

Basic Buddhism practised with a Dzogchen view:

With reference to Ngöndro

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Introduction

I will be looking at the general preliminary practices (*ngondro*) in Tibetan Buddhism and showing how these can be taken up and made use of within the general frame of the *Dzogchen* view.

We are always viewing the world from particular positions, through particular kinds of lenses and with particular kinds of selective attention. For example, some people are very interested in sport, and the idea on a Saturday afternoon of being in a Buddhist Centre would seem insane. They could be at a stadium or they could be at home watching TV, watching football, and football is completely lively and vital - and what we do would be tedious in the extreme. It depends what you are looking for. And what we are looking for is usually based on the assumptions and habits that we have, and because of our selective attention, we go out into the world seeking experiences and situations that confirm the values that we start with.

In our practice of Tibetan Buddhism, it is important that we are clear about the view, what is our understanding of how the world is structured and in relation to that, how meditation practice functions. Because Buddhism has been running for a very long time and it's a system which has developed very sharp and clear systems of logic, all the various propositions have been checked for millennia now through the rigours of philosophical enquiry and through relentless meditation practice. People going on and on and on looking again and again and again. So, I think it's very helpful for us to make sure that we understand this particular reading of the world. Of course, as is stated many times in the Buddhist texts, "whatever you can say is not the real dharma", that what we talk about are the methods to understand how things really are. But if we understand how things really are, we can't say anything because it's just there. So, what we are talking about is always a kind of shadow-boxing, we are creating as it were illusions but illusions that help us to move gradually more to a place of awakening back to our own nature. The illusions in themselves are not true. In that famous example taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, "if you want to cross a river you make use of a boat. When you get to the other side, you don't carry the boat with you". The boat is useful for its function. Each of the views in Buddhism has a function, it is a tool, a method, to become over dogmatic about a method or a lineage or a particular loyalty is to misunderstand what it is. Dharma should be held very lightly, it's like a little wild bird that deigns to come and sit in the palm of your hand. We don't want to move too much, it's not for us to interfere with it. If a butterfly comes and lands on your shoulder, you just gaze very gently at it and you feel: "how lovely". And then it goes. In a similar

way, we are participating in this river of *dharma*, this river of understanding which has been flowing for a very long time and it will never be ours if we grasp it, if we try and turn it into something solid that we have. But it will always be available to us if we keep diving into the river, if we keep bathing ourselves in these practices as ways of moving ourselves, loosening ourselves up.

Dzogchen is a particular stream of understanding, most particularly practiced in the *Nygingmapa* tradition in Tibetan Buddhism and it starts from the fundamental understanding that from the very beginning our own nature has been completely pure, that is to say there is nothing wrong with us. Where we get lost is: we imagine that something is wrong with us and then we spend a lot of energy trying to repair things that are not broken, trying to cure things that are not damaged. So, we suffer, in a sense, from misdiagnosis. We think we are sick; we think we are bad; we think we are limited; and because we are chasing these thoughts - and these thoughts, the more we chase them, the more they lure us into the dark woods - we become more and more frightened by our own badness. And in that badness, we then get tired and we seek compensations which do make us actually bad and confused and we just go round and round. And this is what samsara is. And the function of the practice is to awaken to the natural purity of existence. This is a purity which is not in a binary opposition, a dualistic opposition of good versus bad, but it is something which is truly unspeakable because it is not a concept. Most of our lives we are intoxicated by concepts. Everything we experience, we put through the filter of our likes and dislikes. Some people like milk chocolate; some people like dark chocolate; some people like tea; some people like coffee; some people like Chelsea and some people like Arsenal, and inside these particular decisions, different things are illuminated. But these are just our ideas. They have the status of something which is true for me, but they don't have any truth or value outside the little circle of myself. Who is the one who is holding that view? Who is the one who says Swiss chocolate is better than Belgian chocolate? "That's me!" So, who is this me? As I try to explore myself, different ideas arise: "I am this, I am that, I was born in this place, I do this kind of work, I live in this kind of town, I wear these kinds of clothes". We can describe ourselves, but what we are doing moment by moment is developing more and more concepts. We are introducing ourselves in terms of things about us, things that we are linked to, but who is the one who is speaking? In the immediacy of our being, in the immediacy of our presence, who is this one? Can you catch that?

The purpose of Dzogchen practice is to awaken to the always naked nature of awareness, and inside that awareness all sorts of patterns, memories and associations arise. Just as if you have a strong

white light and you put lenses or coloured filters in front of it, when the light streams through the filter, different colors will appear. And when you see that the wall has suddenly got a red tinge on it, you think “oh, it’s coming from a red light”, but the light is not red. The light has a pure light, it’s the filter that’s red. And if you can’t see the difference between the filter and the lamp then you have a confusion, because you keep thinking I have got the wrong lamp. “I don’t want to be red; I want to another colour, I know I should be blue”. The danger then is that you try and smash the lamp. Our lamp is always pure but these obscurations stand in relation to it. Now if you imagine that here we have got the lamp: here is a lamp, here is a filter (James uses a napkin and a tea cup as an example). Now the lamp is shining this way, so it’s hitting the filter and it’s coming out this side. So, if you are looking on this side, what’s come through the filter, that’s what you will see. And the more you are fixated there, you will never look here. You’ll be looking in the wrong place. You know, as it says in many good books: “by their deeds you shall know them”. Is that true? By their deeds you shall know their deeds. Shall you know the person? If somebody does a bad thing, does that make them a bad person? Does it make them bad forever or does it show that that person has enacted a particular activity which has caused grief to themselves and others. If you steal something, you have stolen something, that is an activity. You take something and you put it in your pocket and it’s not yours. And maybe the store detective grabs you and says “Oy, what are you doing? I didn’t mean to take it. You are a thief! No, I was just taking it. No, you are a thief!” So, now we know why somebody takes things, because they are a thief! We know who they really are. Now, we do this all the time to ourselves: we make mistakes, we get confused, we think we are bad, and every time we get a bit more confused it reinforces the core belief, “I am a bad person, there’s something wrong with me”. But actually, all that was happening was that the filter was very dirty and the filter needed changing like a carburettor in a car. There is nothing wrong with the lamp. Don’t blame the lamp. Change the filter! And that’s really what the preliminary practices are about: learning to change the filter. You cannot change yourself because this nature, this primordial awareness, the essence of who we are, each of us, is radiant, that is to say: we are always coming into existence moment by moment, with this freshness and vitality. Even when we feel very depressed, we know we are depressed. There is a kind of illumination of that state. Even if we are very anxious, there is somebody being anxious. So, there is a presence, but when it gets very close to its filter, it seems to merge together and then we believe that we are this composite in which the clarity of the lamp has become invisible by being merged into its lens or filter. Does that make sense?

So, the key thing is you don't have to do anything about the lamp itself. From the point of view of Dzogchen, it's recognizing this natural illumination of your own being. So, in the mornings now, the starlings are starting to fly around and zoom and you see them zipping very quickly into their little nests. In a moment when you catch something like that, or I just walked through the park and there were the last of the crocuses and there is a sudden surprise, "oh!" In these moments there is just nothing much going on, there is nothing to think about. This, if you like, is a pure aesthetic moment. A moment in which the openness of our capacity to receive the world and the richness of the world come together and we get a kind of full circle. In these moments there is a sense of who we are, we are just already full and in that moment of fullness you don't need anything else and yet the filters come back into play very quickly. And then we are tumbling around in our thoughts, hopes and fears start moving and we think "oh, oh, I have got to correct this, it's gone wrong!", rather than finding a way of staying open and allowing all that we experience, all that we take ourselves to be as simply the movement of energy. Because in the park there are also paper bags; there is rubbish of various kinds. When we look at the rubbish and we think rubbish, then we think, "why are people like this, why can't they just think, this is a public place!" And the mind starts racing or we just look at it and we see the shape and the colour. What is there? That's all there is, shape and colour. It's our own mind, our interpretation that says "flower good, crisp packet bad". We are doing that. So, this is the energy of ourselves. And this energy is caught into a spiral of judgement. I now become the ruler of the world and I, with great dignity and grace, ascribe value to everything I see. "Dear friends, this is good and this is bad, Swiss chocolate is very good, Belgian chocolate should be banned". We do this all the time. We go to a clothes store to buy something: "rubbish, rubbish, ah!" The thing you said is rubbish someone else has bought. Should you go after that and say to them: "excuse me madam, I have to inform you, but you have the most terrible taste!" We can't do that. Because who are we? We are just another punter: we are just someone bopping along in life with our confusion. Our deep value is not based on our opinions, our judgements, our evaluation. It's based on the innate quality of the lamp, of the illuminator which is a pure awareness which reveals everything. But we tend to imagine that we are the contents of our mind. We are our thoughts, our feelings, our memories, our intelligence, our capacities and capabilities. And so, if we can make ourselves useful people, people will like us and then we will have friends and we will feel good about ourselves and we will get a better job. Now all of that is true, but all of that is also impermanent. Friends move away, companies close down - you become redundant -, children get sick and die, parents get sick and die. All the things that we invest ourselves into - and imagine will be a stable house - just crumbles into sand. It's not that we shouldn't participate. We are embodied, so we have to participate in the world but it's how we participate. If we participate with a

lightness of touch, with an awareness that is open to what's arising but not appropriating it, not grabbing it and turning it into a solid basis because it's never solid. As the Buddha said many times: "this world is like an illusion, it's like the reflection of the moon on water". That means you can see it, it's there, it's vital, it's gorgeous but you can't have it - it's beyond appropriation. All one can do is be present and alive moment by moment. That's how you have a life. Not by planning it in your head, not be taking things from the world and keeping them very privately, but with an open heart participating and being with other people.

In this view of *Dzogchen* our nature is pure, that is to say, it's unobscured. Unobscured means that all your thoughts, feelings, perceptions and so on are arising for your awareness - actually from your awareness - but they are not who you are, yourself. So, when we think "well I'm kind of lazy": what we are doing is taking a filter, and you may well on an energetic level be a bit lazy, and you are wrapping your true sense of self in this filter (James takes the napkin and envelops the tea cup). So, you are now defining yourself as being this one thing. When we say "pure from the very beginning", it means no filter, no assumption, no habit actually ever touches your nature. The traditional image, as some of you will well know, that is used to explain this is the mirror. The mirror reveals whatever is in front of it, whatever is in front of the mirror seems to come into the mirror. When you look in a mirror at your own face, your face seems to be inside the mirror, yet when the next person looks in the mirror, their face is inside it. So, if Mary has been looking into the mirror before you, you don't have to kind of knock on the mirror and say, "Mary are you finished, could you get out of the mirror please? It's my turn!". As soon as your face is there, Mary's is gone. This is how the mind is working, moment after moment after moment, new experiences are arising. You were waking up this morning, cleaning your teeth, having a pee, having your breakfast and so on, moments coming and going, coming and going, they don't stay. You were there, this is your life and it's gone. You are fully there; this is it and it's not it. It is it, it's not it. So, who is the one who is always there as all this stuff is going on? This is the pure unborn awareness. This is our own nature. Which means if good things come, we can only open to them, you can't grasp them you will never hold onto them forever. In the same way if bad things come, they won't be with you forever. Settling into this awareness, which is at the heart of the practice, means that one can be with the world as it is. Which means you can give up your "full-time occupation as universal dictator", you don't have to struggle and strive to live life on your terms and make sure that everything works out right. Because you start to develop a sense that what feels right for you is just a momentary positioning, it has no more truth than an opinion.

Now this nature is fresh because just as the awareness allows each thing to arise, the moment of arising is always new. Each time you eat an apple, if you are there with that apple, that will be a new apple. But if your relation with the apple is mediated through the categorisation of this is an apple, I am eating an apple as a concept you will hardly taste the apple. So, things are familiar and repeated: if you play another game of football, it's just another game of football, but in the moment when you are chasing the ball it's an absolutely unique moment that will never be repeated again. So, part of the approach of Dzogchen is to live in the absolute freshness of each moment. Now this is something which means that there is no boredom. That may be a revelation to some people: nothing is boring. Doing your mathematics homework is not boring, it's absolutely fresh and exciting. There's an idea! It's fresh and exciting because it's new each time. Every time you write the word 'the', although whatever age you are you have written it thousands and thousands of times, in this unique moment your pen is making that mark and it's doing it in a slightly different way. So, freshness means you are not making sense of the present through the past, you are not anxiously waiting to jump into the future, you are just here as your life reveals itself moment by moment, and what could be more delightful than that?

However most of the time we are living wrapped up in our familiar thoughts and obsessions and habits and that's why we use the preliminary practices. Because they are ways of trying to thin the obscuration which stands between us and ourselves. So that instead of being very externally focussed and trying to improve our world, our sense of self by moving objects around, we start to simplify the matrix of interpretations, the patternings of sense-making that we apply to the world, so that we have a less mediated, a more direct relationship with what's occurring. And all the preliminary practices are concerned with purification of one kind or another.

So, two things are here, one is saying: (1) from the very beginning, everything has been pure. And the second is saying: (2) although that is the case, it is also necessary to purify that which doesn't need to be purified - because it only doesn't need to be purified if you've got to the right side; if you're on the wrong side of the fence, it does need to be purified. That's at the heart of it. So, from the point of view of Dzogchen we are purifying something that is already pure. Why would you bother doing that? Because you don't recognise the purity. In the same way, if somebody develops a condition, for example, obsessive compulsive disorder. They may know that their drive, the demand they feel inside themselves to check that the door is locked or to wash their hands, they may know that that is ridiculous, they may know that they are being stupid, they may look at their hands and see how red and raw they are and despair and

weep, and yet next time they feel that somehow, they have been contaminated they have to do it. That's the relationship that we have with the obscurations. Actually, the obscurations arise and pass by themselves, everything is impermanent.

In the past it was a weekly, or even a daily, duty to take a pail of water and wash your front steps and even the pavement in front of your house. You might even whitewash the front step. That done and then along comes some dog and pisses on your step, and now there's a dirty puddle! "This is outrageous! It's my step and it's my job to keep it clean!" But actually, your doorstep is on a public street. You want to keep something clean as if it was yours, but it is in the public domain. Is your mind your own private possession?

Of course, on one level we have to take responsibility for our thoughts and feelings. If you are sitting at work or in school and you are fidgeting and moving around someone is going to say "oy, what's the matter, settle down!". That is to say: you, as a person, need to be able to control your body, you need to be able to focus your mind. So, in that sense we have to take responsibility for our behaviour. But at the same time thoughts and feelings arise inside us. Do they show us who we really are? If you have a cruel thought or a selfish thought, does that make you a bad person? That's a really, really important thing. Normally we think it does. We imagine, "if other people knew the kind of thoughts I'm having, that would be so shameful. I'm very glad that people can't see inside me". So, although I appear to be quite a nice person, really, I know how bad I am. So, I have a lot of work to do and also, I'm always a bit frightened that people are going to find out. And I would suggest that most of us live our lives in that way. Somehow weird stuff arises in our head, we then feel contaminated by it, as if it was within our capacity to stop this stuff coming in our head. Actually, thoughts and feelings are always arising and passing. When a negative thought arises, does it define who you are?

From the point of view of Dzogchen, from the point of view of the innate natural purity of the mind, it's just like a cloud arising in the sky. The cloud is just water vapour gathering together which will then disperse itself. It starts to rain or the wind blows, and then the cloud has gone and the natural clarity of the sky will be revealed once again. But on a day like this, if you want to go and play outside and you look out and you see the grey sky it's not so much fun. It seems to be doing something to you, it seems to be a limit to your world, you think "ah, it's going to rain... This is not an ideal day to go and have a picnic on the hills, it's too cold, too wet". So, just as the external weather can determine our feelings, the internal

weather does the same. Some depressive thoughts, some periods of anxiety, self hatred, irritations about what's going on a work or with colleagues, and suddenly everything gets a bit spoiled. So, from the point of view of Dzogchen, the most important thing at that moment is to relax and to be present and allow the obscurations to go free by themselves. And we will do some of that practice a bit later. But most of the time we find ourselves meshed in, united with these obscurations: they appear to be true, and that's why we do the preliminary practices.

First Reflection: Turning the mind away from samsara

So, the first general practice is the four reflections that turn the mind from samsara. And the first of these is to reflect on the nature of *samsara*. *Samsara* is a way of thinking about how human existence fits in with other kinds of existence. And Buddhism, traditional Buddhism, follows an understanding of time which used to be very common in the world. It's cyclical time, that is to say that there are cycles of time that go round, and round, and round and repeat themselves again and again. So, you have a kind of golden period, then a silver period, then a bronze period, and finally a lead period - where everything goes bad and you have a dissolution -, and then you go back to a golden period. Many of the ancient Greeks believe that proposition. That means that you are not in linear time. Our modern world is devoted to a notion of progression through time: Darwinian evolution, the clock time which covers everything. A modernist cultural view is all about progress: going forward, moving ahead, doing things differently, getting away from the limitations of the past. In cyclical time, one is concerned much more with escaping from time itself. Time - which is the linking of the past, the present and the future - is a relativization, that is to say I am bound in time. "I once was ten, if I live long enough, I will be 80, I am somewhere in the middle" so I can look back, I can look forward. And there are all the things that I used to do that I don't do, and there's all the things that might lie ahead of me. So, people become concerned when they are young about passing exams, and working out whether they have got friends or not. And then people start to worry about whether they will get a job or not, and then start to worry about whether they are going to have a pension or not. In that way there is always something to worry about because the mind goes forward into the future, tries to imagine the scenario, and set up the right sort of responses that will make the future better. On one level that's very intelligent. If you're a farmer you have to keep seed crops, so you have got something to plant the next spring. If you eat all your seed, then what will you do in the spring? You have to be able to think ahead. However cyclical time means that whatever is built up will

also go down, whatever is created will be destroyed. There used to be the “great and glorious” British Empire, where in the map of the world there was always something red in colour. And now here we are, still called Great Britain but not so very great, somehow, a little bit sinking... We reveal ourselves as just another “war mongering nation”, very concerned to go out and drop bombs on other people. In fact, Britain has a shameful history, we are one of the most violent, invasive corrupting influences in world history, in this determination to show the world what we are made of, and to help other people be like us, because we are so superior. And where has it all gone? Endless chaos created by disturbing other people’s worlds. This is the idea of modernity, that if you have the truth, you have to take it out into the world and convert other people to that vision of existence.

From a Buddhist point of view, it’s much more important to examine your own mind. Because when you realise that your mind is not very clear, on what grounds would you want to go and convert other people to your propositions? Dogma is very dangerous! Because dogma is a set of beliefs or assumptions which seem to tell the truth, but when you start to meditate and look at your mind, you see every thought arises and passes. And it’s only by repetition of the dogma that it appears to be true. So, if you become dogmatic, all you’re doing is repeating thoughts again and again to kind of mesmerise yourself, to hypnotise yourself into believing that they are really true. But they always, I think this is true, dogmas are always lies, because our world is incredibly complicated. The Buddha taught the idea of dependent co-origination, which means that everything influences everything else. There are these incredibly subtle chains of connection between all our activities, all the time. And that’s very, very nuanced, just very, very delicate. But dogma is not like that, dogma is firm, dogma is secure, dogma is certain. So, one of the functions of meditation is to make us non-dogmatic, so that we start to enquire into how is the world? So, a notion of cyclical time, that at this time we are born in a human body but that we also see that there are animals in the world, and maybe when we die, we could be reborn as an animal.

