
Question and Answer Session

With James Low

Brighton, 1st February 2009

Transcribed by Sarah Allen

Question: Are there any thoughts that are useful, apart from thoughts like 'I need the loo', 'I am hungry' and suchlike?

James: Useful in terms of?

Comment: Am I meant to ignore all thought? Well, not ignore it, but be aware of it and let it pass through?

James: Yes, in the meditation practice.

Question: But in life as well?

James: In life thoughts can be very helpful.

Question: It might sound like a stupid question, but the practice is part of life as well isn't it, a way of being in life?

James: Generally speaking, we exist as a subject who is in the world but having that relationship mediated by thought. And the function of the practice is to awaken or re-integrate with this state of the mirror, the openness, and use that as the ground for being in the world in a less mediated way. Thinking about situations and being fully present in them are not the same. Therefore, it is not that thoughts are bad but if you rely on them as telling the truth rather than being connective gestures, then misconstruing their nature and their function leads to an over-solid sense of what is going on.

However, most people have strange daydreams and thoughts and all of that is to be welcomed. For example, you might suddenly have some very angry thoughts or cruel thoughts and rather than thinking: *Oh, but I am a nice person, I shouldn't have thoughts like this* or *Well, I am a buddhist and I shouldn't have thoughts like this*, what we can do is just be with that thought and see what it is on two levels. One is that the thought is itself empty and impermanent, it has no substance, and if we recognise that it will have no power to condition us. On the other hand, it can remind us,

on a more relative level, that in our past lives maybe we have been very cruel. We have probably been everything it's possible to be and therefore murderous and unpleasant thoughts will return.

However, we can activate these or not. And the more we can practise not activating them we can also be more tolerant of people who do have these thoughts. If we want to help people just telling them not to be bad is not enormously useful; the main thing is to be able to work with every kind of energy however it is. Therefore, our bias, our limitations, blocks us communicating with others. And the more complex we see ourselves to be, the more we can deal with whatever forms arise. In that sense self-knowledge is very dangerous because if you know yourself to be one thing, if you have got your 'own number', in a sense you are lost because our nature keeps moving and changing. People's lives go through pulsations – sometimes we are stronger and clearer and sometimes we are confused – and when we are confused if we really understand the nature of confusion that is also very helpful.

In the dzogchen tradition, in the kind of prayers that go in the more elaborated forms of this, it often says: 'May obstacles be the path.' Therefore, rather than trying to get rid of obstacles or difficulties or confusions, by finding a way to use them they become very helpful to us. Often, the example is given that aconite is a poison and if many animals eat it they become sick. However, according to the Indian tradition if the peacock eats aconite it makes the colours in its feathers even brighter. That is to say, we should learn to become like the peacock, being able to eat even the most dangerous things but able to transform them. This means you have to stay close to things, and so the more rigid you have a definition of 'who you are', the more you are likely to exclude some things because they don't fit. Therefore, softening your idea of who you are, allowing the mind to be however it is means that every kind of experience can be directly taken on board and it will reveal something about itself. It will then be liberated and when you encounter it in the world you won't be so afraid of it and you will be able to respond to it in a more flexible way.

Comment: You spoke about not taking things too seriously and you also spoke with passion and frustration about the NHS and about politics. So, I wonder if you have any thoughts on where you find the balance between having a strong view or response to something which is happening in the world and introducing that levity that allows people to get stuck in quite heavy emotions, and also enables you to take a positive action rather than an action in opposition.

James: Since I find real horses a little bit scary what I have instead are some hobby horses. One of them is ranting about the NHS. I can also rant about the Prime Minister as well. I enjoy it very much; I find it quite cathartic and it doesn't really mean anything at all. I don't think he is going to be listening to me. Therefore, as long as we know some of the numbers that we run, I don't think that we have to block them. We should try not to bore other people too much with them but it can be a way to listen to ourselves as the blinkers come on, as the intensity comes -and then - it is gone. And that is what it was. Therefore, rather than blocking it, one can be aware, as one is doing it, of what it is. It is a tightening and a forcing and then you relax. At other times we are more like jelly fish swishing about in the ocean. Again, it is not that any behaviour is particularly wrong but by being present as we are in the theatre of our existence as we perform ourselves, as we display ourselves, we are also hopefully aware that we are doing this with other people. Therefore, the feedback loop from the other can also be a deconstructive move. So it is not to say that this is really true and it is not to say it is completely not true, rather, just every now and then, 'I am like this –I am like that.'

