
Illusion delusion and confusion

James Low

Public talk, Shang Shung Institute London

13th March 2020

Transcribed by Kate Egetmeyer

You can watch the video here <https://youtu.be/6Pjjn0hiNkM>

Four aspects that move together: magic, illusion, delusion, confusion	1
Illusion: to be taken in by appearance	2
Immediacy or pattern reiteration?	3
Language as a vector of illusion	4
Asleep on the job	5
At home in the world, or in a cocoon?	5
Magic: (<i>chom trul</i>) an illusion that stretches and troubles your mind.....	7
Interactivity in a co-emergent field	8
Stillness and movement	9
What is the essence of me?.....	10
Delusion: believing in the illusion.....	10
Everything is pulsation	12
Participants, not puppets.....	12
'Self' is a verb.....	13
We can have it all.....	15
Confusion: trying to think our way out of delusion keeps us in confusion.....	16

Four aspects that move together: magic, illusion, delusion, confusion

The theme for this evening, for tomorrow and the half-day on Sunday is the same. It's really about four aspects that move together: the first is magic, the second is illusion, then

delusion and confusion. They're not very different one from another, but they're all at the heart of the buddhist understanding.

In European culture we usually scan things in terms of a polarity between reality and fantasy. We have a sense of 'the real' as being something substantial, something we can rely on, something which is in some way enduring. From the buddhist point of view this is itself delusion. It's a very stupid thing to believe in reality—there is no reality. That's maybe a bit confusing at first, so it's important that we get a working sense of what these terms mean and how they're being used. In dzogchen, mahamudra, madhyamika and all the various buddhist schools we find many, many descriptions addressing this theme.

Illusion: to be taken in by appearance

We'll start with illusion. An illusion is something which seems to be true, or, in our ordinary sense, real, and yet it's not. We've probably all experienced a mirage on a hot summer's day. You're going along in a car and you see this glittering water in front of you. It looks like water: you don't have to trick yourself into believing that it's water. It seems to be there, and yet it's not. The basic structure of an illusion is that of an appearance offering us the seduction of believing something is there which is not, or that that which is there has a truth status which it doesn't really have. Another classic example would be going out on a full moon night and looking in a pond—you see the reflection of the moon in the water—it is as if the moon is there in the water. Or, you see a rainbow in the sky and it is as if there is something there.

What we have is appearance, but our move is towards a consolidation of the appearance. That is to say, we take the appearance to be an indication that some personal or individual essence is behind it, that this is the appearance of something—*when a rainbow appears in the sky that's an example of rainbows*, as if there were an essential rainbow out there somewhere. That would be like a platonic pure idea: somewhere there's a perfect form of the rainbow and here we have this slightly imperfect version of it. *But when you see a rainbow you see a rainbow*: we name it, we start to learn the qualities of rainbows and we feel secure in our knowledge of rainbows. An illusion occurs when we're taken in by an appearance and we give credence to it, we believe in it. We believe that there's something there which is secure, defined, predictable, that it's a site of knowledge. Then, of course, it dissolves, because if you're looking at the moon in the water and someone throws a stone into the pond the moon dissolves. The wind blows the cloud and the rainbow vanishes. The car accelerates, or you go around the corner, and the mirage vanishes.

From the buddhist point of view it's about the nature of perception and conception. Usually our perception of the world—that is to say, the life that we have through our senses, through what our senses reveal—is instantly merged with conceptualisation. When interpretation, which is essentially the play of our imagination, of our mental activity, gets fused, as it were, into an appearance, then we can take hold of it. Now we can apprehend the world, and for the ego aspect of our individual existence this is reassuring because it allows us to build up a sense of competency, of being able to relate to many different kinds of phenomena. *Something is there and I know about these kinds of somethings*. And so I develop a sense of personal efficacy and efficiency in moving through the world and am able to create patterns of interpretation. I can compare this rainbow with the one we saw last week—*this one is better*, or *this one is more faint*—as if comparing and contrasting were somehow operational in truth. The differentiating of the real truth of phenomena, or what we take to be their reality, arises from and is strengthened by this possibility for comparing and contrasting—and in order to do that you have to have some thing: you have to have *this* thing and *that* thing. Say you just have a pure appearance, that you allow your mind to relax and you open your gaze to a tree in the park or to

a cloud in the sky. The more you relax the more you release yourself from your habitual function of grasping at the concept and of wanting to make sense of the world, a habit which alienates us from our senses. When we release this meaning-making we find that the world doesn't at all vanish: it remains as other than what we thought it was. There is more potential, more possibility, in our vision when it's not apprehended.

Immediacy or pattern reiteration?

This is one of the chief aspects of training in the visual arts. Say you're looking at a tree that you're going to paint. If you start with an over-determined notion of what a tree is like you won't be allowing the conversation—that is to say, the relational aspect of this appearance, this patterning of phenomena in this very moment—with your own mood, with your technical capacity, with the kind of palette you have available to you, whether you're painting outside or in, and so on. What emerges then is not the truth of anything: it's a gesture. Most of our life is gestural. We move in particular ways and reveal aspects of our embodied being in relation to the field of appearances, but the freshness of that tends to be covered over for us because we build up expectations. Being able to imagine many different possibilities we think we know what will be there before we arrive, and so the terrible thing is that what we end up encountering is ourselves. It's actually quite rare for us to have a truly fresh experience. It's like in psychotherapy, where there's a lot of attention given to this. When Freud talks about repetition compulsion he's not talking necessarily about a drive to complete a reiteration of a particular pattern: it's more that you imagine you're doing the same thing again.