You may be familiar with Tibetan paintings of the Wheel of Life? On the top there is the heavenly domains and then there are the jealous gods, who want to be the masters of heaven - but never get there so they are always angry and frustrated and irritated -, and then there is the human realm, then the animal realm then the hungry ghosts, who are always dissatisfied, their bellies are huge and their mouths are very small so they can never get enough. And then there are the hell realms, hot hells, cold hells, two intermediate hells in which people suffer greatly, without solace. You can understand these in psychological terms or you can see them in actual terms. One of the things that it’s pointing out is: at the

moment you take your body to be the limit of who you are... and most of us don't really imagine that we could be a duck or a frog, but imagine if you were a frog. "Croak croak" there are lots of birds that would like to eat you. Why would they like to eat you? Leave me alone "croak, croak, go away"! And the problem is that you want to get a boyfriend or a girlfriend so you have to go "croak, croak" but when you go "croak, croak" to get sex, death also comes to visit, this is a human dilemma. The life of animals is not very nice. If you are born as a pig or a cow, you probably belong to a farmer and the farmer is thinking "my lovely profit". "Moo, moo", "my profit, going to send you off to have your throat cut", "moo, moo". Not very nice. Animals can't do very much to protect themselves. You just need to see a little sparrow eating and looking around to see if anything is going to attack it. The life of animals is not very nice. And then you imagine being a *preta*, a hungry ghost, always hungry, always needing something and you can't get it.

From the Buddhist point of view these are possibilities, that is to say, your current form is created out of your past deeds. You are not just human. "Here we are on this planet, moving through space we don't know why we are here; we happen to be here, later we will die and that's that". This is a kind of modern view of human life. From a Buddhist point of view, our existence is determined by the karmic fruits of our past activity. That is to say the universe is moral, at the heart of it it's a moral universe and the forms that we take on demonstrate the nature of our past activities. But because actions exist in time, the causal basis for having this kind of body is very small, and will get used up and then our consciousness will move off and find another home, and many of the homes that are available are not very nice. That immediately means that if I spend the whole of this life making sure that this lovely body is pampered and safe, I may be doing things to make it safe which lead me into dreadful places later. The Buddha said "everywhere human beings want to be happy", but in order to be happy they do the very things that will make them unhappy.

So, traditionally it is said that if you steal, you will be reborn in a country where there is a lot of poverty and famine. Now if that is the case, then in order to have a good time in this life you don't think of cause and effect, you just think of getting away with it, and as long as the police don't find out what I've done then I'm safe. But what you've done is set in chain a natural system of punishment, you don't need the police to punish you because you will get your own come-uppance, because your come-uppance is your own karmic tendency in a later life that will lead you to be born in a particular circumstance. This has major implications. Whether this is true or not true, if you just took this as a kind of map of existence, what it calls upon us to do is to be very careful about what we do. To think, "what is my motive, why do I

do what I do, how am I spending my time?” From a Buddhist point of view, wisdom and compassion are the two main things to be developed. So, in the course of a day, how much of your time is devoted to developing wisdom? Can you live in a state of wisdom? Wisdom meaning to recognise your own nature, to recognise the nature of the phenomena around you. Can you live with compassion? So, if you are in a work situation, what would it mean to be compassionate? Does that mean giving in to people? Does that mean standing up for yourself? The practice is always complicated, it doesn't come from a little printed handout. When you are in the actual interface with other people, you've got to be there. You have got to be light on your feet, you've got to be able to catch your impulses as they arise, you have got to catch the filters that come down to obscure you and get you caught up in habitual responses, and stay fresh and find a way through. That's quite hard, especially if we are thinking: “anything for an easy life, what about me, why shouldn't I, and it's not fair!”, and all these little turns that we have that bring our attention back onto number one.

So, reflecting on these six realms, and the fact that at death we move around into different realms helps to relativize our current situation, rather than thinking “this is all there is, I've only got one life and I have got to get the most out of it!”, as if one is kind of a juicer and you are squeezing oranges onto it, “this is life, ah, I want the most!”. What is it for? What is the purpose of my life? That again is: is my life personal or is my life public? Because if I am part of the world with other people, then in a sense my life belongs to other people as well. So, compassion is just me being in my world. Because if other people are my world, given that I see your faces, I don't see mine. So, if I'm doing things that make me happy but make you all pissed off, all I see is your grumpy faces. That's my world. So, it makes sense to try to make other people a bit happy, because they are your world, that's all you've got! That's quite a different thing then, isn't it? So, the way I should take care of myself is to take care of other people. Taking care of other people is taking care of myself. That's a very different view. Your welfare is my welfare. It's not that I have to think, “how will I help you?” and I'd better sort my own situation out and make sure I'm secure before I do anything for you. Rather it's the other way round, that unless you're happy, I can't be happy. Therefore, what I do with my life is connected with all the possibilities of existence. And this wheel of life I think is extremely challenging. Because if this had been understood at the beginning of the industrial revolution, we wouldn't have had the development of modern factories which were hellish environments which enslaved many people. And all over the world now we have child labour in factories making running shoes and so on, hot sweaty environments with lots of chemicals in the air, also pumping our masses of pollution into the rivers. So many developing countries have enormous pollution. Now if you think this is

all my world, the animals are part of my world, then for me to make a profit from my factory, while poisoning lots of fish and birds, is attacking myself, If we have this kind of map. But if we have the kind of map of narrow self interest it doesn't concern you, as long as I'm OK, that's fine. So, reflecting on *samsara* is a way of reorienting oneself, to say I am part of this and every aspect of the universe is my concern. I can't have a partial vision any more. Privileging me over other people won't do me any good. Now of course this is a very high ideal to live up to, it's very challenging to think in that way but essentially that's what reflecting on *samsara* is. That the situation that I'm going to do so much to protect now, is arising out of many past causes and won't last forever. Therefore, not to see my connection with other beings will lead me into many false choices; but seeing my connection to other beings will give me a value system which is very different from the ones that we get raised in at school. From that point of view, a concern with ecology is just ordinary ethics. For example, in Tibet people were traditionally very careful about taking minerals out of the land because they saw that the land belonged to the protectors of the land, many different spirits. The water belonged to another group of spirits, these *lu* or *nagas* were very concerned with purity. So if you polluted a river, you would have an anxiety that you would develop a condition like measles, or leprosy because skin disorders in particular were seen as the punishment from the protectors of the water for people who dumped their rubbish in them. *That's an incredible idea!* It takes the *Gaia hypothesis*¹ quite a few steps further, it says that the earth is not just a living organism but it's alive and has voices and that if you are respectful, if you know that people are already there, then you have to be tentative. So, if you want to build a house the first thing you have to do is to make some offerings to the spirit of the land to say "may we have your permission to build here, and we promise that we will make these offerings and we will remember you, and we will always be grateful because our house is built on your land". What an incredible notion! When the explorers went out from Europe, the *conquistador* and the British and the Dutch, and Spanish and so on, they didn't have that notion at all. They had the notion that every land is empty if it doesn't have Europeans in it. Nobody else exists, nobody else exists! We can take all your land, we can kill you, because we are the definition of reality, everything else is just nothing, and we are going to turn that nothing into something. This is a spectacular karmic violence to have enacted, it's unbelievable! In one of the states of Australia it was only in 1956 that they revoked a law that said that you can kill aborigines for recreational purposes. You could drive out in your

¹ The Gaia hypothesis also known as the Gaia theory, Gaia paradigm, or the Gaia principle, was developed by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis in the 70s, and proposes that living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings on Earth to form a synergistic and self-regulating, complex system that helps to maintain and perpetuate the conditions for life on the planet.

Land Rover and shoot an aborigine, for fun, 1956. This is mind boggling, the lack of respect for each other among humans, for animals and for the whole planet. So, thinking of *samsara* is a way of waking up to the fact that everything is dynamic, everything is movement and every move we make is impinging on this whole energetic system. The challenge in that is that you have to be awake, you can't be just bopping down the street asleep just listening to your sound, cocooned in a private world because this is your world and you are impacting other people. So that's quite a remarkable vision. So, the first preparatory practice is to really think, what is this universe? If it's an interactive, energetic field, then I have to experience myself as energy, not as an entity, not as a thing, not as a done deal, something which is already established, but as a naked evolving revelatory force moving with other force factors. Maybe we need a wee cup of tea after that. Shall we have a break?

Sun, clouds and umbrellas

If you imagine that up in the sky the sun is always shining but sometimes it's obscured by clouds and sometimes rain is falling from the clouds. So, some of the *dharma* practices that we do are to develop an umbrella. So, you can hold the umbrella up and the rain of your own obscurations won't make you wet. That's generally what's called the *Hinayana* View, of trying to protect yourself from the potential difficulties and dangers that are in the world. The problem with an umbrella is that you have to hold it up: if you forget to hold it up, you will get wet. And so, in the *Hinayana* tradition, they have a lot of vows, because vows are ways of remembering your umbrella, what to do when this happens, what to do when that happens, so that you always are attentive. It is a very dualistic vision. If I am not careful, if I am not attentive, bad things will happen, it's all up to me but of course my capacity to be on the ball all the time is not great. So, it's a very difficult task. The next level is to look at these clouds and to think, "how can we thin out these obscurations?" So that's where the purification practices come in. We develop positive qualities, courage, endurance, patience, compassion, wisdom and so on. And the more we do that, because we are devoting our time to doing that, the less we are encouraging and maintaining our more negative qualities of selfishness, irritation and so on. If you keep doing that, gradually, slowly, the "band" of obscurations will become thinner and thinner. So, this is something that you get in the *hinayana* path. But also in the *mahayana* path, where we make a commitment that over many, many lifetimes you will work to thin away these obscurations, and the motivation is not just that you will have an easier time, but by removing the obscurations of all beings, everyone will have an easier time. Again, the focus is still dualistic: there is me and my obscurations and they are an obstacle or an interruption to me going to where I want to go. The third aspect in this image is the sun, the sun represents the radiance of awareness

itself so when you practice in the Dzogchen tradition, we enter the heart of the sun. Our own mind is the illuminating force of the sun itself. So, we are not obscured from the sun, we become the sun. And from the position of this radiant awareness, everything that arises is simply the revelation of the capacity of the sun. So there are no obscurations. And this is the practice that we will do now. The function of the practice is that whenever thoughts, feelings, and sensations arise that you can start to wrap yourself around, or pull into a familiar story you have about yourself, you just relax and allow whatever comes to come. Don't edit, don't protect. Part of the profound fear that we have is: that "I will be contaminated by this experience". What is it that gets contaminated? Well clearly our personality will be influenced by what happens to us. If you grew up in a family where there was a lot of cruelty, a lot of criticism, physical, sexual abuse and so on, your pathway in life will definitely be affected. When we say your pathway, what does that mean? It means your personality, the patterning of your energy in terms of how you relate to yourself and how you relate to other people. Is the mind itself affected by all these experiences? From the point of view of *Dzogchen*, it's not. It doesn't matter what your history is, if it's good or it's bad. If you stay in a state of awareness and just observe what is arising, it will come and it will go. Say for example you grew up in a very, very critical family and your inner world is full of criticism and judgement, you are very harsh on yourself. And you might say you beat yourself up. So, there's a negative thought and there seems to be a recipient of that negative thought, "oh why do I keep doing this, I'm so stupid, I'm so stupid!" Now, if "I am saying I'm so stupid", the one who is saying that is the I, so I'm the attacking force but I also seem to be simultaneously the recipient of it. So, I'm whacking myself. If you just sit and something like that arises, it's then gone. Both polarities go. The attacking polarity and the attacked polarity will both vanish. If you fuse into it, if you think "this is a true account of how I am, I am indeed a waste of space, this negative thought is telling me the truth about myself", then you will become limited, conditioned and defined. And then whatever thought arises in your mind will be your master. So, if you have the bad luck to have lots of very negative thoughts, you will just be flattened and annihilated. And as we know, every year many people kill themselves. They come to a point where they feel that "the content of my mind is so overwhelming and the strength of my impulses is so intense and my arousal is so profound, that I can't self soothe, I can't bring myself down, that when these three factors meet together the only way forward is out." This is so tragic. Tragic because this life is gone, but from the Buddhist point of view it means that you move off into the next experience with a very powerful sense of being at the mercy of whatever arises. From the point of view of *Dzogchen*, whenever you find yourself falling into your thoughts, believing your thoughts, relax... observe... and very gently pull your attention back from the thought so that you stand still like the mirror and let the thought pass. Thoughts will always

pass, they have no inherent power, you give them power... you give them the power. But it doesn't feel like that, it feels like the power is in the thought. So, this is the heart of the meditation practice.

Four Reflections

Karma

So, back to these basic principal thoughts, the second one to think about is *karma*, that everything is created by *karma*. *Karma* simply means activity. But it means a particular kind of activity. Just to unpack this a little bit, some of you are familiar with this, but it's very important to see the basis of it. Traditionally it's understood in terms of four aspects. The first is the basis (1), and the basis of the generation of *karma* is to believe that I exist as a separate person. It's called the ground, but here meaning the relative ground. So, I am me, and I am looking out of my eyes at you, I am real and you are real. When this is installed, then you have the potential for *karma*. Am I real? Not really. What is the basis for my reality? "My name. I am James and I also have a passport to prove it", so if I don't know who I am, I can look in my passport, there's my picture and my name, that's me. Am I reliable? Not at all. Would I want to be reliable? Sometimes. But the reality is that thoughts, feelings and sensations change. The content of me being me, varies a great deal. It varies according to the season, to hormones, all sorts of factors bring about different constellations of what I call me. From a psychological point of view, more and more there is an understanding that we have different aspects of ourselves inside, sometimes called sub-personalities, self states, voices, that we are made up of a congregation, an interplay of different aspects, none of which are enduring or inherently true, but they move together. So, for example in a football team: you have people who take up particular positions, and while the game is going on, they make moves in accordance with the particular role that goes with that position. At the end of the game, they are no longer doing what they did in the game. The goalkeeper is not jumping about as he walks down the street, he is just walking down the street. So being the goalkeeper is a situational identity. It's very important in football to have a goalkeeper, but in the same way, inside ourselves as a person, it's important to have a bit of us that's got some teeth to us, because if you can't bite, then in some situations, that's a bit dangerous. It's important also to be kind and generous. Of course, we often get trapped in being placatory as well, so many of the positions that we take up is not so helpful and they need to be balanced by other helpful things. It's very rare to have a football team where each of the positions is occupied by somebody who is really good at that position, and not only that, understands the position of the other players. So, somebody may be fantastic as a star

but they never want to pass the ball, which means that they are not a team player. To become a good team as a person is very difficult, because we tend to be divided against ourselves. We don't even want some of the members of our team to be in our team so we are always trying to send them off! So not only are we a bad, malfunctioning team, but we are the referee as well. So, in that situation we are a bit divided against ourselves. And yet "I exist, I am real, I am true!" So, we have got this double move where we can see that actually we are rather incoherent, we are rather situational in how we present ourselves, and yet we are quite strident in protecting our integrity, so called. So, this is the first stage of *karma*, thinking I exist as I, me, myself, I am someone. On the basis of that, I am positioned in the world and I have intentions (2). My intention is to protect myself, my intention is to develop myself, my intention might also be to protect you. But say I am going to do something kind, "I want to help you." I am real and you are real and the help I am going to give is real. So, then I think how am I going to do that. The third stage is the actual enactment (3), it's called *yor wa*², it means joining your intention to the actual situation in which you do whatever it is. And then the fourth stage is the outcome in which you think "I did that, I am glad I did that, that was a good thing to do" (4). So, when these four factors are fully aligned, then you get the full weight of *karma*. That is to say, you put your full energy in one direction, you have committed yourself to a particular formation in the world, and therefore you're likely to re-encounter that formation coming again. Say for example you stop smoking for a while and then you get upset about something or you drink a bit much at a party and you have a cigarette. In that moment you might enjoy the cigarette. Now afterwards you might think "oh, what am I doing?" This is stupid, in which case you have blocked it on the fourth level, on the level of the outcome. You have said I don't like that outcome. But already you have set up a bit of a tendency, and you want to have another cigarette. Do I really want to have another cigarette? Well, part of me does and part of me doesn't. This is the problem with being in duality. Because we are divided against ourselves, the self of self-management is very hard. This is why paths based on vows are very difficult. The person who takes the vow and wants to be a good monk, or nun, or really wants to be a *bodhisattva*, is not the whole person. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand does, the right hand doesn't know what the left hand does. That's the problem. If only we were all of a piece, we could speak our truth and be reliable. But because we are poly-vocal, because we live in this polyphony of different voices, which is often a cacophony, because we are divided against ourselves, we can't really

² In Tibetan: *yor wa*: application, preparation, exertion.

be quite sure when we say something if we carry it through, because whose voice is this? “It’s my voice” and yet I have other voices that disagree with it.

So, *karma* means that we are often carrying through activities without much insight into what we do, bumping into the world, which has its own small consequences. But the key thing is that the structure of self and other as separate and strongly real is always being installed. And this is very important because in the view of Buddhism, good actions are not enough. Even if you manage to be a very, very good person and you never cause any trouble, and you are always kind and gentle and thoughtful, that would not be sufficient for awakening. Because the self-referential nature of activity, knowing what we do, not in an egotistical sense, not taking great pride out of it, but just knowing I did that, the way in which every time you do something, like if I lift the cup (James lifts the cup), I am just lifting it. But there is a kind of invisible feedback loop that says “I have lifted this cup”, so there is an affirmation, a confirmation of my existence, “I am the agent, I am the one who is doing this”. And that solidity of the individual self - me as an autonomous subject separate from environment - that’s the basis of the problem, because that’s the nature of ignorance: to take oneself as separated from the integration of spaciousness and manifestation. And to then see: I exist in relation to the world and I can choose to participate or not. So now, I am going to be a good person and I choose to participate in a good helpful kind way, but I am still confirming my separate existence. And from the Buddhist point of view that is ignorance, it’s not seeing how it actually is.