A really central question in life is: how shall I be, what will I do. Traditionally, in buddhism we have the Eight-Fold Path, which includes 'right-livelihood'. What is right livelihood? Maybe it is helping people. How will I help people? Maybe work in a hospital so people get care. However, maybe the hospital is full of bad politics and insane policy decisions, and so on. And in order to do good, you become caught up in something which is perhaps bad. This is why these basic things like right livelihood are very sweet to say but very difficult to find. How will you be able to control the

experiential field; it is very hard. So how shall we live? If you get into relationship with other people sooner or later you will hurt them or they will hurt you; that is just part of being close to people. You might decide: 'Oh, the best way to live is to be a monk or a nun.' However, that also has its politics; every monastery is full of politics. Therefore, where will we go to live a proper, clear, ethical life? Who lives a proper, clear, ethical life? All our existences are complex. So what will we do?

From the point of view of dzogchen don't go anywhere else. Be present and aware with your existence as it manifests. Rather than having a kind of check list that you tick off, trying to evaluate how you are doing, by staying present with the natural self-liberation of each form, you are then in the best position for being open to the next moment. The danger is if you take up a particular position that will mark everything that you do. That marking *sometimes* is helpful. For example, if someone becomes a monk or a nun then they wear robes that show other people not to try and engage them in sex or money and not to expect them to respond to worldly questions. Essentially the robes are saying to lay people that: 'I want you to stay in the world and get my food for me and support me in a holy life.' It is the common religious economics of: I give you blessing and you give me food; I am a holy person and you are a worldly person. However, that positioning has already set up quite a choreographed game wherein the moves are pre-established and there is a kind of security in that.

Is it ethical? Well, there are all sorts of problems in that. For example, in many traditional buddhist countries not to give food to the monks or the nuns is seen as very bad, and then you get competitive food giving where people bring their food along to the monastery and show who has cooked the tastiest thing.

Samsara is insidious; it is like the morning mist just creeping into everything that we do. Therefore, trying to sort out what is good and what is bad, is an endless task. From the point of view of dzogchen don't waste energy in that; whatever arises, good or bad, will go by itself. Therefore, allow it to be there, don't act strongly into it, and as it goes you won't start to build up a composite picture.

Comment: I mean, I rant about education, so if I am having a rant about education I can be in the rant, know it is ok to have a rant and then let the rant go and approach that situation afresh. Not to try and control the desire or release energy in that direction – it is not bad really.

James: I don't think these things are bad. I mean some people say that anger is very dangerous but anger is also a response to a situation which is causing grief, causing difficulty. Things could be better and to know that means you are not stupid. However, to spend all your life trying to make these particular things better and becoming a campaigner may not be so wise.

Clearly, it is a wonderful thing that many young people become activists in terms of ecology and so on but that can also pull you into an incredible morass of conflicting of emotions, hopes and fears and so on, and you re-traumatise yourself again and again in doing that. Therefore, again, there is something about: *How shall I live? What will I use my energy for? What is the actual structure of this situation.* If I want to help people be more peaceful, acting in a way that they find provocative is probably not helpful. I may feel I am just exercising my democratic right to protest and therefore what I do is valid but if I know that other people will see it as provocative then I am provoking them.

This is because the meaning of a communication is what is received not what is sent. Therefore, there would be something about taking the anger or the outrage as the first step but then thinking about how to proceed. One then has to be connected with the other and find a soft and yet powerful way of connecting. The danger of course is that the clarity that comes with anger.

In the tantric tradition they say the purification of anger is called the mirror-like wisdom, because, the mirror shows things clearly. For example, if you have kids and they go to the local school and you think that the school is no good, then 'Ah!', that is real and important. You have seen something but now what are you going to do? Hitting someone with that anger is probably not going to be very useful. Therefore, it is using the emotions, as it were, as a diagnostic tool but then finding a skilful means to deal with the problem. What shows you the problem is probably not the best solution to the problem.

Question: You have talked a lot about not identifying with the thought and not letting yourself get sucked into the sort of dynamic whereby you get caught up in chains of thoughts and before you know it you are somewhere else. In many spheres of our life, say, there might be things that we find important or valuable and so we get attached to them. It is attachment like any other attachment. So, from a dzogchen point of view how would you deal with those kinds of feelings which are very cultural, about how we grow up, how we know things?

James: Well, it depends what we are looking for. If you imagine that interactions in this world are designed primarily to about bring happiness, that may be wrong; it may be that is not really what they bring. They bring all sorts of things, so, what are you looking for? If you want to by spinach don't go to the butcher; butchers don't sell spinach. If you want to find peace and contentment why are you looking in the turbulence of outside interaction?

In the state of awareness everything is perfect and pure from the very beginning – wonderful – now you integrate that with turbulence *and* many different experiences arise, some happy, some sad. If you accept happiness comes and it goes and sadness also comes and it goes, then you don't get so much into blaming other people as the cause of our sadness. Sadness is just part of the world why wouldn't you get some? Heartbreak is part of the world, why wouldn't you get some? Of course, you still have to speak but the speaking is, again, a gesturing *into* a situation, accepting that all we can do is participate, that we can't control, we can't make other people do what we want. We can reveal ourselves, show ourselves, be as present as possible and see what happens, however, we cannot guarantee an outcome. Therefore, what is my investment in making the gesture?