Here we have a sign outside the room that says we should wash our hands. We know how to wash our hands. You get the tap, you get the soap and so on, and you make these different gestures. If you work in a hospital they teach you how to wash your hands professionally, because there are proper ways to do it to get the soap in between the fingers, and so on, so you become an expert in hand-washing. Now, when we're washing our hands—we've all got hands here—we're doing something very familiar: *I'm just washing my hands*. But what are these hands? We have conceptual hands and we have presenting hands. In this moment in which you're washing your hands there's the temperature of the water, there's the soap which does or doesn't have a smell, you're in a certain mood, you're washing your hands vigorously, maybe mindfully, or unmindfully: this is the actuality of what is manifesting in this moment. You have never washed your hands in that way before, and, in fact, you've never had the hands that you are washing until this moment. These hands, the hands being washed, are fresh. This is an appearance which is constellated in the midst of the vector of many different factors operating together. But what you have when you want to consolidate your idea of basic competence and a basic predictable knowledge of the world is that you don't attend to the immediate disclosure of sensation in your fingers and so on. You don't really attend to it at all because you go on automatic pilot—*I know how to wash my hands*—so in that moment you can actually be thinking of something else, and if so, then what are you washing and who is doing this washing? This is an example of an illusion, that you take it for granted that you have hands and that you can know what your hands are, and so you exist in the thingness of your existence. *This is me, I know how I am. This is you, I've seen you before. You always do the same thing.*

Then life gets heavy and stuck, becomes what we generally call neurosis. This is pattern reiteration. The advantage of apprehending a particular pattern as an exemplar of an underlying deep structure is that every time the pattern arises, even if you clock that it's a bit different this time, it's as if it's still the manifestation of the underlying truth of things—*that's what you're like, you're always doing that*. Ordinary language is full of such statements.

When we start to look into the immediacy of the situation, however, if we stay freshly in the senses we start to see that there are two streams running parallel: we have what's coming

through the senses and we have how we interpret it. The interpretation manifests as the display of many, many different factors—childhood, language, class, culture, gender and more—but, of course, the interpretation is not fixed. We have a potential of interpretation, evoked according to various things. For example, if you had to run to get here you were breathless and wondering whether you'd arrive late, which creates a particular mood inside you. Then you enter the room, where everyone else is more or less calm, and you think, *oops, uh-uh, what now?* And that mood influences how you hear, how you respond, and so on. What we take to be subject side, the profile, the topology of myself, doesn't belong to me. If I've had to run because the previous train was cancelled, or I just missed a bus, that running is part of my existence: I didn't want to run, I didn't plan to run, but I found myself running. That is to say, my sense of the requirements of the situation, my gaze into the future—*oh shit, we start at half-past-six, I've got to get it together!*—I'm entrained into runningness, and runningness brings me here in a particular mood. Or you might have arrived here very early and you've been sitting around, are a little bit bored, drifting off and thinking about this and that—*god, when are we ever going to begin, what am I doing—all these people breathing in and out, I'm going to get infected, I'm going to die....* All sorts of thoughts can arise. This is the unpredictable, ever-shifting, wind-like movement of the mind—and simultaneously, of course, your gaze is changing. You just need to turn and look around the room, move your head one little inch and a whole new vista opens up, with different ranges of perception, colour, shadow, with seeing someone clearly, then not seeing them when they become part of your peripheral vision, and so on.

Language as a vector of illusion

This is the interactive field, very unstable in its unpredictability, and into that, in order to function, we feel the need to be able to predict. If we know someone's name we can stick their name onto them—it's as if we're seeing them again. *Hello John, good to see you.* Who am I seeing? Am I seeing John? What is John? John-for-John's-mother, John-for-John's-lover, and John-for-me are different Johns. It's as if through the naming you've got hold of something veridical, that rings true and is reliable—and this is an illusion. This is an illusion. Language is one of the many vectors of illusion within which we operate, especially when we feel that language has actual, real reference, that if I say 'camera' I'm referring to a thing which is in front of me. Generally speaking, when the thought-sound 'camera' starts to arise in my head, arising, as it were, subject onto object, the signifier, the formulation of *this is a camera* is a mental event, and the signified camera is also a mental event. What is signified is always mental: you don't get out of the mind—if you actually go over and touch the camera, and you lick it and you rub it on your face and put it down your trousers, this camera will reveal all sort of different qualities. What is the camera? You can only take care of, get close to, or have a real sense of the camera as camera-for-me. Camera-for-camera is a land you will never, ever visit. What you get is camera-for-you: this particular camera in this particular moment. That is to say, you cannot separate what you take to be the truly existing object out there from your interpretation.

This has a lot of implication for buddhist meditators, as we'll explore in some detail tomorrow when we have more time. The key point at this stage is to start to see that if the world is not established in itself 'out there', that if the world is a revelation not of fixed things but of potential, and of a potential revealed through my quality of participation in this moment, then there's both a freshness of engagement and a kind of bewilderment at the same time—because I can't make sense of it. Then, of course, arises the question, *do I need to make sense of it?* If I live in my narrative sense of self, if I see the world as a whole stream of stories issuing out at me, wrapping themselves around the moments of my existence, creating patterns, shifting my desire to be close to or distant from different people, different situations, foods and so on, then it's 'my world': what I get is my world. This is enormously important because if I don't get access to a real world that exists out there then the world as revelation depends on the quality of my participation. That is to say, if I fall asleep on the job I'm going to have a dull world.

Asleep on the job

Falling asleep on the job means to fall asleep into the dreamlike weaving of my habitual forms of interpretation so that I am carried along on a stream of thoughts, but I'm not actually thinking. There's an absence of freshness, so it is as if I know, for instance, what people from various different backgrounds are like: Pakistanis are like this, Chinese people are like this, men are like this, gay people are like this.... Everywhere in the world we see prejudice, and this is its very structure: a 'pre-judice', a judgment made yesterday, is taken to be valid and projected into today—and I can extend it out from *oh, he's a Pakistani so he's like this*, to *all Pakistanis are like this because that's what Pakistanis are like*. We see so many wars. So many of the difficulties of welcome and inclusion arise from the idea of having definite knowledge about people. The exploitation which occurred in the past, and which continues, on the basis of people believing that such behaviours are valid, is clearly a mental activity. If you believe that certain kinds of people can be enslaved and that, in fact, it's appropriate to enslave them *because they are slave material*, because *these are the kind of people who get enslaved*, you might also believe that these kind of people should not be educated because *why would you educate that kind of person?* As soon as you begin to think of 'that kind of person' you're taking a category, which is a mental event or construction, and believing that it expresses a truth about what you actually perceive, and with that belief you're saying, *my category, my belief, my interpretive matrix, allows me to speak with absolute confidence about the world*. At this point in time we frequently hear many world leaders speaking in this way. They claim the monologic truth, that because they see things as they are they don't need to enter into conversation, they can just shoot from the hip. They don't need to build it up as a matter for unpacking.

