatever's there. If the mind wanders, just be aware of it and stay present with whatever is occurring. ,

In this kind of practice, there is no particular object of meditation. You're not trying to achieve anything. You're not focusing on anything specific. The object of meditation is whatever arises in the mind so no experience is better than any other. Through this we can relax into a tolerance of the complexity of existence which will open up a lot of freedom to be in the world without feeling persecuted and without persecuting others.

This simple practice has many different layers to it. At first, it's useful to do this for short periods of time, maybe ten minutes or so and gradually, as you get used to it, you can extend the duration. It's also a good practice to do just before you fall asleep. It provides a space in which we can see that

who we think we are an ever-changing process. We can see the birth and death of what we take to be self, happening moment by moment and yet there is still this state of lucidity, this openness, spaciousness, a presence which is not the presence of anything that can be grasped or objectified. Of course, a lot of the time this is hidden from us because we collapse into identification with and attachment to, the thoughts and feelings that arise. We follow them because we think they're important but the more we can stay with them without merging or rejecting and observe them, we start to see that these forms, although fascinating, are impermanent and therefore not our true identity.

Also we start to see that there will be no end to this kind of experience so it's like watching a soap opera. Some soap operas have been going on for a very long time and some people have followed them pretty well all the way through. These kinds of story have no real substance to them, they are artificial constructs, and yet they can be your life. They speak to people's existence – of aspects of family, of relationships, of sadnesses, of births and deaths and so on. In the same way our own minds are also playing a kind of soap opera with continuing themes and continuing characters that populate our own existence. It's a fascinating never-ending story, playing in the television of our mind. There's nothing inherently wrong with watching a soap opera, it can be quite pleasant, and there's nothing wrong with watching the soap opera of our mind but we do have to realise that it is a soap opera – it's not solid, it's not real! By falling into the story we tend to lose the immediacy of the presence of awareness. We don't have to stop the story, just relax and integrate with the presence that reveals it

LETTING AN ATTACHMENT DEFINE US

The conditions for entering into states of anxiety, depression, obsessional compulsive disorder, hyperactivity and all the many diagnostic frames that people apply nowadays are always the same. They occur through taking the content of the mind to be the mind itself. So instead of thinking, 'this is happening and it's not true' the person becomes overwhelmed by what is happening to them, as if it's the only game in town. When people have automatic negative thoughts, these thoughts don't arrive labelled as, 'here's your daily thought' they arrive as, 'this is who you are!' These thoughts – 'I'm useless' 'I'm stupid' – don't come from the outside in through a letter box, rather they seem to come right up through the core of our being and to define who we are in a very real and powerful way, and this is how attachment functions. Whilst there may be some truth in your thought, 'I'm a very selfish person' and something to learn from that, as a definition what is it going to stick to? A human being cannot be defined by a thought.

An attachment is formed where something is added onto something else. This watch has a strap which is designed to be put around the wrist and fastened. It is designed to form a secure attachment to *something*, there's no point in putting the strap around thin air and closing it on itself. Similarly an attachment may be attached to an e-mail, but can the mind have attachments added onto it? Attachments stick to 'me' but who am I? When we see that the 'I' is empty then there is nothing for an attachment to stick to, so the attachment, which is just a thought, falls off.

With this understanding, if the thought 'I am stupid' arises, then instead of going into despair you just think, 'Oh, this thought is arising in my mind.' The kind of mindfulness practice now being brought more into psychology is working on exactly that process – to try to decontaminate or take away the sticky edge of the thought that causes it to cohere to the self. However the stickiness of the thought and the stickiness of consciousness are born together so this approach is lacking a critique of the nature of the self to which the thought adheres. Consciousness always takes an object, you can't be conscious in an intransitive sense, you're always conscious of something; intentionality always has an object that it intends towards.

When we start to look at our mind, we see how we get caught up thoughts. On an outer level, as I was suggesting earlier, you can try to simplify your mind so that there is less turbulence. This will allow you to see the thought coming and, since forewarned is forearmed, you can take precautions to avoid getting so enmeshed in it. However this approach is rather like picking the leaves off a nettle so that it won't sting you. These 'attachments' are only dangerous when they have something to attach to; if there is nothing for them to attach to they cause no concern. For example, every year I get four or five letters from the Television Licensing Authority written in red ink reminding me that I need to get a television license and warning me of a very serious fine. If I had a television then these could be very sticky but as I don't have a television I have no basis for the attachment of this 'sticky thing'. So this terrible threat has nothing to do with me and I can ignore these letters.

WE AFFECT EACH OTHER

An ego that says, 'I want to be loved', 'I want people to like me', 'I want to be safe', 'I want to be happy' has a very sticky surface. It's as though it's smeared in marmalade so many things will stick to it. If, for example, people don't like me and I want to be liked then I'm going to be disturbed. I might be thinking, 'Oh God, I don't know what to do at work. I've got this colleague and they don't agree with whatever I do', 'Oh, I hate this, I feel so trapped' and so on. On the level of ego consciousness this is understandable because, through dependent co-origination, subject and object arise together.

So if an object in the field is unpleasant then a feeling of unpleasantness will inevitably arise for consciousness.

Recently a patient and I were talking. As it was quite cold I had closed the window in the room we were sitting in. Something was wrong but I couldn't work out what it was and then she said, 'Oh, I haven't washed since Christmas' then I realised that there was rather a strong smell coming from this person. This doesn't mean that this is a personal problem inherent in her, she hasn't washed for reasons which I can understand, but the fact that she doesn't wash communicates itself very directly to other people. With a physical smell this interpenetration, the nature of our connection, can easily be seen. People's minds also smell – if we are depressed or anxious, our depression or anxiety will leak out and impact other people. So our experience is not personal and private, it is always communicated. The moods that we bring into the world always are moods shared with others, and our mutual reactivity starts to pulse .

REBALANCE YOUR PORTFOLIO!

Our own true nature is a pure awareness which has no content. This awareness is not an object, it is a our open fresh presence. This is the mind's noetic nature, its capacity to know and to reveal. The function of meditation is to give us a direct experience of this awareness. When we taste it directly we see that our usual sense of identity, our identification of 'I, me, myself' is one of the phenomena which arises in that awareness. Everyone has egoic-consciousness, it doesn't vanish if you recognise awareness because it is an aspect of our being in the world. However, to give an example in banking terms, we have an inadequately balanced portfolio. We are over-invested in consciousness and objects and we need to reinvest part of our portfolio into awareness. The market for objects and consciousness is very unreliable, like banana futures the weather can shift their value very quickly. We need something more stable – government bonds!

Awareness is the best government bond because it is underwritten by the Buddha. If you can get hold of some of these bonds they'll never let you down. You can always cash them in and they always have the same value but if you put your investment into consciousness, because states of mind fluctuate a lot, the value of your investment can go down as well as up. If we rebalance the mind you won't need to worry so much about correcting your experience because then all our identity is not at stake in one fragile area of investment. If we are over identified with consciousness and its movements in the world, we will necessarily feel anxious. Anxiety is not a personal problem; it is a structural quality of the misapprehension of the nature of existence. So it's not that there's something wrong with us, it's that our attention and our sense of self has been tilted in one direction

so that we're off balance. Because we're out of kilter, when we look at the world we don't see it clearly. The purpose of the meditation is to rebalance ourselves.

When we practice we sit in a relaxed way with our gaze slightly raised. Very often in meditation the gaze is down but here it's slightly up, the eyes are open, resting in the space in front of us and we make the sound 'A' three times. 'A' represents emptiness or the insubstantiality of all things. As we say 'A' we release all the tensions of our body and our voice and our mind and relax into the sense of spaciousness. Just as with the mirror in which we see many different reflections which are there but insubstantial, when we relax into this state we're here in this room but this room is revealed to us more as a flow of experience. As we relax we are more able to experience the shifts and changes in our experience, without bias or editing.

As long as we're attached to a dualistic subject-object interpretation, there appears to be fixed entities with which we have an on-going clear relationship. The more we relax and respond and actually experience the dynamic display of the world the less sense there is of being cramped and defined. After we say the three 'A's we simply relax and open to whatever occurs – this could be thoughts, sensations, feelings, a perception of colours, or a noise outside. Instead of following what arises and try to develop a relationship with it by tracking it, we give it space to arise, reveal itself, and then pass away. We are relaxing our identification with a consciousness which takes an object and opening to a presence which offers hospitality to whatever is arising.

We have looked a little at the underlying structure of anxiety and at some of the common forms that anxiety takes. It might be useful for us to think a little more precisely of our own anxieties – what are the sorts of things that we worry about? What are the things that can frighten us? So, it might be useful for a few minutes to talk to someone beside you about the sorts of things that you worry and get anxious about. Before you do that you could also have a sense of whether that feels something very intimate to do with someone you don't know. Is anxiety something a little bit shameful? Is it showing something about you that you might prefer other people not to know?

It's probable that most people feel anxieties and yet it may be something that we don't often want to talk about unless it's presenting in a crisis and we feel overwhelmed. However, maybe it is an on-going part of our inner make-up, in which case noticing where you tighten up, where you lose confidence, where you collapse into yourself is important as part of the practice of becoming aware of the lived experience of being ourselves. This involves trying to put the critic out of the way and releasing our ideal image of what we feel we have to be in order to be acceptable to other people.

Question: What is the difference between worry and anxiety?

James: Worry could be seen as a very inefficient kind of thinking. When we're worrying about something we spend a lot of time turning things over again and again with the sense that we're doing something quite productive. We imagine this is going to lead somewhere but actually the very structure of worry means that it always turns back on itself. Although you go round and round the problem in different ways worry always returns you to the place you started from – back to, 'What shall I do? What shall I do?' – and off you go again.

If we want to solve a problem first of all we have to define it. Once you have a clear definition of what the problem is you can start to mobilise problem-solving thinking. Problem-solving thinking and worry are very different. Problem-solving thinking breaks any issue down into its constituent parts and then looks for specific, precise and achievable solutions to them. However when we worry we are investing more and more energy into something which persecutes us. Worry is the main sustaining force in non-biological depression as we run hopeless and de-energising patterns of thinking again and again. We think that we're actively choosing to do the thinking, but actually worry is something very sticky and it pulls you in, so actually the worry has caught us.

