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# Love, emptiness and awareness

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## Excerpts

*...Love is not an act of will. You can't make yourself love someone. You can open a loving feeling in yourself so that you can include more and more people in, but love is something which comes to us. We find ourselves feeling love for someone. It's not generated by an intention. Rather, it's almost like a breeze that's blowing and we put ourselves in the way of it...*

*...When we say 'I love you' there are three factors in operation. There is a subject, the one that does the loving; there is an object, the one who is loved; and there is a relation between the two, the movement of the expression of a warm connection of care and concern. This sounds pretty good, but, unfortunately, from a buddhist point of view it's not so good in so far as it is affirming that there is a real and enduring 'I'...*

*...Love, in a sense, is unimpeded flow of energy; being open and available to what arrives. It's not based on an attachment or dependency. You can relate to people for five minutes or thirty years and yet it can be fresh all the time. If you get to 'know' someone, and then you mediate your being with them through your assumed knowledge of them, freshness will diminish and, in a real sense, love vanishes...*

*...in directly experiencing the infinity of what we call 'ourselves', we experience the infinity of others. We don't try to put them in a box, keep them positioned so that they can reassure us about who we are. But rather, to use the traditional image, we interact with the world as sky to sky...*

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Good evening. Tonight we will look at the nature of attachment in relation to love, and explore how that fits in to the buddhist path of dzogchen.

### Love and our relationships

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In the general mahayana teachings of buddhism, that is to say the ones that are concerned with wisdom and compassion, a lot of attention is paid to love and generosity towards others. Aspirations such as 'May all beings be happy' are cultivated and there are meditation practices such as *tonglen* where we imagine exchanging one's own happiness for the suffering of others.

However in the meditation traditions which developed from this, the paths of tantra, mahamudra, and dzogchen, there is not much emphasis on love. They may even appear a bit cool, a bit abstract, and so what I'd like to do is to show how the understanding of the path of dzogchen is in fact really the practice of love.

Love is a very problematic word. It can mean many, many things. When we say to someone '*I love you,*' it sound like a gift, and like all gifts, implicit in it is a huge demand. If I love you then, of course, you should love me. So it creates an implicit contract, whereby if I give you myself, and you don't give me yourself, then I'm going to lose out!

Often when people fall in love it feels like an infinite experience. Like any new business, it starts with a lot of enthusiasm and excitement about the future, but sooner or later the accountant has to arrive: '*This is what I'm putting in, this is what I'm getting out. I do all of this for you, but you don't seem to notice what I do. And what are you doing for me?*'

Although at first we open to the person – because they seem to be the site of the possibility of infinite openness and expansion – we often find that we are pulled back into the cycle of arithmetic, of adding and subtracting, of trying to work out what is fair.

That is to say, the experience of love becomes a means to an end. It becomes a way of ensuring that my needs are going to be met by the other... that I won't be lonely... that the forms, the patterns of my existence are going to be fundamentally validated.

From this point of view, a lot of what we call 'love' is actually a means of trying to manage a basic existential anxiety. *'I don't know who I am. I don't really know what my life is for, but as long as you love me, I'll be okay.'* Like the song says, *'I've got my love to keep me warm'*. Love becomes a kind of duvet, a protection against some of the uncertainties of existence.

In previous generations relationships were guaranteed by the law. The law of the church and the law of the land both made divorce and separation very difficult. This has changed now and a lot of relationships are much more transitory. We may see that romantic love is a feeling, a feeling which creates a particular kind of mood that can suffuse our world, but that it doesn't actually establish anything. What holds things in place is more like planning, learning to think together. This of course, involves negotiation, which involves compromise, and so we are back again with the accountant and winning and losing. This is not a fall from heaven, it is just how it is.

When adults get together, especially if they have children, a lot of management is required and we come to the view that we have to go beyond an initial romantic phase into a period where we have a love that includes the limitations and irritating habits of the other. This can be very helpful because it allows us to expand our notion of ourselves and our capacity to relate to the wider world, however, it's still posited on a basic sense of being an individual self.