Maybe we start to think, *okay, I'm involved all the time in what's occurring. I don't really know what's out there, I can't really control that much, but maybe I could have a little bit more sense of me and whether I am present or not*. And once we start to meditate we notice that, actually, we're absent quite a lot of the time. We're just running along on this automatic pilot of knowing how to do things. You walk down the street thinking of something, you're not really having to look at the street. Maybe you suddenly notice that there's broken glass or some dog shit, or someone's pushing toward you and they're lost on their phone, but most of the time you're just sort of drifting along with a not very precise registering of this field—which is your life! This is the field of emergence of which you are a part! We participate inside a shared field of experience.

'Shared' doesn't mean that we all get the same share, not because of some mean-spirited hierarchy but simply because we are embodied in different ways. For example, through our own moods we have different availabilities. Some people are morning people, some people are evening people. If you've had a drink of alcohol that will affect your mood, if you're hungry that will affect your mood, or if you've quarrelled with your lover that will affect your mood—there are so many things which are part of your existence. From the point of view of meditation these aspects are not optional extras: they're not something to be pared away so that you get to this pure form of yourself and awaken to who you really are as someone. You are, in fact, many ones. You are a multitude, a plurality, you are an ungraspable potential—evoked situationally. You don't belong to yourself, you don't belong to the other; but you find yourself, co-emergent, in the pulsation of attention with that person. When you have a pre-determined agenda, even if it's benign, there's a kind of violence in it. Say you have to be in a hospital lying in a bed and the nurse comes along to do something, they might speak quite nicely but they're going to stick this needle into you—they've got their job. They're looking at their watch, they're thinking about a cup of tea and going off shift, and in that moment you're an object they're going to act on. They don't really want you blethering on about your anxieties and so on.

At home in the world, or in a cocoon?

The field we are in is determined by our availability, and this, really, is the heart of meditation. It's these various strands and moods and flavours which give us more chance to be more available, and under diverse circumstances. It's the restriction of availability that closes down the possibilities of our existence. Traditional texts say the mind is like the sky. The sky has no gatekeepers, it has no immigration control. The sky accepts whatever is arising. Nuclear bombs, airplanes, viruses, bacteria—all sorts of things are flying through the sky. Easy come, easy go: phenomena arise in the sky—self-arising!—and then they vanish— self-liberating!—and the sky just stays open. This is how our mind actually is. However, when we collapse into the patterning of the content of our mind, into our habit-formed tendencies and selective turns of liking and disliking, of wanting more or wanting less, these tilts, these selectivities, bring us into the patterning that we recognise as I-me-myself. *I am like this, and on the basis of being like this, this is what I choose.*

When you're in a restaurant you scan through the menu and choose something, often something you're familiar with, something that you like to eat. There are plenty of other things, but *heh, not for me!* Why not for me? Presumably the restaurant isn't authorised in a kind of Russian roulette with some of these dishes poisoned so you'd better choose carefully—it's all food. There are other people eating the foods you don't want to eat, but you don't want to eat them. Why? *Because I'm me: I'm like this.* This 'like' is a wonderful word: *I'm 'like' this.* Cats are more like leopards than they are like dogs, right? 'Like' indicates comparing and contrasting, so when we say, *I'm like this,* it means, *in this moment the lived actuality of me and my idea of me are brought into alignment.* 'I am like myself': now what could that mean but that 'I am like my idea of myself', that the truth of me is not this body and the space around it, but the idea of it. In Buddhism this is called stupidity, which means being very dull, because you think you're an idea. The advantage—and the only advantage—of privileging the idea is that it lets you turn down the attention you're putting through your senses. And this makes the world more manageable because you are tuning out so many of the factors which are arising. I mean, when you walk in the streets here, they're really, really interesting, the architecture's so chaotic in many ways—old buildings, new buildings, different shaped windows—it's just new experience, new experience, and flowing, flowing, flowing. You can never get enough of it because it changes with the season, with the time of day, with the people who are out in the street, with when they turn on the electric light—at first it's kind of wobbly and then it strengthens and that affects the shadows—this is your lived world, this is what you actually inhabit.

But we *don't* inhabit it, because we are inhabiting a cocoon held in place by commitment to our ideas about ourselves. Then, in order to maintain an idea about myself I maintain ideas about other people: that is to say, I want definite, predictable knowledge. It feels, then, as if psychology, psychiatry and diagnosis become very important so that you can formulate some indication of the key patterns operating in a person, and on the basis of that come to some kind of conclusion about how they are and what might be done in order to help them, or to shift them. This is very, very crude! You take the living complexity of a person and try to squeeze it into the categories that you have—*oh, so this is what they suffer from!* Now you're not at all interested in the person because you've got the truth on them, which is embedded in the DSN5, or the ICT10 or whatever, one of these books of identifications. You've got to the truth of them—*this person's a heretic!* Or, *this person is an enemy of the jihad,* or *this person is from a substandard race,* or (if you're like me, if you're Scottish), *this person is English!* English is pretty bad if you grow up in Scotland—you wouldn't want to be English: *you know what the English are like.* And I grew up in Glasgow: *you know what the people from Edinburgh are like... Jesus!* It's like that. It's so interesting when you catch your own prejudice because then you can see it, so delicious in its simplification: you don't have to think because you know. Nowadays we think, 'Racial prejudice, gender prejudice, sexual orientation prejudice? Not good.' And it's 'not good' because it packs people into a flattening, a homogenisation—*they're all like that, you know what they're like*—and so we decide, 'Oho, let's not do that!'

Buddhism, essentially, just extends this a bit further. *This is a tree*. Really? Why do you want to put it into tree-ness? What is it? Have a look. When you look at the tree you can't speak. There's so much: the branches, the colours, the shapes, the light when the wind moves.... It's not invisible, it's not hidden, it's a revelation, but it's not an apprehendable revelation. *But it's an oak tree*. Ah, now you've got your teeth into something! *It's an old oak tree, or, it's a young oak tree. Some disease is going around in oak trees. It's terrible! What can we do about it?* Off we go—narrative, narrative, narrative.... But if you stay with the thing itself, through the senses, without 'making sense of it', you can't speak, you can't think... and yet you are. It's like a holiday from the tedium of your mental construction. That's why the senses are so very important to us, but, of course, we live in a world where conceptual identification has become very important.