If you have children and you worry about them this doesn't help them. It means that your mind is so preoccupied with all sorts of thoughts and feelings that when you see them you can't really get through to them and they also can't get through to you. Worrying tends to carry quite a lot of judgement with it, there's a sense that something has happened which shouldn't have happened or that we should have done something which we didn't do. So there's something harsh and persecutory in most kinds of worry.

I would understand anxiety as a state of not being at home in oneself and in the world. Worry feeds into this as a method by which we further displace ourselves from ourselves. We locate ourselves in a world of thoughts which hovers above actual embodied existence. Worry and anxiety are activities; they are something that we feel, but also something that we do. They generate the sense that something should be done and they encourage arousal. Whereas in any actual situation, what you can do is usually fairly limited and sometimes it's just a case of hanging in there with something which is beyond solution.

For example, if you're not happy in your job you either leave or stay and if you stay either you can make it better or you can't. If you have to stay even though you can't make it better you usually know why you're doing it – you need the money! So if the situation seems immutable you can just

say, 'Well that's the deal. I don't like it, it doesn't taste very good but I have to eat it' – like castor oil! So in that way we can think, 'I know why I'm doing it. If I know why I am doing it, why do I need to think about it? There's nothing to think about.'

If you go to the doctor and he says, 'Oh, I'm afraid you need to go to the hospital and have some more tests' that's not very nice. If an appointment is made for two weeks time, what are you going to do in the meantime? Worry may not be the best way to pass the time. Why not have a little champagne and do something nice? When you go to the hospital, if they say, 'This is terrible' it would have been better to have enjoyed yourself first. Worry will not improve anything. Worry is a really, really good way to waste this precious human life. Just the process of maintaining it eats up energy; also it feeds further undermining qualities such as fear and helplessness into the texture of our being. One of the benefits of meditation is that you start to see how much time you spend involved in thoughts that go nowhere.

WORRY EATS OUR LIVES

If you go for a drive in the country, you might see nice little paths leading off the main road and think, 'Oh, I'd like to come back in the summer and walk up that path and that path and that path'. Yet you probably never will because you already have plenty of places to go to. If we have a sense of purpose and direction in our life, whether that's on a day to day level where we want to live in an ethical way and help other people, or perhaps on a more profound level where we want to try to gain enlightenment and work forever for the sake of all beings, that intentionality gives us a direction, it gives us a big road to drive on. Heading off from that road will be many other little paths, all of which have some charm and interest about them but if we're going on the big road we've got no time for these small paths.

Once you start worrying, five minutes goes by, half an hour goes by, an hour goes by – that's an hour of your life, an hour that you could have done something much better with. You could at least have had a sleep and woken up rested or you could have read a nice book or done a bit of gardening or you could have baked something for someone else. You could have phoned somebody who you know is troubled, you could have talked to a stranger, there are many things you could do with your time,

To devote it to worrying is like throwing bits of your life away, it's equivalent to cutting bits off the ends of your fingers. Our life is short, death is certainly going to come, so between now and our death what are we going to do? Are we going to spend it in worrying? Many of us have spent a lot of

time worrying about things... 'perhaps' 'maybe' 'if only'...hopes and fears moving together, but when you look back what have you ever gained from this? Ruminant animals chew the cud, round and round in their mouths then take it into their stomach and bring it back up again. Worrying is a kind of cognitive rumination, turning things over and over again. Our worries are things that we never quite swallow and let pass through. We keep them alive long past their 'sell-by' date.

It's important to recognise when we are worrying because we need to interrupt its tendency to increase anxiety and decrease our ability to cope. Anxiety feeds worry because it diminishes our capacity for rational analysis of our actual situation. We're more likely to be overwhelmed by negative emotions and our ability to think our way through a situation is diminished. An anxiety response impacts our breathing, making it shallow and rapid which mobilises our sympathetic nervous system so that we are not at ease with ourselves. In that state, with the adrenaline and other hormones rushing in our bodies, we just cannot think straight. If you cannot think straight you're much more liable to be caught up in worry, that's how these two feed into each other. The more we think about things in an ungrounded way, the more we imagine them going wrong in a spectacular catastrophic way.

Once you have a global sense of doom and dread, it's not unreasonable to feel anxious but there's nowhere to run to because this is samsara, the whole house is on fire. Not only is the house on fire, the street's on fire, the town's on fire, every where's on fire. So where are you going to go? 'Oh, winters in Britain are terrible. Let's go to Thailand for a holiday.' Then the tsunami comes!

That's what happens, isn't it? People always imagine that there's something better but very often the places we go to are full of their own difficulties. You cannot run away from samsara because samsara is a state of mind. Suffering arises due to our relationship with the world, and not just the qualities of the world. We know that people who are very wealthy are often not happy and that should be the proof that objects in themselves do not generate happiness. It is our relationships with objects, a relationship of openness and the capacity to be appreciative, that make us happy. So some rich people are very happy because they know how to enjoy objects and some poor people are very happy because they also can enjoy objects.

Enjoyment is enormously important in Tibetan buddhism. That's why in the paintings and ritual practices there are beautiful inspiring depictions of our divine potential. The deities wear lovely clothes, they're usually smiling unless they're being angry for a particular reason and there is a function to this beauty and indeed to this excess. Padmasambhava is not wearing a lot of clothes

because he's a nomad who has to wear everything on his back but because each of these clothes symbolises something in terms of good qualities. He shows his limitless good qualities in his very appearance.

You can load yourself up with riches, in itself that's not a problem. Our problem is that, even when our lives are actually quite safe and secure, we wear the clothes of beggars. We wear the clothes of worry, doubt, insecurity, fear and anxiety. In Western Europe there is so much food and so much heating in people's houses. Lots of people sit in their houses and they don't wear a sweater in the winter because they have the heating on, burning up the earth's resources to have an ease of movement.

DOES OUR WORRY IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

We have to remember that devouring and consuming is not the same as enjoying. Guru Rinpoche was sometimes very rich and sometimes very poor, but his particular approach to existence was to see everything as if it was divine, as if it was perfect. When we practise in the tantric mode we imagine that the world we live in is like a perfect palace where everything that we need for our senses is complete and our own bodies are the bodies of gods and goddesses, everyone we see is divine, is perfect. That is a practice, a practice which means there is nothing to worry about. Worry is something that my mind introduces into the situation.

Say you have to go for a difficult operation, you don't know what will happen – but then none of us ever knows what will happen. We imagine that we're going to live for a long time; we imagine that we're going to be healthy and happy but none of us knows for sure. Accidents happen all the time – they may well happen to us, our future is not secure. What we have is this moment, and this moment is all we ever have. So the question is, 'Where are we in this moment?' When we are in our anxiety, when we are in our worrying thoughts, where are we?

Well we are, in common parlance, up our own arses, we're deep in shit! We're not in the world, we're smelling this bad old smell of 'Why did this go wrong?' 'Why didn't that relationship work out?' 'Why haven't I got a better job?' 'Why has my mother never loved me?' All these obsessive thoughts that persecute us are just old shit, stale and dead! You can take the shit of cows and horses and you can turn it into manure. Then it becomes healthy and then you can put it down in your garden to help the plants to grow very well but if you put dog shit around roses it won't help them. So some shit is helpful and creative and some shit isn't. We have to know the difference and then we can be creative and work with our minds. Worry is just old unproductive shit, it smells bad and you can turn

it over with the pitchfork of your attention again and again and again but nothing of life is going to grow from it. You have to bring something different in; you have to have a new relationship with life. And that means dropping our fixations, just letting go.

All of us have made lots of mistakes in our lives; I'm sure we can all look back and think it would have been better if we had done something differently. What is the point of such a thought? Where is the past? It's gone; nobody can walk into the past. Blaming people for things they did in the past will never help us. 'Somebody hurt me thirty years ago and I remember all the details.' Is that helpful? If I meet that person now, they're thirty years older and they probably can't even remember what they did to me but it's been cooking in my mind. 'Why did they do that? If only they hadn't done that then ...' We start to see that our minds are full of dead, stale material – we need a colonic irrigation of the soul, a good flush out!

Just as we are subject to the turbulence of our thoughts and emotions we are also subjected to an onslaught of media stimuli, the ceaseless flow of information, rushing like a river that's been channelled to turn the wheel of a mill. What is actually being ground in that mill is our own confidence, our belief in ourselves, our belief in the world. To avoid being ground down to dust, we have to separate the flow of water from the wheel. We have to find the sluice in our own mind so we can turn the water away and stop the wheels from turning. Then we start to see that all of these provocations that come from the world can be stopped if we don't react to them; the power that they have is the power that we give them.

Events are always happening which can get us going, so when a disturbing thought arises in our mind or when a new sensation presents itself to us, the question is how can we remain cognisant of it so that we stay connected, and yet remain spacious? We don't want to dull ourselves down; it's not about dissociation and avoidance but about finding a way to note an event – maintaining your compassionate empathy, yet avoiding the sense of powerlessness.

I think meditation is very helpful for this. For example if we practice calming your mind by focusing on the breath as it goes in and out, we start to see that our experience of ourselves is always already separate from the flow of thoughts which our attention normally hooks onto. We see that attention and the content of the mind are two different orders of mental life, and that they don't necessarily have to run together. Whilst being aware of anything which arises, we can have a decision not invest energy into it, and this is the way in which we regain our basic freedom. Then, in terms of politics,

rather than becoming jaded and cynical, which is not a great state to be in, we can hear what politicians say but without being oppressed by it.

In the practice of tantra this is called 'sound and emptiness' and people practice by repeating mantras like *Om Mani Padme Hung* over and over again. On one level this sound is completely meaningless, no different from repeating Ha Ha Ha Ha Hoo Hoo – just sound and emptiness. So it's like listening to someone speaking a foreign language and thinking, 'This doesn't mean anything!' If you speak English to people who don't speak English they will also think, 'this doesn't mean anything!' So the idea in tantra is that one hears the sound as meaningful and meaningless, like an echo. This protects us from being caught up in the narratives of others as if what was being said was real. It may be relationally important but it is neither real nor intrinsically true.

When I am speaking some little vibrations in the voice box in my throat create a resonance, a sound which comes out of my mouth, passes through the air, and goes into your ears. Understanding these sounds requires your active participation as meaning arises as a co-creation from the sounds that are passing through the air with the knowledge of the English language in your mind. Without your active participation you wouldn't know what was being said. There's at least one person in this room who doesn't speak any English and so he doesn't have a clue what we're talking about. That's not because the person is unintelligent, he simply doesn't have the key to unlock the nature of these vibrations.