So, *karma* is the seed of being born in the different realms and you can read elaborate rationales for why different realms are created. But the root cause is not recognising one’s own unborn nature or Buddha nature. So, *karma* means, if I don’t waken up to the fact that my nature is open, unborn, spacious - a luminous awareness -, and if I continue to see myself as a finite personality created out of causes and conditions, I will always be trying to protect myself and interacting, pushing away what I think is bad, trying to pull in what is good and that energy will drive me round and round in these six realms. So, the path to liberation doesn’t lie in activity, it lies in awakening to the ground out of which activity arises. This is why an understanding of *karma* is very important. Of course, the Buddhas also do things, they help people, but they help them in the manner of a dream. Sometimes that is explained in terms of the Buddhas live in their pure lands, like Amitabha in the western paradise of *Sukhavati*. Amitabha is always there, but out of him radiate rays of rainbow coloured light and many beneficial forms come into the world. What that means is that he is not doing it, that is to say, activity is spontaneous. Now of course if you are driving

a car, you have to take responsibility to stay on the right side of the road and overtake carefully, you can't just let it happen. And in that situation, it's normal to have a sense of being the agent, but when you sit in meditation, the more you relax, the more you realise stuff is just happening, you are not the thinker of the thought. The thought arises and if you relax, there is simply this open field of awareness which reveals the thought. So, your mind is then like the stage, and on this stage, dancers, performers of many kinds, come and go; and then they are gone. The stage doesn't create the dancer, it's not doing the dancing, the stage is simply the environment in which this occurs. It facilitates it - without the stage, the dancing wouldn't be occurring there -, but the stage itself is not dancing. So, this is very important, this is the understanding of the dreamlike or illusory nature of the Buddha's activity. It's said to be in the manner of a dream like a rainbow, like a mirage, it's there and yet it's ungraspable. What gets in the way of our recognising that, is that we grasp at ourselves all the time, we think we are strongly real, we take our pains and sufferings very seriously. In fact, they just pass; it's normal to suffer. Suffering is what we get here, there's a lot of it about. So, when we get it it's kind of "You know, that's what you expect". This is Macclesfield weather, we are not in the tropics, this is it, this is what you get here. Why would we be surprised?

So, *karma* is enormously important as a way of thinking about who is the one who is doing this action, being more alert, because our tendency is to be sucked into the world of objects. Because the object is there, I feel that I have to. "Why did you need to climb Mount Everest?", "Because it's there". "Why do you invade this other country?", "Because it's there, because we can." We human beings are very, very stupid. We do things just because we can do them. Ridiculous. "But why? Why would you want to do that?", "Because I can". "No but why?", "Because I can." This is a completely circular argument, isn't it? There is no rationale in it at all. Human beings are very, very stupid, and that's the danger of *karma*, in thinking that you are doing something good inside one little frame of reference, you end up creating a lot of turmoil. So, Buddhists sit on their cushions and try not to do too much. And that may be a better hope for the world.

Impermanence

So, the next factor is impermanence. Impermanence is very, very important to understand. Everything is impermanent. Moment by moment by moment the world changes. We have been sitting in this room for some time, we haven't had an earthquake so we might believe that this room is a fairly stable environment. It's only stable in terms of its concept. The concept of the room won't change because

we can keep repeating it. But as the day changes, the light coming in the windows affects the colouration that we have in here. As the air gets more stale, we get more sleepy and so our perception of the world changes, that's what happens, isn't it? The room as revealed to us is changing moment by moment. The room that we conceptualise and think about can remain the same. All the stability in our life is conceptual, all the change in our life is experiential. So, the Buddha's teaching on impermanence is to bring us away from the pseudo-security and fixity and sense of control that comes from resting on concepts, into the immediacy of the fact that it's changing suddenly. Because you're sitting in your chair and you just move slightly, you've got a new room. You just tilt your head a little bit and you have a new room; you have a new perspective; you see people's faces from a different angle. "Oh, but that's still John". What is there? It's a particular profile, the light at this time, how the person's expression is revealed, that is this, that's what we have got. As soon as you say "oh yes, but it's John", you have lost the detail of that face and you have reassured yourself on the basis of saying, "I trust the name, I don't trust the experience. I prefer concepts to experience". That's an amazing thing to do because actually we live in a world of experience. Sparrows don't trust concepts at all, they are very wary of cats. You know, they are checking it out, they live in a world that is completely naked. Now we have managed to use concepts to make our world much safer. We have things like insurance policies, which are very useful to have, but it's mediating raw direct experience through contracts. You have a contract of employment. Somebody gives you a bad deal you can go and take them to arbitration, you can take them to an enquiry. You can say, "this is not right, this is how it should be, what about that?" But if you have ever done a process like that, you find out it's awful. Because the realm of bureaucracy is just trading one term against another, that's what our whole legal system is. You know, if you have to write a court report for a patient, going into a legal system about child benefit or child care, it's very, very political, isn't it because you are simply telling a story. How can you say whether somebody would be a good mother or not?

So, impermanence is to call back from the mediation of conceptualisation to the directness of experience, that includes concepts. That's the whole thing: concepts are not outside of experience; they are a part of experience but they have taken on a privileged position that seems to set them apart as the judges of experience. Does that make sense? So, when you speak, when you have a thought: "it's gone, it's gone, oh!", there's the impermanence of the concept. Now the concept is "I remain, I am true, this is Macclesfield, it was Macclesfield on Monday, it's Macclesfield on Saturday, it's always Macclesfield." But where is Macclesfield? You can't find Macclesfield. You can find it on a map because you look for the word Macclesfield and say oh there it is, it's near Manchester. But when you walk around in the streets of

Macclesfield, where is the heart of Macclesfield? “Oh, this is the oldest part of Macclesfield, this is the oldest house in Macclesfield, oh, that’s the real Macclesfield”. It’s not like that is it? Macclesfield is ungraspable because it’s always changing. And yet the concept can be applied again and again.

So, impermanence allows us to see how we bring ignorance into the world, how we concretise situations which are actually dynamic. “Oh, I am going to see Swan Lake tonight”. So, we have Swan Lake, we have a notion of the music, we have a notion of the standard choreography. And so, you get an interpretation and afterwards the critic can say “that was not an impressive performance, da da da...”. Because they have in their mind what the ideal performance is. But all you ever get in Swan Lake is a beginning, a middle and an end, and then it’s gone and it was ungraspable all the way through. And how will you receive Swan Lake? If you are the critic, you know that you have got to write something for the newspaper, and you want to keep your job so you have to say something interesting, so a little bit of sharpness in your eyes looking out, you are looking for things. The child going to Swan Lake for the first time, imagine a little girl of seven, you know dressed up, with a little bow on her dress ... “ahhhthat’s a very different Swan Lake isn’t it?” No agenda, just ah, “oh, so beautiful!”, tears coming down, it’s very sweet. So, it’s very, very important for us to see what is impermanence, nothing to grasp. And if there is nothing to grasp, then in life either we are there or we are dead. And we are the zombie nation. Most of the time we are asleep, we are just bopping around in our heads, thinking about this and that, not here, somewhere else. So impermanence is saying, attend in the moment, attend in the moment, there is nowhere to hide because if you link impermanence to karma, while you are in a daydream, your activity construction is still going on. You are doing things without being aware of them but that doesn’t stop them having consequences. And these consequences, because you are in the world of concepts, seem very strong. When you take concepts to be real, then when you come to think about what you did, you get the strong response, “oh god, why did I do it? Ah, I shouldn’t have done it!” and you feel it in your body and you tense up, the muscles tense, the diaphragm squeezes, the breath comes up, “oh, oh, what will I do now?”. It’s very intense. And what’s causing all that? It’s not the action, the action has already gone. Self-attack is conceptual, the moment of the event is gone. You have created a mental construct and you are now standing in relation to the construct and linking it to your value system which you had forgotten about when you did the action, but you suddenly remember, and now these three factors are grinding together. This is an intra-psychic conceptual battle. And in that you get a lot of grief. That’s what a great deal of suffering is.

Suffering

Buddhist suffering, which is the next factor, means the way in which the momentary evanescent pain of situations is cooked up to become something else. It's normal for us to get aches and pains, you get a headache, or a backache. This is not suffering from the general Buddhist point of view. Suffering is when you feel yourself to be the victim of that pain, "it's not fair, it shouldn't be happening, why is it happening to me, I hate this!" These are the sources of suffering. Because you are then not allowing this factor to be part of the total sphere of your activity, it's just one of the many things that is going on, but you are now getting closer and closer to it, obsessed, mesmerised by it and it is determining who you are. And when an event determines who we are, that's the real basis of suffering. Do you think that's true?

So, freedom from suffering doesn't mean that everything is "ha ha ha" all the time. What it does mean is that things are just as they are, some days are happy, some days are sad. When you are sad, you can just be sad. Being sad is not the same as suffering. Suffering is when you feel that you shouldn't be sad. When it's not something you can occupy. If you inhabit your own existence, every experience will be impermanent, so it will pass. Really understanding the impermanence of phenomena and the natural purity and spaciousness of the mind, you don't have to be upset. "But I don't want it to be like this!". Bad luck. Life is like that. Prince Harry wanted to stay in Afghanistan. Bad luck. No matter how rich and powerful you are, things don't go well, suffering comes to everyone. That's just a fact. "But I don't want it to be this way!". What's the cause of suffering? Is it the fact of difficult events happening, or, I don't want it to be this way? From the Buddhist point of view, it's the latter, that's where the suffering is. Because now I am standing in relation to my experience and I want to change it and I can't so I feel small and stupid and despairing. I feel ashamed and I feel angry, I want what I want, and it's all cooked up and you feel tight inside, you stop breathing properly and all kinds of revenge fantasies or despairing fantasies arise. And this is suffering, being immersed in something which has already gone.

Old age, Sickness and Death

And this is linked to old age, sickness and death. This body which if we are lucky is healthy for quite a bit of our lives, though for many people it's not very healthy, may be a great source of pain. If you are lucky and you have a longish life, sooner or later, sickness starts to come. Your body starts to wear out. Cartilage and so on gets thin, the skin gets thin, the body bruises easily and so on. And then we move towards death. And death means that we are having to leave all the things that were close to us. All the

things that we thought were ours, whether that's family, possessions, knowledge, all the ordinary bases of my identity. It's very easy to explore this. You just think of how you would introduce yourself to someone you meet for the first time. You start to tell them something about yourself. Everything that you tell them about yourself will go when you die, it's not just your body that dies, it's your identity that dies. So, in the Tibetan tradition, the elements which make up the body start to dissolve, the earth into the water, the water into the fire, the fire into the wind and finally our consciousness is merged in the wind element and it leaves the body through one of its nine doors and goes off on a journey. And the first thing it experiences is this open spaciousness, the *dharmata* (*sans.*), the *chönyi* (*tib.*). And in that moment, if you have done open meditation and relax, you can just recognize it and think, "oh, this is familiar!" and just stay in that and then you have liberation in the *Dharmakaya*. That moment passes and then you start to encounter colour and noise which comes in the form of first of all peaceful gods and then the wrathful deities. And if you have done some practice and you can be with that, then you relax into that state and you can have liberation in the *Sambhogakaya*. But if you don't know what it is and you think "whoa, what's this?!", that turning back into yourself, you move on and then you find yourself moving towards rebirth. And if you recognise what that is, then you can enter into the world in the *Nirmanakaya* form, but if you don't recognise what it is, your *karma* just spirals off somewhere else and then you begin with a new identity, and you start all over again. What you bring from your previous life is your *karma* which includes your developed capacity for awareness. And you see that with small children; some children get very turned in on themselves. They just cook and you say "sweetie, take it easy", and other kids are just happy and laughing and they fall over and look at the blood and laugh, others are whining, "these gurlly little kids!" And it's very sad, isn't it? Because you can see that it's all too real and you want to "say sweetie, it'll be fine". But if mum's not very able to do that then the child finds it difficult, then you see how the *karma* starts cooking and the child starts to become wary. The world's a bit dangerous and so they become a bit frightened and avoidant, and then of course when you get avoidance of situations you feel lonely inside, and you look at the other kids and they seem to do it and you think "well if they can do it, why can't I do it? Must be something wrong with me" and you start to cook up these very lonely little stories. That's how *karma* manifests.

So, old age, sickness and death is a reminder, don't leave this life empty handed. Because your house won't go with you; your body won't go with you; your possessions won't go with you, your collection of DVDs won't go with you; the number of sexual partners you have had won't go with you, nothing will go with you, it'll all be gone. So, what can go with you? Only the *dharma* and the *karma*, and

if it's mainly *karma* and not very much *dharma*, not so good. But if it's mainly *dharma* and not much *karma*, not so bad.

So, these are the four thoughts that turn the mind from *samsara*. That is to say, we should use them like wedges to interrupt and to open up a little gap in our normal immersion into the habitual formations of our lives. It's very important to try to do that, not to take things for granted. Because certainly from the point of view of *dzogchen*, the only thing which is granted is awareness. Only the Buddha nature is unborn, is just there. Everything else is arising and passing and therefore, is prone to be woven into constructs.

These four thoughts are not designed to make you anxious and upset, the lever is not to hit yourself on the head with, it's just to make you reflect, "oh, for the moment things are like this, but I need to make use of this opportunity". When times are good you should save and put some money in the bank. When times are hard, you will not have the resources to put money in the bank. When you are healthy and have energy, then you should practice the *dharma*. But many people wait until they are tired and sick and then practice the *dharma* and then it's a little bit too late. That's the important thing.

So, the view means, "ok, I really accept this, this world is always changing; the patterns I experience are contingent, that is to say they are dependent on many different factors - most of which are not at all in my control. For the moment things are good but they can easily change and I, anyway, will have to leave this body and go wandering long hither and thither like a leaf in the autumn wind. What should I do?" Luckily, we meet the *dharma*, and they say, practice wisdom and compassion. Is this going to get you into some terrible cult? Are you going to be asked to do some dreadful things? Not really. Mainly you will be asked to be kind to yourself and kind to other people. You don't have to do anything funny. You don't have to wear any particular funny clothes, you don't have to learn any special secret handshakes, you don't have to do anything peculiar, except find out who you actually are. There is a cost to that though, because I think it's not insulting to say that we live in a zombie world. Zombies are people who are wandering around not quite there, that is how we are but as soon as we start to do the meditation, we realise how "zombied" we are. The more you wake up, the more you realize how bad *samsara* is. When the Buddha explained the nature of suffering, he said "there are different kinds of suffering". These are organised in different schools in different ways but generally we say that there are three kinds of suffering. There is this kind of gross suffering (1) which is bad things happening to you. Then

there is the suffering of change (2), where good things become bad, but also when bad things become good, when people win the pools, win the lottery, wonderful luck but it often makes their life go very bad because it's so disturbing. But the third form of suffering is a very subtle suffering. They say that when you have a grain of sand on the palm of your hand, or a hair on the palm of your hand, you can hardly feel it, but if it goes in your eye then you would certainly feel it (3). And for the Buddha, he feels this all the time. This is why the Buddha's heart is so full of compassion because he really sees, everybody wants happiness but they do nothing to make that happiness. I live in London and all these young people who are carrying knives now, and the anxiety that this brings in their mums and their dads and so on, it's awful, it's awful. The kids want to be safe but they think the only way to protect myself is to defend myself, but the statistics show that you are more likely to be involved in a knife fight if you are carrying a knife. Then you can see why that happens. People want to make their lives secure but the way they go about it provokes the other person into more violence. So, one of the beautiful things about *dharma* is it gives us many useful and subtle methods for living in the world in the easiest possible way

Refuge

Refuge in the Buddha

So the next aspect to look at is Refuge. and all the Buddhist traditions have some notion of refuge. The basis of refuge is thinking that we need some kind of protection, we need some place to go to which will keep us safe. So that's again predicated on the idea that somehow, we are in danger or we are vulnerable or there are forces against us. So, from the *dzogchen* point of view, the first thing we would be looking at who is the one who is in danger? What is the nature of this attack that is happening to myself? So, you can have protection from *samsara*, protection from the habits and impulses you have in yourself, protection from untoward experiences, whether you see these as accidents or the impact of demons or local spirits on your life depending on how you see the world, but essentially, it's thinking: "I need some protection". So, who is it that can give us protection? When we were small, if we are lucky our parents give us protection, of some kind. But as we move out into the world, we find that many situations which should protect us, don't protect us. But also, we find ourselves drawn towards self-destruction, that we behave in ways that are not particularly helpful to us and yet they seem enormously important to do. Who can we really rely on? Can we rely on the government? Can we rely on friends? Can we rely on family? Can we rely on ourselves? A lot of the time we focus on how other people let us down, how other people

betray us, but there is another more important aspect: that we betray ourselves. We let ourselves down, because although we might know things, we don't listen to what we know, and we find ourselves being involved again and again in situations which are not helpful.

So from the Buddhist point of view, the main refuge is in the *buddha*, the *dharma* and the *sangha*. The Buddha here is on a general level the historical Buddha Shakyamuni who awoke from the intoxications of his birth situation, of being a very privileged young man who was entitled to have whatever he wanted, and he had a first awakening when he recognised that life in the palace, the life of privilege, was not the whole of life. In his travelling outside of the palace, he saw a sick person and an old person and a corpse. And he started to think, "if that happens to them, and they have a human body, maybe that will happen to me, and I have a human body". And that's an enormously important thing. At this time, in local hospitals, people are dying. People are being prepared for surgery. But somehow, we live as if we won't die, we live as if we won't have cancers and terrible diseases and so on. So the Buddha's first awakening was, "because I am human I will die. Because I am human, I have no particular protection" and we have to remember that he was a very privileged person. So later, when he had his awakening under the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, he awakened to the fact that there was a protection. But it wasn't on the basis of ordinary human identity, not on the basis of class or race or gender or status but on the basis of seeing that most of the things that he had relied on before were actually cheating him, and the things that he had never really attended to were things that were giving him refuge. That is to say his gaze was wrong, he had been looking in the wrong direction for happiness. And you know, most of us do that in our lives. It's very normal, isn't it? To see in any city on a Friday night, a Saturday night crowds of people milling around doing underage drinking and taking drugs. That feels like a refuge from the pressure of school, and the demands of parents and so on. But there is no real refuge in it, one is simply hoping that there must be more to life than this. If only I can get out of it, if only I can get some good mate, then we will really be able to make something happen. But then of course it doesn't really work out. And so, we seek object after object of refuge, whether these are conventional things about getting a proper education, a good job, a marriage and so on, or whether these are very radical in terms of being spaced out and running around, or travelling round the world or living in a bender³. People make lots of experiments, but do they generate any real happiness? So, from the Buddha's understanding, the real refuge came from recognising

³ In the colloquial usage, "a wild drinking spree".

who he was and in that moment of his awakening, he makes this *bhumisparsha*⁴, he touches the earth and he says, “I call on the earth to witness that I am free from entanglement in the concerns of everyday life”. That is to say he wasn’t putting the burden of his existence, the sense of who he was, he wasn’t putting that onto his thoughts and feelings and sensations. Of course, he continued to have thoughts, feelings and sensations, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to speak, but he was able to say “these are not me” in the sense that these do not define me. So when we read in Buddhist texts in translation that there is no self, it doesn’t mean that there is no individual existence. We all exist individually, even the Buddhas look slightly different, what it means is there is no internal or inherent definition.