Magic: (*chom trul*) an illusion that stretches and troubles your mind

According to the tradition (and this is not necessarily about time, it can also be an immediacy), the arising of the potential, which is often called the ground or the base or the source, manifests in two particular directions. In one of these directions the arising of the energy of the ground is aware of its own ground—I am the radiance of the ground—before we think 'person', or anything. It's this self-luminous '*here we are*.' The other pathway is to lack awareness of the ground or source, and so there's just an '*oh, what's this?*' For example, in the famous prayer or aspiration, the Kunzang Monlam, it says, 'These two, aware and unaware, arise like magic (*chom trul*).' So, magic... miracle....

The Buddha Shakyamuni performed many miracles and these are translated into Tibetan as '*chom trul*', which means that something appears and it's there, but it's not really there—a blessed illusion—and it's a blessing because it kind of stretches your mind. *This happened?? Fuuuu... how did that happen?* Mm hm, you can forget about it, but if you stay with it—*this doesn't make sense*—it's troubling. *How could that happen?* Being troubled is a major part of our path.

As we know, Prince Siddhartha lived in a very protected environment when he was young. His father didn't want him to be exposed to the world, and when he did go out of the palace he saw an old person, a sick person and a dead person, and then he saw a yogi. He hadn't encountered any of these experiences before, and they rankled, they got to him, like a stone in his shoe. He couldn't settle, and this shifted him into, *well if this is the case, what am I doing with my life? I can't just put the blinkers on and go day after day after day 'business-as-usual'. What's it all about, what is this? I'm going to die! I'm going to die... and all the things I've done, all the bloody exams I've studied for, all of this, all the tax I've paid, what the fuck was it all about, what was it for? It must be for something. Is it for anything? Maybe it's not for anything.* That's very troubling indeed, and the advantage of that kind of trouble is that it starts to loosen up the constrained patterns of our predictive operation. *Oh! Maybe I could do something different!*

So he leaves the palace and wanders around as a yogi, engaged in all kind of ascetic practices, and so on. So now he's a yogi. After a while, six years the texts say, he's thinking, *what the hell am I doing? I'm a yogi, I'm starving, I'm cold, I'm hungry! I've come from a palace—what am I doing? ...But I can't be in the palace and I don't want to be a yogi anymore—I've had enough.* So he cuts some kusha grass, a grass that has a very nice soft ending to it, a local girl brings him some milk-rice and he sits under a tree and says, 'I've had enough. I'm not doing anything.' And as he sits all kind of habit formations arise for him, all kind of interpretations about what's going on, so that he could go this way or that way, and he just sits with it. At some point he reaches down and touches the earth and says, 'Be my witness: I'm not moving.' And the more he finds

himself able not to move, the more clearly he sees: *It's the mind that moves! Sensation arises and pass, thoughts arise and pass, memories arise and pass, and if you don't get on them—because they're like buses and trains and you just don't get on them—they're just passing through, passing through, passing through.*

Gradually his mental clarity—instead of it being organised as a consciousness of particular things in such a way that he can think about them and make more patterns—that particularising consciousness relaxes into a simply knowing, not in the sense of knowing about what is arising and passing, but of simply knowing or noticing that many things are arising and passing. This opens up to reveal itself as an awareness, an awareness which you can't take hold of. It's not 'any thing', and in this sense it's unborn: it hasn't been born into the world of real things. It's here, it's present, but not present as someone or something. Awareness, the mind itself, has no race or colour, no ethnic or national identity. It is unconstrained, undefined and uncompounded, and because of that it can offer hospitality to everything, to everything we can see, hear, touch, smell. Everything we can remember, or imagine in the future, is the movement of the mind. It's the movement of the mind. When we encounter other people we think, *wow, you're not like me—how can that be?* Potential is arising in that form and in that form and in that form. The potential is the potential of the emptiness of the ground.

Interactivity in a co-emergent field

When we look to find ourselves, our true selves, who we really are, we encounter lots of storylines: things our parents said, things our school said, what our political interest groups said—many, many narratives and interpretations. These are all storylines. You hear someone describing you, or you describe yourself, and when you stop talking it's over. Now you say something else, now you say something else, and something else. The descriptions you give of yourself appear to be valid in the moment but they're just vanishing like steam. You switch off the kettle and the steam starts to fade. So all these constructs—racial identity, gender identity, age and so on—are positions in a dance drama, and there is no choreographer, nobody setting out to make it this way. There's no originatory god with a meta-plan to plonk everything into its place, but we find ourselves, due to infinite, interactive sequences of causes and effects being this kind of person for a while—and we won't be like this forever, and me, at my age: I'm certainly not going to be like this forever, and if I get this virus [corona virus is just beginning to spread] I might be gone... all over... finished. *Gasp! How could that be? I'm me—how could I die? It's not possible! I've always been me, I'm going to live forever. You guys can die if you want, but not me!*

It's the idea of a self, a permanent self, a someone who is like this, self-defining, autonomous: people want autonomy, self-definition, independence. Independence from what? *I declare independence from the air! Then stop breathing. Oh! No, I think I'll keep breathing. I declare independence... from... food and drink... well, for a while.* What are you going to get independence from? You are an interactive part of the co-emergent field! We are interdependent, and yet we have the absolute particularity of ourselves as we are, moment by moment. This is not sustained by some enduring self-essence, but it's the pattern which is revealed. In a sense you have to be your own patterning as it patterns, so that if you're present in the arising of the patterning of yourself this is who you are—functionally, situationally, in this field—and then it's dissolved, and then dissolved, and then dissolved. The more you open to the openness which is the ground the more ability you find you have to manifest in different ways with different people. Then, there is an undeniable thus-ness or is-ness to being alive, but not alive as a thing. We're starting to move to the very edge of language, into a zone of paradox, of allusion. That's why there are many metaphors, like the moon in water, rainbow, mirage, and so on, because it can't be stated: the truth of our existence is inexpressible.

Now, there are a lot of dharma books, and in the Tibetan language alone there were thousands and thousands and thousands of books, incredible books, but none of them could say how it is—you can't say how it is. The function of study is to allow the language of dharma to massage you into a relaxation that allows the truth of *how* you are to show itself, without you trying to say *what* you are. When you meet someone and introduce yourself, '*I'm from this country and I do this*' and '*Oh, I was there as well,*' you start weaving all kind of stories and you're in the territory of thinking about and talking about, but we are not an about-ness—in the immediacy of our existence it is *this*, and the this-ness of *this* is inexpressible.