It's really important to see that at least half the value of whatever we hear comes from what we do to it. Understanding that frees us from being the pinned-down and helpless passive recipient of this stuff that's coming at us. This stuff only has meaning when we attribute meaning to it, and the meaning which we ascribe depends on the signifiatory systems embedded in our minds. It is important to see that rather than being passive consumers of reality we are active co-constructors of the world. So how we develop our own existence, the qualities we have in our own minds – the particular take or colouration that we manifest– very much influences the world that we live in.

Although when I'm speaking we could say that the source of the sound that you're hearing is me, I don't know in advance what I'm going to say or where the words come through me and are 'mine'. The normal activity of speaking is that speech arrives – the words are coming to me. Therefore, in terms of how you understand it, not only is half of whatever I'm saying being created by you but also, as the speaker, I don't know what they will say until I say it. I hear what I'm saying at almost the same moment as you do (I get it a little bit quicker because it's a shorter distance to my ear than to

yours) but I don't know before I speak what I'm going to say. So it's not that I'm producing it in a factory inside me and putting little 'James Low' stamps onto each thing I say.

If we attend to this we see that speech arises out of the open potential of our mind. This open potential is populated by many factors – our own memories, our education, what we've been reading recently, what we had for lunch, how the people in the room seem to be. These factors all have an impact on what comes out, so what I'm saying is an emergence; it's not predetermined. Speaking in this way is very different from transferring something from an inner private world across a threshold to an outer public world. If we practice presence, being fully open and aware, we are being called back to being present, moment-by-moment as we speak. We are connected in each moment of the shared revelation of being as it comes into the world.

Our being together and sharing something is only happening here. If later on someone listens to the recording of this talk, or if the recording is transcribed and somebody reads it, each of these will be very different experiences from that which we are experiencing now. Shared experience, in this moment, will never happen again – even if I come back to Macclesfield it will be different, even if you turn up tomorrow it will be different. If we have a tea break, after the tea break it will be different. To see that this moment is always fresh and can never be repeated is, I think, the key to freedom.

Seeing this, even when the content of the stuff that is going on around us seems very boring, very dull, very constrained and we feel persecuted by it, the actual experiential, existential moment of revelation is always fresh. Although the meaning or semantic content may be quite stale, moment-by-moment, the process is freshly made from the wellspring of existence. If we can stay open to that, even the speech of a tedious politician is beautifully fresh – not on the level of the nonsense that is repeated again and again but it's fresh in the sense of sound manifesting. What is arising is sound and emptiness, and across that we can layer whatever sort of meanings we want and freedom can be found in any kind of restriction. Alternatively in every moment of freedom we can imprison ourselves through the disheartened, exhausted and depleted ways in which we engage with our existence.

HOW NOT TO BE A PUPPET ON A STRING

Buddhism is basically libertarian which I think is very important since so many of the ways in which we try to protect people also take away their freedom at the same time. In essence, buddhism is very non-judgemental; it's saying that people are 'as they are' so don't try to correct the object, and look instead at the way the subject feels persecuted by the object.

We might say, 'if only we had a different government it would be different' or 'if only more people realised what we're doing to the planet things would be better' but in trying to change the object we put the locus of control outside ourselves and become like puppets dangling on strings. Good-hearted people then feel completely lost or castrated and the people who are self-obsessed have all the power. This is, I think, a very unhelpful way of being. We have to bring the locus of control back to ourselves, not back to the ego-self which is determined to have control over others in order to feel safe, but right back into the centre.

As I observe myself I see that I am not something fixed and solid but rather that I have the capacity to move and regenerate and re-connect myself with the world in myriad ways. So I could think, 'A year ago I was like this, yesterday I was like that, and today I am another way.' I can allow 'how I am' to be created by the environment. However, if we think of ourselves as constructs, or as our memories, or that we are the narratives we tell about ourselves, we will be afraid of this creativity. We prefer to be the same today as yesterday and the year before because we feel that the 'I' that I know behaves in certain ways. Anything which seems to attack the compounded edifice of self makes us feel anxious so we avoid change.

FORMATION OF FEARS

For example, next Saturday, I agreed to chair some sessions at a meeting of psychiatrists who are interested in philosophy. When I got the timetable I wondered why I had agreed to do this since, although I'm sure they're charming people, I have almost no free time and it's not really my world. It's one thing to be at home and relaxed in your own world where you think you know all the moves, but when you enter someone else's world, one where they have certain expectations and there are more of them than you, then I feel that uncertainty – how shall I play it?

I'm taken regressively back to childhood experiences of being in the school playground and not knowing what to do. As I become aware of this anxiety I think, 'Maybe I should tell them that I'm sick'. That's always a good one! Then I think, 'What's the worst that can happen?' Although the answer is, 'nothing very much', the fear is still there because the fear is not rational. It is about my childhood. I hated school, I had a terrible time there and felt very unsafe, I was very frightened a lot of the time. So although I know on an adult level that it is safe for me, some situations evoke that old fear and then there is a sudden transference, a re-staging of the past, with a feeling of un-safety in the marrow of the bones. This feeling seems to move from inside to outside with a kind of horripilation through the flesh saying, 'Whoa, this is not going to be good! I shouldn't do that. Why

am I making myself do that?’ That then spins into anxious thoughts and worries which have nothing to do with the actual lived situation.

From the buddhist point of view there are ways of working with this. On the outer level we have the analysis of impermanence. From this analysis we can be sure that, whatever the situation, it won't last for very long. We also have an understanding of the lack of inherent self nature. So we know that the situation itself will be composed of a whole series of moments, none of which is in place in advance, and that all of these moments are amenable to certain positionings in ourselves. This means that we can actively participate in order to influence at least some of the mood of the situation. In order to do this we need to maintain mental clarity. Calming meditation is very helpful for this and there are many prayers that one can learn which are also very empowering and energising.

Then we can apply our understanding of emptiness. I often experience fear, a dread that something very humiliating will happen, because when I was a child I couldn't spell so I got a lot of beatings. In our school we had little boards with letters on the front and back and we used to have to go and stand in front of the class and read them out. As I tried to make sense of what was on the board, a little dribble of urine would be going down my leg because I couldn't read it out. Then the teacher would be hitting me on the head, then more urine would be coming down, then I was being hit because of the urine coming down my leg... This beating and humiliation was very common in Scottish schools when I was a child but situations like these are not very helpful! When we feel that a situation is unmanageable and emotionally intolerable the world seems to be like a kind of granite wall with no cracks in which to get a grip. You feel you're facing something very shiny and solid, something impenetrable, and it is coming towards you. You have to do something but you don't know what, so it's terrifying.

WISDOM LIBERATES FEAR

Buddhism teaches that there is a lack of inherent self-existence in all phenomena – that the attribution of inherent self-existence comes from our own mind. What makes a situation appear like a polished granite wall is our sense that ‘this is real, it is permanent and there's nothing I can do about it.’ Of course, as a child it is very difficult because your teachers seem absolutely powerful. Yet they are not, they have limitations and nowadays for people who are vulnerable we have systems of advocacy so somebody else can go in and be the voice of someone who has no voice. If we start to examine any system we will see cracks.

What does lack of inherent self-existence mean? Well, when we look at something like a watch although we know that it's made up of many different parts which are hidden from us, we just see the outer form. So we apply the name 'watch' and think, 'Oh yes, I know what this is, it's a watch.' We do the same with a human body – we all have a body but most of us haven't a clue what's going on inside it, and we don't really care as long as it keeps working. We are this incredible rich complexity yet we take it for granted.

Taking it for granted is a kind of mental laziness, a choosing not to see, and this is the basis for our own undoing. To take something for granted means that we take it as a 'given', and then we don't put it into question, we automatically accept its right to be there. This very easily takes us on to the next step of thinking, 'Well, that's just how it is' 'As it was in the beginning, so it is now and ever shall be, world without end!' That approach is okay for God Almighty because you don't meet God Almighty, but when you take it into your work situation, or being in a bad relationship, or having poor communications with your parents, it's ridiculous. These situations arise in time due to causes and conditions, they are not fixed, they are not permanent.

Many of us grew up with the cold war situation between Russia and America and that's now over. Situations which seem to be very real and very solid can suddenly change; things which have been locked and stuck for a long time suddenly move and the situation is transformed. You can see this in economics, in politics, in farming, and so on. Many people who grew up on a farm and thought they were going to inherit the family farm and have a good life, now start thinking that farming is a wasted effort. They sit and do their sums and they think, 'This is daft!' It's the same for fishermen; all around Britain little fishing towns are losing their original livelihood. The shipyards have closed; the coalmines have closed, so people's careers and identifications, things that were family lineages, have suddenly vanished.

If you grew up in mining villages then went down the pits as your father did before you, you think, 'I am a miner'. But mining is something you do; it is an activity, it cannot be an identity. It's rather a mouthful to say, 'I am a person who works in a coal mine' much quicker and easier to say, 'I am a miner' but if they close the mine, then what are you? 'I'm a miner, what else would I do?' so you feel depressed, hopeless, even suicidal. But as a human being, there are many other things you could do. So we can see how, in our desire for a stable identity, our attachment and over-investment makes us stupid. The world is changing in complex ways so we have to change with the world. Following simple government directives like 'moving on, moving on and modernising' will not suffice; we have to stay attuned to what is actually there.

I think that if you observe yourself you'll find that the beliefs you have about yourself – that I am unlovable or people don't like me, whatever it would be – get in the way of attending to the changes of the world. If you believe that people don't like you then when you meet someone who does like you, you have a choice. You could believe the new person who likes you but if you do that you have to get rid of your old belief which you've had for a long time. You've only just met this person so perhaps it's better to get rid of this person and hang onto your belief! Many people do this because the representations they hold in mind are not in this lived, phenomenological world. The house of beliefs seems to be infinite and last forever but 'everyone hates me' is not a statement that can sum up anyone. People loved Adolf Hitler; people loved Joseph Stalin. Many people want to marry murderers and send erotic letters to them in Broadmoor Prison. Anyone can be loved because love involves fantasy.