So, say for example you have a Lego set, you have all these different pieces some have three little bumps on them, some have two, some have one, some have five, and with these pieces of Lego you can make many different things: you can make a house, or a fortress. Most of us have done things like that. Before Lego there was Meccano, there was building sets where you use standard pieces to create something. When you put all the pieces in place and you build it up, you suddenly have a castle, or an airplane. But it has been built out of the pieces: the pieces came together and at a certain point you thought “oh, it’s a castle, it’s an airplane!”. If you take all the pieces out, you don’t have a castle or an airplane any more, you just have these pieces of Lego that can be used to create something else. In the same way, our world is full of many different building blocks and we can create many different possibilities with our existence. We have to create, it’s one of our capacities to manifest in this world that we are always creating things. What we do though, is to fall in love with or become intoxicated by the things we have created, and then imagine that they are truly existing. So the key thing is to stay with the fact that these are pieces of Lego which look like a castle, which look like an airplane. I say “airplane”, I say “castle”, because I have this concept in my mind, but there is no castle there. That was the major part of the Buddha’s awakening under the Bodhi tree, to realise that the concretisation of the world, the reification, that is to say, to see truly existing things, truly existing entities is just an act of imagination. It is our overactive imagination that causes us to believe that things truly exist when they only exist conventionally. That’s what Lego does. You take pieces of plastic, you put them together in patterns and then suddenly you have a castle. “Look mum, it’s a castle!”, “Ah that’s great, how did you do that?”, “Well, I did this and this”. “Cor, you’re smart”. So, you’ve got this castle. Where did the castle come from? The castle came from your head. What you’ve got in front of you is bits of colored plastic. But we have a cultural social

⁴ In Sanskrit: the *mudra*, or hand gesture, of gently touching the earth.

convention that agrees that we are going to call this a castle. But we don't just agree with it in a calm way, we believe in it. If you go to an art gallery, go to the National Gallery, paintings worth millions of pounds, and you look at a Constable⁵ and you think, "oh, look at that tree!" There is no tree there. What you see is bits of paint. These are very expensive bits of paint. You see a tree, where is the tree, in your head! What's on the wall is a con, it's a fraud there is no tree there, it's just daubs of paint. We agree it's a tree, we agree it's very important. There are many kinds of modern art that lots of people with a more conservative sensibility will say "that's not art, that's rubbish". Someone else who is more in touch with the *avant-garde*, so called, will say no, that is truly art because of this and this and this. That is to say the same object is being layered with projections, interpretations, associations and therefore either it "rings true" or it "rings false", not on its own terms, because there are no own terms in any object. There is no inherent truth in any object at all, it's all a construct.

So, this is what the Buddha saw, and this is why we take refuge in him. This radical vision that says at the very moment when we think we have got it, that's where we have lost it. The very point where having spent a couple of hours moving all these little bits together, and trying to piece these bits together, you have finally got your castle or your airplane, you've just cheated yourself. The really exciting thing was putting bits of plastic together and seeing how they could fit, that was creative and connective. As soon as you've got the airplane, you're cheated, because it's only plastic. That's the thing. We add the idea into it and we take the idea as the main thing about it. Our existence has been nothing but work, has our work led us anywhere? Only to new work. Will it never end? (laughs) My mum always used to say, "I'm just a skivvy⁶ in this house, I do the cooking and the cleaning and no-body says thank you except once a year, and I get my shampoo or my bottle of perfume..." Too damn right. That's it, that's it. It doesn't end. If we're lucky we live long enough to have endless non-endings. You put the Lego together, you get your airplane, then it's a bit boring so you take it all apart and then you build your castle, then it gets boring so you take it apart and you build something else. That's what we are doing with the whole of our life, and yet we are doing it in the name of getting to the airplane, getting to the castle, getting sorted, doing your "A" levels, maybe going to university, getting your life into a particular kind of shape. How do we do that? That's a really central thing about the Buddha's understanding, he's saying "there is no rest, life is a marathon, it is not a sprint, no matter how hard you try, you will not get to a place when it's sorted". It's

⁵ James here is referring to a series of paintings by the 18th century painter John Constable of different trees in various landscapes.

⁶ In British English: "someone who does menial household tasks."

never sorted, and especially if you are foolish enough to take the bodhisattva vow and connect your luck and your life to everyone else's, how could it ever be sorted? But it can never be sorted anyway. Being sorted is not really the point, being connected is the point, every situation we meet gives us the chance to move our energy, to express ourselves, to connect, sometimes with tears, sometimes with happiness. That's at the heart of the Buddha's first teaching, which brings us onto the refuge of the *dharma*, when he says, "there is the truth of suffering". That is to say we find ourselves in a situation where it is not what we want. Either we don't get what we do want or we get what we don't want, that's happening a lot of the time. But that this suffering has an origin, it has a basis, and we can understand that basis. And if we understand that basis, it can be removed, and there is a method for doing that. All the Buddhist teachings have evolved from that. So, taking refuge in the *dharma* is a way of understanding that our suffering comes because we believe in entities, in truly existing things. We believe we can sort out our lives and know what's what. And we believe that we can then have rest, like it says in the good book: "for six days god labours and creates the world and on the seventh day he has a little rest". Work is over. But actually, it was just beginning for him, because God's supposed to keep his eye on everything that's going on. I think we are quite able to give God lots of trouble, wouldn't you think? So he didn't really get much of a rest. That's it. Life goes on. Life goes on. The question then is: how can I live in a dynamic universe without trying to control it and think that we will have it sorted? If you think of Marxist dogma, if you think of National Socialist dogma, if you think of any of the great dogmatic systems, they have all been ways of saying: we can come to a final solution, we can bring about the end of history, we can bring about the triumph of the working classes and then it will be back to paradise; paradise regained. It was what was offered to the soldiers in the Second World War, when it's over, a world fit for heroes, the National Health Service. There you go! That was what was offered, sacrifice today, tomorrow jam eternally! This is one of the great fantasies we have in our lives. Actually, our nature is stillness and movement, the mind is always moving, the body needs to move. Stillness is not the reward you get at the end of movement; stillness is the very ground of movement. Stillness is something we have to find inside ourselves moment to moment, as we speak, as we move, as we do our various activities. Because if we think that somehow if we do enough movement, we will suddenly become still, it doesn't quite make sense. So, people work all week and then they have the weekend, and then they are often busy because there is so much to do, there is always something. Is that not true? So, when will it end? Well, it won't. It won't end. "That's terrible, how will I ever have a rest?!" You are trying to rest in movement. Movement moves, so you won't find any rest there. Look somewhere else. "But all I've got is movement, there's always something, the kids, I thought they would leave home and get on with their own lives. They keep coming back and they have

got problems and now I have got to look after their kids!”. People’s lives are like that all over the place in constant turmoil. Why did you think that movement would become still? Stillness is not the same as movement, where is your stillness? Look into yourself.

Refuge in the Dharma

So, the Buddha said these three basic propositions, the nature of suffering that we have just been looking at, impermanence which we looked at in the morning, and the absence of inherent self-nature. In the first teaching he said that what you take to be a person is actually a bit like a Lego set construction: it’s brought together, it comes into being through the interaction of the five *skandhas*. That is to say, form (1), which is shape and colour, feeling tone or sensation which is positive, negative or neutral, perceptions (2) with all the filters that go with that, associations (3) which are habitual constructs, (4) the beliefs and values that we bring into any situation, and our capacity for consciousness (5) which is the consciousness of our five senses and their organising consciousness. When these five factors are operating together, they give us the sense of what is a person. On a very ordinary level, if we were to have our brain removed, we wouldn’t be doing very well. If we had our heart taken out and nothing else was put in, we wouldn’t be doing very well. Take out our liver, you wouldn’t be doing very well. That is to say, these vital organs are part of your existence, what you take to be you, the naivety of your simple body is based on the collaboration of the vital organs and all the other factors in your body: the blood supply, the lymph nodes, and so on, everything has to collaborate. This embodied existence is an exquisite, subtle collaboration of an incredible complexity of factors. Our body demonstrates to us the absence of simplicity in our existence, that is to say, manifestation is always complex and interactive. So rather than trying to sort our lives out, we have to look, what is the ground or the basis of this experience? That is awareness. Why is it that we don’t encounter this awareness in our daily life, given that we are intelligent, educated people with lots and lots of resources? From the Buddhist point of view that’s because we are truly mesmerized, we are fascinated, we are enchanted, we are bewitched by objects. We think if “I get this, then I will be happy, I just have to do this, when I’ve finished this, then I can relax.” That is to say, the answer to the problem of my existence lies in the object. “If only I can find the right object, then I will be OK”, whether that’s a partner, or a job, or a book to read or a holiday to have or a drug to take, it’s always out there. The Buddha’s essential teaching through the *dharma* is: “the answer isn’t in the object, it’s in ‘who is the one who claims to be the subject given that subjects are always involved with objects?’”. That is to say, as a person, from the first time you wake up in the morning until you fall asleep at night, you are always into something. You are thinking about this or that, got to go and have a cup of tea, got to go and do this and

this. That is to say, the world speaks to us or we go out to the world, there is a constant “to-ing” and “fro-ing” of subject to object, object to subject. And that’s what keeps this state of *samsara* turning. But who is the one who is the subject? When we look at ourselves, we hit this waterfall of ideas. “I’m just me. Well, I’m me, you’ve known me for a while, I’m just me, that’s a stupid question, I’m me. *Tchau!*” So, here is a wall, you can’t get through that. “I’m just busy...”. There is way that people bat these things out. I work as a therapist and in my experience, most people who come to therapy have no real desire to enquire into who they are, they simply want to get sorted and get back into the battle, they want to get on with life. And that’s what the government’s development of this new layered scheme of CBT⁷ for everyone is about: getting people back into life. What life? Whatever life is there, whatever bops them on the nose. “But who am I?”, “Let’s not look there, that’s much too complicated. We won’t do that. Just do what you have to do”. “But what is that?”, “Well, let me tell you if you don’t know, I’ll tell you”. the Government is very good at that. From the Buddhist point of view, the central question is: who am I? At this very moment I have thoughts, feelings and sensations and when I wrap myself in them, they are like a duvet and sometimes the duvet is warm and sometimes it’s very damp and cold, but anyway, it gives me some kind of protection, some kind of wrapping in. Taking off the duvet, what is this naked being itself? Who am I when I am not wrapped in anything? That’s the central focus of *dzogchen* and that is the heart of the *dharma*, to see how we mistake our clothes for ourselves.

Most people believe they are ghosts. They have no true existence. But this “no true existence” is a kind of nineteenth century nihilism, a kind of absence of existence at all, a kind of empty nothingness. And only by fulfilling my social function, by having a value for other people can I claim any right to a true existence. The Buddhist understanding of emptiness is very different. Buddhist emptiness says: “from the very beginning there have never been any real entities that you can rely on, everything is dynamic interlocking patterns of energy which manifest, de-manifest, manifest and you can never catch them, you can never catch yourself”. Each of us in this room has been five years of age at one time. Can you remember being five? Now you’re not five, you’ll never be five again, but at one time you were five. Imagine, you went to primary school and you sat there, your first year in primary school and you sat at your little desk. “Hello!” You look around with your little box, maybe with some little *Smurfs* on it and you have got your little sandwich for your lunch and you’re sitting there, “what am I going to do? Don’t know”.

⁷ CBT means “cognitive behavioral therapy” and has been popularized in England due to a campaign of “free therapy” through the National Health Service (NHS).

That's gone, that was you. You were five, when you were five you were fully identified as five, because when you were five you had nowhere else to go. When you are five you can't be four. You can't say "I'm not going to school, I'm not going to school, I don't like school, I'm not going to school". "Ah ah, you're going to school!". "I don't want to!". "You're going to school because you're not four". And when you're five you can't be six. "I want to be big; I don't like this; can't I get a bigger bike?". "No, you're not big enough for the bike", "but I want a bigger bike, my friend's got a bigger bike". "Yes, but you're not as big as your friend so you'll have to have that one, you're only five". That's it isn't it? But you're not five anymore. Isn't that amazing? If you can remember in your body what it was like to be five, how real it was, that was you, it ain't here anymore. It's not here and now you are whatever age you are, and if you are lucky, you will get another year at least. And then maybe another one, we don't know, anything can happen. But all we've got is what we've got.

So, it's a very beautiful thing this, the very vitality of our being which causes us to be alive is just a little bit cranked up, a little bit over intense so "oooh, this is me!". If you just lowered the amplification a little bit, you could be exactly you but with a little bit more space. That's really what the Buddha's teaching is about. Bring a little bit more space and allow the identification to be "this is today's me, morning me has already gone, this is afternoon me, then there will be evening me", and on and on and each time it will be different. And if you're young, you experience that more because you grow and you say "mum, these trousers are too short for me now", or "mum, I can't wear these shoes any more", because your body is growing. When you get bigger you don't notice that so much. Then you have to read fashion magazines just to tell you that your clothes are out of date, because you want to fit in somehow. But it's always changing. Can you see? All the Buddha's teachings fit together? It's very beautiful. Although there are these different *yanas* or different paths, all the methods fit together and they are saying the same thing: be alive, be present in the moment, enjoy the exquisite, unrepeatable moment which is here, and then here and then here. But if we are trying to be in the past, missing it, longing for it, or being endlessly pissed off that we had a terrible childhood and were treated badly, or if we are longing for the future, we are not where we are. So, how to inhabit this existence? ... The moment is very naked, isn't it? I don't know if you can remember: as a kid, maybe on a bicycle, going down a very steep hill, when I was a kid, we didn't have gears on a bicycle, so when the wheels are going very fast, the pedals go very fast as well, so you had to take your feet off. You had to steer this thing, and you've got very little control of the bicycle. That's what life is. Actually, we have very little control over our existence. We could leave this room and some drunken driver can go off the road and onto the pavement and kill you or you could be in

a wheelchair for the rest of your life. We don't know how our life is going to evolve. This is it: we don't know. What is in front of us each moment is completely un-formed. It's only because we are rather polite people that we sit in our seats for a long time, we might not. We might throw beer cans or something, in other places in this afternoon that's what people will be doing. There are many possibilities but we lose the sense of the possibility because we agree to abide by certain un-stated rules. That's a really important thing, when we take refuge in the dharma, we take refuge in the fact that there is nothing ahead of us except how we proceed.

So, if we've got a notion, "I am me, I know roughly who I am, I know what my life is going to be like", yes, it's OK, that's it, we have already filled the space. How could we be startled? How could we encounter something fresh and new? But if you just experience colour, shape, sound, a car goes by, "whoosh, oh!". As soon as you say "it's a car", you don't need to worry about it. But if you just hear "whoosh...", "It's an amazing world, isn't it? it's like being on acid!", but you don't need that, it just is like that, it just is like that. What stops it being naked is our predictive conceptualisation. Taking refuge in the dharma is to be in a more immediate naked relationship with the world.

Refuge in the Sangha

Then we have taking refuge in the *sangha*. *Sangha* means, in the Mahayana tradition, it means firstly the assembly of the great bodhisattvas, those who have committed their life for the benefit of others. But also the assembly of the *arhats*, the assembly of the great *shramanas*, the great monks and so on. It means we need other people. Or certainly we need other beings. Why do we need them? Because our world is determined by other people, we are born into the world and we learn language. Language is that which is spoken by many people before we were born. After a while we start to speak, and we have the confidence that we can speak our mother tongue, but we are speaking exactly our mother's tongue, we are always speaking someone else's language. It's the tongue of our mothers and for our mothers it was their mother's tongue, and their mother's tongue and so we swim in the sea of the cultural assumptions, the linguistic assumptions of other people. That's an amazing thing. My very own voice is giving voice to the words of my mother, my father, my grandmothers, my grandfathers back and back and back, and all the people I have met, all the teachers I had in school, all the essays I had to write, all the times I opened a dictionary and learned words. All of that which was not me, becomes me. And then I speak it as me, but even as I speak it as me it's still not me, because it's language. So that's an amazing thing. For me to be me, lots of people have been involved. All the teachers we had in school, without

them, how would we have learned the things that we learned? All the people who made our clothes, prepared our food. Without their work we wouldn't be ourselves, isn't that amazing? Hairdressers, opticians, doctors, dentists, all of these people have influenced us, the shape of our teeth for example, whether we wear glasses or not, these people's lives are part of our lives. Isn't that an amazing thing? We tend to want to keep them on the outside of it, and we just take these things into our world, dropping them in bleach first so that they are pristine and they don't contaminate us. But you can't do that, we are infected with other people. Other people are like viruses moving inside us, transforming who we are. That's why in the Buddhist tradition they say there is no entity of a self, other people's words speak through you. You see that particularly with younger people because they tend to use catchwords again and again, there is a kind of slang and if you want to be in with a group of friends, you have to use that kind of slang. But you don't even think you have to, by being a member of that group you find that you speak in that way. So how does that happen? That your very way of speaking is informed, in-formed by other people, and by being in-formed you become yourself! Hang on a minute, that doesn't make sense, does it? "In-formed: something from outside comes inside and that's me! Ah no". But that's how it is. "Me" is a name I call myself after the fact of being informed by everything I've met. That's a very different thing. Therefore, we need *sangha* and it's not that *sangha* is a choice, *sangha* simply means a circle, or a grouping together of people. So, we have all these groups, we have all been part of family groups, some people might have been in care, they have been in residential care home groups, in primary school groups, in secondary school groups and so on. All of these groups have influenced us. So, from a profound level, *sangha* means not just high holy enlightened people somewhere else who we hope will help us, but the refuge comes from waking up to the fact that you are always already part of groups. You have no individual autonomous existence, and therefore no one is a stranger to you. So, in the Mahayana tradition, that idea is developed through the idea that we have all been born many times and in each of our lives we have had a mother. And the mother has done so many things for us. The mother has borne us in her body, and fed us from her own body, cooked for us, taught us how to speak, wiped our body when we got soiled, and taken care of us and when we got upset, we've been comforted. That is to say, in all our lives our existence has been connected with people, and if these people weren't there for us our existence would have been very fragile. So, we owe a great debt of gratitude to other people. Everyone we meet, we meet as a debtor. So, when we meet people in the street, these are people who have already helped us. That's a very different view from the paranoid existence in a big city where you think, "is this person going to mug me?", "You know, what danger do they offer to me?". Everyone has already helped us, that's an amazing idea. Therefore, thank you. We can start whenever we meet somebody, just thinking "thank you, I'm in

your debt. What can I do for you?”. And of course, it’s such a better place to be, to think “what can I do for you”, than “what can you do for me”. Because if I’m thinking, “what can you do for me”, I’m already thinking “well, what’s the matter with me? or what do I need?” I have already gone finite. But if I’m thinking “what can I do for you”, I’m starting with the infinite, because I don’t know what you are going to ask and I will try to do what I can, so I have to be very big. So, this is again a very beautiful thing, that our connection with the world in taking refuge is to be returned to the infinity of our potential. How can I make myself most available to other people? Now of course, what we experience is the limits of our physical situation, we get tired, we get sick and so on. We are not talking here so much about the concrete capacity, especially as we get old there are lots of things that we can’t do, but we are talking about the orientation, or the view of the heart that says: “I am available, I will not turn my face from you even if I’m so tired I have to say ‘hang on, I can’t take any more’”. I’m saying that in terms of my capacity, I’m not saying it in terms of my heart. My heart is still open. What an amazing way that would be to live, to accept that the connection is always already there. And that’s really what *sangha* really means, that it’s not about stepping out of the narrowness of one’s world but about accepting I don’t have a private world to be in. I am always a public servant.