Stillness and movement

Expression, language, is not about wisdom: we speak in order to connect. Language is about compassion, or connectivity, or, it's a movement in the field of non-dual or undivided energy. It's an aspect of the potential of our existence, but through language you can't get to wisdom—wisdom begins with silence. That's why we have meditation in which we're just present, not doing anything in particular, becoming less distracted, with less following after the past and less waiting expectantly for the future. *And there's this... and this... and this and this...* and we're still here. We're not holding ourselves in place, we're not being mindful as an activity. When you're aware it doesn't really matter whether you're mindful or distracted, because the movement of the mind is movement and the stillness of the mind is still. The still mind is silent and the moving mind can talk, walk, engage with people, cook dinner and so on—all the ordinary activities of life. That is the movement of the mind. As we know with our bodies, we need to have space to move in: the movement of the mind is movement in the space of the mind, and the space of the mind is the fact that our awareness, our presence, is not a thing. Whenever you have a thing you have location and duration.

Right now we're in Hackney. We're in this building and we're going to be here this evening for a while. A certain period of time is allocated for this meeting. The seats are set out in a particular way. Your body is located here on this set for a moment in time. Energy always has location and duration, but the mind as awareness is not an energy: it is the field revealing the movement of energy. When you're dancing or singing or eating, whatever the activity is, it's you, but not the whole of you, and if you are very still and not moving that's you, but not the whole of you. The integrity of the individual is the space, this ungraspability of our awareness, revealing itself as a field. We're here in this room: this field is your field. No two people in this room are in the same field, but simultaneously you can't say that we're in different fields. According to how your body is situated a certain vista opens up in front of you—you see the back of some people's heads and so on. This is the unique specificity of your room. This is your room: no one else has it, just you. And it's like this when you move your head or bend down to tie your shoelace: a whole different world arises. *Ah... instantly arising, instantly arising!* In Tibetan we describe it as 'lhun drup'—lhun means a heap or a pile or a hill, and drup means accomplished: that is, it comes all at once. As you bend forward—*oh!*—suddenly the floor's there, then—*oh!*—no floor. *Oh!* I was looking over there, then, *oh hello!* It's like that: instant revelation, moment by moment, moment by moment, and within that field we are moving.

So we have this ungraspable, open ground, the undivided field within which we have the unique specificity of our movement, moment by moment—which is our movement as a descriptor, but it's not our movement as an autonomous intentionality because we find ourselves moving due to this or that. If somebody was to suddenly come into the room you'd turn your head and look—*what's that?* And then you'd know, *oh, I'm a puppet! I'm a puppet! You make a noise and I look—where's my autonomy gone?* We are interactive beings. This is the shared quality of the field that we emerge from, in and as, because we don't emerge out of the field, we emerge within the field, and the field is emerging within itself. What then is the individuality of the individual? Individual is a funny word because it means 'impossible to

divide', but we are dividing all the time: we're ceaselessly fragmenting. Now if we were just one thing, being fragmented would be bad news—if you had a vase and you dropped it you'd say, 'Aaaaarghhh, where's the glue?' You wouldn't want to be fragmented. But we are not one thing and we never were one thing. Culturally and socially you're given a name and people talk about you as if you were 'a person', but you have never been a person. That is delusion, a cultural virus that infects you, a false belief, a cause of madness.

What is the essence of me?

'You should try to behave better. I've seen the report from school—you're getting into trouble.' You talk to the child. 'You are somebody and you have to control yourself.' 'But he pushed me, he pushed me! What am I supposed to do? He pushed me—why can't I push back?' 'No, I saw *you* moving.' Kids have lots of experiences like that. Suddenly somebody's got the scissors out and they've cut around you, and you've become figural and everything else recedes into the background. There's just you in the spotlight. 'Ooooh, you're in trouble now, wouldn't like to be in your shoes, ooooh...' Oh. All alone. What's going to happen? 'I didn't mean to do it. I don't know why I did it!' So many people when they're caught by the police say, 'I don't know why I did it, I just don't know why I did it.' Shoplifting.... 'I don't know why I did it!' Of course they were thinking of nicking something, but they don't know why they had the thought that they needed to steal that—it just came into their mind and they fused into the thought and put the thing in their bag, and the detective catches them at the door. 'You've stolen this.' 'I didn't do it.' 'You did it.' 'Okay, I did it... but I *didn't* do it.' You may have had some experience like that in your life.

What is your agency? It's you, yes, but what is it that's expressing it? Is there some deep, true self inside, some master, some magus, some homunculus, some little essence of you? It's a field experience. Due maybe to poverty, maybe to contempt for organised society: all kind of reasons lead people into shoplifting and crime, and all kind of factors also lead some people to be studying in the university library until ten at night—everyone else has left, gone to the pub, and they're reading away because they've got their vision of how life should be. We get caught by ideas and the idea becomes the rhythm and the pulsation and the direction of our existence. So delusion is when you don't see what you're up to. It's an illusion: you *find yourself* having this kind of life. You might look back and think, *How did I end up like this? When I was young I never thought I'd be living like this. What the hell, how did this happen? Come on....* You end up with an *oh well, I guess this is me*. At that point you can think, *okay this is me*, but it isn't you: whatever you take yourself to be has been a co-creation with other people, with your school teachers, with your parents, siblings if you had them, if it was a friendly family, a rivalrous family, a cruel family... all kind of factors moving together. *Oh! I am performative and without a personal essence!* There is no performer of the performance of myself. There is no maker of the identity of myself. It is an illusion. You see the mirage.

A mirage arises due to causes and circumstances. The heat rising from the road causes the air to quiver in a particular way that appears to us as we move towards it to be the presence of water: there is no water. And there is no self—the self is an illusion. That doesn't mean you don't exist, but you don't exist as 'a thing'. There is no personal essence of you. The essence of you is emptiness, mahashunyata. This is the ungraspable, unborn, open ground of everything—and you are flowering, you are displaying, you are radiating from that, moment by moment.