The idea that 'I am unlovable' is not of the real world, it's in the world of constructs and representation. That world of representation is the false mode of the sambhogakaya, the false mode of the divine realms where someone like Padmasambhava lives. Tibetan meditational deities are always the same, every time you meditate on them they look the same and they live in the same kind of environment. We're not like that, every day we look in the mirror and think, 'Where did this face come from? I used to have a nice young face.' 'Where did this fat body come from? I've been robbed! I've been cheated.' These are the traumas of our daily existence! However on the level of neurosis, as with mandalas and meditation deities, everything stays the same. Mandalas act to purify the apotheosis, the granting of a quasi-divine, eternal quality to experiences that are actually transient. By purify the false reification and solidification of the lived experience tantric mandala practices can act as a way of transforming this matrix of fixed assumptions.

If somebody says, 'James, you're an arsehole' that's a statement. It doesn't take any more than five seconds to say, 'James, you're an arsehole' but I could think about it and dig it a little deeper. What did they say? James, you're an arsehole!... How could they have said, 'James, you're an arsehole?' But who's saying it now? I'm saying it to myself now and it's digging deeper and deeper and deeper. Then it starts to get quite heavy and I hang onto it – 'this person thinks I'm an arsehole. Who do they think they are!' –and I'm now entering into a domain of ideas speaking to ideas. I'm no longer in the lived world where moment-by-moment things are changing; I've gone into a kind of cyberspace, a mental world where the same thing can be repeated again and again and again and again.

So, worry is a re-iteration of thoughts in a timeless zone where, each time they come, they seem fresh. If the things we worried about got old, the next time the thought came around we'd think, 'I'm

bored with this one!' but people can worry about the same thing for years and years, and years. The same preoccupation can run in someone's head thousands of times, tens of thousands of times, millions of times and they don't get bored. This is because in the realm of the symbolic there is no time; it is, as Freud said of the unconscious, a domain outside linear time – everything is always fresh.

RELEASING ATTACHMENT TO CONSTRUCTS

This is why it's very important to attend to the fact of impermanence. Impermanence shows us that each moment of the arising of the neurosis does not last very long. Yet although as direct experience, it's just there and then gone, the habitual thought, the constraining conceptualisation of existence, seems to be weaving an eternity about it, becoming part of the warp and woof of existence which will always be there. Thoughts and statements like 'I've always been unloved' or 'I've always been liked.' Seem to point to an enduring truth but the thought or statement itself only lasts a moment. Some say, 'I always have lots of friends' and whilst this may be true for a while, if they live a long life their friends die off and they are left with just memories.

Any definitive statement we make about ourselves is bound to be false because we are always in the process of becoming. Yet we want to make definite statements because we find a terror in living in the ungroundedness which is the moving nature of lived existence. We prefer to retreat into the artificial domain of representations – in buddhism this is what is meant by attachment. When we attach to phenomena we decontextualise them, we abstract them and pull them out of their lived world. Then, as though we are magpies, we bring these fascinating shiny objects into our nest and live around them. This attachment makes moving freely impossible as each thing to which we are attached takes on a life of its own.

Even people who are quite flexible and alive and responsive to each other find, that their own thoughts are largely stale repetitive ideas. Although we might appear to be quite fresh on the outside, all sorts of accumulations, the detritus of existence, is piled up inside. Core beliefs and core assumptions lead us to take a negative reading of a situation, a conclusion which is formulated after the moment of experience. Many people participate in an event, seem to have a good time, yet afterwards they say, 'Well it wasn't so great after all, it could have been better.' In the moment it was fine but the 'person' who was in that moment is not the same 'person' who constructs the narrative of the story. The writer of the narrative is the ego, trying to organise patterns of meaning. When we participate in the world we are not in control, we are taken out of ourselves and revealed to ourselves anew through an interaction which is not just ours. When I'm speaking I don't know in

advance what I'm going to say, so in talking I'm revealed to myself just as I'm revealed to you. That's how it is, there no safety-net!

Conversation and direct communication is not like going to a conference where people read out the lecture they have already written. There isn't a fault in sight, it's all nailed down, and so it can be tedious because it's not fresh in the moment. PowerPoint is like the perverse sambhogakaya; it's the domain of representation as attack. It organises thoughts in a way which is anti-human – computers and human beings do not think in the same way. All knowledge and all the constraining patterns, the restrictions on human existence, can be represented. However human freedom, by its very nature, is ungraspable. Essentially buddhism is trying to offer us methods for engaging moment by moment in that liberating freedom.

As you do more practice, you start to be able to stay open to intense experiences and see that this is just one of those weird places where I feel lost and I feel as if I'm falling apart. I'm not falling apart but I feel as if though I am – so who is falling apart?' The Buddha said that all compounded things are impermanent, pointing to the fact that anything which is compounded will fall apart. Thus a flower will come apart because it is composite, made up of bits and pieces. But the mind itself cannot fall apart. Through the practice we see that the nature of the mind is not a substance, it's not an entity, it is not compounded. With the middle way understanding we are neither trying to push arisings away nor taking them as absolute reality and merging with them. Without saying, 'it's true' or 'it's false' or 'it's bearable' we relax and sit with just what is arising in the mind. Then we see that it's here, and then it's gone.

We hold beliefs such as 'my world should be secure', 'I should know who I am', 'I should feel relaxed and at ease.' So if we don't feel relaxed and at ease we interpret this feeling of dis-ease as a sign that something's gone wrong. As we slip into a panic attack or a panic situation this felt sense that something's gone wrong becomes very difficult to stay with – why would you want to stay with a feeling that's *wrong*? Likewise, if my felt sense is that I should be happy or healthy or some similar state then when I am in a state where I feel old or tired, unloved or ugly, useless or stupid, then life feels unbearable. I begin to feel that 'I cannot be here and be me!' When we have this fear of loneliness and abandonment and falling apart – when it's all too much and we feel overwhelmed – what we're actually saying is that this 'me' is fragile weak and insecure. But actually, whilst it's true that we are all fragile weak and insecure, this is just one moment, one gesture or one aspect of our experience. We are also relaxed open and spacious. Through the practice we try to bring these two

aspects together and allow the awful feelings at the same time as having a sense of ease and naturalness.

The awful feelings arise from a juxtaposition of, and conflict between, two self-constructs. One is an 'ideal' self-construct – I want to be happy and relaxed, I want to have friends, I want to be able to feel good about myself. Another set of constructs arises which says 'I'm stupid' 'I'm fat' 'I'm unlovable' 'people don't find me sexy' 'they don't find me interesting' or whatever it would be. Then I'm terrified because the 'ideal' construct seems like a hopeful fantasy while the other tastes like a bitter reality. I think, 'why should I have to endure these thoughts?' 'I can't bear it! If I'm really like this, I don't want to stay alive, this is just too awful.' So we want to get out of it but where are we going to go?

Often where we go to is into a distraction from the painful sense of ourselves and we do things which, although they feel good at the time, make us feel guilty or bad afterwards. Most people have habits or behaviours they don't like, such as eating too much, talking too much or drinking too much. From the point of view of practice, rather than changing our behaviour we seek to explore the fundamental question, '*Who* is eating too much or talking too much or drinking too much?'

Perhaps sometimes I'm dreary and self-obsessed and people get really pissed off with me because I just go on and on... probably all of us to get into that state sometimes...but *who* is it who is boring? I could say, 'I am' but am I defined by this quality? Without denying this quality, because we are limited beings and so are not so fantastically interesting and fascinating all the time, is this boring tedium the revelation of the true nature of my being? That would be to overvalue a momentary manifestation, one which arises due to causes and conditions, and to treat it as though it were an X-ray revealing what is below my surface. 'People find me boring because I *am* boring', 'I *am* a waste of space'... on a bad day these beliefs can echo right through us so that we seem to be totally defined by them. However if we allow everything to arise in our mind without interference then it will all pass and we will see the insubstantial nature of thoughts, feelings and beliefs. It's important not to be afraid of any of them because a fearful resistance actually makes them stay longer.

With this understanding even the most persecutory thought can be quite useful because it shows you a bit of yourself you'd rather hide, a bit of your shadow. It's like the barber holding a mirror behind you so that you can see the back of your head – something you can't normally see. We all have our shadow, it is part of us, but it does not define us it is not who we are. If we fuse with the negative aspects of ourselves this is to betray our buddha nature. On the other hand to deny the

negative aspects of ourselves is to become fantastical and crazy, because we're all off balance one way or another!

Question: I've noticed that, being able to sit with an experience without fusing with it is a lot easier to do if you share it with another. I'd really like to be able to do it alone on my cushion but somehow that seems much harder.

James: Well I think that the presence of the other can help to contextualise what's going on. Also the presence of the other splits your attention so that you're 'in' what you're talking about and, at the same time, you're attending to them attending to you. If you're sitting in meditation there is less dualistic context to limit you collapsing into it. So the main thing you have to try to learn in the practice is how to 'go close to the swamp without falling in'.

However in terms of therapy, many people who've had a terrible experience in childhood don't want to go near that part of themselves, and sitting with someone who is really listening may intensify the avoidance. Although it is always with them, to talk about it and be in touch with it feels overwhelming so it's experienced as a kind of swamp. If they get close to this place they feel that they're going to sink into it, that it will grab them and they'll lose the sense of who they are now. However, their past is an aspect of themselves and the more they feel that they have to live their life in resistance to, and denial of, this aspect the denser the space it occupies in their life. So in that case we also have to find a way to go close enough to the fearful experience to really taste it, be with the unpleasantness of it, yet without being overwhelmed.

In meditation, when our mind is wobbly, we need to go back again and again to the basic focusing meditation – focusing on the breath, focusing on an external object – because we need to develop a capacity to hold a fixation of attention in the face of stormy thoughts. If that is not achieved it will be very difficult to be close enough to these stormy thoughts to see their emptiness – they'll just grab us.

Question: I've been puzzled by the fact that, if you do push yourself to overcome fear and do whatever it is you're getting screwed up about, it doesn't actually seem to get any easier, whereas you'd think with practice that it would?

James: Well, I think that's because the karma giving rise to such fears can be very deep and the impact of painful events in this life may well be reinforced by all sorts of fears from previous lives. When I was small I lived in a house with my grandmother and my mother and my father and my

elder brother. If my elder brother did anything wrong I would always blush and my mother would say, 'James, why did you do that?' and I would say, 'I didn't do it.' She would say, 'Ah, but your face tells me you did that.' but I hadn't done it! I'd say, 'he did it.' 'Well, why are you blushing?' So, why was that? I don't know.