If it is a gift it is not a boomerang, it is not a contract; a gift is a gift. A trade, a bargain is something different: *I will do this for you if you do that for me. I have done my bit where are you? I am really disappointed that you haven't done what I am sure you meant to do, what I assumed you would do.* Most of the time we are not very generous, we make implicit contracts with the world, we have an expectation. For example, 'If I am a nice person people will like me.' However, you may find that people don't like you. Therefore, what are you trying to mobilise in the world by your activity? From the point of view of dzogchen it is just this; moment-by-moment, just this. And there may be no return therefore do you want to do it?

If you don't have the capacity, don't do it. That is to say, the activity may be a very good thing to do but if you can't do it from beginning to end then don't do it. Knowing your own capacity is the place to start. Often we are led into situations because we think they are a good idea or 'something must be done'. It may have to be done but may be by someone else, somebody who knows what they are doing.

I think that is often what is very difficult; to really live in one's own skin and not to imagine that one is bigger or smaller than one is, and, also, to see other people as they are. People are often not very nice and if you get close to them you have to manage their nonsense and your own. That means being aware, observing the colour changes in their face, their breathing, their posture, the kind of vocabulary they are using, and working with that. And if you are feeling very down it is more difficult to do that.

Question: I have a question on meditation instruction. Can you say a bit more about integrating into space? The way I am understanding it is that it means some kind of equalisation of say a 'tension field' not just in my body but kind of around here and there is a felt sense I have some idea, although of course the sensations are predominately still in my ankle and my knee. In terms of the other senses though, the site seems to be mediated by the eyes, the hearing, by the ears, so I am not quite clear what you are asking me to do.

James: I will step back a little bit into the view and from there come into the question. Generally speaking, the infinite ground of our experience is often referred to as the *dharmadhatu*. *Dharma* here means phenomena and *dhatu* means sphere or dimension. Therefore, it is the great space in which everything occurs, and this space is said to be inseparable from awareness. This awareness is not a cognitive quality but it is the way the light is present in the sky; it permeates it. This is the root clarity. From this point of view everything arises from space just as the reflection is always in the mirror. Everything that occurs, whether a wall of a house, a speeding car, a horse running across a field; every phenomenon no matter how strong, how real, insistent and persistent it appears to be, is simply an energetic movement in space.

Due to the power of ignorance we have separated ourselves out from this integrated field into the sole proprietor of this particular skin bag and we live inside this skin bag looking out; this is my home, this is *self* and everything else is *other*. This, then, *appears* to be self-existing; the ground of myself is *me*, I take myself to be eternal. I think most people live their lives like that: 'I have always been here, I am just me.' These are rather totalising statements about ourselves.

Therefore, from the point of view of dharma the goal is to see that this is an illusory basis that has been constructed, and the real ground of our existence is indeed the dharmadhatu wherein all that we take to be our secure substantial basis are simply the sky flowers or the rainbows arising from that.

Therefore, my ears, my nose and so on, these are movements of energy in the world; a smell comes and it goes. The nasal consciousness catches that smell, arises with it, and then they both dissolve together. It is the same with hearing and so on. Therefore, this is not a substantial basis towards which or with which I proceed in the world, because, I can stand in relation to *myself*, think about *me*, be aware of *me* in which it is almost as if I am outside myself looking at *me*, *and*, I can be fully in this looking out at *you*. Both of these are constructs and these constructs are flowing and changing but we are used to taking them as real.

When we come into the meditation we sit down, *we* do 'Aa' and *we* sit. Nothing much seems to have changed: *I* am just *me* sitting in a room a little bit cold, I have finished my 'Aa' what do I do now? That is to say, my frame of reference will be thoughts which will return *me* in that moment to my familiar sense of self; I will continue to construct my composite, compounded, conditioned notion of who I am. All of that work is being done by thought, feeling and sensation, which are meeting together and constructing my familiar sense of self. The task at that point is to observe, as far as possible, how these thoughts arise and seem to meet together, congeal, and create something. It is almost like if you were making jelly; you take the gelatine, pour boiling water on it and get this clear liquid. And as it cools the jelly sets; what was originally flowing starts to set. We can also see this with water: water this morning has turned into ice, the flowing water is now fixed. In that way, we can see how the flow of our experience is brought together in a way that gives it a form that *seems* to have an endurance through time.

However, the sensations that create this don't endure, the thoughts that create it don't endure, the feelings that create it don't endure but '*it*' this mystical signifier of '*me*' seems to endure.