Being a public servant is a very good thing. But if you take the bodhisattva vow, which we will come onto shortly, you say “from this time on, I will always be a public servant. I have no private place to retreat to”. What we do retreat into, or abide in or rest in, is the unborn *Dharmakaya*. But it’s not private because it has no colour, no shape, no beginning, no end, no top, no bottom, it’s infinite. Our own nature is infinite and out of that, energy ceaselessly arises, we are just connected. But of course, when we walk down the street, hopes and fears, liking and disliking occurs. So, part of the practice, the preliminary practice, is to observe, “how do I limit myself? How do I tie myself in knots? How do I turn my face away from the world, and look again and again, what am I trying to protect? What is it in me that feels so incredibly vulnerable?”. Of course, our body is vulnerable. If you walk across the road without looking and a car hits, you will not be in good nick, that’s just a fact. This flesh and blood body is very easy to destroy. One has to take care. Here we are not talking about foolishly just leaping into situations, but rather thinking of the more subtle moments where we pull back, we don’t open ourselves, we want to keep something in reserve, something for me, and why? Well certainly in my own life, my experience is that when I have done that, afterwards I have felt very sorry, because whatever I have hung on to, especially for me, it sorts of rots, it turns sour, what am I going to do with it? It’s so much better to live one’s life in contact. I don’t know whether that speaks to your experience. Because, sufficient unto the day, the whole

idea, or the experience as it can be of the *Dharmakaya*, is that it is like a well-spring, it's the source, and each moment a new freshness will arise.

So that's the basic principles of taking refuge. So, taking refuge in the tantric tradition we do that with the support of making prostrations. Prostrations are very important. We make full body prostrations not as a way of permanently abasing ourselves, not as a way of saying "I am inferior, I am less than", but as a way of honoring that which we are going to be. You know, say you are at school and you think "A levels are a waste of time, they are just rubbish, why would you bother studying?". You have to think "oh, I really want to get these because I want to do that, I want to do that, so this is useful" and if you can believe that something is useful it mobilizes your energy. This is the basis for prostrations. If you can believe that the Buddhas, the bodhisattvas have value and you say, "I think you are wonderful, you have these qualities...", when you then go into the tantric practice, and you visualise these deities and then they come and dissolve into you, and you become inseparable from them, it's amazing. You have a real transformation because that which was not you, that which was so shining, so bright and so wonderful is now coming together with you and your nature and the nature of the deity have become inseparable. But if you are saying, "well, not so sure, seems like a nice idea but..." every time you flatten it, what will it mean? So prostrations are about joining the Buddha fan club. If you go to a gig and there are people there who really like the band, and they have got the t-shirt and they are really into it, and they sing along to all the songs and you have never seen them before, I think we would agree that they are more into it, they probably get more out of it, because it's their world. And that's what the practice of taking refuge is about. It's not about joining a cult or a sect, it's about being so caught up and involved in something that it starts to show its value. There are people who travel around Britain going to see different Abba look-alike bands. That is a devotional activity, isn't it? That shows great love for the original Abba, so much so that you are prepared to go and watch copy bands that aren't all that great. What does that mean? It means presumable that in a certain period in these people's lives, they got really touched, these songs really meant something to them, they felt more alive. And it's very important to see that the practice of the *dharma* and the practice of ordinary life are not so different. Getting involved in the practice is just the same as people getting involved in football. That is to say, the human aspect of our experience is the same, we invest our energy, we invest our belief, we become excited. You know, when people are going to a big match and they paint their faces and they go in and see their heroes coming out of the tunnel, tears come out of their eyes! It says in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist texts you know that when you hear the name of your teacher your eyes should open, tears should come out, the hairs on the back of your neck should

bristle. It's the same thing, it means "wow, wow, I see value in that". So, when you do your prostrations, you see value there and then in the practice you integrate with the object of value, you become the one that you idealize, which is a way of leaving all the limits and restrictions of your ordinary identity and being reborn through the object of your devotion, into your own nature. That is to say, it is only through being reborn in the womb of the great mother that we become born as Buddhas. You can't make yourself a Buddha, but whether it's *Padmasambhava*, or *Tara*, or *Chenrezig*, any of the devotional deities, by putting your whole heart and soul and being into them, you see them as shimmering, as full of value and because of that you are not distracted by anything else, so without effort, your own faith has given you a one-pointed attention. You could spend years and years,

and years observing the breath going in and out of your nostrils, and your mind would still be distracted but when you bring up the love of your heart, it's much easier to focus your attention. That's why they say that tantra is a superior method to implement the basic Mahayana position. So, it's using all your emotions, all your feelings into the task of integrating yourself into the absolute identity of the deity and through that you are transformed and reborn, and you start to believe, "my nature is radiant". Moment by moment, I am manifesting out of the unborn space, every sound I hear is mantra, everything I say is mantra, every taste is bliss and emptiness, every movement I make is the gesture of the deity, that's what coming into this relationship is. So, *sangha* is part of this because it's saying, "you are already part of the world". The whole of Buddhism is saying, "don't live on your little island, it's terribly lonely, it's very sad, come in, the water's lovely, and anyway, you're in the water, you're just living in a little barrel. You are bobbing about on the water; in the barrel you can't move and there's nothing to eat! Come in the water!". "Oh, the water's very dangerous, maybe not, maybe not".

Bodhisattva vow

So, the bodhisattva vow is about recognising all sentient beings have been my mother, I have an obligation to them and, in all my future lives, I will work for the benefit of others. The essence of the vow is its infinity, it's not limited, we are not saying just for this life, we are not saying as long as the going is good, we are not saying until I retire, we are saying all my life. On my deathbed, as I am dying, I will remember all sentient beings. "Wow, there's something!". I won't be thinking about myself and all I am leaving; I will be thinking: may all beings be happy. Imagine if that was your last thought when you died,

wouldn't that be lovely? Rather than thinking I don't want to die. You are going to die anyway! "I don't want to die, yuk!", it's a shrinking thought, isn't it? It's full of turbulence, of trouble, it's full of feeling diminished. "May all beings be happy". When we walk down the street, "may all beings be happy". That's at the heart of the bodhisattva vow. I will do whatever I can for the sake of all beings. 'Whatever I can' means it stands in relation to my own capacity, 'for all beings' means I won't make a differentiation between friends and enemies. That is to say, I am going to leave the realm of the contract. If I help you, I know you and I know that you will help me back, so we will both keep our little scorecards. Lots of people do that. You might go to the pub and you think "I'll buy you a drink, you bought me one last week", they've got a little kind of auditor in their head. If you take the bodhisattva vow, you get rid of contracts, you get rid of boomerangs, you just think, "I am for you". Whether you're for me or not, doesn't matter. "I'm for you because I'm for you". But why? What would you get out of it? What would I want to get out of it? "I'm for you". How can you do that, won't you deplete your own resources? How will you have enough, if you give everything to everyone else? Well, again, if you are a small pot, if you are a limited container like this (James exemplifies), it will be very hard because you will come to a limit, and of course our physical body can get exhausted. What we are talking about here is the quality of the heart. It doesn't mean that you have to sell all your possessions and become homeless. That is useful for some people, but for most people it's important to continue with your family, your job and so on. It's about opening the heart to feel "I am for you. I am for you". Even if you turn anger towards me, I am for you. It's about non-retaliation, or if you like, turning the other cheek. But in the Buddhist sense, it's not so much turning the other cheek as returning to space. So, if somebody attack us or insults us, in that moment, who am I? Because it is really impossible to develop the bodhisattva vow if you have no understanding of emptiness. Because as long as we stay as an individual, "I, me, myself, with my history, my likes and my dislikes", someone is going to get to me, I'm going to get really hacked off. "What?!". You get that resistance, that tightening up, "how dare you! You have insulted me!". Well, of course the people have, why wouldn't they insult you? They are all daft, they are zombies, this is *samsara*, it's not the garden of Eden! People will be horrible. What a surprise... Why are we surprised? People have the five poisons, stupidity, aversion, attachment/desire, envy, pride and many, many more. So why would people not insult you or give you a hard time? Why would the parking attendant not listen to reason? Why did they insist on writing the ticket even though you had arrived at your car? Because they are like that, they are in a bad mood, who cares? That's what they are, how are you going to be? Will we be reactive? In which case, anybody we meet will be our master, anybody we meet will be the dog, and we will be the little tail, "bop, bop, bop". So, emptiness is to understand all the personality traits we have, all the hopes and fears that we have, all the

positions that we have are contingent, that is to say arising due to causes and conditions, and ephemeral. They won't continue, they won't last, it's just this moment. Would you attack this person just this moment, would you insult this person just this moment, this person who has been your mother in a previous life, who has made so many sacrifices for you? Children often do that, they get really hacked off with their mothers, "I want you to do that, why won't you do that, I hate you, I hate you!". This is the person that made your breakfast, this is the person that does your washing! "I hate you; I don't want to live in this house, I never wanted you as my mum, you're useless". "OK. Go down the road, go to the shop and buy yourself a mum, here's two quid, go and buy yourself a mum. See how you get on".

One of the functions of all these *dharma* practices is to act as a stick that stirs the bottom of the pond. The more we have an aspiration, the more we realise all the shit at the bottom of the pond, all the crap inside ourselves which stops us fulfilling it. That's why it's important to overleap yourself, to bite off more than you can chew. If you bite off more than you can chew, what happens? You get a mouthful of something "whaaaaahhhh, it's horrible". That's quite useful, oh I have still got a lot of work to do. If you waited until you were ready to take the bodhisattva vow, you'd never do it because you have to be at the end of the journey before you began it. We begin it not very ready and part of the journey is betraying other people, letting them down, getting confused, but open, release and begin again, open, release, begin again, I'm sorry. It's a wonderful practice to apologise, to apologise from the heart because not only does the other person feel seen, but you recognise your own limitations. So, the bodhisattva vow, when we develop it, is a functional practice which helps us to see the ossification, the drying up, the calcification, the way in which we become solid and we develop this shell around us, and to keep moving and shaking it up. And a certain point in this is: don't be afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes are a part of life. If you act, you will make mistakes. Is it better to make a mistake? Imagine the good Samaritan. Here's this guy lying at the side of the road, he's not very well. He takes him to a hotel, and says, "I have to go on my journey but I'll give you the money to feed him". And they give him his food and when the guy comes back to health he says, "I'm a Vegan". "Oh, we have given you nothing but beef soup!". It's like that. You help people with the resources you have, it is not always going to fit. Sometimes it will be helpful, sometimes it won't. Getting it wrong is part of participation. There is a whole fantasy that these lovely Tibetan pictures make is that these guys always get it right. But we are in this world where lots of things are wrong and that's part of it. What is my self-hatred? Can I recognise it? What is my aspiration to help? So, when I make a mistake, I can recognise it and apologise for it but I don't need to add on the self-hatred. This morning we were looking at the difference between ordinary pain and the Buddhist notion of suffering,

that the suffering is something you add on. You will always make mistakes, we don't always say the right thing, we can upset people in various ways, different people have different needs and we don't always get it right. That doesn't mean that you are betraying the bodhisattva vow, because in the Buddhist tradition the meaning of any act is determined by its intention, not by its outcome. There are many different readings of that in other philosophical systems and so on but it's very important. If your heart is true, you can try your best and sometimes you will get it wrong. You can just apologize, be open-minded and continue. But don't give up hope in your good intentions. The bodhisattva vow is very important. A bodhisattva means, the term itself, *bodhi*, means awakening and *sattva* means being. It simply means that your being is connected fundamentally with the project of awakening. It arises from saying: "The reason I'm here, what I'm about as a person is to help awaken, to bring about my own awakening and the awakening of other beings". Now that's different from helping people. Feeding people is very good, helping people who are sick, helping people who are distressed... that is very good. But that won't necessarily help them awaken. How do you help people awaken? Well, if you've never awakened yourself, you wouldn't know, you wouldn't even know what it was like. So, part of the bodhisattva path is to understand wisdom as a basis for compassion. In the traditional example, they are like the two wings of a bird, they have to be in harmony. Most of us try to be reasonable people in our lives, so in that sense we know a reasonable bit about compassion. We may not be very good at it, but at least we do our best to help people, so one wing is reasonably well developed. What we don't have very much of is wisdom. Wisdom is about emptiness, seeing that when you make your Lego castle it's just pieces of Lego, and it's a castle, and it's just Lego. There is an emptiness to the castle which doesn't mean that there is no castle at all, there is a castle but there is no castle. And we apply this to every aspect of life. There is a hospital, there is no hospital, there is a patient, there is not patient, there are children, there are no children. Things are there and not there simultaneously. It's the same if you go to the cinema and you see a film. Say for example it's an action film, you get very drawn into it and you see these cars coming, "ahh, oooh!" thinking they are going to crash. What is in front of you? A white screen with bits of coloured light going onto it, that's what you are seeing. But no, you feel you are seeing cars, suspending disbelief, getting caught up in the narrative, getting caught up in the image. That's necessary for art, you have to surrender yourself into it. Buddhism is about not suspending this disbelief; it's about maintaining disbelief. Not the disbelief of "I'll have nothing to do with it, it's all a poisoned chalice", but a deconstructed belief that says: this is an illusion, I can be in it and out of it, in it and out of it. Then when you go to help someone, you don't take your helping so seriously, and if the person doesn't want the help that you've offered them, it just dissolves into space, it wasn't so invested. It's when things are too concrete, when you've gone to great

trouble to do it, then you can feel that obligation. I used to remember this as a kid, you'd get these Christmas presents from some old aunty somewhere and I would say "well I don't like it, and I don't want it" and my mum would say "well you have to write a thank you letter". "Well, what am I thanking her for, I don't want it, I never asked for it, it's stupid!". "But you have to thank her!". So, emptiness means everything has the same nature which is empty, and the values that we ascribe to things come from ourselves. That is a really important thing, you can find it again and again. You just need to go along to a shop to rent a DVD, and you're standing there looking at all these covers and someone comes up and they take something off the shelf and you think, "wow, you're daft! Why are you going to look at that?". They are going to look at that because they are them. You walk down the car and you see someone driving a car and you think, what are they driving that for? Because they are them. Other people are other. They are not you and your values don't tell you anything about the other person. That's where emptiness is really important. Emptiness says, "oh, with your Lego set you've made a little Barbie doll, why would you want to do that? I've made a killer soldier, don't you want to have a killer soldier?". "No, I want a Barbie doll". "Well, you're stupid!". "Well, that's because you're not the same as me". So, if compassion is going to work, it means we are going to have to connect with people who are not us, and if we go towards them from our little box of our assumptions and value systems, we are not going to get very far. In the name of compassion, we are going to be carrying out some colonizing gesture, we are going to be seeking to pull them into our world because we believe our values are right and this is why in Buddhism, emptiness is so important because it lets us see the conventional, or constructed or the assumptive or the imagined nature of what we take to be true, and we think "oh, it's just my take on it!". It has no internal truth, it's my life, this is what I want to buy, this is what I want to eat, this is how I am going to live, but it doesn't tell me anything about how to connect with other people.

So, connecting with others is going to take me out of myself. And that connection out of myself is going to put myself into question, which is why compassion supports wisdom, but in order to move towards others, unless I have got a looseness in myself, I am going to be like a rubber band. As I move towards them the band will get stretched and stretched and at a certain point "ping!", come back in, "I've had enough, this person is making me feel really weird". So, you are still looking at them in terms of your home base. Can you leave home and launch yourself truly into the world of the other? In that way wisdom and compassion flow together, and then the bodhisattva vow takes on its deep meaning. And you can see, I hope, how this is a very profound preliminary practice that supports exactly the *dzogchen* view that everything is pure from the very beginning. In a sense, the *dzogchen* view says that your nature is pure,

and all these thoughts and so on that are arising. They vanish by themselves and yet when we sit in the meditation, some thoughts seem incredibly sticky. They seem to attach themselves to everything they come into contact with, and so the preliminary practice is just. It's like if you don't clean your frying pan or something properly, there is always grease around the outside of it and then you need to get a real scouring pad to get the layers of scud off otherwise it's sort of tacky, every time you touch it it's "yuk". And that's what these habitual invested thoughts are like, they are very greasy. So, it's not that they are purifying your nature, from the very beginning our nature is completely pure. What they are doing is thinning the level of obscuration, so that we come to a point where we can directly see that obscurations are the radiance of the *Dharmakaya*. What you thought was getting in the way of your life, was your life! This is it. This is the unfolding, unimaginable world, the radiance of all these Buddhas and it manifests as going to Tesco's⁸! It doesn't look like the pictures. It's like a holiday brochure, isn't it? The hotel is never the one you saw in the picture! Shall we take a wee cup of tea?

Mandala

Okay... so, one of the things that we have been looking at is the relationship between what we take to be me, and what we take to be not me. So, for example, we take our body to be me, and we take other people's bodies to be not me. And we take our thoughts and our feelings to be ourselves, and we take states of very openness to be somewhat strange experiences. And the various Buddhist paths are all saying: part of our problem is that we have misconstrued these two categories. What is actually me is this unborn openness, this ever-fresh state of awareness, and what is not me is this tumbling change of thoughts and feelings and sensations. But due to attachment and ignorance, we identify with the thoughts and the feelings and say "this is me", although they are ungraspable and always running away. And because of that we don't pay attention to the intrinsic openness of how we are. So, in that practice, when we do the 3 'A' and we relax, I think for most of us, very quickly thoughts and feelings come in and we find ourselves identifying with them. And this feels like us; it feels familiar, it feels true, it feels how things are. But it's not me. Who we actually are is more that first sense with the 3 'A', nothing at all, ungraspable. And yet, there, because our awareness is there, we are not dead, we are not unconscious. But we are not there as something, as this or that, as good as bad, as male or female, young, old, whatever it is. It's

⁸ TESCO is a British multinational groceries and general merchandise retailer.

beyond characterisation, beyond particularization, and yet it's just there. So, an essential part of the path is to free ourselves from the familiar identifications with things which are not me in order to have more space to become me. And in the Tantric preliminary practices, part of that is through the offering of the mandala. Mandala here means the ordinary mandala of the world, mandala means circle really, mandala is a coming together of factors, it's like a shape. In a sense it's like a *Gestalt*⁹, something which appears to have an integrity. So, according to the tradition, we offer the world as constructed in Indian cosmology. In the centre of the world there is a vast mountain called Mount Meru and around it there are 4 major continents, then 8 minor continents with different kinds of seas around them, and then you have rings of iron mountains, and so on. So, you imagine the whole universe, and you offer that. For most of us that that doesn't mean that much because we don't live in a world that's like that. So, best is first think: "it's best to offer something you don't need, and which maybe you don't have or you don't want". I always start with America! I've never been to America and I hope in my future lives I'm not born there! So, for me offering America is dead easy, offering Scotland is a bit more difficult! So, generally if you start by offering your friend's toys, a nice way to begin, offer their bicycle, keep your own to the last! In that way you get used to seeing that what we are attached to is of course not just our possessions, but our possessions as they stand in relation to other people's possessions. Because, like when I was young, I always wanted to go to India and I never wanted to go to North America. So, but in some way the value of India was that it wasn't like North America. Having never been to North America, I had no idea what it was really like, but it was a construct in my head. So usually when something is being valued, something else is being undervalued. There is a kind of splitting and projection going on. So, in terms of this tantric offering, we keep offering everything. We offer, generally speaking, the things which we like and which are enjoyable. So, we offer beautiful food, we offer nice houses, we offer swimming pools, we offer ease and attention, we offer the best doctors and so on. We offer whatever could be pleasing and heart-warming. And we do this again, and again, and again. That is to say we take all the objects that we might want to identify with and say "this is me, this is my world, this is what I'm for", and through the offering of them, we say "this was me, but it's now no longer me. This was me, it's now no longer me". It's one thing to do that when you go to the toilet: that which comes out of your body as poo was once you. You were your poo but now it's gone down the loo. "Bye bye!". But it was you, it was in your body, it was part