Later I thought that maybe in some previous life I did something very shameful and so I was born with a kind of guilt which made me over-associative to things going wrong. Who knows for sure, but that idea certainly makes some sense to me. With a Scottish protestant education as well, guilt was a very important factor in experience and so I can feel very guilty about lots of things which are not my fault. I realise that it's like a kind of slippery slope which I could slide down, because it's a familiar polished pathway in my mind. Although I'm aware of it being there and I have an overview that allows me to understand it, it is the conditioning of my karma, my luck, that I am particularly tilted towards these things. I can see that other people are not, but this is part of my lived existence.

In terms of meditation I can find ways of not being so caught up in this. However when I'm in the world and the hooks and provocations of interactive experience occur, often very suddenly and powerfully, then presence in the practice may not be enough to stop the initial glide into 'Oh no' as fear arises.

LET THE THOUGHTS COME... AND GO

In dzogchen they talk about *rang drol* or 'self-liberation' – it means that everything which arises will go free by itself if you don't over-invest in it. However, if you try to block the mind as it arises, you will have a deadened life. If you say to yourself, 'this is a terrible mental experience and I will not allow it to arise in my mind. It is a sign that I'm bad at meditating or that I'm a bad person and I never want to have it again' you start trying to control what is coming in your mind.

I would suggest that this is impossible because even the buddhas have all kind of weird shit coming in their minds. When they take the bodhisattva vow they connect themselves with all beings... who are full of shit. If you take the bodhisattva vow, you think of the most unpleasant being and say, 'I'm your man! However you are, I'm with you, I'm for you, I'm for your enlightenment. I will not turn my back on you, I am open to you.' If you are open to people, then how they are will impact you.

Many different things arise in our continuum, both because they are linked with our own past – our own private karmic history from past lives and our early developmental experiences in this life – but also just because we are connected with others. It is because we are impacted in so many different ways that controlling the content of the mind is impossible. There are many meditation systems

which try to do this but all they can ever do is block the content for a brief period of time. You can learn to stop thoughts in your mind for half an hour, an hour, maybe even for a day but after that thoughts will come back. If they don't come back you couldn't feed yourself and you would need to go into a mental hospital.

Without thoughts we couldn't connect and be with other people, so thought itself is not the enemy. The enemy is the attachment to thought. The teaching on *rang drol* – on self-liberation – is that whatever arrives, if you leave it alone it will go free by itself. So you don't have to push away bad thoughts, they go by themselves and you can't hang on to good thoughts because they also go free by themselves. So don't waste your time trying to edit your mind as though you are weeding a garden – good thoughts will come and bad thoughts will come. Sometimes you will be kind, sometimes you will be cruel. Sometimes you will be selfish, and sometimes you will be incredibly generous. In each of these situations if you maintain awareness as they arise and pass, then the subtlety of your manifestation will increase. You will not perform gross, cruel actions but you will become more freely responsive in the world.

If on the other hand you try to control your mind, the more you exert that control the more dull you will become and the more you build up a pressure inside. People who tend to be very placatory, always trying to please other people and going out of their way to help them, are usually burning up a little bit of sulphur in the background – there's a usually little bit of anger, a little bit of irritation running. 'When is my turn going to come? I'm just a skivvy in this house, people just take me for granted! Of course I want to help, of course I'm very happy to do many things for everyone else but why don't they realise...?' At a certain point their patience snaps and then the others are surprised and ask, 'But why didn't you tell us?' These behaviours are very common because we try to be better than we are, without understanding the actual structure of our experience.

The middle way is: don't be worse than you are, don't be better than you are – just be who you are by being the open presence that reveals all your experience. If you are really being who you are, without artificiality or manipulation your way of being will become lighter by itself, it will be self-purifying. Whereas if you try to polish it according to some concept of how you should be, it is likely that your intentionality will have an obscuring bias. The behavioural modification resulting from thinking 'I want to be a good person because when I'm a good person other people like me better' has an inferior self-referential motivation. It may lead to me being afraid to show people my anger in case they won't like me. One has to be aware that it is not wise to show people more anger than

they can deal but my assumption that my anger is so poisonous and so terrible that it will offend everyone may not be correct.

That's why self-liberation is so important – it means not hanging onto ideas or building your identity out of them. So, if something arises in your mind, you can be angry. You can say, 'Hey, I'm really pissed off about that' and see that it's gone. But if you either don't express it, or by talking about it build it into something seemingly real, then the thought is not liberated as it arises and you get lost in it. The idea that talking something through with someone else makes things easier is not always true for all beings. Sometimes as people talk about something they wind themselves into it and then they wind themselves up more and talking intensifies the problem rather than releasing it. We need to know the likely effect on ourselves of talking something through.

Spontaneity is a free responsiveness in the moment. Unlike impulsivity, which is a habit, spontaneity is fresh in the moment very light, and doesn't cause harm. An impulsive action is not free and responsive, it's rehearsed, it's something that I do, and it has a head of steam coming from something prior. There is a particular kind of grinding energy to getting on my hobbyhorse and 'doing a number'. If I hit someone with this energy I'm not just saying, 'Hey, I'm a bit pissed off' it's more accusatory and usually quite judgemental 'You do this!' So you're giving them some stick and, of course, you will get a reaction from that. If we can release things in the moment, with the weight of the moment, then the release won't be overwhelming. If you store things up, if you nurse your wound and feed it on bile, then it will become quite poisonous.

THOUGHTS DON'T NEED AN EDITOR

If we are able-bodied we can take responsibility for keeping the body clean, but can you keep your mind clean in the same way? The importance of self-liberation becomes clearer as we start to see that our mind is not a private possession.

We can make some choices about the kind of thoughts we entertain or don't entertain – you can make a decision whether or not to look at pornography – but if a thought arises in your mind you can't decide not to have it! You wouldn't know you were going to have it until it had come, and by the time it's come it's already there. So, it's very important to know that whilst you can control your reaction to the thought once it's arisen, whether or not it arises is outside your control. So, if you make yourself guiltily over-responsible and you say, 'I only want to have pure thoughts in my mind' you enter into an omnipotent fantasy which condemns negative thoughts as events which should never happen.

Just as death is already inside our bodies so samsara is already inside our minds. Whilst you can't take samsara out of your mind what you can do is realise that, from the very beginning, your mind and samsara – the mind itself and the content of the mind – are not the same. When you hold a mirror in front of something horrible the mirror has a horrible image in it but if you then turn the mirror towards something beautiful the mirror has something beautiful in it. The mirror is not still carrying the image of the horrible object; it simply shows what is front of it. Our mind is actually like this but instead of seeing this we tend to hang on to thoughts, building them up and developing narratives, dogmatic positions, and stories. In this way we are always prefigured, already filled up with something which appears to be real and this is the big problem for meditation.

Patrul Rinpoche writes in *'Self Liberating Understanding'*, one of his texts translated in *Simply Being*, that you should not worry if you have angry thoughts, and that to think you are a bad meditator because you have angry thoughts is a sign that you have not understood meditation. When the mind becomes angry, relax and bring your attention, your awareness, close to, but not into, the anger. Don't turn away from the anger, don't merge with the anger, be present with the anger and if you do that the anger will reveal itself as clarity. One offers hospitality to the anger, without fear and without attachment; with this position the anger is there and then gone. However, if you say, 'I have this terrible anger in my mind and I hate it. I need to go to an anger management group because the anger is attacking and polluting who I am' you will have very little freedom. This construction traps us in the belief that anger is real, is separate from me, and is taking me over.

We are not our anger, we are not our cruelty, we are not our envy, we are not our stupidity, and we are not our desire. If you find your mind is full of lustful thoughts and you become obsessed by sexual images, don't worry but bring your awareness close to these images. Don't collapse into them because if you do they will take over your life and, as with any kind of addiction, you will need to have more and more. Don't try to push them out of your mind either because you don't have the power to do this – it is a stream of karma. Stay present with it and observe it: 'Oh yes, this desire comes.' Although the thought might indicate that you must do something –masturbate or go to a prostitute or whatever– you will only have to do these things if you merge into the impulsive energetic quality of the arising. If you just tilt slightly back then, even though the feeling may be very powerful, you can stay present with it. The feeling is very intense and strange and then it passes, it will self-liberate; this is for sure. It's the same with a desire for alcohol, or the desire to hurt someone else, or the desire to stalk someone. Sometimes patients stalk their therapists; the patient makes the

therapist's life so important that they are willing to sacrifice their own freedom just to get hooked on them.

So again, if any impulse arises strongly inside you and you can catch it before you fuse with it then you and the impulse, you and the intense sensation, will sit together for a moment and then it will be gone. If you fuse with it, it's caught you and then it's not that you have lust, lust has you! It's not that you have envy, envy has you, or murder has you and you're taken over and you do it. The 'thing' has caught *you*. For this reason buddhism sees attachment as the root of all suffering.

THE ROOT OF SUFFERING

Attachment doesn't mean merely being attached to outer objects like new cars or a nice job or a fancy watch; attachment occurs when the mind merges with its object. Experience is impermanent and the mind itself never changes, but attachment means that the energy of your mind cannot sit still while an experience is arising. Our mind is an open awareness but it also manifests as the energy of subjectivity, where 'I' appear to be the experiencer of my own experience. One of the experiences that the mind has is 'I am me having my thoughts' but 'I am me having my thoughts' is not a permanent stable state, it's just a movement of the mind. The ego has no inherent self-existence yet, because it's one of the modes of the manifestation of the mind, it seems to be always there. It will always have desires and hatreds – that's just its nature – but although you can't get rid of your ego you don't have to be just your ego.

Question: In your work how do you square the self-liberation of dzogchen with a therapeutic approach, where the emphasis is on change, on feeling better and happier?

James: Well, attachment is at the heart of it. How do we help other people to realise that what they are attached to is unreal? With great difficulty! One can give maps, one can give suggestions, one can give interpretations, one can do gestalt role-play exercises together, you can use sand trays, puppetry, you can use all sorts of things... However you can take a horse to water but you can't make it drink! It is important to look at who doesn't change. Some people say, 'Why should I change? I'm the one who's been hurt and I'm entitled to want to punish other people' The one who says this is caught up in a deep attachment to a neurotic position. When somebody's in that state it can be a slow process to open a space within which new possibilities can occur.