When we say *'I love you'* there are three factors in operation. There is a subject, the one that does the loving; there is an object, the one who is loved; and there is a relation between the two, the movement of the expression of a warm connection of care and concern. This sounds pretty good, but, unfortunately, from a buddhist point of view it's not so good in so far as it is affirming that there is a real and enduring *'I'*.

*'If I say, "I love you" I really mean it and I am a pretty reliable kind of person, so I can guarantee this feeling will not change.'* This is a rather dodgy territory because we all can be unreliable. We may formulate an intention, which is then maintained by an act of will. That is to say, we can manage our time and our energy so that we can guarantee e.g. to be at work on time and focus our attention over there. In a relationship you can mobilise the same clarity of intention toward caring for someone – holding them in mind, so that when you go shopping you buy the kind of food they like and you buy the kind of flowers they like. You remember their birthday; you take care of them when they're sick and so on.

But, love is not an act of will. You can't *make* yourself love someone. You can open a loving feeling in yourself so that you can include more and more people in, but love is something which comes *to* us. We find ourselves *feeling* love for someone. It's not generated by an intention. Rather, it's almost like a breeze that's blowing and we put ourselves in the way of it.

So, the subject is unreliable, the object is unreliable, and the connection between them is unreliable. These three factors are called the three wheels in Buddhist philosophy. They are the wheels which turn and keep the vehicle or the structure of our existence in place.

## There is always more than we can know

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But, who is this one whom we love? We have a sense of them, and if they would like to be loved by us, they present themselves in a particular way. We start to see them in a way that their mother would probably not recognise. That is to say, we are constructing a selective sense of the other. Loving and editing may be inseparable. We think we see all of the person, but we are three-dimensional creatures.

If you go into a park and there's a sculpture, as you walk up to the sculpture you see its shape, you think, '*Oh, it looks like that.*' Then, as you walk around it, it starts to look different. As you continue around it reveals more and more aspects. Which is its one true aspect? How the sculpture appears depends on how you are situated in relation to it. That is to say, you can never get, you can never appropriate, the whole sculpture. You may have a profound experience of one aspect of it, but there is always an excess. There is more that is not caught within the particular take that you have, from where you are situated.

Perhaps it is something the same with love, that there is always more to the other. There is an excess that will always elude whatever comprehension you have of them. And this is a blessing, for wanting to have total knowledge of the other can lead to frustration! If I know everything about you, then you will be completely incorporated into my world. But actually, this is impossible. Even if you have been with someone for many years, you may hear them talking to a friend on the phone, and you catch some tone in their voice they don't use to you. With their friends, with their parents, with their colleagues they are showing aspects that will never be shown directly to you. What we have with other people is an experience: an experience of the revelation of their being. This is our share. It's not total, it's partial and, it's also changing with circumstance. We change, they change, the feeling tone between us changes.

That is to say, love, although it may feel very profound and intense and the real truth of the situation, is not something that can escape the general fact of impermanence. All that we love will vanish. We love our own bodies, this precious house that we inhabit, and it will get sick and die. The bodies of those close to us become sick and die. The fact that we love someone can't stop the path of death. It can't stop the path of time. If you have children you love your children, yet they can grow into somebody you hardly recognise. When they were small, they were so sweet. That's because they were not really existing very strongly. [laughter] The more that they become who they are, the less it's possible to know them.

This points to a basic fact: the isolation of separation of the individual ego. We are born alone, we die alone. In between these points, in a profound sense, we live alone. We can be close to people physically, emotionally, and yet there is a separation because we cannot know what anyone else experiences.

Indeed, a lot of the time we hardly know what we experience, because we go off on daydreams. Life is happening but we are swirling around in some thoughts about this and that and being absent from the fullness of our embodied being. We are especially prone to develop images of the other, which exist primarily in our own head. Even if we talk, and talk, and talk with another person, they can never *fully* show who they are. They may reveal things about themselves – there's no end to storytelling. They also show themselves in their posture, their gestures, the look on their face and so on, but there is always an excess. There are other things going on that we have no access to.

The same with ourselves; we will never see our own back. You can look at yourself in the mirror, but this is a reflection. You see other people's backs and neck. In fact, your back belongs more to other people than it does to you. So, there is a lot of us that other people get, but we don't get.