⁹ According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *Gestalt* is "something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than, or different from, the combination of its parts". Origin: German: form, shape, structure. From Old High German: *stellen*, to shape, to arrange, to fix.

of you. So every day we take food which is not me and we stick it in our mouth, “munch, munch”, and then gradually it becomes me and then gradually it becomes poo in the loo. “Bye bye!”. We do this all the time. You breathe in, the air is not me, it becomes me, “ah”, and then becomes not me, all the time, all the time. This is the nature of our existence, me, not me, me not me, fusion, separation, fusion, separation. So, when we do this mandala offering, we are attending to this process: internalization, identification, introjection, and then disassociation, cutting off, splitting, projection, splitting, separating, splitting off. These are the primary functions of our identification in the world. In terms of most modern psychotherapy theories, particularly Kleinian and post-Kleinian theories¹⁰ particularly, we very clearly identify how these things operate. So, when you offer the mandala, everything which could be you, you offer, and then you can continue to offer everything which is absolutely not you, and by being able to offer these two equally you come to see that there is no real difference. Having offered your possessions, you can then offer your body, you can offer your eyes, your ears, your heart and so on. “But who would I be if I didn’t have a body?”. Well, when we do the 3 ‘A’ meditation. If you really go into that, you don’t have a body. What you experience is the immediacy of the currents of energy that are arising and passing which create these momentary constructs. The mind itself is stable and open and grounded and these temporary phenomena are creating patterns which come and go, come and go. Most of the time, that’s not what we have. Most of the time we have “this is me” (James bumps his chest). So this precious body that we spend so much time taking care of is actually part of the world. In some of the texts it’s described as a rented body, or a borrowed body, that we borrow our body from the five elements: earth, water, fire, wind and space come together and create this structure, and at a certain point as we move towards death, they will disband, just as the corpse if you leave it will start to crumble, it will rot. When the police find bodies that have been dead for a while they are blown up, they are bloated because their internal corruption means that the air element is coming out and that’s what happens. So, offering our body means: “I am not this body”. Also: “I don’t have this body”. We are used to nowadays having computers and so on, having possessions that we haven’t a clue about how they operate. People say “oh, this is my car”, but if it breaks down, I don’t know what to do. So, you have a computer, it’s your computer, but you

¹⁰ James is referring to Melanie Klein and contemporary developments on her studies regarding the “Object Relations Theory” which emphasize the child-mother relationship, constructing the child unconscious specifically by operating within the child-mother symbiosis and separations.

manage to press a few buttons on it and “ping!”, you get an email. But that’s about it for most people. So, we are used to being very stupid owners of possessions, but number one stupid owner is of your body. You haven’t a clue how it functions, it’s got all these amazing things inside it and you just hope it’s fine, but the body is not a possession. The body is you but in a non-reductive way, that is to say, your body is a dynamic energetic radiance arising moment by moment as the joyful display of the Dharmakaya, it’s not a thing. “One arm, one leg, one nod of the head”, it’s like that, this is who I am, this is what my body does. And as children we get inducted into this thing, “it’s my body, it’s me” and we fight in the playground, we are good at running and so on, and everything in our culture is saying this is your true nature. But actually, the body is always ungraspable, it changes by itself. At a certain point we feel very tired and we have to go to sleep, we don’t decide that we are tired, the body is tired. We wake up and we think “oh my back is a bit sore”. It’s not my back that’s a bit sore, sensation is arising onto which we put that story. If we stay close to the body as direct experience, which you can develop an awareness of through things like *taichi* and *shiatsu* and *qi-gong* and so on, moment by moment the body is revealing itself in different ways, it’s never an entity, which means offering the body is helping you to awaken to the sense that the body is a display, just as this whole room is a display. So, at first when we offer the mandala, there is me offering things, “I am real, the things are real and I truly offer them to the Buddha”. But the more we do the practice, we want to come to see that the things we offer are actually moments of experience. We wrap them, just as if you give someone a present, you wrap it in nice paper. We take the direct experience of the world and we wrap it in concepts and we say, here you are. But actually, when you get a present, you take off the wrapping paper to get to the present. You don’t take the wrapping paper and say “oh, this is gorgeous” and throw the present away, that would be a bit silly. But that’s what we do all the time. We hang onto the concept and let the experience go, this is tragic. Then the more we offer, we see we don’t need any wrapping paper at all, it’s this immediacy. So, when you are walking down the street, every step you make, your body is slightly turning. As it is, the visual field is opening up differently, instantly offering us, instantly offering, offering the sensation of your feet, the movement of your shoulders, the sense of the breath coming and going, everything which arises is the ceaseless flow of offering. Offering arising from the unborn *Dharmakaya*, into the unborn *Dharmakaya*. Just as it says in the *dzogchen* texts, you should meditate sky to sky, your mind is like the sky, whatever is arising is just like rainbows and clouds moving in the sky. Sky means sky with this interface of material, in the same way offering everything, all the time. Sounds like this, “whrrrrrrrrrr”, we say it’s a car but really, it’s a “whrrrrrrrrrr”. Buddha says “this is fantastic, I haven’t had one of these for a while. Everyone is offering me cars, what am I going to do with a car, we don’t have cars in Buddhaland! This is incredibly useful, whrrrrrrrrrr”. So, in that way, try

to stay open, relax, and the idea of offering, again is no reward, no contract, not waiting for any expectation back, I can give away everything and then I will have nothing, and because I have nothing, I will be freed from the need for something. If you write your letter to Santa Claus, “Dear Santa, please give me”. Santa sometimes doesn’t understand English very well so he might bring the wrong thing. That is to say, the more clearly defined your hopes are, the more determined you are to get something, often it is the more you set yourself up for heartache. Do you think that’s true? Somehow hanging loose and being able to work with what comes is probably a better basis for happiness. So, in that way, when we offer, we offer everything. Now we have nothing. Well, remember the old saying, “beggars can’t be choosers”? Thank you so much, thank you so much, give us this day, our daily bread, no expectation, no demand, then you can be grateful for whatever you get. “What is this that’s coming?”. Well, this is the radiance of the unborn *Dharmakaya*. Looks like cheese, smells like cheese, but today the *Dharmakaya* is coming in the form of cheese, isn’t that amazing? “How do they do it, it must be modern packaging!”. Everything is luminous, everything is radiant if you’re with it. When you wake up in the morning and you have your first cup of tea, it’s very nice because it’s familiar but its also fresh. So, there you have the choice, do I go towards the familiarity, “ummmn that’s good, that’s just what I need, or ah!”. You can have both, if you stay with the freshness, you still get the reassurance, but you are in touch with the unborn nature. The freshness is the same with everything, if you bite into an apple, if you cook an omelet, you have eaten a lot of omelets in your life, but at this moment, in this way, the knife cuts into it and it’s slightly soft, slightly spongy on the outside and when you get through that layer that’s been hardened by the contact with the oil, it suddenly gets softer, “oh”, and so the movement of your shoulder. That’s your life. What is life? Where is that coming from? Well, if you have nothing, it’s coming from nothing because everything else is gone. Hasn’t got anywhere else to come from. When we do this 3 ‘A’, everything is open, it’s coming from nothing. Some of us in the past have done this ‘*phat*’ practice, where we make the sound ‘*phat*’ very strongly and use it to free the mind from any thoughts and constructs, and in that state, there is nothing, and then thoughts come. So where do they come from? If there is truly nothing, if that moment of openness is infinite, that is to say, not finite, not limited, there is no boundary to it. If there is no boundary to it, it can’t be imported from somewhere else. It comes from inside the emptiness, and this is the central understanding of tantra and *dzogchen*: all phenomena are the flowers or the rainbows of radiance itself. That is to say: there is no substance anywhere, everything is truly an illusion. So, what you have got is the immediate vibrancy of just this, and it’s coming, and it’s coming and it never stops. And if you are in it, not trying to secure it, not trying to cut it up, not trying to make it familiar, “ahhh”, how free that is because it comes as it comes, but you now, are also empty.

So, we think back to the image earlier about the room, if you have a room with a lot of furniture in it, what you can do with it is very limited because the furniture will be determining the usage. But if you just have an empty space, you can do anything, that's why in the theatre the stage is so important. Take all the props off and you just have the space, the open space, anything is possible in that space. In the same way, when we offer everything, we are just an open space, then we can become everything, so hopefully you can see again how wisdom and compassion are working again. You get rid of your assumptions, you get rid of the limiting thoughts about who you are and what you can do and what you can't do, and then you just get on with it, just get on with it. How do we do that? Be just being out. If you have to take care of somebody who is sick, maybe it's somebody who you are closely connected with, maybe your mother or your father and they are old and maybe you have to bathe them, or if they have messed themselves you have to wipe these excreta and so on off their body, and you might think "oh I can't do that, it's my dad, it's my mum". There is somebody in front of you who needs help, so who needs help, this person. Who is this person? Somebody who needs help. So, if you stay in your category, you feel this reservation, "how could I?", some kind of taboo of relations in the family. But here is the need and you just go into that. And in the same way, the more definitions and decisions we have about who we are, the less freedom we have to respond to the situation in the world.

So offering the mandala, the sun, the moon, the planets, the mountains, the seas, the cities, the countries, the motor cars, the food, the clothing, everything, everything, everything, then you find a kind of freedom. In the higher tantric practices, in the offerings that they have, they also offer human meat, dog meat, feces, urine and so on. These are not the normal things that we would think are a nice offering, you wouldn't want to offer them to the vicar. But why are they offered? They are offered to help you move beyond your categorization of saying "this is disgusting, ugh, I don't like this, this is horrible, how could you?". 'How could' you means that in my system of categories, I allocate the value of disgusting, therefore, this is truly disgusting and therefore one shouldn't do that. So, we know where we stand. Except, what are we standing on? Concepts. It doesn't mean that you should actually offer people horrible things, so please don't kill local dogs, it's not very nice. It's not about doing these things externally, it's not a kind of macho heroic thing like becoming some kind of blood brother or doing some strange kind of bonding ritual. It's about examining your own mind and seeing "what is my fear, what is my inhibition, how does that grasping, that feeling this is impossible, how does that stop me from recognising my own innate freedom and also how does it stop me from being open to respond to other people?". In the London Underground at the moment there are some adverts from a charity, I can't remember the name

of it, but it's an organisation for people who have very intense facial disfigurements and they have these photos of people with completely mangled and distorted faces and you can really look at these pictures, and they are very interesting because people with these kinds of faces, I certainly don't see them in my streets. So, there is something about, what is that urge to turn away, the horror of seeing someone's face and then you see these eyes looking up, and you think "oh, ugh" and it's exactly that isn't? You know, if you have a disfigurement, always you're encountering people's revulsion, and we, maybe not in these cases, but we all I'm sure have some degree of revulsion towards certain kinds of people. We may feel it for people who murder or who attack children, all sorts of activities or who look in particular ways. But from the Buddhist point of view, all of these beings have been your own mother. How could that be possible? How could somebody who has been my mother be a pedophile? Well, due to the turning of *karma* people end up in many limited, distorted positions. How can I remain open and believe that somebody has an infinite potential, even if that has got wrapped in some particular shaping which seems so dense, so intense, so perverted that you might want to think "oh, I don't want to be there". In your work you might be working with people who are dangerous, maybe they are in prison or forensic units, people who cause trouble, who have murdered, who have harmed and who might even exalt in cruelty, they might have no guilt or insight into what they do. We might say, "oh, this is the kind of person that society wants to lock up and throw away the key, we want nothing to do with them". But it's a central question in any spiritual path: how do you relate to people who have behaved in ways that take them beyond? Because they challenge us to what is the limit of our compassion. That is to say, in this Buddhist frame, can I bring my wisdom and compassion together to have the wisdom to see both the emptiness of the situation and the dependent origination structure out of which this terrible deed has been done, because the deed is still terrible, if somebody has raped and murdered some child, that's terrible, that's absolutely terrible. But... the person still has the Buddha nature. So, you have to work with the limitation of the behaviour and the infinite potential. The danger is, of course, that we split the two and staff teams in these kinds of units. Usually somebody sees the victim and the offender, and the other person sees only the offender and then everything gets into conflict and they get different responses from people. The best exit from that is to look at yourself. If we don't know our own cruelty, if we don't know our own selfishness, the big danger is that we will project this onto other people. That's one of the benefits of meditation, is that when we just relax and sit, all kinds of stuff arise in ourselves: hatreds, envy, murderous feelings, sexual feelings and so on. And we have to think "oh, if this was to come into activity, what difficulty and turbulence this could make". I have all the fuel ready to create chaos in the world. My task is to link this knotted energy back into its own ground of openness that will let the knots untie. Because

the desire to kill someone, “I hate you, I hate you, I don’t care about you”, think of what that is. It’s such an assertion, it’s such an up-welling of energy. No object. “Because all my life people have been coming at me they have been pissing on me, they have been giving me a hard time, well I don’t care!”. Subject says, ‘my freedom depends on the annihilation of the object’. From a Buddhist point of view, tears should fall from our eyes, we say “oh brother, oh sister, oh yes, of course, we understand”, but you have the wrong method. Killing the object doesn’t free the subject. If you want to be free, kill the subject, don’t kill the object. You’ve killed the wrong one. Look in your own mind, look at this mangled turmoil and chaos, cut! (phat!) “Oh, I’m not that, oh”, then you’re peaceful. This is not suicide, this is radically cutting the root of ignorance, recognising that I am not these impulses. It is said, isn’t it, that there are many young people nowadays who cut themselves, they feel some turmoil and pain inside, they feel upset and stressed and they don’t know what to do. So they can end up easily getting into a situation where they attack themselves. Because by making an incision into the body, through various mechanisms, there is a kind of release, it helps to shift gears and go into an altered state and so on. We can understand why they would do that, but it’s a very poor method. You can learn much better methods, kinder methods, more gentle methods. It’s exactly the same thing, it’s exactly what the Buddha said: “everywhere all beings want to be happy, but they do nothing but create the causes of their own unhappiness”. People don’t think, as far as I know, they don’t run around doing dreadful things because they want to have suffering themselves, they are trying to free themselves from suffering but these are very ineffective and stupid methods.

So, coming back to the idea of the mandala offering... the more we offer outer forms and inner conceptualizations, the more loose we can feel. But then we have to offer our shadow: we have to explore and know all the darkest parts of ourselves, our cruelty, our greed, our laziness, our hatred, be aware of this and then offer this as well. The Buddhas don’t mind, they are quite able to cope with our anger, they are not going to be frightened of it. But what we have to believe is that this is something we can offer. That is to say, one of the things that keeps us back is secrecy. Are you more likely to do a bad thing if you can get away with it, or if you are more likely to have your name in the newspapers? I think that’s called a rhetorical question, because it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? Secrecy makes us bad. I remember at school, we had to do this exercises in *précis*¹¹ and we did them on these essays on “Addison and Steel”. One of the essays was about a bishop who was travelling in a carriage in the early trains, and he’s sitting in a first class compartment, but then he became very ill and they and they had to take him to the hospital and in

¹¹ *Précis*, synonyms: summary, synopsis, resumé, abstract, outline.

the hospital they found that he had a second class ticket: because if you are a bishop you don't expect anyone to ask you for your ticket. That's what people do. We try to get away with things, we try to get away with things. What makes us dangerous is that we try to cheat ourselves, if we didn't cheat ourselves, we wouldn't be cheating other people. Do you think that's true? What does it mean to cheat yourself? It means to compartmentalize yourself, there are little areas inside, again... the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, we do things out of focus, the person who creates chaos is not the person who has to be accountable. Recently somebody, this person had been with a friend with a bar and drunk a lot, celebrating something. And then he left the bar and he didn't go to the toilet first and he's standing in the bus stop and he decided he needed a pee. So he went and pissed against the wall of a restaurant. A waiter came out from the restaurant and shouted at him, so he hit the waiter! So then more waiters came out, and called the police and took him to the police station, and then they took him to the hospital and when he came into the hospital, he was completely furious! He said "how dare they, how dare they arrest me, I am a good person". Well, pissing on someone's wall in public is probably not going to make people like you very much. Yes, but they shouldn't have, they shouldn't have. So there you can see very clearly that the part of the person who feels disinhibited and free just to do what they like is not the whole person, the person who gets the consequences is not the person who was pissing on the wall is it? And that's what it means to recognize, to recognize your own shadow, that unless you get to know the whole of yourself, all the different aspects, it's very difficult to free yourself up. Which is why when we do the meditation and you start to fall asleep or you get bored or you go off on a fantasy, this is very useful and helpful. This is not that you are bad at meditating, it's just that you are reluctant to know who you are. You are a lazy fantasist; you are just out to lunch! You are not nearly as clear as who you think you are. When you're on the ball, doing your work, doing this and doing that, we have a sense of clarity, but as soon as you relax a bit you see all the stuff. This is what the Freudian unconscious is all about, just weird stuff. Now this is us. So the more you can know this, about how you get lost, your lost-ness is part of your found-ness. Instead of trying to get rid of it, "this is me too!". All the dark thoughts that might come, all the strange mental states, "this is me". They are not an obstacle to my path to glory, *they are my path to glory*. This is the path, knowing I am lazy, I am dull, I am not interested in this. "What am I doing here? I'd rather be somewhere else". All these different kinds of thoughts, this is how my mind functions. I say yes and then I mean no, I say no but somehow, I keep doing it, what is this? This is the unity of *samsara* and nirvana, this is the nature of duality as it arises, we are divided against ourselves. And the only way to stop being divided against yourself is to allow all the bits of yourself. Most of the time we don't do this. We think, "I know how to stop being divided against myself, I will find the bad bits and get rid of them". Does

that work? Maybe not, because the bad bits are mixed in with the good bits. They are just brother and sister; they are so close together. Most of us wouldn't like to do a DIY appendectomy¹², it would be a bit difficult. In the same way, trying to cut bits out of your *psyche*, "I must be a good boy, I must be a good boy", it's the sort of thing I had to do at school, lines, write out a hundred times, "I will not cause trouble, I will not cause trouble", at the end of which you are so angry and pissed off you are just ready for mayhem. So, in the same way, in the meditation, whatever is bad and limited, stay with it, don't try to push it away, don't fall into it. Stay close to, present with that experience, and you will start to see that it is impermanent and it will go by itself. But the more you try to correct yourself and improve yourself, the more you are likely just to get tied in more knots. This is the *dzogchen* approach to this. In some of the other Buddhist traditions they would say "no, whenever you find yourself having a bad thought, you should immediately recognize this and pray to the Buddhas for help never to have such thoughts again". That's also possible, but that's to say "I have to get rid of this", that's nice on an interactive social, but for real meditators, when you really look at your mind, it's not the mind you wanted, the mind you've got is the only mind you have, you can't get a mind transplant. This is your mind, how your mind is, this is the limit of your existence. If you have anger, you have got to work with that anger, if you are jealous, you have got to work with that jealousy, if you are by nature stupid and stubborn and always want to get your own way, that's the coal-face for you. And if you deny who you are, how will you be able to be integrated? And then of course, in your inner blindness towards yourself, denial towards yourself, the very idea that you could help other people, is a bit silly. Because who is going to be helping them, somebody who is frightened of themselves?