Therefore, an epi-phenomena is being generated, a meta-sense, an over-arching sense, which is different in character and structure from its constituents and that is what we are trying to not fall into.

Therefore, as we observe these familiar patterns weaving together and confirming that, 'I am just sitting here', we see that 'Oh, that was just a thought.' If you fall into it: 'looking out I am just me.' If you don't follow the thought it goes and there is a bit more space and then there is the next thought. At first, we are constantly falling into the thought; we are taking them as being veridical, telling the truth.

Question: My question is how applicable is dzogchen for lots of people. Milarepa apparently went to one of his first teachers who was a dzogchen teacher and he basically didn't get anywhere. He then he went to Marpa who put him through all the trials and tribulations. I am just wondering how applicable dzogchen is for people in general. That is a big question, and it seems like dzogchen doesn't always help everybody. So could you say something about that?

James: Well, dzogchen isn't a thing. I mean this watch is a thing and if it helps me and if I was very kind and you didn't have a watch I could give you this watch. However, if you simply like the look of this watch but didn't know how to tell the time, this useful gift that I have, in giving it to you, is not much use. Therefore, you have to learn to tell the time for the watch to work. So, you have to be able to look at yourself. That is the basis. So why don't we look at ourselves? For all sorts of reasons. Milarepa was very young, enthusiastic and energetic and Marpa gave him lots of stupid things to do. The more he did these stupid things he stopped being so energetic and at the end of it was quite tired and despairing, at which point his mind wasn't buzzing so much...

Question: So dzogchen is not for people whose minds are buzzing?

James: Well, it depends. I remember when I finished one *ngondro* practice of doing a hundred thousand prostrations and I said to my teacher, 'I have finished that now.' And he asked me, 'How are you?' I said, because I was doing a lot every day, 'I am very tired.' And he said, 'Good. That is the main purpose of doing the prostrations; you get very tired and then your mind is not so busy.' He then said, 'Now this is how your mind operates' and then he gave me some instruction. Because my mind was very quick and I was a bit of a smartarse, I would run around things and this was not so useful. Milarepa was a bit of a smartarse. In the tradition they say that if Marpa's wife had not interfered and asked Marpa to lay off, then Milarepa would not have had to do any meditation at all. If Marpa had continued giving him such a very hard time that would have exhausted him so much that he would have realised something – because exhaustion means being totally finished and dzogchen means totally finished too.

Comment: If I am not totally exhausted would dzogchen be useful to me?

James: Well, it depends whether you want to observe yourself. Observing yourself is very difficult. If you have to do ten million mantras it is quite easy. You can sit on your bum and start and you have a little counter so that every time you go around once you move the counter. While you are doing the mantra you could be here there and everywhere. You could be doing your shopping list, planning your summer holidays, but anyway, you are getting some place. Then, at the end of it you can say, 'Ah, I have done ten million mantras.' Wow, hey, powerful yogi. Have you got anywhere? We don't know. However, it is easy to do. It is easy to do prostration, I mean they are hard to do but they are easy to do because you have something to do. Raising and lowering my hand, although it is quite tiring, is very easy to do because I can direct myself as an act of will to do this. Observing myself, given that it is not looking at something in the ordinary way, is not an act of will. It is passive, presence which is clear and ungraspable. That is a little difficult. Therefore, if you find it difficult you can do something; doing things is activity and we'll generate some karma.

All the dharma paths go in the same direction; who is the one having the experience? What is the ground of activity? It is not that all these paths are wrong or bad but we have to get the central point. If we can't get the central point then we work with energy. All the tantric preparatory practices are working with energy; that is what tantra is. Is it a good thing to do? Of course it is a good thing to do. However, there is the question of how long are you going to live? Ten years, twenty years, five years, one year? We don't know. What do you want to get before you die? A certificate: 'I have finished my *ngondro* five times.' These are really important questions.

All of the dharma is good; the dharma is good in the beginning, the middle and the end. Should you go on a pilgrimage? Of course. Should you burn a hundred thousand butter lamps? Wonderful. Should you earn money in a worldly way to sponsor the building of a monastery in India? What a beautiful thing to do. That is to say, there is nothing wrong with any of these things but between now and your death maybe they don't really help. What really helps is recognising your own nature.

Milarepa said, *'If you recognise yourself in the morning you are a Buddha in the morning. If you recognise your nature in the evening you are a Buddha in the evening.'* That is the thing to do. Now, what will help you do that? That is a question. Only we ourselves can know our limit; until you look for yourself and find your limit you won't know what your limit is. When you do the practice and you find the limit then you start to have precise meditation questions which can then be answered and then your practice develops. However, if we don't explore ourselves we won't know our limits and then you go to someone else and say, 'Oh, holy lama what should I do?' They look in their menu of practices and yes, item number 33: 'Tara – very good for you.' It is a cultural form.