### Identity is contingent and love is contingent

From the buddhist point of view, as we start to inquire into the facticity of our embodied existence, we find that, actually, we manifest moment by moment as ever-changing patterns of manifestation. Sometimes these patterns are harmonious with the environment and life seems to go easily. Sometimes they are conflictual with the environment and we become troubled with what's going on. We don't understand why other people are behaving the way they do which highlights our sense of being different.

In these moments we are looking for an ease of being, an ease of being that's generated by a pattern of becoming, a pattern of coming into a new form, which once again will get into a modulated rhythm with the patterns that are around us. That is to say, we often feel most at peace when we have harmony of our manifestation and the field of experience.

In order to facilitate that, we have to be willing to experience ourselves as a range of possible ways of manifesting. That is to say, if we have an over-refined sense of self, the clarity and the security, which that can seem to generate, is purchased at some cost, because I now have a defined shape. I am like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle and I have to take my little piece and try to find where it can fit in the world. I try here, I try there. It doesn't seem to quite fit anywhere...

So, we take a pair of scissors. Now, we have a decision. Do we cut the world, or do we trim our self? Extroverts try to change the world. Introverts often trim themselves, and it can be quite a painful thing to trim yourself. So, is there a place in the world for me where I can just be myself? But what we call, "myself," is a pattern. A pattern generated from – if you believe it – the influence of karma from previous lives, from family dynamics as you're growing up, the experience of school, the economic situation that's around when you start to move into the realm of work, and so on. That is to say, my pattern, that which is me, has come into being as a dialogic formation in communication with the environment around it. I am historically, situationally developed.

However I feel like me, and in wanting to be me as me, I want to meet someone who loves me as me. *"If you really love me, you will give me a sense of the infinite truth of my contingent identity."* That is to say, if you love me, you will believe the lie that I believe about myself because actually, I'm not the person whom you love. Or, rather, I'm not **only** the person you love.

That is to say, we are condemned to be multiple. We are rich in our creativity, in our responsiveness, and part of our problem is that we're not quite sure how to inhabit the quality of existence, which is flexible, and responsible, and beyond appropriation. It feels easier to retreat into some kind of fixed definition. So, for example, you hear someone using a word you don't know. You go home and you look it up in the dictionary, *'Oh, so that's what it means.'* But is that exactly how that person was using it? As Wittgenstein told us, if you want to know the meaning of a word don't look in a dictionary, listen to how it's used. Words show themselves in different ways in different situations. As the word is brought into conjunction with other words in the sentence, it shows certain

aspects of itself. You can't say what the word really means and in the same way, we can't say who we really are.

In terms of the buddhist notion of attachment, attachment is seen as being something quite unhelpful for us in that we lock into attachments because of an ignorance, because we've lost touch with how things are. How is it to be alive? We are here, we know it's us, That is to say, we experience, somehow, on some subtle level, the continuity of me being me, and yet we can't even predict how we're going to be five minutes from now. Our bodies move, sensations, emotions, thoughts arise. This is the facticity of our existence. This is how we are revealed to ourselves, and we don't know what's coming.

So, we become attached to an image of ourselves, which operates as a screen or veil that stops us being in touch with the immediacy of the phenomenological presentation. That is to say, who I am is co-emergent with the circumstances I'm in.

When we become attached to a particular idea of ourselves, it's as if we believe that we have some essence inside of ourselves: a true self, a real self. We might even go to workshops to engage in encounter sessions to find out 'who we really are'. *'I'm tired of being false, I'm tired of playing all these games. I just want to really be myself'*. If it's a good workshop you can really express yourself but then if you go to work on Monday morning, you probably shouldn't behave in the same way, because at work nobody's interested in your authentic self! They're interested in your capacity to fit into the role that you have, and how you perform the tasks that go with the role. Workshops like that can be quite exciting and seem very vital and real, you might go to another, and you discover something new, and equally authentic about yourself. *'Wow, this is a never-ending journey. Who knew that there was so much in me?'*

Well, why is that? Is it that there is some secret bank vault in the heart, full of treasures, or that the particular mood of the group you're in allows you to manifest yourself in this particular way? From the buddhist point of view, there is no essence to our individual identity. There is no distilled, true, drop of who we really are. That is to say, identity is contingent, and indeed, love is contingent.