I think that if we do want to change then psychotherapy is quite a good thing. There are many kinds of psychotherapy but basically they're all saying that you can observe yourself, you can observe your behaviour, and you can make new choices. When you're caught up in a particular position, whether

it's anxiety or depression or a personality disorder, the world appears to you in a particular pattern and that, for you, is all you have. Within that pattern it's as if there is only one option and therefore there is no choice to be made, life is just 'as it is'. If we can shift our perspective then we start to see that actually there are other options and although what I habitually do seems real, seems concrete, seems the only game in town, it is actually a choice. Once one realises that whatever one does is a choice, then other options become visible.

Take the example of somebody who feels that they're being harshly judged at work and who then works extra hard, stays late, and comes in early. It's not a very severe problem but lots of people get into feeling that they have to please their boss to keep their job. If you say, 'Why do you stay on until eight o'clock every night when other people leave work at say half past six?' the answer will be 'Well, I don't want to lose my job. I'm not as good as them.' There'll be lists of things that the person really believes which are probably not true. Although you can challenge each of these in turn, for many people the heart of the problem lies in believing that there is one rule book for them and a different rule book for everyone else.

Essentially they're trapped in a self-encapsulation –they're thinking, 'I am an island unto myself, what affects other people doesn't apply to me.' So one tries to bring some sense of dependent co-origination into their understanding and help them see that they are choosing to see themselves as different to other people. Although they wear the same kind of clothes, say the same kind of things, eat the same kind of food, and in fact almost all of their life is very similar to everyone else's, they feel on this particular issue that, 'If I do what other people do, I will be punished but they won't be punished.' You can start to help them see that this is a belief; it's an artificial construct. In dharma language, you'd call it a conditioning, a grouping of ideas that come together and form a sort of node of dullness, like a fibroid. It consists of material which is not in itself useful but has become compacted together and the resulting density is taken to be an indication of its truth.

Our karma or activity manifests both in our outer activity when we impinge on what is around us and in our inner activity of our arousal. There are several common tendencies of inner arousal which impact both daily life and experiences in meditation. For example if you have a manic tendency it facilitates arousal and reduces inhibition. In meditation we experience this as wildness, *rGod-Pa*, where thoughts, feelings and sensations arise quickly and with great intensity – so it is easy to get carried away. Or if you have a tendency to depression there is an inhibition of arousal with a corresponding reduction of its facilitation. In meditation we experience this as dullness and sinking, *sBying-Ba*, where our agency is weak and we sink like a tired swimmer.

KARMA

Or one might have a tendency to anxiety. Anxiety can be predominantly facilitative of arousal leading to manifest agitation and driven activity. Or it can be predominantly inhibitory of arousal leading to feeling overwhelmed, collapsed, paralysed and unable to act. Anxiety can also manifest as a contest between the competing forces of facilitation and inhibition of arousal. This can present as an ongoing tension manifesting as curbed over-activity with a lot of distressing sensation in the body, or as a serial alternation between facilitation and inhibition. In meditation this displays as an inability to either release tension or mobilise it, leading to dispersal and lack of focus.

KARMIC CONSEQUENCES

However, I am also increasingly respectful of the idea of karma. In the NHS we have lots of very brief, highly interventionist methods of trying to change people or help them to change. This is very popular for all sorts of economic and political reasons but actually some people don't change and neither we nor they know why they don't change. If you say that the ego is responsible for change and the person doesn't change, then you hold them responsible for not changing. At least with a psychoanalytic view you can say that there is an unconscious force that we haven't yet been able to bring to light which is preventing the change, and so you wouldn't berate the person. However therapies like CBT hold the person to account and this can end up being quite punitive.

So with an idea of karma, you might ask, 'If somebody's stuck in something why try to keep pushing them to make a move in the area of the pathology that's caused them to be referred for treatment?' If you feel you're in your box and that your box is getting narrower then having someone pushing down on you is not going to be helpful. So why not talk about something else? It might be better to say, 'Let's go and sit in the café and have a chat, talk about football'. The therapist and the patient could sit in a garden and look at the flowers and talk about life, perhaps look at the people walking up and down and discuss, 'Which of these people would you like to kiss?' That's quite nice – looking to see 'Who's very kissable here?' As some new part of the world is revealed, the patient can see and feel something different. So we need both flexibility and movement in ourselves and also to know when to stop pushing.

I think that the split between the expert therapist, or healer of any kind, and the 'damaged patient' is really unhelpful for the patient. It's important to see that although we may well be much luckier than many of the people we meet, samsara is very big and deep and our good luck is something quite fragile, it's not a secure position. We all have plenty of problems and the more we know, 'I am in samsara; I have my own confusions and anxieties' the easier it is to relate. The fact that I can have

some clarity in my meditation doesn't remove all my anxiety but it does however make it easier to live with it and not be ashamed of it. It also means that I don't feel that what plagues the patient is so very bad... it's just weird shit... There's a lot of it about!

Question: Can we purify our bodily karma or our genetic karma, through spiritual practice?

James: According to the tradition, and I would agree with the tradition, karma is not delivered through genetics. Our parents are our karma and they give us our karma in the sense of the family dynamics and so on that we grow up in. To purify the karma of the body is not about improving the image you have of your body, it's not to become more supple and lithe or restore your hearing if you're deaf or something like that. Purification practices are designed to show that the reification, the belief in the hard real separate objective reality of the physical body, is a false understanding. So in doing a *Dorje Sempa* practice you experience the body as a dynamic process of energy which arises due to many factors. Whilst this not a miracle in Christian terms in that you're not going to change your gene structure, through this practice you can come to feel less burdened and constrained by your genetic luck.

Increasingly in the NHS people present with what are called dysmorphic disorders, in which they believe that their body is the wrong shape. They might believe that their nose is too big or their breasts are too big or small, so they want enhancements or reductions. They might believe that they need to have their foot cut off or that they need to have an operation on their knee, many different presentations arise. Through believing that the shape of the body determines who they can be as a person, their ability to become a different person has become dependant upon an operation on their body. From a buddhist point of view that would be a very negative reading, all it does is affirm that the subject is the puppet of the object. However, under certain circumstances, the NHS will pay for these operations and if you have money you can have anything done to your body – you can fly to another country and people will peel your skin off for you.

If, having had the 'nose-job' you think 'I'm better because now I have the nose I always wanted' your happiness is seen to depend on your ability to control the circumstances. However, the day you get the nose you always wanted might also be the day you get the cancer you never wanted! Life is what happens, and in this world some people have more luck than we have, some people are healthier and happier than us. Of course we need to work to benefit sentient beings, not just in a spiritual sense but on a physical level, and give people as much care and support as possible. However we

also have to be aware of the existence of envy for part of what can really persecute us is that we want to have what we don't have.

As the Buddha said, the two main forms of suffering are getting what you don't want and wanting what you don't get. Lots of people would like to have someone else's body. I was reviewing the case of a patient who said, 'I've been with three women in my life and each of them had something attractive about them. The first one had very nice breasts but she drove me crazy. I liked the mind of the second one and I really liked the ass of the third. I feel upset because I can't find a woman who has all three.'

Although that's quite extreme and crazy, plastic surgeons are willing to create the external form as a movement towards an imagined 'ideal'. It's not that people shouldn't have plastic surgery if they really want it, if you can have it in the manner of a dream, as a drama, that's fine. However, if you really think that you can make your life better and safer for ever by acting on the world, then you set yourself up to fail because these gestures are all within the wave of impermanence. Good things become bad, bad things become good; young people become old if they live long enough and everything moves and changes.

Dzogchen is about learning to move towards a greater tolerance of existence, away from the fantasy of control, from over-active engagement, from interfering with everything. All over the world human beings are interfering – cutting down the rainforests, killing off the fish and polluting everything – we just can't stop doing things. If we were to sit a little bit more and examine ourselves and allow ourselves to be satisfied, we wouldn't need to do these things. Perhaps the most difficult thing in life is to work out when to act on the environment to change things and when to relax into awareness and integrate the experience of whatever is arising. If you do too much of the former you can become caught up in endless reactivity but if you do too much of the latter you can become spaced out and unable to respond. It's trying to find a balance between these two positions – between space and movement, between relaxation and engagement – that's at the heart of all our practice.

Practice is vital if we are to develop confidence in our ability to cut through the confusing and ensnaring patterns of association in our mind. Without this ability the clarity of the mind is always at the mercy of the changing content of the mind. We are then in a very dangerous situation because the content of the mind is not at all reliable, it is unstable and impulse-driven. People who attack themselves physically, who self-mutilate, binge eat, or drive cars recklessly, do so because they are taken over by an impulse. That impulse is simply something arising in the mind on to which our

attention and intention have locked. While the person is in that impulsive state it seems valid but afterwards they wonder, 'Why did I do that? What came over me?' Many dangers and accidents in life happen in that way.

So if we want to have a life which is more balanced and more spacious we have to be able to see the relative nature of all our options and make decisions that are not over-invested. Then as our mind becomes more open we can be in a more spontaneous relationship with life – we don't need to spend a lot of time thinking about what we are going to do. However, in the early stages of meditation, because we get so caught up in enmeshment in and attachment to fixed habits, we have to slow things down and struggle to see the other options. Unless we do this we'll just do what we feel pulled to do. This pull is the pull of karma. In its manifestation as the consequence of our prior actions, karma comes to us with a particular kind of familiarity. This is why it seems to make sense for us to do whatever it is. Often when we look at someone else's karmic pattern we think that what they do is really strange, we can't imagine anyone wanting to do that!

I used to swim in the sea a lot and the water would be very cold. I would think, 'Oh I should stop now' but then I'd think, 'Well, I'll just swim until I'm level with that rock' and then 'the next rock'... Being caught up in what one is doing is a kind of blindness. It's a closing down which can be energising but is also potentially quite dangerous because you're setting goals which involve a degree of forgetfulness of one's actual capacity. We need to try to recognise how easily we get lost, how easily we get taken over by patterns. If we are able to step back from these patterns and see them for what they are they often seem ridiculous, but when we're in them they're very powerful for us.