In the lineage that I am from my teacher always said, *'Go straight to the top of the mountain. You may fall off but then you can climb back up and at least you know what is on top of the mountain.'* If you start at the bottom of the mountain you might be dead before you get anywhere near the top. In other traditions they say everybody should start at the bottom otherwise it is very dangerous...

Question: In your book [Being Right Here](#) there was this person that went to a psychotherapist and he said that he thought he was going mad but the truth was he had already gone mad. Could you explain about that?

There is something that comes up sometimes inside – if I recognise there is awareness and then that is very clear and then I recognise it again in the night, let's say, or I am on a retreat and the mind is quiet I can see something. But, then, in between that, is the ordinary sense of being here that doesn't really always want to have liberation but just wants to carry on doing the things it normally does, just a little bit better. Then, it is almost like a duality between the glimpses of seeing whatever it is, that is spacious, that is different from the one that worries about things, and the other one. You also say in your book that the dharma is not a toy and I am just wondering about how important is it to have a clear vision towards liberation because if I am really honest quite often I think will do the dharma, I will do the practice so that I can get on with my normal life and just feel a little bit better about it. How important is it when on the path, having that vision of liberation? Does one go mad because it is not a toy – just to feel a bit better?

James: Well, anything can be used for purposes it wasn't designed for. When the great gurus in India in the past were developing yoga it was with a particular focus. Now it can be used as a particular adjunct to having a healthy body. It is not wrong to use yoga to have a healthy body but you miss the whole lineage of development or you don't understand anything of the meaning of the yoga sutras. That is sad because there are many ways to help your body to be healthy but if you really understand Patanjali's instruction and you integrate that with the asanas you can find liberation – it is a path. Therefore, buddhism is a method of liberation, of being awake and aware. If we don't

want to be awake and aware why would you use it for that? If in your kitchen you have very beautiful Japanese knives you wouldn't use them for chopping wood; that would be terrible. You can use something else to chop wood better.

If, however, you want liberation then dharma is very, very helpful. It is not wrong to use it to improve the quality of your life but it is just not what it is built for. And of course if you use things for the wrong purpose you take a path to salvation and turn it into a worldly method. And in the predictions of Padmasambhava he says that this is what will happen at this time, and things will go very wrong.

Question: But you don't think that practice is just to relax a bit whether it is yoga or tai chi or whatever.

James: Being relaxed and happy would be very nice, there is nothing wrong with a nice existence where you can maintain your standards: a car, a holiday home, being nice to your friends and inviting them round for a dinner party, nice wine, laughing and joking. It is a nice life; you feel relaxed and at ease and there is money in the bank. There is nothing wrong with that and when you die – well it costs something to have that kind of existence, and the karma-meter is running on your karma taxi and when you die they throw you out of the taxi and you find yourself in another life. What are you taking into that life? Not even a memory of how nice it is to know which wine glass to use.

That is the traditional teaching: life is short and here is a chance, why not make use of it. So then your real question is why is it that I sometimes can't be bothered?

Participant: My real question is maybe whether there is some kind of fear inside that resists it[...]

James: In your mind stream there are many different kinds of thoughts and many of these thoughts are going, from the dharma point of view, into total nonsense but they are very familiar and very attractive and they have your name on them. 'I can't be bothered.' 'I don't feel like it.' You believe the thought and that is what we were talking about earlier; we believe the thoughts in our head are telling us the truth: *I don't want to do this. I don't like this anymore. I used to do a lot of that but I don't know, I got bored doing it.* What does that mean, 'I got bored doing it'? A thought arises in the mind: *I got bored of it.*

I remember when I used to do a lot of retreat. I would be sitting doing the practice and then I would suddenly be up making a cup of tea and I didn't know how I got from sitting down there to making a cup of tea. However, as the retreat went on I started to notice that I'd be sitting in the practice and the thought would arise *I have done enough* and I would start to get up but I would be enough in the state and would let go of the thought and then I was sitting in the practice again. It is always like that: if you sit on the thought it will take you; thoughts are always going. They make your body do something; you think, 'Oh, I am so tired' and you fall asleep. Or...you think: *I am so tired* and the thought comes and goes and you are still there – that is always the thing.

Samsara is made out of thoughts; there is no end to thoughts. The more we pursue thoughts the more they feed into each other and move us out into activity. That is the karma and the karma gives the particular colouration to the thought. From that point of view thoughts are very dangerous – *if* you believe them, *if* they catch you – because they will immediately condition and limit your existence. Therefore, and this is the point where you might feel you go a little bit mad.