It's extremely common to find that we fall in love with people who bear some relation to one or both of our parents, because my sense of who I am is a particular sequencing of patterns, patterns that first manifested in the early family matrix. In order for these patterns to show themselves in an easy way, I need to find somebody who has parallel patterns. So, if they speak a bit like my mom, that's a tune I can dance to. If I thought it was really my mom, that might be a little bit too Oedipal and terrifying. But somehow, we come together because we both know what to do. So, love me, love my pattern, because that's all you're going to get.

### So why then our felt sense of self?

If we are only patterns, what is this continuity of our felt sense of self? Well, in just the course of a day we go through many different changes. These are changes that we can be aware of. As our life is happening, we can be both consciously participating in it, and we are also aware.

In the tradition a differentiation is made between consciousness and awareness. In my consciousness there is a specificity of response. I become conscious that the level of water in my glass is going down and on the basis of that, my body moves through the



sequences of contractions and expansions of the muscle; I turn my spine in order to be able to pour in the water and successfully accomplish this very sophisticated manoeuvre. I am conscious that I am doing this. That is to say, there is an intention which is being organised towards a specific task, my sense of self, as it were, is coming together in the function of an agent or a manager. I have a perceptual feel: I can see things going on out there. I have a proprioceptive feel: I can feel the tightening and the relaxing of the muscles in my body as I turn, and bend, and so forth. I have a subjective intention towards these various object formations, and this is often revealed to us in terms of our internal self-narrative.

That is to say, if we do something in a conscious way, we can give an account of what we have been doing. So, when adults ask children what they were doing, and the child says, *'Playing,'* the adult continues, *'Well what were you playing at?'* The child then gets a little bit confused, because the whole function of playing is not to be very conscious. When you're playing, the imaginal realm and the realm of the senses move together without too much internal self-commentary. But if the child is sitting in the back of the car on a long journey, they are very able to give you a conscious account of how bored they are. *'Are we nearly there yet? I'm tired. Can't we eat something?'* and so on. There is consciousness rapping the events into a story line.

Consciousness acts as a commentarial process, like listening on the radio to a football commentary. Now, if you were not at the football match, it's quite strange to listen to someone talking about it, because the commentary and what is seen are not the same. They are linked but parallel worlds. One of the risks we run with our enormously established intelligence is to become very addicted to narrative. Because the actuality of a football match, people running around – there are many, many things going on but the commentator looking at it is picking out certain gestalt formations, and is giving a verbal account as if this was what was really happening. So narrative is always functioning as a simplification of the open experiential field. You walk down any street, thousands of things are happening simultaneously. We're in touch with this, but we can't think about it. We can't describe it.

Who is the one that gets everything? This is what is called awareness. In the tradition it's compared to a mirror. Mirrors in this room show quite a lot. Depending on how you angle yourself with it, it illuminates big areas. The mirror shows the room. It doesn't edit it, it doesn't pick highlights, the best bits, it just shows what's there. This is the quality of awareness.

All of us are aware. Awareness is the bedrock, the basis of our existence, manifesting in this open sphere which is the space of experience. We experience the rising of these three wheels I referred to earlier: the subject, the object, and the connection between them. I *feel* that I am the subject. I am sitting here, I am talking with you. This is me, this is you. That's clear. But, how I am with you is changing moment by moment. That is to say, due to the particular nature of this situation, I am called into being, or called into expression, and so I'm talking and saying all these different things. This an exceptional way of being. I wasn't doing it on the airplane when I was coming here. It is situationally specific. So it is me, but me on the basis of me being here with you. I am called into being in this way. Just as on your side, because you're listening, you are in a particular positioning. When we end, then again, you get up, you move around, you chat, you go off, you do many different things.

The specificity of how we are can be formulated, can be put into thought and language, by our consciousness, but this is not the whole of what is happening. There is

an excess. The whole cannot be caught by our consciousness. We will never know what is going on because knowledge, cognitive knowledge, is a very narrow slice of life.