So, the mandala offering is something very deep, it's not just about practising generosity, it's about learning to fully welcome and embrace all of oneself, and to feel that all of that is a worthy offering for the Buddha, because the Buddha, this Buddha here for example (James points to an image of a Buddha) is already quite at home with everything. The Buddha is not worried about anything, that's the whole thing. Buddha is not making discrimination between good, bad, right, wrong, he's just saying "oh yes, that's that". You know, in some of the Tibetan paintings that they have of the Buddha at the moment of enlightenment, he is attacked by demons who are throwing spears and firing arrows at him and he is being tempted by people who are being sexually provocative towards him. He doesn't have to annihilate the object, he just releases himself from that, he releases his fear which is linked with releasing his anger

¹² DIY stands for "do it yourself" and appendectomy is the surgery for removing the intestines' appendix.

and he releases his desire, “that’s there, oh yeah, oh yeah, so what?!”, and he’s free. Tibetans have a saying that “it’s better to cover your own feet with leather, than to try to cover the whole road”. Can you imagine what moralizing positions there are, always trying to say “if only everyone behaved in this way, why can’t we all get together and we’ll do it this way and then it will all be fine”. But it never quite works out. Put the leather on your own feet, be tolerant and then offer everything the Buddha. Are there any thoughts and questions about that or any of the other things that we have done so far?

The Two accumulations: merit and wisdom

So we can continue looking at the preliminary practices and I’m discussing them in a general way because people here come from different backgrounds, different lineages and so if you are doing practices like the *ngöndro* you will have different texts, but the principles are the same for all of them. Generally speaking, you can group the Buddha’s teachings in terms of them being *ego syntonis* and *ego dystonic*. That is to say, that some of the practices we do make us feel good about ourselves: they confirm what we are doing, for example, being kind to people. When we are kind, we feel better, we feel that we are good, that is formally a good thing to be doing but it is also affirming the value of the ego. And many of the basic practices are like that, for example, circumambulating a *stupa*, turning prayer wheels, doing charitable work, pretty much everything which is inside the family of the accumulation of merit is affirmational towards the ego. And in the tradition, it says we need to have the two accumulations, of merit and wisdom. So, merit is the “fruit” or the “profit” that is generated by performing ethical activity and generally speaking, it makes us feel good. The accumulation of wisdom is slightly different because there we come in contact with the idea of emptiness and emptiness is *ego dystonic*, that is to say, it makes the ego feels a bit weird. Most of us have had periods on our life where we have felt a bit strange, we maybe don’t feel like ourselves, we feel under the weather, we feel a bit cut off, depersonalized. And in these moments, how we are and the things that we do are not really confirmational of our identity, we feel divided against ourselves and confused about who we are. That’s traditionally called *ego dystonic*, that’s to say it’s not harmonious, it’s not affirming of who we are. And that might come about say for example if you have a bereavement of someone close to you. Your sense of who you are might have been woven in with the felt presence of that person, and then suddenly they are gone and there is a kind of rupture or tear in the fabric of your existence. And you might go off your food, have difficulty sleeping, not be at all sure what you want to do, you go and carry out an activity that’s always brought you pleasure but it feels like eating cardboard and you think “well, what’s the point” and there’s a sort of lostness, alienation and depression. That’s a kind of ordinary notion of the dystonic, being “out of sorts”. Now, imagine the

notion of emptiness. From the very beginning you have never existed as the person who you think you are. You can't get much more alienated from your ordinary identity than that. All your life you have been living a lie, you've been thinking that you are the construct of your thoughts, held together by your name but that's not who you are. Well, that's pretty weird, that's pretty strange. So, I don't know who I am. No, you don't know who you are. Well, but everyone seems to know me, my friends know me and my family knows me so does that mean they are wrong too? Yes. This is called *samsara*, this is the realm of ignorance, this is where the lost souls gather, here we are. Oh. That's pretty alarming. "So, actually I'm really nothing at all?", that's right. "Oh, that's pretty weird...". Now, to then call that wisdom sounds like the madhouse. But that's really what the Buddhist teaching is saying: that the familiar constructs, the way in which we create an identity that seems to be strongly real is functional in the sense that it allows us to connect with other people, it's socially generated, but it is fundamentally flawed because it is a misinterpretation. A misinterpretation in that by linking together the aspects of our manifestation and our behaviour, we create a sense of ourselves as "always out here", always engaged, always caught up in stuff and that actually there are many other dimensions to our existence. And this is the function of meditation, which is to introduce ourselves to ourselves in the parts that we have never attended to. And when we do that, we see that the basic move, the apprehension, apprehending, the way in which we take ourselves, this activity is arising from something which is not to be found. The one who we are is not something that we can establish and yet here we are! This is a great mystery: how can we exist, but not really be who we take ourselves to be? That's because, who we take ourselves to be is contingent, it's depending on many causes and circumstances and it's always changing, the ground or the site where that is revealed to us is this open unborn awareness. The open unborn awareness is not your ego. You could say, 'I am emptiness', and some of the texts speak in that way, but 'I am emptiness', you have to be very careful. Because 'I am emptiness' going out and folding into, it is very different from "oh, I am emptiness, at least I know now who I really am, I am emptiness", and then you get a perverse solidification of the situation. It's actually dissolving, because if we say "I am emptiness", we also have to say "I am in Macclesfield". Because on the level of stating it, it's just another concept: the emptiness of our existence is not a concept. This is why we have to do practice again and again, because not only are we unfamiliar with these open dimensions of being, the unformed, ungraspable radiant nature that we are, but when we get close to them, we pick them up as if they were familiar substances. You know, if you think of the early researchers in radioactivity like Madame Curie, the substances that she was dealing with were very dangerous but she proceeded for many years touching radioactive material as if it was a lump of coal. And then after a while, her body started to show the danger, and she became very ill and she died from

radioactive induced diseases. Because radioactive substances are not the same as a biscuit, they are lively in a way that even a chocolate finger is not. Chocolate fingers when placed in front of children seem to give off an electric charge and there is an irresistible pull, but radioactive substances are very different. So, we need to learn to deal with different materials in different ways. And if we think about the material of emptiness, as we approach that, because of course it's no material at all, we have to pick it up in a different way, that is to say, we have to be with ourselves in a way which is not about appropriation. And the ego is always concerned with 'I, me, myself' pulling in the good, pushing away the bad, it's about sorting out, discrimination in a self-referential way. But wisdom and emptiness are ego dystonic in that they don't pertain to the realm of the ego, and they are disruptive of the organising function of the ego and, fundamentally, they make the ego redundant. It's not that we don't have an ego, or you have to get rid of your ego, it's simply that it's going to be moved down in value. The ego is like the child that has taken over a situation and got out of control. Some of you may have read the book or seen the old film of "*Lord of the Flies*"¹³ where you get a bunch of kids who are shipwrecked on an island and they set up their own way of behaving. They split into two tribes and there is a lot of viciousness and cruelty... and then the adults come, and their little world collapses. And of course, there is an earlier play by J.M. Barrie, "*the Admiral Crichton*"¹⁴ which had a similar story where the butler, when this rich people's yacht crashes on an island, gradually takes over and he becomes the king of the island but when they are rescued, the doddery old lord is immediately rehabilitated. So, our awareness is like the doddery old lord, and when you waken up somehow this lord that doesn't really do very much is reinstalled, and the very active butler goes back to being the butler. The ego is a function of causal connectedness between subject and object. But it doesn't really have the wherewithal to be the master. I would suggest that most of us feel a bit out of control in our lives, we face these questions: "Well what am I doing? Am I doing the right thing? Should I be doing something different? Am I doing the right job? Am I with the right person? What sort of clothes should I wear? What food should I eat?". Because there is so much information that comes in saying you could be a different person, you could be a different person, "well yes I could, I see that. So who will I be, how would I ever know?". This is the problem of the ego being placed in charge of this existence. We are trying to work it out, we are trying to do problem solving, to something which is actually a mystery. And

¹³ "*Lord of the Flies*" is a 1954 debut novel by Nobel Prize-winning British author William Golding. It was made into a movie and launched in 1990.

¹⁴ "*The Admirable Crichton*" play was a critically acclaimed social commentary with elaborate staging, about an aristocratic family and their household servants whose social order is inverted after they are shipwrecked on a desert island.

the mystery is about the integration of form and emptiness, that all forms are actually empty and so they are beyond being grasped as this and that. Instead of trying to control the forms, by seeing the form as part of emptiness, it reveals itself as an energy and so you are working with the energy and things become shining, and dull, and exuberant, and then quiet, and all sorts of movements occur. And you are just pulsing with that, and inside that, if somebody says “who are you?”, what would you say? You don’t know, all you could say is “this is what I am doing today”. But we live in a culture where we feel required to give a true account of ourselves, and now that we will have iris recognition, and we will have our fingerprints everywhere, and DNA testing, the big computer will always be able to tell us who we are. That’s scary but it’s not so new, because we have all got a small computer in our head that’s always been doing the same thing. We are always giving a little print out about who we are and we believe it. So, the ego dystonic aspect of meditation practice is to go beyond self-referencing, self-evaluation, relying on, believing in the stories we tell ourselves, to experience the naked immediacy of life as it reveals itself which is an interaction of subject and object. Traditionally that’s called non-duality, it means ‘how I am’ and ‘how the world is’ are forming together, I don’t exist apart from it but I am absolutely always implicated in everything that’s going on.

The Practice of Vajrasattva

So, in relation to this next aspect, the practice of *Dorje Sempa* or *Vajrasattva*, it’s about purification, and purification is very important as we started to look yesterday, because the name *Vajrasattva*, *vajra* means indestructible and *sattva* simply means being or existence. *Vajrasattva* is, therefore, an indestructible mode of existence. Now what we were looking at yesterday is that all the aspects of our lives are very destructible. Our youth passes away, last year’s summer holidays are just a distant memory, Christmas is gone, all the various kinds of identity that we have are changing all the time. Sometimes we feel healthy, sometimes we feel a bit sick, sometimes we feel happy, we feel sad, in that sense our ordinary being, our ordinary identity is highly destructible. On this level, as personality, we are very far away from being *Vajrasattva*. What would it mean to be an indestructible being? *Vajra* traditionally refers to emptiness. Now emptiness again is the absence of inherent self-nature, that is to say, there is nothing truly present as an essence, as a self-defining essence in any phenomena. This is something to study again and again. Whatever *dharma* center you go to or books that you read, it’s so important to return to the Heart Sutra, to commentaries on the Heart Sutra and to join with others in

really trying to analyse and see this. Because it's the one thing that distinguishes Buddhism from all other readings, apart from a few Hindu schools, which are very similar. But it is a radically different orientation, it is the truly *ego dystonic* part, it's the part that says, yes, improving yourself, becoming a better person is very important, developing virtues, kindness, generosity, endurance and so on, these are very important. But all of these qualities are empty, and the one who develops them is empty, and the ones on whom or with whom they are enacted, they are also empty too. These are called the three circles, self is empty, other is empty, and the connection between the two is empty. So, I am talking just now, my words come out of my mouth, they come out of my mouth when I move my mouth. I have to move it about otherwise it doesn't come out, that is to say, the words are created. In the throat there is a voice box, wind comes up "wrrrrr", a little bit of vibration and then it goes down. Some sound goes to you, because you have the knowledge of English, you construe, you make sense of the sounds that come in your ears, then they are gone. So, my movement, the movement of the sound and your movement are working together and that's what we call communication; it is a dynamic process. Who is the one who is speaking? Well, the words come, I don't know what I'm going to say, I'm not having it somewhere inside me, words reveal themselves to you as much as to me, to me as much as to you. So, there is something about the interaction of the various parts of my self in relation to the field that I am connected with, with you being here, that brings about a particular kind of speaking. And then inside you, there are particular kinds of interests, background reading, practices that you have done that make what I'm saying more or less comprehensible, I hope! (Audience and James laughs). So if you didn't have that background, or that interest, this would be a completely crazy kind of thing to be talking about. Most people in Macclesfield are not discussing this at this time, they may be discussing equally strange things, if they go into a Christian church, that's pretty strange, about the resurrection and so on. Here we are talking about this. So, what's happening is two dynamic fields, the dynamic field of the listener and the dynamic field of the speaker are connected through the dynamic movement of sound and something seems to be enacted, but it's changing, isn't it? And each of you will hear what I say in different ways because the sounds will come into your ear through the ear consciousness, and then the mentation consciousness, the sixth consciousness, the one that organises the sense consciousnesses will then be forming patterns and shapes with what is being said. That consciousness for each of you is dependent on associations and your own history. So you will formulate, you will give shape to what I am saying and it will have more or less resonances according to the internal furniture that you have, all of which is dynamic. Sometimes we hear something and it doesn't mean much, and then a couple of days later we say "oh yes, now I see", because a new bit of furniture has come up and somehow it slots into place. So, this is our way of proceeding in which there is

nothing substantial. If you look at yourself, if you think, since you got up this morning and think of all the things that have happened, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, sometimes open, sometimes closed, maybe angry and so on, these things have arisen and gone. You are unreliable, you are undefined, you are undefined because there is no solidity to who you are. If there was a solidity, your life would be very dull. Would you like to be in a coma? Maybe not. It's quite nice to be alive and connected with the world. Of course, the world that we are connected with is sometimes a great source of grief for us, but nonetheless being alive means being dynamically shaped. This very dynamism indicates the absence of an inherent self-nature. That's the key thing. It is because I am not a thing that I am everything. I can be happy then I can be sad, I can be full then I can be hungry, my nature is changing all the time and these changes are part of my relation with the world. For example, you can take hunger as being an individual personal feeling, "I feel hunger". But hunger is a sign that your body wants a different kind of connection with the world, it wants to take a substance from the world and chew it up so that it can extract the valuable nutritional essences out of the food and metabolize them, that's what hunger is. We are all the time seeking things from the environment. If we drop away the personal self-referential ego part of that, then we are a dynamic system interacting in a field of dynamic systems, and what promotes the greatest degree of interaction with the field is having minimal rigid self-definition. Does that make sense? Now that's really what emptiness is designed to do, is to help you unlock the knots, the bindings, the rigidities of yourself where you define yourself and say "well, I'm not that kind of person, or I couldn't do that or that's not for me", in which knowledge moves in advance of you and determines how you are going to respond. So instead of having an organic moving response to the situation, you pre-determine the situation. That is the absence of emptiness, the absence of awareness of emptiness because you have brought in a rigidity. So, if we stay with this idea, I am changing all the time, therefore I have to attend to how I am to know who I am, that is to say, knowledge of myself is predictive but limiting, attention to myself is unsettling but revelatory. Does that make sense? The first version, if you like, is the *ego syntonic* version, that is to say, "I know who I am, I know what I like and I like what I know". There's a very closed little world. So, under all circumstances, "this is the kind of tea I like to drink, this is the kind of coffee I like, this is this, this is that". Inside that there is a lot of prediction. Of course, each time you make a cup of tea, you (pause); make (pause); a cup (pause); of tea (pause). That is to say, it's a dynamic process. You cannot escape from dynamism; dynamism is all there is. But if you have got a strong narrative storyline, a highly stitched together set of concepts, they will confuse you and bewilder you and delude you into believing

“I am always the same person”. “PG tips for me, I don’t like that Typhoo. PG Tips¹⁵”. People are like that, especially with cigarettes, people like their familiar cigarette, the exact taste of them or if they drink beer, they might like their particular pint because “that’s me”, when I get that taste, that taste now becomes a confirmation, “ah, hits the spot, just what I wanted”. So, familiarity becomes like the gentle touch of the mother’s hand on the baby’s face, it’s a soothing reassuring thing, the world is just as it is. And will there be honey for tea? Of course!

So, if we try to move away from that, it doesn’t mean that we are going to lose out, you can have exactly the same thing, understanding emptiness doesn’t mean that you have to give up on things, it’s simply that you are move startled by the world, your gaze and your experience is more fresh. If you are not taking things for granted, that is to say, if you are not feeling entitled that things will be as they are, then you live with the gift of the world, moment by moment we have this gift. What a wonderful thing. Then you have gratitude, gratitude is a very important transformational experience. You have it in every religious tradition, you have it in traditional psychoanalysis, particularly through Melanie Klein. She wrote very movingly about the real breakthrough that can occur when people awaken to gratitude. Because so many people spend a lot of time feeling hatred and blame, “I was robbed, I didn’t get the childhood I wanted, the world hasn’t given me the opportunities I need”. Many of these things may be true, but it does give us daffodils and blackbirds and clouds and winds and many things. It also gives us our depression, our anxiety, now there’s a gift, did we ask for it? No, so it’s a gift. Our problem is that we don’t know how to receive that gift. What is this depression? If you are alive into your depression, it will reveal something to you, it will reveal the nature of attachment which is the fusional thing in which you are caught up in it, and then it will reveal its self liberation as it changes and passes away, the same with pain, the same with misery. All of these experiences are dynamic.