Somebody might drink quite a lot of alcohol but would say 'I never want to use heroin.' Somebody who uses heroin might think 'I'm okay about sticking a needle in my arm but I wouldn't want to cut my arm.' Somebody who cuts their arm might think, 'I could never be anorexic.' Somebody who's anorexic might think 'I never want to be bulimic.' We're all surprised at somebody else's particular pathway but our own feels very comfortable to us. All of us, I would suggest, have some kinds of intense behaviours that we get locked into, which are actually perverse forms of comfort. In the practice of meditation it's important that we recognise the early stages of the lock-on to that mental encapsulation or intoxication so that we can start to struggle to see that there are other options.

THE EGO WANTS A JOB!

The basic practice of focusing on the breath is very useful as we are trying to integrate attention, intention and boredom. When the mind is very disturbed the key thing is to release our interest in the content and to bring the mind back to the focus. The breath continues whatever is happening; it's a focus which is reliable and boring. Boredom is very helpful for meditators, it occurs when the mind is not intoxicated by an exciting object. When we are sitting in meditation, particularly for longer periods of time, nothing much is happening and then any thought which comes seems interesting just because it provides a relief from boredom.

If there is a piece of written work to be done, say a presentation for a conference or a school exam or a dissertation, many people will sit down and write for maybe fifteen minutes. Then they get up and wander around and perhaps even start to clean something – *anything* will become more interesting than the thing which has to be done! If you ask the person 'Don't you want to do the dissertation?' they'll say 'Yes, yes, I've been studying all this for years, I really want to do it' but when they sit down to do it the mind wanders off.

This happens because, paradoxically, calm focused attention can bring a deeper anxiety into the mind. The ego thrives on distraction; it thrives on anything which lifts it out of the situation in which its own nature might be revealed. Our ego-self needs something new to happen; it needs some kind of chaos or excitement in order to give it a sense of being an active and important actor in a world where something is always going on.

When we start to meditate for longer periods of time nothing much is going on and so the ego has less of a function. We can then see the ego's defensive strategy – the arising of the desire for distraction – and the more we practice the more obvious this is. The ego's function is to direct the investment of attention into the world in order to maximise its own value, so naturally if the ego is feeling diminished then anything will become interesting.

WORLD VIEWS SHAPED BY KARMIC ATTENTION AND INTENTION

As we look around the world we try to find things we like and avoid things we don't like. We're always construing, shaping and making sense of the experiential field in terms of things that will fit us in certain ways. Some people are very interested in shopping and some aren't. If you don't enjoy it then going shopping with someone who likes shopping is excruciating. You wander around and they're saying, 'Is this nice? Is that nice?' You feel like saying, 'Why don't you just buy *something*! It's all the same' but for the person who really likes shopping it's incredibly important. Their karmic gaze

sees something that the person who doesn't like shopping or isn't really bothered just doesn't see, for we live in different worlds.

If we imagine that we're all human beings, it's very interesting to ask why the actual experiential worlds we occupy are so incredibly different. Why do some people like rugby but can't stand football? Why are some people willing to go and stand in the cold on a Saturday and watch people running around in a field? It's an activity which some other people just cannot relate to. If you ask why they do this they would say that it is very important to them, that it gives a sense of meaning and value to their life. The ego identity of the person has become connected with particular kinds of stimuli and without these stimuli their sense of identity starts to shift and break down. You see this with small children if they can't find their special toy and it's why people become anxious if they can't have the object they're fixated on.

If you pass a playground when you're out walking with a small child they become very agitated if they're not allowed to go on the swings. Walking along a road is very boring for a child so the sight of a swing is very exciting but for the adult the sight of the swings means 'Oh no, we're stuck here now for half an hour!' So, we have very different ways of experiencing the world and part of the function of meditation is to be able to catch the fact that this is not a given, but it is a process of attention and intention. The more we can slow the mind down the more we see how the richness of the world is closed to us because of the particularity of our choices.

So basic mindfulness practice, in the first aspect of calming the mind, is the basis for the freedom to be able to make different choices. There's really no point in thinking about compassion if we can't free our mind from our own obsessions. Although you may want to help people you won't be able to help them *as they are* unless you are able to do the sorts of things that the other person needs rather than the things that you want to do. In order to do that you have to free your energy from its fixation in its familiar patterns so that it can then be plugged into something which is more turned towards what the other person needs. Much of the time we use other people to confirm ourselves to ourselves. The other person is simply used a kind of mirror which reaffirms that there is some value in how we are. However we could experience the other person as a kind of turning point through which we can be released from some of our self-encapsulation.

I would suggest that the more you sit and do the practice, the more you see how easily your mind locks into patterns of thoughts and when you're in these thoughts you're just lost. Your mind goes off on a riff, it's just wandering around, then you recognise this and can return to the practice. When

you went off you were in something where you didn't know what was going on, you were truly lost. We pass much of our lives in states where we are not truly present.

When we start to pay a bit more attention to the content of these riffs or fugues – these sets of thoughts feelings and sensations that flow together – we find that they're actually pervaded with both anxiety and the compensations to anxiety. Sometimes we have wish-fulfilment fantasies where we imagine ourselves as rich or famous or maybe telling our bosses what we really think. Sometimes they come in a more raw form and we become fearful and preoccupied but whatever the form our fantasies take their content is generally something which relates to our place in the world – they are ego-centred.

As it becomes clear that a lot of the time our mental life is made up of self-referential fantasies, we really start to understand the meaning of narcissism. The story of Narcissus tells of the young man who sees a reflection of himself in a mountain pool. He doesn't recognise this reflection to be his own and he becomes intrigued and entranced by the image. He's seeing an ultimate value that he finds very difficult to move away from.

Like Narcissus, our dreams and fantasies are delicious to us and they seem to suggest something truly important. So, without us being aware of what's happening, a lot of our life energy becomes caught up in them. The result of this is so that we are not fully present; we live a slightly dulled existence, operating on 'automatic pilot'. Often we can walk down the road and realise at the end of it that we haven't really seen anything much. Luckily we have a very good brain which controls the movement of our senses and our feet and lets us hear traffic coming. It acts to keeps us safe and alive while our minds are actually absorbed in something else. What we are absorbed in is a fantasy, a story about ourselves.

Earlier I referred to the nature of representation being the way in which signs and symbols become invested with energy and then take on a kind of absolute identity. That is exactly what happens with the story lines which repeat themselves in the fantasy. In meditation, as you discover the content of your own mind, you can check if this is true. At this point it becomes clear that there is a lot of work to do and there are two different approaches to the task. One is to try to sort out the mind on the level of the object, where the emphasis is on working to purify and simplify the content of our mind. The alternative, which is privileged in the nyingmapa tradition, puts emphasis on the subject side. So, as we can see that the contents of the mind are so numerous and variable, the focus is on freeing the mind itself from the sticky connection into whatever is arising.

Question: When you find yourself going into all the stuff that goes on in your mind, do you bring your mind back to your breath?

James: Until we have some capacity to make clear decisions inside ourselves it's very important just to come back to the breath because whilst whatever arises in the mind has the power to distract attention towards it, then you can't really do any more subtle meditation.

There's no point in asking a small child to use a fork to feed itself until it has some development of its sensory motor capability so it has to be fed in another way. At first, even when it is able to put some food in its mouth you still have to feed the child because it gets distracted very quickly and wants to play a game. Then gradually it starts to have more sense of agency and can make choices so then can you say, 'Hang on, you're eating your food now. When you have finished your food you can play.' By the age of maybe four the child is able to hang onto that idea and wants to eat quickly in order to be able to play but when the child is three, they usually can't do that. If you ask, 'Why don't you eat it quickly?' they reply, 'But I don't want to eat it' so you then say 'You have to eat it otherwise you won't have any energy to play'. And then you play a game to get the food into its mouth. At this stage it doesn't have the capacity to think: 'eating will take this amount of time so if I contract the time, I'll get the boring thing over and then I can play.'

So, as with the child, if we can't sort out one thing from another thing then we can't follow the line down the middle. Until we're able to focus into the breath and maintain that attention for some period of time we won't be able to recognise thoughts coming, so trying to do other meditations will be very difficult. The three 'Aa' practice is very helpful to do but, as beginners, I think we have to do it in conjunction with basic focusing on the breath and with tantric visualisation. There are many different kinds of practice but the more subtle the practice, the more subtle both our attention and our mind need to be. When our mind is in a crude state, in an overwhelmed state, then it's better to use a crude method.

TANTRA HOOKS ATTENTION

Question: Is that why the tantric practices are easier in some ways, because you've got a lot to think about?

James: Yes. Following the breath is a path of boredom. The philosophical background to basic shamata practice has the premise that if you focus the mind on exciting objects then the mind will become excited. Therefore, as excitement is the enemy of focused concentration, you should choose a simple object for attention.

Whereas tantric practice shouldn't be boring because here interest is used in order to hook attention. In tantra you can sing, play instruments, do mudras, visualise fascinating deities, and the practices each have a narrative storyline and are pleasurable to do. In the development of buddhism there are many different styles of meditation practice and each of them is based on a fundamental view or reading of the human situation.

The first one, the hinayana or path of avoidance, indicates that the world is very dangerous. Because we are easily distracted we should simplify things – simplify our food, simplify our way of life. Tantra, however, says that the world is rich and complex therefore we need to awaken to a rich and complex relationship with ourselves and with the world. If we try to hang onto simple categories and fix the world, according to them, it's not going to work. When we engage rather than avoiding we see that the path is the practice of relaxing and opening into a more playful dynamic and responsive relationship with the world.

Generally speaking, it's helpful if we learn something of each of these patterns of practice because sometimes we're just overwhelmed by events and then it's important to go back to regaining the calm necessary for sorting things out. Sometimes we've got more energy and we can be more playful and we can work with whatever's happening and sometimes we can just directly integrate whatever's happening into our sense of spaciousness and being at home.

Question: Would you say it is still necessary to do the traditional *ngöndro* tantric preliminary practice in order to practice dzogchen?

James: Well, if you understand the principles for using a particular approach, you then have to be in touch with whether or not you have the necessary presence to apply it. Basically, if we don't understand what something is, we can't do it. Also if we don't have the wherewithal within ourselves to engage with it, we can't do it. So we need to have both the knowledge and the capacity.