For example, if you're learning yoga, you learn a new sense of gravity, of the line of the body, of balance. These are not constants. These are immediate relationships which become more and more manifest for you as you develop your sensitivity to the actual nature of embodiment. As you get used to it, you can be practicing in a state of awareness. As the flow of postures and the movement of breathing becomes second nature to you, the necessity of maintaining the correctness, as it were, of what you're doing through conscious intention starts to fall away until, eventually, you have a sense of the seamless flow of movement, experience, arising and passing through the space of awareness.

At first, when you go to learn something like yoga, there is usually an intention. *'I want become more flexible. I want to maintain my health,'* even, *'I want to get my body ready for the summertime.'* It becomes a means to an end; the consciousness is in charge, *'I am going to do this because I want to get to this outcome.'* But if you give yourself to the practice, if the practice is integrated as part of your existence, then after a while you're not doing it for any reason or purpose at all. Why do you do it? *'I do it because I do it. It's just what I do.'*

In that state, then you start to experience movement through space. What you are doing is not being captured by any pattern of egocentric intentionality. The basic energy of your existence is revealing itself through the sequence of asanas, and that's what it is. This can be taken out into the whole of life.

We are as we are. It comes into patterning, into relation with the context in which we are. As the ways of hopes and fears subside, we're present. Our lives are like this, are like that, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes lonely, sometimes feeling the warmth of intimacy. We become able to offer hospitality to our existence as it is. Rather than stepping apart from ourselves and trying to design the life that we really want, we are present with our life as it is.

### Plenty of space for everything

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In this open spaciousness, there's enough room for everything. Sometimes there's heartbreak, people close to us get sick and die. We don't want that to happen; there's space for that feeling. We accept what's happening. We're sad, we're touched and moved, persecuted. It is all part of life. Each of these experiences is valid as it is. In this openness, there is space for me as I am. I am not being attacked by life. My sense of identity, my map of who I am, and my map of how my life should be, that may well be under attack. So long as we cling to these, life will be abrasive and we will feel a lot of friction.

However the heart of the buddhist path is to let go of attachment to these maps, plans, world domination fantasies, and to be present with life as it is. In this way we find a middle way between the extremes of trying to be in control and making things happen on our terms, and the other extreme of feeling like a helpless victim.

Acceptance is a subtle balance of passive and active. Actively, we open to what is here. Passively, we accept what is here. We are not in charge, but neither are we at the mercy of events, because we manifest as participants within this evolving field of manifestation.



This is the heart of the dzogchen practice: to see that the self is not an essential formation. It doesn't have to be destroyed – because it's a pattern of manifestation. It's our calling card, our point of entry into the world with others. It's not who we really are, because we are not really anyone. We are an infinite potential of possibilities and the more we realise the emptiness of our ground nature, the more we're free to manifest many different possibilities. To put that in another language, we begin to accept and love all the possibilities of how we can manifest, so that, rather than entering into judgment and evaluation, *'I like this, I don't like this, this is good for me, this is not good for me,'* the sense of self is given its true function, which is not to be the judge or the gatekeeper, but to be the point of contact.

Manifesting from the space of awareness, in the unique specificity of whatever the situation is as it evolves moment by moment, we allow ourselves to be in this way, in that way. However we are, this is how we are. There is a paradox here. The more we accept just, *'Oh, this is how I am,'* without making conditional effort, there is a natural process of purification, so that our more selfish or malicious intentions soften. We find ourselves with a sweeter temperament, more able to connect with others because we have less and less of an agenda. If I can be at home in what is happening, I'm not storing up a big shopping list of how I want it to be. That is to say, we work with circumstances, finding a way of being present with whatever is occurring.

Instead of starting inside me and moving out towards the world, we can start to see that I am always already in the world. You're born out of your mother's body. Your mum was in the world, you come out of your mum's body into the world, but it's a world you were already in except before, you were in it inside your mum. In the morning, when you go out of your front door, you go out of your house into the world. But your house is in the world, it's not somewhere else. We're always in the world. This is the basic non-duality of our experience. Whatever lines we draw across our life, cutting things up, making divisions – inside, outside, mine, yours – this is like children drawing patterns on the sand.