Delusion: believing in the illusion

Delusion arises when you seek to apprehend this formation as indicating who you are. Working in therapy you hear all kind of sad stories, but one of the saddest flavours is the people who take so much responsibility onto themselves, who always blame themselves, who think that the difficulties in the family were due to them. *If only I had been better then my dad would have loved me.* Really... really? What you see in that moment is the desire for agency: 'if only'. *I am an autonomous subject, I am myself, I have to take responsibility for myself, I have to try to make the best use of this life that I have.* Pretty wild language! *I have a life*—really? Where'd you keep it, in the bank? What do you do with it, do you clean it? You have to clean your teeth, what do you do with your life? Kick it about? Give it to other people? *If you don't love me I'm going to kill myself. Without you I'm nothing.* So where's your life, where's your autonomy? Lots of young men, especially, get into this blackmailing of girls—*if you don't love me I'll die.* It might look romantic with Shakespeare but it's not very pleasant if you get involved in it.

Where is this self, then? The self is an idea, the self is an idea! We can look at this in detail tomorrow, try to see it in the stream of our own experience and do some practice to make it more immediately revealed to us. We're not trying to change anything, or develop something, or make our life different. We just want to see: when I explain myself to myself or to other people, am I revealing myself or covering myself? Am I showing myself or inventing myself? The narrative self from this point of view is a story. And the more you tell the story and develop the story, adding your adjectives and adverbs and bringing all kind of flavours and feeling tones into it, the more it is as if *this is who I really am.* So the function of meditation is to give yourself time to pause: is this story true? We like the movies, we like going to the theatre, we like reading novels. We like things that aren't true. We like to believe things that aren't true, and one of the reasons for that is that we believe that everything is true—and it's not true. Everything is fiction. Somebody wrote the novel.

The novel of yourself has multiple writers. It may have your name on the cover, "This is My Life", but your mum wrote one chapter and your dad another, and all these people: it's a group production, and it's you, and it's a construct. There's nothing wrong with the construct because it's movement, and if the movement is released from its entrapment in the cocoon of self-reference, from this endless reverberation around itself, it becomes connective, and we say, 'Oh! when I look at you I feel like this, and when I look at you I feel like this. I feel differently with different people—oh!' So I come into being in connectivity. I don't have a being, a private being inside, my true being, my true self. So who I hang out with, sure, is important, but more important is how I hang out. Do I actually receive people? Am I interested in people? Do I allow them to come in? What are the filters between me and the world? What is my editing frame of reference? *...I get a bit wary, not sure about other people, what they're thinking... I want to know what you're thinking.* That's a pretty stupid question—you could never say what you're thinking because it's already gone.... What I was thinking? *No, no, what are you thinking now?* It's already gone. Thoughts are very quick. You can never tell people what you're thinking. You just notice it as it's vanishing.

You can't know other people because they change and because they're not separate: this is the same for us. Delusion is taking the illusion as an image which is created by something, that there is some inner defining essence which could reiterate, repeat and represent that kind of structure, and then we believe in it because we live in a world of representation. When you are a kid you gradually learn your name. Your mum says, 'Didn't you hear me? I was calling you!' *Oh, okay: when I hear that noise I have to know 'that's me' and I have to run inside.* So, I am that. That's not a kind of Hindu mysticism—tat twam asi—it's just *I'm this name, I am my name.* Then the name, the nominative, gives you a noun, a something, and that thing then has people who like you and people who don't like you, and things you're good at in school and things you're not good at in school, and you start to get this profile, the topology of the lived experience of being yourself. That's what we inhabit, and it goes on and on, interacting and interacting. *I like this* and

I don't like that. We have enthusiasms and we get bored and so on—all of this is movement. Delusion is to imagine that the movement is manifested or driven by some internal stasis of true definition or true self. It is the movement of emptiness, the movement of awareness.

Everything is pulsation

Now, if you're new to this way of looking at things it can seem very strange. It's a basic question: how can something come out of nothing? Well, it's very easy. When something comes out of nothing it's the something of nothingness—'something' is how nothing shows itself, and the something, when you look at it, is inseparable from nothing. 'Nothing' is not an annihilation, it's not a homogenisation. We're not throwing everything into a blender and smoothing it all out. Each moment of existence has an absolute precision, but it's not a something—you can't catch it. What you catch is concept and language. You catch the idea of things. The things themselves you cannot catch. Western philosophers have written a lot about this as well—'Das Ding an sich', the thing in itself, the true thing—but you can't get it: it's not there. That's why phenomenology always kind of vanishes into the Sahara. It just runs out of gas. There's nothing there. *But we're here! I exist! I'm me, I exist, I'm me! Look, I'm me!* That's a statement. That's a tensing of muscles. *I feel like me: you're going to tell me I'm not me? Well, fuck you! Waaaahhh!* That's contraction. Relax the contraction and *ahhh... oh... hello!* So we isolate and we connect, we isolate and we connect. We are pulsatory creatures: closer and more distant, breathing in and breathing out, the heart moving with pump-pump and pump-pump. Pulsation is the truth of everything. To want to find true essence as a thing is not in the game. 'Thing' is delusion, a false, misleading concept. We live in a consumer capitalist culture with the fetish of the object, the fetish of the commodity, running just about every aspect of our life. It is delusion. It is delusion. It's just delusion.

Mr. Putin now is wanting to extend his total control of Russia for another twelve years—why??? *You're getting old, you're getting tired, go and hang out on the beach. You stole Crimea—go and hang out on the beach there. It's nice, have a vodka....* But he can't let go of power. Trump, too, will find it very difficult to let go of power, and Mr. Johnson looks like he's fairly power-hungry. *I am this person! I am an important person!* No, you're not. You're there due to various wind and currents blowing through, creating this temporary pattern in the sand, and the wind will keep blowing and that pattern will vanish. The idea of karma is that every activity (and karma simply means activity) sets up particular tendencies, or movements, or vibrations, which show themselves at some other time. For example, if you've been in a place like the Sahara, you know that it's very, very hot in the day and then as soon as the sun goes below the horizon the wind starts to blow—*whoooosh*. You get that in India as well in the hot season—*whoooosh*. Why is the wind blowing? It's blowing because the sun's gone down. The heated air and the cool air meet together and *whoooosh....* the wind is blowing. That's our life: factors which are not us blow us. We are the movement of life.