One of the key things my teacher said about himself was: *'I don't trust anyone and number one I don't trust myself.'* Knowing how you can cheat yourself is the most important thing in the

practice of dharma. Therefore, a thought arises: *I don't want to do this anymore*. Should you trust that thought or not? But then you think: *If I can't trust myself who will I trust? I will have to go and find Marpa*. That would be one solution, to find some big person somewhere who will tell us what to do. However, if we don't trust anyone outside and we don't trust ourselves what do we have? And in the Korean zen tradition this is called 'the great doubt'. Staying in a state where you just don't know anything can open a possibility. We can't trust ourselves, we can't trust others and so who shall we trust? The mirror.

What is the mirror saying? Nothing – it is empty. If you have the mirror and then you see the illusory nature of all thoughts, you can then play with them; it is *as if*. And then you can 'not do any practice' and be aware of 'not doing any practice' which is the best practice – which is dzogchen. If you are doing dzogchen you don't need to do any practice if you are aware of not doing any practice. Because who is the one who is aware: emptiness itself. However, you can also cheat yourself doing that, and so, it might be better, when you feel you don't want to do anything, to start doing some prostrations or go on a pilgrimage or do some circumambulations. It is not really possible in this country to build stupas but certainly in a town like Brighton you could make a buddhist pilgrimage path. I used to do this in Austria; we got some potatoes, cut them in half, carved out a little buddha and then made potato prints. This is nice and you can do it with lots of children. You then roll all of these up, put them in a little plastic container and then hide them in the park. You can climb up the trees and put them there and every time you pass that tree you know that this is a holy place – and it reminds you of your practice. You can hide these little dharma things everywhere and then you can have a little pilgrimage route on your way to work. So you can do things like that if you feel you don't want to practice; you can make your dharma more interesting and more fun.

Participant: Dharma is a toy?

James: It is very serious. If you believe the dharma it is really bad news. Dharma says that when you die it doesn't stop. The quickest way to solve that problem is not to go to any buddhist thing and become a Darwinian materialist and know absolutely, categorically, that when you die there is nothing. Then you can have any life you like – no problem – it's easy – have champagne for breakfast. However, if you believe in the dharma it is a big story; many lives, going up and going down. 'What will I do?'

Question: Are there any instances or any people who you think shouldn't practise dzogchen?

James: Well, the main thing of course is that we should observe ourselves. In the tradition they say that these practices are self-secret because you have to be in a particular mood to get through the door; they are subtle. If we are pre-occupied with something a bit intense or a bit gross, when we sit down we won't be able to do it. In that sense, it is reasonably safe. There are other practices which are more energetic and if your nervous system is a bit shot – if, from a yoga point of view, the channels in the body have many knots in them and the winds are not balanced – then you can become more disturbed by doing the practice. Therefore, first of all, you have to know 'what is the kind of practice' but most importantly you have to know 'how am I?' You have to be able to check yourself out. If you can't check yourself out it is very difficult.

It is what I was saying earlier: anybody can say to someone to do prostrations and because it is an external activity it is very straightforward to learn and you can do it when you are sad, when you are happy and when you are angry and so on. You are just mobilising your body in a particular direction with a visualisation and a recitation. However, if you are observing the nature of your mind there has to be a degree of presence, relaxation, and openness to do that. Therefore, we can't do it every day; sometimes we will be more in the mood. The key thing then is knowing *how* to do it and then being able to check in with oneself to find when is the time when you are most able to do it.

In a sense this is adult practice. A lot of buddhism, a lot of any spirituality, is children practice: you go to Papa, somewhere, and he usually will tell you what to do. You say 'yes, yes' and you do it. It is not wrong, but you are acting in the position of the one who doesn't know. This is adult practice where: *I am looking for myself. I have to find it.* The fact that the teacher might know who I am, in a sense, doesn't help me. I have to find myself, so what capacity do I need in order to do that. And that is where preliminary practices come in, because, they are now *uniquely preliminary* for me. Rather than having general preliminary practices that you do as a standard buddhist, you now know: *Oh, this is my problem. When I sit it is ok for a few minutes and then I start to become very sleepy, so what do I need to do with that?* That tells you something about the energy in the body and then there are many different meditation methods as antidotes for that; you probably need to learn more about breathing it that is the problem. That is to say, if we don't practise, we won't know what our problem is. Nobody can tell us from the outside.

Question: Whatever practice it is, whether it is yoga or meditation practice, generally, it seems to make me more sensitive and less protected and I often cry, whatever, because I am sort of soft and open now and sensitive. Then I go out into the world and I get battered. So how do I do that? How do both of those things like do a spiritual practice and have a job?

James: There are two aspects to your question. One is the openness or the side of emptiness, and the other is the aspect of clarity. What you are describing is that your tendency is to move into a state that is open and very sensitive, that receives imprints from the world around; it is almost like not having a hand in your back supporting you in that situation. So in a sense there is too much absorption and the place of response is weakened. That is to say, the clarity of seeing the external situation and mobilising towards it in the precision of 'exactly how it is', gets collapsed because it is just too open. There is a kind of overwhelm that goes on. Therefore, we have to develop the clarity.