### The full circle of self and other is undivided

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Other people are not an optional extra, a kind of side salad, whereas 'I' am the main dish! Other people are our lives. We wear clothes made by other people. We speak language formulated by other people. The knowledge we have comes to us through school, through the minds and books of other people. We walk down roads made by other people. Other people are our existence.

That is to say, the full circle of self and other is undivided. So, we start from within the circle, or the sphere, or the mandala of existence. So, if others and self are not two separated domains, then love and concern is natural. You don't have to make an effort to love others like yourself, because in that sense, others *are* yourself. Children come into being with their parents, through their parents. The self is a dialogic formation. Psychologically we are born through interaction. If a baby is brought up all on its own in a little room, it will not do well. Without the other, we don't become a self.

The self and the other emerge together, they're woven together. This is revealed when we relax into awareness. Egotistical consciousness operates as a kind of ceaseless ignoring of this basic fact. I feel that in order to protect my own individual life, I have to be very busy, I have to work out who is a friend, who is an enemy. But, of course, as the Buddha pointed out, enemies become friends, friends become enemies. How will I position myself here? What do I really want to get?

Well, often we get very confused, *'I'm not sure what I really want.'* When people are in this state they can feel a bit stupid whereas actually, this is the birth of wisdom. Paradoxically, again, the more you know what you want the more stupid you are, because, how can you be touched and moved and taken out of yourself if the blinkers of your self are welded onto the side of your head?

We are all in it together. Wherever we go we are sharing our situation with others. We hear sounds we did not make. We smell scents we didn't make. We taste food and drink we didn't make. We are alive through our interaction with that which is other, and it's only of use to us when it stops being other.

### Love in dzogchen

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We exist as ceaseless intercourse. Moving out and receiving the pulsations of interactions. Sex is not just a genital activity. Sex is happening through the eyes, and the ears, and the nose, and the mouth, and not just with another person. This is the actuality of our co-emergence, moment by moment. The less fearful we are, the less defiant we are, the more we can offer ourselves into the play of the world.

From the point of view of dzogchen, this is love. It means we are available. We are not hiding inside ourselves. We are not coming to the world with a particular shopping list, but, we respond to what is happening. We don't know how we're going to respond, and the blessed thing is we don't need to know how we're going to respond. That is to say, this huge superstructure of cognitive narrative that we run a lot of the time, this mediating faculty, is not necessary. It's just happening. We're in it together.

Love, in a sense, is unimpeded flow of energy; being open and available to what arrives. It's not based on an attachment or dependency. You can relate to people for five minutes or thirty years and yet it can be fresh all the time.

If you get to 'know' someone, and then you mediate your being with them through your assumed knowledge of them, freshness will diminish and, in a real sense, love vanishes. Yes, you may have an accommodation, you get along together, you know how to keep this show on the road. But where is the space for the freshness of the other? Because if other people have a stale image of us, and we have a stale image of ourselves, we have a very stale relationship. We know what to do, we know who we are, but we don't see what is there.

### The function of meditation

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The function of meditation is to allow us to relax out of the matrix of interpretation. Which means also relaxing the felt sense of neediness and ontological insecurity which is embedded in the quality of the ego, so that self and other arise together as the unified field of our experience.

We then don't need to form attachment to the world. The basis of our co-relating is not the contract, but the very direct experience of participation in a shared field. This is spacious, fresh, and also intimate, an intimacy which is not something to be protected, but rather something which is robust because it's part and parcel of being present.

If you sit in a café with a friend and you're not preoccupied by what happened at work, and you're not in a hurry to get to the shops before they close, but you just give

yourself to being with them, it's very close. You are there, they are there. You are there together. This is a very beautiful feeling.

The possibility of meditation is to have this all the time, so that it doesn't become just a peak moment or a special moment engendered by meeting my close friends, but it's the pervasive feeling tone of being present and available in the world with others, who are not truly others – so that what we call '*self*' and '*other*' are moving in this eternal interaction of love, which is free of desperation, free of accountancy, free of trying to ensure one's own benefit.