Participants, not puppets

Inside of that we're not entirely puppets, and we're certainly not entirely masters of the game either. We are participants, and the most important thing for meditation as we manifest into the world is to find a delicacy of attention to the emergent field where we are with other people, and to respond into that. Finesse gives us timing. We don't talk over other people. We can hear, receive and respond, and find a healthy pulsation of that. Then life's very easy. But if you get sealed in yourself it's very lonely and isolated. If you then want other people to do what you tell them to do it's very tedious, because they never will. Who would want to be the ruler of the world? Everyone will disappoint you, everyone will disappoint you. It's like like the old saying, *'If you want something done well do it yourself.'* When I worked in the NHS I'd ask some colleagues to do something, and then they'd write something and I'd go, 'Fucking hell, what is

this? What is this?' 'Oh, well, that's how we thought it should be.' You don't have my thoughts, you don't have my thoughts. Only I have my thoughts, so if I want it to be an expression of my thoughts—as they are in the moment because they won't be like this tomorrow, as they are in this moment—then I'm going to have to do it.

That's how you become workaholic: not trusting other people *'because they fuck up, because they're not me'*. And that's how you become The Great Fuck-Up yourself, thinking that everyone else is fucking up because they're not you. You bind yourself in and that's where we can see that my criteria for how it should be arise due to causes and conditions—my education, the forces that were around as I grew up, the people I've hung out with, my particular value system, and so on. All of these are valid, but they're not true: they are functional.

The first of all is the open ground. The field, the unified field, the undivided non-dual field, within which I am: the field came first. Although we don't want to know it, mum and dad were there before we were. The world was here before we were born and it will be here when we are dead. We're just passing through. We're not the alpha and omega—we're just a breath, a puff of wind. If we see that, it means we see that participation, connectivity, is more important than anything else.

You see that in work teams. If the team has synergy, if there is an alignment of the energy of the people who are working together, it's very beautiful. It means that people have to recognise that collaboration, the being in it together with others in the shared rhythm (which is never going to be my rhythm and it's never going to be your rhythm) is what counts, that if we all engage in a rhythm which is not ours individually but is ours collectively, then we can have really effective work teams. Or, if you're dancing with other people it's also exactly that—you're not following one person's particular way of doing it, but the group is finding how it is that you're going to do this dance at this particular time. The delusion is the isolated individual self, there before the event.

'Self' is a verb

From this point of view there is no self—no fixed, enduring self. What there is, if you like, is a 'selfing', which might be a way of describing the unique specificity of myself as revealed to you and to me both in the moment of our participation together, because although I'm talking just now, I'm talking looking at you and feeling with you. We're engaging together, hopefully, in something: this is a field of connectivity which is the basis of my talking. I'm talking *with* you. The group is expressing something through me because how I can talk depends on the quality of attention that you bring to the task. If you look completely bored, as if you're desperate to leave, and I see you taking out your hip-flask for the third time, that's going to be a different feeling. But it's the being in it together that's so amazing. When we say the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that's the whole thing. Dzogpachenpo essentially means the whole. It means that which, although it has diversity, is never fragmented or divided. When we experience the whole there's always space for everyone. The danger of delusion is retreating into the definition of an essential self which is apart.

If, for example, you do tantric meditation you visualise the arising of a deity, in front of you or as yourself. You inhabit that sphere and then that sphere dissolves; and then you do it again, and you do it again, you do it again. You get up in the morning and you open the mandala of your daily life. You go to sleep at night and you close the mandala of your daily life. It's opening and closing, opening and closing, and each time it's different: each time it has a different flavour, a different mood and different qualities. This is our life: it is not a thing. All the different schools of buddhism are concerned with how to take the thingness out of life without life collapsing. In this room we have pillars holding up the ceiling. Sometimes it feels as if my

sense of the truth of myself, who I really am, is like one of those pillar holding me up, and if that collapsed, if I had a kind of de-personalisation, if I didn't recognise myself I'd kind of collapse. *Who am I? What am I doing?* That is a cul de sac, a dead end road that arises because you're still trying to find a truth through narrative. I can't tell the same story about myself today that I told yesterday. You know that if you get a cold, if you get a bit depressed, if you fall in love, you tell different kind of stories about yourself—you're happy, you're sad... you feel expansive, you feel contracting. These are modalities of how you express, but there is no truth to them because they are always relational.

This grasping at an enduring self, a kind of ahamkara, as if there was some 'I am-ness' which could be taken hold of, is often seen in buddhism as the great delusion. It's addressed in a different way in hinduism, in its various tantric schools and so on. Essentially, they go on the same point—there isn't much difference in the descriptions of Brahman and shunyata. But buddhists don't like to hear this because buddhists are inclusive/exclusive simultaneously, and inside the buddhist schools there are nyingmapa who are inclusive/exclusive, and inside the nyingmapa there's the people from Dorje Drak Gompa who are inclusive/exclusive—you can't have 'this' without getting rid of 'that' because if you get 'this-that', well, what's 'this'? *It's part of 'this-that'*. But what is 'this'? You get rid of 'that', bump them off, final solution... *get rid of the problem, then there'll just be me—I am the ruler of the world, I define everything on my terms!* Then you get lonely.... Where is the other? The Upanishads say this is how the world began: God was sitting and he got lonely. *I'd better invent someone then*, so he made a little man, a friend—*oh, hello!* And that's how everything began. But duality 'is' because a unified point would be totally bleak and lonely. Non-duality is not-one / not-two: it's the interactive complexity which never fissures out into fragmented aspects. each with their autonomy.

In tantric texts it says how everything exists in the womb of the Great Mother. The Great Mother is Prajnaparamita, the wisdom, the understanding of emptiness, and we are in her womb, and you cannot become a buddha unless you are born in her womb. You're not born out of her womb, but in a funny way you're born into her womb, because this womb, this circle, the bagua, is actually emptiness: it is 'how-it-is'. We're born into nothing, but not nothing for long, because nothing becomes everything. We're in this field of everything. Now, after some time we'll go out into the evening—people in the streets, cars, and so on—and you turn a corner and a corner and a corner, this way and that, always this and this and this and this. It never stops, this ceaseless display—the texts always say 'unborn and unceasing'. It's unborn because everything has the root quality, or heart, of emptiness and it's unceasing because there's no limit to the openness of emptiness.

Now, there's a limit to me! In a while we'll come to an end and I'll go home because that's what you get if you live in a skin-bag—you get tired, you have a limited capacity. But emptiness has no capacity at all because it has infinite capacity. You could never totalise it. You could never say that you come to a limit: it has no inside or outside, no top, no bottom, no preference in any direction. That's why it's often compared to a thigle, to a ball, because a ball has no corners. If you get a glass ball and you spin it around, how would you recognise where you began? From every direction it looks the same. Emptiness is like that, but when you come into manifestation it's easy to privilege your sense of self and get the rest of the world to recede into the background.