A lot of that would be about developing an aesthetic relation with the world. That is to say, not doing any meditation, in its ordinary sense, but that when you walk down the street, look at all the red objects, look at all the blue objects, look at all the round curves, look at all the sharp corners and in that way you are spending a lot of time with the precise details of the structure of the world. You are now defining and determining what is there in the field. Then, you can turn it towards people; as you see them coming towards you, you can think: *How close to this person do I want to get? What do I read around their mouth, around their eyes? Would I like them as a friend? Would I like them as a lover? Would I like them to be living in another continent?* And in that way, you work out what the energetic fit is, what the resonance between yourself and the situation is. That is to say, your energy is now out and actively tracking what is in the field and *I am not going in here.* In that way, you are not waiting for the field to impact you, but, *I am the one...* In that way so you are mobilising an up attentive energy, and that I think is very helpful...

Response: You have spoken about not thinking in terms of oneself as acting on the world but now you are talking about strengthening your sense of self. Are they not contradictory?

James: Acting on the world *as if* you are in control is not very useful. What we are talking about here is correcting an imbalance in energy; it is a specific thing. There are general principles but when we apply the general principle it helps, diagnostically, to identify the particular tensions or movements of ourselves, and then we have to work with that. You have the unique experience of living in your body and other people will have their problems. Some people might not like loud noises or might feel shy or not like the shape of their body, and so, each of these particular 'takes' will lead to ease or dis-ease in being close to others. And for each of these, if you know enough about the situation, you can find the remedy.

The general principle is that when you are sitting, to relax and open and allow phenomenon to come and go. However, as we move out from that *into* the world – as we move into the precision of interacting with others – that involves participation, that is to say, an energetic movement *into* the field as part of the field; not overwhelmed by the other but also not overwhelming the other. That is a subtle balance and we have to practise it and do it for a long time. If it was easy we wouldn't have to practise it. However, that is one of the advantages of having some kind of Sangha, because then you know there are other people doing the same kind of thing. And having a practice is a particular thing because it immediately says: *My life has a meaning and the meaning is now close to me, it is in the palm of my hand. Sometimes I might close my hand and forget what it is and then act as if I don't have it but actually, every time I remind myself, it is here. It is not necessarily easy to do but there is something for me to be about. So I want to increase my clarity and I want to increase the arising quality of a pro-active compassion towards the world.* Compassion can be passive/receptive or active/demonstrative. Therefore, if you tilt too much in one direction you need to move in the other. Some people are very busy, always solving other people's problems and that is not so useful – all the time. Maybe it would be better to be quiet and just be impacted: *I can feel a lot but I don't need to do anything. Just because I can doesn't mean that I have to.* Therefore, this is at the heart of it isn't it? We have to know more about ourselves and become friends with ourselves, collaborate with ourselves, learning about how the five elements are balanced in our body, learning about the use or not use of dreams and so on.

Question: So, on the one hand we are not determined by our history and our experiences but on the other hand, in order to do what you have just described, there needs to be a learning from experience as well. So, there is some kind of sense of movement or some kind of maturity and that is tricky isn't it? Because, you don't want to be determined by something in the past but at the same time if you don't have some kind of awareness of that then how can you take that into the future, and have some kind of movement?

James: As personalities we have histories, we have energetic balances and so on and this determines our capacity, which changes. Therefore, the more we learn, the more we study, the more we avoid extreme situations in life, the easier it becomes to work with circumstances. Some people have a lot of difficulties, bad karma, inherited problems – whatever you call that – and some people's lives are easier. Some people have very difficult childhoods and life gets better; some people have easy childhoods and then it gets worse. The key thing is to keep reviewing where we are and trying to build on that, making use of whatever resources we can find.

However, there is no simple answer, I think, and so to overidentify with our history is unhelpful, because, then we are merely conditioning ourselves more and more by past event. Although, to ignore our past conditioning and not to be in touch with how it manifests in the moment as tendencies, likes and dislikes, is to be blind to the actual presenting nature of ourselves; we don't know what we are doing. Some people are oversensitive to their diet and that can feed into a whole anxiety about 'I am going to poison myself if I eat this.' Some of the time there are real allergies which are operating but it can also be a developed over sensitivity. Some people are completely insensitive and harm their bodies by having terrible diets which they survive when they are young and healthy, and then later they get a bad result from that. Therefore, again, it is always the middle way.

Question: I was wondering if there was a danger in identifying with the mirror rather than the reflection. For example, '*I am* the space in which everything arises' rather than '*this is* the space...' I mean some people talk about 'my' buddha nature but they also speak about it as if it is permanent and, presumably, if it is my buddha nature and it is gone when I die ...so are you suggesting or is there any suggestion that we should be identifying with the mirror: 'I am the space and everything arises, nothing can touch me, isn't life fantastic.' Or not identifying with anything and just recognising that everything is arising in the space.