The more we are able to accept our lives as they are, the more we can accept the lives of others as they are. When we stop being violent towards ourselves, putting demands on ourselves, we can stop putting demands on others. Because if we are grounded in space, we are not resting on anyone. We open to being inexperienced, to relating in the moment with the other, but this is light and fresh. It's not heavy, it's not a burden, and so we don't need to make a contract of '*I'll be there for you if you're there for me,*' as if being there for the other was some burden that we needed some recompense for.

From this point of view the heart is like a cornucopia. In the tradition it's called the *dharmadhatu*. It means the ground, or the space of all possible phenomenon. There is no end to it and in directly experiencing the infinity of what we call 'ourselves', we experience the infinity of others. We don't try to put them in a box, keep them positioned so that they can reassure us about who *we* are. But rather, to use the traditional image, we interact with the world as sky to sky.

The world is open, radiant, and shimmering, as are we. This body is alive. Blood is moving, breath is moving, hormones are moving. This is a shimmering palace, as it is for everyone. This is a shimmering world, a world we are already in with everybody else.

Well, this is a brief look at what love means in the dzogchen tradition.

#### Question about responding to how others treat us

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**Student:** Does accepting what is there mean that I need to accept mistreatment?

**James:** So if somebody is being harsh to you or cruel to you, you feel that and you can respond. How will you respond? According to the actual situation. If we are really present, we feel the actual topology of the world. The more we do the practice, the less we project our interpretations onto the world. Very often, when we react to circumstances, it's the circumstance as interpreted through our habitual matrix, which can be why our reaction doesn't quite meet the actual situation.

If you have been placating many other people, and you come home and you kick the cat, that's not so good. We have to be very precise so that our response fits the actual situation. This does not mean being at the mercy of what is going on nor does it mean being the master or being in control. We need to check out, '*What exactly is this situation?*' otherwise it gets a little out of balance.

I remember, after I lived many years in India, I came back to England in the mid '80s. I was involved in some university activity, and I started to encounter women saying to me, '*As a man you have done this!*' I had never met this new form of feminism. I kept

asking myself what was my historical responsibility? *'This is what you men do.'* Okay, what will I do with this? I personally didn't do it, but somehow I am culpable. So, this is quite difficult. Of course men have done many exploiting and cruel things to women in history and also in the present day, but when we take up a particular position, a dogmatic position, although there is truth in it, a historical truth, a structural truth, it's not necessarily, precisely attuned to the specifics of this moment.

So, finding the middle way between being too accepting, in a passive, victim-y way, and too active, in a determined way, is really quite difficult. If we're experiencing cruelty or oppression it's very important to respond in a full way, but the fullness has to fit the actual situation, which is why a lot of meditation practice involves experiencing these packages of undigested or unresolved habitual formation, feeling the temptation to fuse our minds and go off on some kind of riff, and then to relax back, maybe simply following the breath, and to let it go. Let it go.

The meaning, the value, the significance, the temptation of this thought formation, has been established somewhere else, some other time. It presents itself as currently relevant, but my meditation task is to stay present on the breath. *'Oh, but this is important.'* No, it's a distraction, it's an importation.

A great deal of meditation is about dropping the strands which weave themselves together into the patterns of meaning that seem so definite, so certain, but are actually imprisoning, for both ourselves and for others. This means that we start to trust the freshness of the moment and that we don't have to over-prepare, because a preparation is the importation of something from the past into the present.

In some situations such as at work, we do need to prepare, but we still have the task of bringing what we have prepared into the current situation. If you're teaching at school, or teaching yoga, or working in therapy, or working in an office, you can have a teaching plan, a class plan, a therapy plan, a marketing strategy. But it's the actual situation it's when the people turn up, and the state they're in, and the mood in the meeting that determines what can actually happen. We're always working with circumstances.

This returns us to your question: how can we avail ourselves of the optimal repertoire of moves which allow us, in an effective way, to work with a circumstance as it's arising?

Okay? Maybe that's enough. Thank you for your attention.