The figure in the foreground is me in my solitary majesty, then there's all of you guys. *I'm so sorry for you: it must be difficult not to be me, because, actually, I am me and you can't be me because I'm me, I've monopolised it, I've trademarked it, it's me.* It's quite upsetting when you hear other people talking about themselves as me. Why is that? Delusion! Everybody sees that they are the centre. Now, one reading of that would be that it's an extreme, a narcissistic position, that people are trapped in a bubble of self-reference. However, if you stay close to your

lived experience, there's just this, and I am the only experiencer of 'just this'. I can communicate a little bit and we can get some kind of resonance, some resemblance, some echoing so that we feel we're somehow in the same sort of field, but it's never exactly the same. Difference and sameness are always in a dialogue. We're in this room together but we're all in different rooms: both are true. If we were only in our completely different rooms you could have infinite wisdom, but then you'd be like Shiva on top of Mount Kailash. And the wind's blowing and you're just sitting there. *Oh, this is great, this is fuckin' marvellous! Wouldn't like to be down there in the warmth and the food and all... aaaaahhhhhh!*

We can have it all

And so we are part of the world, we are with other people, but we don't get lost in being with other people because we are ourselves. We can be close and have connectivity, but the connectivity doesn't mean the dissolving of yourself. If you go confluent, if you merge into someone else in sex or some particular experience, that may be fine, but as a way of functioning in the world it would be impossible. Psychosis is a condition in which people become confluent with distorted perceptions and unhelpful formulations of experience, and they merge into it and believe that it's true. It's not true. It's not true—it's like a dream, it's an illusion. An illusion is not a fantasy that you awaken from: an illusion is the likeness of being, *as if* this were the case.

We have two main foci here: 'as is' and 'as if'. 'As is' is open and empty: the truth can't be said. With 'as if' you enter into engagement with others, sharing and creating. If you work with other people on a joint project, there's a to-ing and a fro-ing, and a 'this' and a 'that': that's 'as if'. You realise that their perception is different from yours, and the key point then is always to avoid the vertical axis of better / worse, better / worse. Most of our life is structured around this axis, but if you collapse it there's just 'different'. Then you can really be respectful of other people, and you can learn from other people, you can be awakened by other people's difference—*wow, you see things the way I don't*—which allows you then to ease yourself out of the cocoon, the eggshell, of self-reference. Then you get nurtured by difference: not same, not completely different, but always in that movement. That's why this image of yab-yum, of male and female deities in sexual union, is so important—it's because they are not one and they are not two. They are functioning together as a unified cycle, with prana energy moving through the body of one and down into the body of the other, endlessly cycling round and round.

As we come to an end this evening and you go out in the world, walking down the street, perception is occurring, judgment is occurring, memory and thoughts are occurring. You don't have to choose: you can have it all. Just relax into the out-breath. Everything is arising at once. If you try to sort it out you will have to simplify. The complexity of the sphere of experience is so multi-dimensional, so multi-flavoured. It's like taking a paper and pen and trying to draw a tree—it takes you forever. You can't catch a tree. You can appreciate a tree, you can receive a tree, through your eyes, through rubbing your face on its bark, through sniffing it. The whole shebang comes all at once, but you can't sort it out. It's non-linear. Rational thought, narrative, is linear, and linear thought goes from A to B—you've got to have A and you've got to have B. So you reify, *it's here, it's this*, and you reify B, *it's that, it's over there*, and then you move up and down, shuttling between these two points. But, actually, it arises all together, all at once, with space for whatever is occurring.

Say you're sitting in the train. You want to read something, and some people get in and they're laughing and joking—you can't read anymore. What shall you do? Shoot them? Get off the train? Close your book. *But I don't want to.* Who's torturing you—are they torturing you, or is your idea of how you want to be torturing you? There are moments for being strong and clear and decisive, but for most of us the lesson is about plasticity. Plasticity is the midpoint between master and servant. Plasticity is our capacity to experience our potential interfacing with the

potential of the situation: not dominating, not being dominated (although we could take up both of these momentarily). The problem always is when it locks into a choreography of power and the situation becomes over-determined. But if we want to find freedom, freedom for relating to people, it begins with not knowing who they are, always meeting the other with the question. The otherness of the other means that whatever you've constructed about the other is for yourself—it hasn't brought you close to the other person. The more you see that more clearly you start to see: all that I 'know' about you is a wall between me and you, because who you are in this moment you don't know—you're just being in this moment—and I don't know.

Confusion: trying to think our way out of delusion keeps us in confusion

This is why again and again in the texts you have words like 'naked' and 'fresh', because the cladding, the clothing, of our assumptions, of our constructs, create a dullness whose advantage would seem to be a predictability, a self-reassurance. Actually, though, it encloses us, limiting our revitalisation through profound connectivity and making us unavailable to find ourselves. We are revelatory creatures: we reveal ourselves through walking, talking, eating, sleeping, doing things, whether alone or with other people. Energy is unfolding—this is what we are. When that is not appreciated we end up with confusion, and confusion condemns us to trying endlessly to sort out what's going on.

The problem is, you know, unless a child is brilliant in mathematics, if you took a class of six-year-olds who still do arithmetic and gave them a calculation requiring calculus to solve it, they would be paralysed: they wouldn't have the tools for the job. Likewise being in samsara, being in this particular socio-political nexus of conceptual formulations, doesn't provide us with the tools whereby we can get even a sense of what awareness means.

We understand consciousness, we understand intelligence, we understand rational thought, we understand the application of mental acuity to problem-solving, but awareness—this open, indestructible, revelatory quality of here-ness—that is not something we have much sense of, and it's only awareness that allows everything to come at once without us being overwhelmed.

We hear a lot these days about PTSD and we see how easy it is to overwhelm the ego through pain, through torture, through car crashes, and so on. The self-structure is given a dose of a big world that it cannot metabolise, can't compute, can't dissolve, and so it collapses. But awareness... it's open to everything.

So that's the big difference. It's our confusion of trying to think our way out of delusion that keeps us in confusion. We have to shift gear into ourselves, because awareness is already present. It's about doing less, about being kinder to oneself, about observing how the false god of the will to power gets us going and how our search for mastery is actually the path by which we become enslaved.

The end.