James: It depends on what we mean by an identification there. Sometimes, maybe if you are dancing, you are just dancing, and sometimes you are conscious that you are dancing. Therefore, if you are conscious that you are dancing you have a more conscious feedback loop that is going on, and in the other you are just 'in this'; there is no difference between the music and the movement of your body and you don't have to run a kind of observer on top of it. It is that kind of experience that we want to have as a basic openness; we are just open.

There is no dogmatic assertion of: *I am an infinite mirror. I can see everything. I am indestructible*, because, as soon as it becomes a proposition like that it is already a fixed position which will exist in time and then be forgotten. Therefore, if it is going to be enduring it's the very ground of our existence, it is what moment-by-moment we live, as it manifests through us. And as you point out in, the buddhist tradition there are different ways of accounting for this. I am mainly describing the dzogchen view. All beings have this nature and therefore they can awaken to this nature. It is indestructible means which means that it won't be destroyed at death; what is destroyed at death is the personality, because personality is linked to the body and it dissolves down. However, the mirror state is present throughout every experience. Therefore, being as present as possible, as open to experience as possible, whatever the nature of the experience, is traditionally very important. It is not a position. Everything else we have is a position.

For example, every now and then some smell comes up from the kitchen below and as soon as that smell comes into my nostrils I am positioned in relation to lunch. My world is now being here but moving towards lunch. That is what it means to be embodied; we are always positioned, we are always 'about something', we have a basic intentionality which is built into the body. However, the mirror has no intention. Everything is going in the mirror but the mirror doesn't move and that is the big difference. Therefore, as long as we are propositional, as long as we are asserting something, building something up, we are in the state of the reflection. And in that state of the reflection, sometimes there is a clarity and sometimes there is not. However, that clarity is not reliable because it arises due to causes and circumstances. The mirror doesn't. This, then, is the difference between consciousness and awareness. Awareness is an innate quality, a basic, what you could say, noetic capacity, a basic capacity to know, to be aware, to register – and – it is always there, it is naturally occurring.

Participant: So it is always there while you are alive?

James: From this point of view it is always there. It is not something generated out of the brain; it has no biological basis. It reveals biological embeddedness but it itself is not resting on biology. Therefore, the body and the mind are inside the mirror of awareness. At death the body collapses, the brain ceases to function and there is the movement away from this particular form, but awareness is still there.

Participant: Still where?

James: It is still there-it is-here-it is-not-anywhere. When you relax and open you are aware but where is that awareness?

Participant: But when you are dead you are not relaxed and open. I suppose I am wondering if it is something a bit like a soul theory?

James: It could be taken as a soul theory, but it is not a soul. The mind has no beginning and no end; nothing is outside it. Everything is inside it as far as you get. For example, America is in your mind; the only America that you will ever have is the America that is in your mind. Other people say, 'Oh, I have actually been to America...' But where is that? It is in their mind.

Question: I wanted to ask about the meditation practice. You were saying, to focus one and a half arm's lengths in front of you. I mean, are we imagining a point in space?

James: You can look at a particular point. Sometimes we visualise a point, a ball or a letter, as a focus, or you can just open *into* the quality of space itself. It is about ungraspability; usually we are grasping at something, at particular objects, and when the subject is grasping at an object it constellates a particular quality of awareness. Therefore, when you focus one something which is ungraspable you have a very different kind of experience.

Response: It feels like there is too much going on and then immediately the mind wants to grasp onto something.

James: Exactly. Then, it is very helpful to relax into the out breath, because, of course, that is the thing: our normal mode is 'I am giving order to the world, I am putting everything in its place.' That is a bit like: *In the beginning was the Word*. We say: *This is a wall. This is a ceiling. This is a carpet. This is a woman*. And in that way, we are like God; we give order. We name things and through that we give ourselves some clarity. When you stop doing that it is as if there is some kind of primal chaos; there is just all this stuff, at which point 'Aah!' and the tendency is to go back to naming and describing and then thinking: *Oh, now I know where I am*. Therefore, in the practice we want to keep relaxing into the out breath and keep allowing whatever is there to come. And you start to see that it comes and it goes, that it is like an illusion, like a mirage in the summer. Something *seems* to be there and then it's gone – *seems* to be there and is gone. Instead of controlling it, naming it and placing it, stay open to its evanescence, its intangibility. And that brings a deeper relaxation, because, actually, you don't have to be in charge, you don't have to know what is going on to be clear. That, then, is a big shift, a shift from the functioning of an identificatory consciousness *to* an awareness which is welcoming to whatever comes. We just have to practise that and go through this wall of panic.