Human beings are very different. Who can say what another person should do? The Tibetan tradition contains many different styles of teaching. Some teachers will say, 'Start at the bottom and work up stage by stage by stage.' Other teachers—not so many, but the main teachers I've had—always said, 'Start at the top. If you can't stay on the top and you slip down, then work from there. If you keep slipping down the mountain, then start at the bottom.'

So why not try starting at the top since we won't know if it will work for us until we try. Even if you can't stay at the top you might just get a glimpse that gives you a direct connection to your potential.

People often talk about the wonderful things that great masters and higher people do. This can be inspiring but it can also create a fantasy of the inherent superiority of special people. Then the danger is that you feel you have to start at the bottom for the top feels far away, and so you have actually increased the distance between where you are and where you want to be.

FORGET THE FANTASY...NOBODY HAS EVERYTHING SORTED!

It's very important not to create a fantasy that there are wonderful people who have everything sorted. That is just an illusion. If you practice from the bottom up it is easy to develop a fantasy that life at the top is free of problems. The idea that *they* are so wonderful is a hope coming from our side, but if you look carefully you will see that their actual existence is not problem-free. As we were looking yesterday, dzogchen teaching points out that the self-liberation of phenomena occurs *after* the fact of their arising. It's a question of how to work with how existence is for us, it's not a way of creating an ideal situation.

I think a lot of the time in the practice of tantra, people make the mistake of thinking that they are going to live in the sambhogakaya realm where everything is sorted. However great your realisation, things in lived existence are not 'sorted'. If you have to do your income tax return you can't do it in the 'sambhogakaya way' you have to do it in the 'income tax system way' because the Inland Revenue want you to attend to particular details. Although you can integrate form and emptiness as you do it so that you don't feel such grief at handing over your money, you still have to deal with bureaucracy where there is right and wrong, good and bad, and where you have to fit in. We have to realise that, in terms of that system, we are not powerful. If the lama or a bishop parks his car on a double yellow line he'll get a ticket. We have to know the limits of our power – dreams of power and fantasies of power are extremely unhelpful.

Western people have an incredibly romantic reading about Tibet and that romantic reading is not necessarily very good. Dharma is very wonderful but people are limited, people make mistakes, and the idea that the teacher is perfect is something to be understood in a very subtle way. The idea that the teacher is perfect means that the teacher is perfect for you, and is helpful for you. However if you say that the teacher is perfect in themselves, then that is a statement of faith. There are sure to exist criteria for the evaluation of human behaviour that would not give a very high score to your teacher. No one can please all the people all the time. Therefore it is vital to become aware of the limitations of judgement and to practise equanimity instead.

This is why when we practice tantra we need to be very careful to know that the sambhogakaya realm is a meditation realm, it's not a realm in the world. In this world everything is limited and therefore you have to practice awareness. In the sambhogakaya level, everything is enlightened and perfect and therefore you can go with the flow. It is very important to see that although yesterday, today and tomorrow will always be the same in the sambhogakaya realm, in this world they are not.

SPACIOUSNESS OF THE SAMBHOYAKAYA VIEW

Usually we tend to see people in terms of our anxieties or our concerns about them. So, if you've got children, when you return from here and see your child's face you might think, 'Oh, it's Sunday, have they done their homework? It's school tomorrow.' As a parent it's always difficult because you want the children to have the best life possible but who can know what the best life for a child is? In order to try to help them you keep encouraging them but you can only encourage them in the things that you think are good. How can you know what will actually be good for the child? That's what's very difficult because when we come into a precise relationship with another person we're always returned to the specificity of our own existence, our own history, our own karma, our own limitations, prejudices and anxieties.

When I went to see my mother I wanted her to be well and happy and was concerned about whether she was taking her asthma medication. Out of my concern I brought her an anxiety in asking her about her inhaler. 'Where's your inhaler?' 'I don't know.' 'Did you use it today?' 'Oh yes.' 'So where is it now?' 'I don't know.' Then she would get a bit perturbed since she didn't know where it was. So we would go around trying to find this inhaler. Then she would say, 'Well, I'm a stupid old woman. I never know where anything is.'

To know someone is to try in some way to do the best for them, but that's always as seen from within a particular frame of reference and in this situation a loving concern provokes an anxiety. The advantage of a sambhogakaya reading of the situation is that it brings a bit more spaciousness – to have a sense that, 'She's fine, she's fine as she is'. When we would relate on that level, the other things were not so important.

In order to have real compassion, we have to have a wisdom which eases us out of this anxious identification and lets us see the other person as different, as not identical to our fantasies about them. This is very important, particularly in terms of family relationships. From the point of view of tantra everyone we meet is a figure in a mandala arising from the ground of emptiness. They arise spontaneously out of the dharmadhatu of which they are the luminosity, the luminosity of the

buddha mind. If we really have the felt sense that they are this luminosity then all the interactions that we would have on the basis that 'this is my mother', 'this is my child', become much lighter.

This highlights the dharma view that the purpose of our life is to experience an unbroken continuity of awareness moment by moment. You can maintain that awareness while you're playing golf. You can maintain it while you're sitting in the pub. You can maintain it while you're out in a disco. You can maintain it anywhere.

EVERYTHING IS FLOW

Tantra can provide a very helpful way of relating to other people in a way that optimises their relaxation and their sense of confidence – not the assertive, aggressive kind of confidence we often have but the confidence to be at home with each situation however it is. When we're meditating with our eyes open in the dzogchen way, we are simply present with whatever comes, seeing in a very direct way that everything is flow. Seeing that there is nothing stable or substantial that you can hold onto is very important. It means that we are not defined by any of the disasters which occur in our lives.

Often in a difficult situation, such as when we become physically unwell or when someone near us gets into trouble, we tend to catastrophise. We think, 'Oh no, this is the end, I can't cope with this, I don't know who I am.' Actually we are always changing and, particularly as we get older, physical ailments come, and so a reading which says, 'This is intolerable; if this is the case then I am no longer me' is one which blocks our creativity. Sometimes we need to do things that we never thought we would find ourselves doing and we can see this as diminishing ourselves, as if it is an attack on ourselves. Alternatively we can experience the arising phenomena as a new display and realise that, whilst these phenomena are impermanent, the state of awareness can be permanent.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

The best way we can develop true compassion is to start with ourselves and be compassionate by tolerating the fact that my existence is just as it is. We can make fewer demands on ourselves and be kinder to ourselves so that, if we are sick, we just allow ourselves to be sick. If we are tired, we allow ourselves to be tired. That will mean that we will not be able to do some of the practical things for other people that we usually do. Are we now 'less than' as a person because we are doing less?

If we examine this we can start to see how our self is constructed. We might have constructs which privilege independence, such as – I like to think of myself as hard working. I don't want to be a burden to anyone and I do enjoy helping other people. This carries the implication that once I start to

be unable to do things for other people, once I am less able to be hard working, I am going to feel that I'm a burden on other people. I'm going to hate that, because I don't want to be that way.

The practice of meditation is very practical in allowing us to see that this construct is not a fact but a belief. The fact is that when we were very small we were very dependent and as we get old we're also likely to be very dependent. In between we get quite sick and then again we're very dependent on other people. So if I'm dependent on someone to feed me, does that make me 'less than'?

We can open our meditation practice to this kind of situation and observe: good thoughts arise and I feel happy, bad thoughts arise and I feel sad. The content of my mind is just like a leaf blowing in the autumn wind, very fragile, ready to blow off at any moment. Can I look deeper than that? What is my real nature? Who is the one who feels humiliated by a physical incapacity? Who is this one?

Thoughts arise, feelings arise – I feel shamed, I feel guilty, I don't want my life to be like that. If we just stay open in the practice we recognise that when thoughts like these arise together, they generate a kind of density. If I sit inside that density I'm completely trapped but when I relax I realise these are just thoughts going by... just going by. Then there's the next moment, a moment where we're looking at the daffodils and we're aware.

THE MIRROR OF THE MIND

The basic view of dzogchen is that the mind, which is both 'our' mind and the mind itself, is something without any limits. Our consciousness, which clearly has limits because there are some things that it can help us to understand and some things it can't, is an aspect of the mind itself. Usually we're so busy fused with our consciousness that we have no space in which to recognise the fact that there is an underlying clarity – a clarity of the mind which reveals everything around.

In meditation practice clarity doesn't just mean bright and shining, it means un-obscured, unattached, unconditioned by what is occurring. Even when our minds are very depressed or very anxious, when we feel insecure, when we feel completely caught up in something, when we feel paralysed and can't move, all of these experiences are arising in the mirror of the mind. The clarity of a mirror is its capacity to reveal whatever is in front of it; this clarity is not interrupted by the dullness of the experience it reveals. So if you look in a mirror in a very dark room you will see the reflection of the darkness; although it doesn't look bright the darkness revealed in the mirror is a quality of clarity.

The implication of this is incredibly important. It means that whatever bad thoughts, whatever horrible persecutory thoughts, arise in my mind, the mind will not be defiled because the actual nature of these thoughts is the energy of the clarity of the mind. The most basic thing to understand and to experience in your own practice is that feelings like 'I don't want these thoughts, they are diminishing me as a human being' or 'I hate it when I get in this state, I can't bear it, I don't want to be like this' are all simultaneously ego-consciousness and the energy of awareness.

Although we have many aspects on the level of manifestation these identities are happening moment by moment and, because whatever we are on this level doesn't last, these moments cannot define us. Part of the problem of our human dimension is that our intelligence is often turned towards definition and judgement. So instead of an appreciation which opens to the moment, we go to a more abstract definition and say 'I am like this' 'I am a waste of space' 'I am a useless person' 'I hate being like this.' The power of these beliefs enfolds the energy of awareness and takes us into states of great suffering.

Of course our capacity is always shifting so from time to time, we experience that it is limited. Nobody is healthy and happy all the time, this is an illusion. Weakness, vulnerability, physical ailment, or as the Buddha said: birth, old age, sickness and death, is part of the human condition. This is just how it is here, it's not a punishment and so the big question is: can we be where we are? The different kinds of meditation practice and the different kinds of view help us to stay open to whatever occurs. Through the practice we can come to see that it's our current capacity which is limited, not the ground nature of our being.

Based on a talk by James Low given at Macclesfield, UK on 26/2/2005

Transcribed by Kevin Lawrence

Edited by Wendy Bates

Revised by James Low, September 2020