So, purification is to recognise the absence of inherent self-nature in ourselves and in others. Emptiness is itself the great purity, because there is no true essence, there is nothing that can be defiled. For example, I have here a mug with some water in it (James grabs a mug with water). Now I could put some ink in this and then it would look a different colour and I might not want to drink it because I say “I don’t usually drink dark blue substances”. So, the purity of the water is dependent on it being protected from other factors. We know very well that water can be contaminated, and we know that in many

¹⁵ ‘PG Tips’ and ‘Typhoo’ are both tea brands commonly sold in the United Kingdom.

countries it's very difficult for people to get pure drinking water and that it's a major cause of infant mortality, because it brings diarrhea and all sorts of other conditions. The air can be polluted, car fumes and so on can bring on all sorts of reactions in people, particularly if they have asthma and so on. Can space be polluted? If space has no substance, if there is nothing in it, if it is simply the host, if it is simply the site of hospitality which has no internal essence of furniture or defining characteristics or substances, what would defile it? This is at the heart of emptiness, space represents emptiness. It is said in Buddhism, all things are compounded and all compounded things will come to an end, but there are three things which are not compounded: space, enlightenment, and the moment of enlightenment. Space is a concept which you get a lot in Buddhism, it's often indicated by this kind of dark blue colour of *Kuntuzangpo*. We have a term, *dharmadhatu*, *dhatu* has various meanings but one of which is kind of space, so *dharmadhatu* means the dimension or the openness or the spaciousness within which all *dharmas*, all forms, all manifestations occur. Manifestation and space are inseparable; just as it says in the Heart Sutra: form is emptiness, emptiness is form. That means that the cup or the mug and the water are empty, their emptiness means that if we put something in the water which contaminates it, that contamination is only conventional because we have started with an assumption that there is real water and that real water has a particular status and you can take it to a chemistry laboratory and you can test it. What are the trace elements present in the water? What is there? Then you see the contamination, but in terms of emptiness, there is never any contamination because water is a concept, body is a concept, the building is a concept. Concepts contaminate each other. Clearly if you drink contaminated water, you will get sick, you might say well that's not a concept but of course it is a concept. You go to the doctor and you say I feel sick, he says what's the matter and you say "well, I was in the toilet all night, something has gone wrong with my bowels". So, then you have a conversation, there is a temporary dynamic situation, for you it feels very strongly real because you don't like it, something is happening to me that I don't want to be happening to me, does that make it real? Is it going to be like that forever? No. Due to causes and circumstances, manifestation arises in certain patterns and then ceases in certain patterns, there is no inherent self-nature. This is really an important area to explore for yourself: how you concretize situations and make them strongly real out of your own self-referential mental activity and your fear and anxiety. "But I don't want to get sick, I don't want to die, I don't want to be unhappy, this is horrible, I don't want my life to be this way." This is called aversion; aversion is an activity. When we are saying that, it sounds as if "I know who I am, and this is shit, I don't want my life to be like this, it used to be OK, why is this happening to me?" We hear that again and again, we say these things ourselves, other people say them, there is an intolerance, "it shouldn't be like this". But what is this it, what is this thing, is there a thing in the thing

that we see? If you attend to it, you will see that there is no thing. It's a set of impermanent causes and circumstances that arise and move our situation around and then are gone. As we looked yesterday, suffering is taking that presenting situation which has its pain and difficulty and turns it into something really monstrous and grinding because we are living in this interpretation, "this is happening to me, this shouldn't be happening to me, I hate this". So, there you have got, "this is happening to me, I am real, this is real and it is impacting me. This shouldn't be happening, I resist this, this is unjust, it's not proper, I know how I should be, I know how the world should be, and I am going to get rid of it, I'm going to resist this, I will assert my right to live my life on my terms". That's how we make more trouble for ourselves because there isn't a fixed definite clear I that has a fixed definite rule-book. Each aspect of ourselves has different rule-books that get pulled in and pulled out, that's why we have these weird self justifications and so on. So, the impermanence of the self, the absence of inherent self-nature in the self, means that there is no real concrete identity. So, if you do a bad thing, that exists as an energetic turn, that's what *karma* is, it's a particular tendency, a tendency is not a thing, it's a particular pattern of likely mobilisation. When we were kids in Scotland it used to be very cold and, in the playground, they would have little dipped areas and they would have had puddles in them and the puddles would freeze, so as soon as you came in on a cold morning, you would set about polishing the ice on the puddle to make it as slippery as possible and then you would slide on it again and again and the more people went sliding on it, the faster it became, you remember that? It was really good fun. It's just like that with ourselves. You develop habits which just become polished by using them again and again and so they are really quick, you zip down them, like a ski slope. It doesn't mean that they are real, it just means that they are used a lot. They are used a lot generates familiarity and rapidity, and we often take that to be a definition that "Oh, this is how it is". This is how it is until the sun shines and melts the ice and then this is how it isn't, it's just like that. This is why on a relative level, learning to do the analysis of causes and circumstances is very important, many traditional Buddhist teachings on that, the questions of King Milano going right back to the third century A.D., but especially now with this Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hhan, has taught many times about dependent co-origination and you can read his very beautiful descriptions of how the phenomena, the familiar artefacts of our world come into being through incredibly complex relationships with everything else, and part of the practice is to keep looking at that. So when you go into the shops, and you look at the fruit, there are bananas, bananas don't grow in this country so you can say bananas come from South America or the Caribbean, you can imagine what the banana trees look like, the plantations, you can imagine the history of that and how they came and how they are cut and they put them on the container ships and how they come to the country and they are in cold storage and then they are taken

out and so on. And grapes have a similar but different story from a different country, they are picked in a different way. You can imagine the lives of the people who are picking the grapes, that the grapes get sprayed a lot with chemicals so the people picking these things are ingesting lots of chemicals for the sake of giving you some grapes. Or you get your runner beans from Kenya which are air freighted in, and you think of what disaster it's done to the Kenyan economy to have this cash crop which breaks down a lot of their traditional farming techniques. It's all there in front of us, the incredible interweaving of patterns, you just need to look at your clothes and see the label, where it comes from and how this impacts the world economy. But all the things we have are linked out in causal chains to something else.

So, in the practice of *Dorje Sempa*, we imagine this being, *Vajrasattva*, he is usually depicted as white in colour, he holds a vajra at his heart and he has a bell down on his lap, he is seated usually with his left foot slightly out and he is dressed in the thirteen different ornaments of a *bodhisattva*, the tiara, armulets, wristlets, upper necklace, lower necklace and so on. All of which have a symbolic significance which you can read about. And he is pure from the very beginning, *Dorje Sempa* is, in the lineages, just next to the original Buddha, so in the *Nygingmapa* tradition, we say "*Kungzam Dorsé Garab Sheeri Sing*" so after *Kuntuzangpo*, this primordial Buddha, the next Buddha to manifest is *Vajrasattva* and in the *Kagyupa* tradition they have *Dorje Chang* and then usually they have *Vajrasattva*. Because *Vajrasattva* represents the immediate power of the purity of the buddha nature. Each of us has a buddha nature, from the very beginning, our nature is pure. This purity has never been destroyed, it has never been contaminated, it's not covered by anything else. But we lose touch with it. Now, because we lose touch with it, we feel we have got to get it. Actually, it's the other way round. You have to relax and awaken to the fact that you have been pure from the very beginning, but because we are trapped in our ego sense, and it's always up to us to study and do our homework and get through the exams and so on, because we have that frame of reference, we feel I need to remove the obscurations that stand in the way of my awakening. It's all up to me. One of the big differences between the *hinayana* path, according to the Tibetan definition, and tantra, is that the *hinayana* view is indeed, it's all up to me. I have to be a good person, I have to be very careful, I have to be very thoughtful. In tantra it's not like that, tantra believes in grace and blessing, so it's all up to the buddhas. We say if we are praying to *Padmasambhava*, "*Jin Gyi Lab Chir Sheg Su So*", please come here and give me your blessing, this is very quick. "You know how to do it, I don't know how to do it, why don't you do it for me, come on big boy, you have made all these

vows, you've made all these promises, I don't know what I'm doing, please get on with it". *Padmasambhava* is the archetypal Polish builder, he can do everything! So, it's about trusting that the Buddha, which is your own self, your own real nature, is coming towards you. That's why it says in the texts, you should pray like a child, pray with tears running down your face, "I'm lost, I don't know where I am, it's up to you, please come and save me". In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, they traditionally had a lot of discussion between these two paths, the path of self effort, which is of course exemplified by zen meditation sitting where it's your own effort sitting on your meditation cushion that brings the benefit, and the path of others' effort, which is to rely on the Buddha Amitabha, also known as *Amitayus* or as *Amida Buddha*. And that if you pray to *Amida Buddha*, if you say his name only once when you are dying, you will go immediately to be reborn in his pure land of *Dewachen*, or *Sukhavati*. So, then of course that has its corrupt form, where people would say "well I can have a long worldly life, do whatever I want, and at the very last moment I say 'oy, Amida, take me away...'" but it's something about how these two forms operate together. Of course, we do need to make effort but it is also vital that we trust that the world is on our side. Many people find the idea of prayer very difficult. Buddhist prayer is not like Christian prayer. Certainly, the Christianity that I grew up with there was always a kind of uncertainty, it was a bit like sending a letter to father Christmas, this is my wish list, this is what I would like and you may or may not choose to give it to me. Because all the buddhas are also bodhisattvas, they have made a fundamental commitment to help us, so certainly, what I was taught by my teacher was that if you pray to the Buddha, he will help you, have no doubt. And again, and again the texts say: don't doubt. When we do this larger Pujas, the first prayer we say is "*kyab nae lu me kon chog rin po che*", it means, that the place of refuge is the precious one who never cheats, *lu me* means not cheating, not deceiving, that means he keeps his word. So, when you pray to *Padmasambhava* the blessing will come. And in the tantric system, we imagine *Padmasambhava* in front of us and when we pray, we imagine rays of light coming and merging into our body, purifying all our obscurations. This purification, if you believe it, if you hold on to it will become operational. You will start to feel lighter in yourself, and when grasping and difficulties arise you will be able to unlock them more easily because you believe that you have received the blessing. The Catholic church traditionally is not so different with the idea of confession, and then you have the mass and, in the mass, you have the consecration and when you partake of the body of Christ you are transformed. But then somehow you blow it and you've got to do it again because there is an entropy in our fallen world, that is to say, the energy keeps bleeding out. As we say, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions". In the tantric system we deal with this by remembering to say mantra all the time. You can walk down the street reciting mantra, nobody needs to know what you're doing. You maintain the state of connection to

the deity, you can do it very subtly through the breath so that when you breathe in, you breathe in with “om” which is the purification of the body, you hold the breath for “ah” which is the purification of speech and then you breathe out with “hum” which is the purification of the mind. And you can have that circular breathing going on all the time. If you practice that, it’s a very simple practice, practice it regularly and it starts to become automatic so that when you’re walking down the street you just go back into that awareness, “om ah hum, om ah hum”. And so, every breath you take, you are reconnecting with your primordial purity.

The Bridge of faith

So, the function of prayer is to build the bridge of faith and connection between the unchanging purity of the deity, who is yourself, and the part of you that believes that you are not pure, which is not really yourself. Isn’t that a very strange situation? That the bit of you that causes all the trouble is not who you really are, but it’s troublesome because it’s disconnected. Now you can go to any children’s home in Britain and you will find a lot of disturbed children and these children are disturbed because they never really had a home. You will always find, this is a generalization, but I’m pretty sure it’s true, you will find that there were disruptions before conception, there were disruptions around the time of conception, there was disruption around all the time of being in the womb, the birth process is often a bit disturbed as well because there’s all sorts of emotions, and then afterwards. So that poor infant, while in its mother’s belly, was awash with chemicals, arousal chemicals and that continues in the early period in life. And of course, then behavior gets disturbed and you manifest disturbed behaviour, social services come in, maybe because they see the parents behaving very badly and the child is then in care. In care, people giving the care may well be good hearted, but they are on shifts and they have their own lives, and the child is not the centre of their existence. And so the child’s longing for the infinite welcome is not given, and this creates disturbance and that disturbance feeds more disturbance and more disturbance. You could take this as a metaphor for what happens in the Buddhist account of ignorance. We all live within the *Dharmadhatu*, the *Dharmadhatu* is also the womb of the great mother, of *prajnaparamita* herself who is the goddess that represents emptiness. But we forget this, we become cut off from our mother, and losing this umbilical cord of rainbow light which feeds our true nature, we become desperate, we become confused and it’s all up to us. So how are we going to protect ourselves? By stealing and biting and telling people to fuck off and causing trouble. That’s what we do. Wandering in *samsara* with the five poisons is the sign of our being orphans. Because if you are an orphan, very often you become a bit *feral*, you become like a cat that has moved away from the domestic, because you don’t have a domestic

situation, you have an institutional situation, and in that, as a wild creature, you desperately try to get whatever you can. I would imagine if you think about your own lives and some of the things that you might feel guilty or ashamed of, these were acts that were carried out in states of desperation, of loneliness, of longing... Maybe seeing that other kids at school had more than you, you nicked stuff from the sweet shop on the corner because you want to have it too. "Why shouldn't I? Why don't my parents have as much money as other people?". All sorts of things set kids off on patterns of "it's all up to me because the world isn't giving me what I want". This is the suffering that comes from duality, subject and object become separated and we are desperately trying to coerce the world to give us what we want. But we are out of kilter, we don't understand how the world works, and so we bang into it. And of course, the more you bang into it, the more you get flooded with chemicals, the frontal lobes aren't working very well, you can't process what's going on, you're rushing with *adrenalin*, *cortisone* and so on and you misconstrue what's going on. This is what *samsara* is, endlessly being out of kilter, out of balance, longing for things, projecting solutions onto situations that don't work. So, when we start to practice the tantric preliminaries with *Dorje Sempa*, we are making a connection back to our own nature. *Dorje Sempa* is not just some pure deity, he is ourselves. *Dorje Sempa* is our father, our mother. Although these gods show sometimes male forms, sometimes female forms, they are neither male nor female, just as we are not truly male or female. We have a particular genitalia and particular cultural development in terms of gender identity but we have the potential in all directions. So, when we do the practice of *Dorje Sempa*, we imagine that he is seated on the top of our head, sitting on a lotus with a sun and moon disc - some traditions just a moon disc - he is white in colour and we start to say the mantra. The mantra is the way of activating the energy of the deity, mantra represents the speech function, and speech is the energy of activation because it is connected with the wind, and the wind element moves everywhere and connects everything. So, we can say the short mantra, "*om benza satto hung*", or the hundred syllable mantra. And as we recite this, we imagine that from *Dorje Sempa's* body, pure fluid, 'dootsie', that the essence of the destruction of all demons, that is to say, emptiness itself, all demons, all the things that frighten us, all the corrupting elements of the world, are also empty. But we don't think they are empty. If the door suddenly burst open here and someone came in with a gun, we would probably not be having as our first reaction, "welcome Mr. Emptiness", we would be thinking "shit, what is he going to do? Oh, this is terrible, this is very dangerous". So why would that be? Because fear is a very deep and powerful experience that we have. We immediately concretize situations. So, in the Tibetan tradition there is an understanding that demons, demonic forms, strongly real forms, forms that seem completely terrifying have emptiness as their nature. So, when we see the statue there of *Padmasambhava* and he has a skull cup in his hand, what's inside

that skull cup is this dootsie or *amrita* which means the liquid of immortality. Now immortality is emptiness. If you understand emptiness, you will be immortal. Because you will no longer be linking your identity to this transient form that you have at the moment, but you will be resting in the open awareness which is present with whatever is arising.

So we recite the mantra, and out of *Vajrasattva's* body this fluid comes down through the top of our head, through this *brahma* opening, the *fontanelle* on the top of the head, and comes down filling our body. At that point we imagine all the limitations of our existence, all the bad things we have done, whether it's thoughts, feelings, sensations and so on, activities, we imagine that all of that is pouring out of our body. Usually, you visualize it as coming out of your anus, pouring out in the form of soot, scorpions, dust and so on and it falls into a crack in the ground and goes down into the centre of the world and gets burned up. In some traditions they imagine that there is a demon there who is eating it all, just our different traditions, but generally speaking in the tradition I learned, we just imagine it goes down into emptiness. So all this defilement is moving out of your body, and your body is gradually being filled up with this pure radiant empty light and the more you do the practice, you imagine your body becoming radiant and translucent like crystal and you keep doing that until you really have that experience: "my body is a radiant crystal form, it has no internal substance, my body is made of light". When you look at your body, light is what you see, even if you had an operation and the doctor took out one of your kidneys, and showed it to you afterwards in a little bottle you would see light. You would call it a kidney but you would see some particularly dark shrinking brownny matter and you would say "ah, that's my kidney". But what you would see is light, light is what we get, light is what we are. So, by doing that practice again and again, we come to see that light plus concept equals pseudo-entity. At the moment, if you are looking at me you see colours and shape. Onto that you can put the name James and you can add to that concept, and then you have your version of me. But actually, what you see is just colour and shape. The rest you build up out of your own associations. That is what is going on all the time, that we are creating the world out of the activity of our own mind. On a conventional level you could say, "yes, but everyone in the room agrees that this person who is talking is called James, so James must really exist because we all agree that he is James". This is simply a conventional definition. You know, you have these places in London where you can go and see the yard, you see a piece of metal which is the national standard for the yard and if ever somebody wanted to know whether a builder's measure was right, they could take it there because that is the actual standard of what a yard is. We don't have that for identity. Each of you will have a different experience of me, just as I will have different experiences of you, from your family and so on.

We have opinions, we don't have facts and the thing about an opinion is that it is situational, it is connective.

So practicing *Vajrasattva* is to purify the sense of inherent self-nature, and to recognise the luminosity of one's own form, at the end of which one recognises that all the forms that one sees also have the nature of *Vajrasattva*. There is no solid self-substance anywhere. That's an amazing thing. Of course, don't walk in front of cars. If you get hit by a car and you are lying in a pool of blood, the blood will be shape and colour. We will call it blood. If you were in a country where there were hungry street dogs, one of the dogs would come up very quickly and start to lick the blood because they would have the association, "food!". If your mother came and saw you lying in the street with blood oozing out of your skull and a dog licking that blood, she would probably kick the dog. "My lovely child, my lovely child!". But the dog's thinking, "leave me alone I'm just having my breakfast!". If you get too caught up in your own socio-political culture, gender-based set of assumptions, your reading of the world will seem to be strongly real. Creatures from different dimensions will experience the same event in very different ways. Looking again and again, see whether you can find anything that appears to be truly real, truly self existing. This is a major practice, check out everything. Check out electricity, gas, motor cars, see how they are constructed, see how these things are delivered. We have gas in our homes, 200 years ago you didn't have that. There was an engineering development which allowed the provision of domestic gas. Then about whatever it was, 20 years ago we had a shift towards North Sea gas, at which point engineers came around and changed the gas things of everyone's house in Britain, do you remember? Because we had a different kind of gas. So, you had gas, but you had coal gas. Coal gas stopped and you have North Sea gas. "But gas is just gas", no it isn't! It develops according to historical political factors. When the North Sea gas runs out, we will have to get something else. We take it for granted. Taking for granted means stupid, and yet you have to take things for granted. So how to take things for granted, without taking them for granted? That is to say, how to know when the post office closes without assuming in a solid way there is a real post office and everything that happens there is solid and real. That is to say form and emptiness are inseparable, some of the forms of this world are very random in their manifestation, some are very predictable. Predictability does not mean inherent self-nature. Because the post office always closes at five, it doesn't make the post office real. This is a conventional structure due to causes and conditions. In some other countries the post offices won't close at five o'clock because they will have a different cultural way of doing that kind of business. So, the general preliminary for practicing the *Vajrasattva* practice is to examine for yourself all the things that you believe to be strongly real. Because if you think yesterday

when we did the *karma* of these 4 stages of *karma*: the first is things truly exist, then you have the intention towards them, then you have the action, then you have the approval of the action. The most important is the first one. If you understand that everything is empty, it will instantly remove the *karma*. The traditional Tibetan example of this is a tree. If you cut the main root of a tree, the tree will die, or, you could pluck off the leaves, or break the small branches or cut through the trunk. But even if you cut through the trunk of the tree, next spring little green sprouts are likely to come but if you really cut the main root, it's likely to die. Cutting the root of *samsara* is to recognize emptiness. Of course, you can try to improve your behaviour, you can make a commitment to be a better person, you can be more careful in how you behave. This is like plucking the leaves off a tree but the essential work is to cut the root and to understand emptiness. This is the real meaning of the *Dorje Sempa* practice.

Guru Yoga

So the last part of the traditional preliminaries is translated usually as *Guru Yoga* (Tib. *lamé naljor*). The Tibetan word for yoga is *naljor*, *nal* means relaxed or ease, and *jor* means to join. So it means something like “hang loose, just take it easy”, which is not the normal connotation of yoga. Of course, the function of yoga is essentially to get to the last *asana*, which is the corpse *asana*¹⁶, so that the body can be completely relaxed and free of tension. And when the body is free of tension, the mind is free of tension. So, *Guru Yoga* means that hopefully the guru is not too uptight, and if you hang out with the guru, you will be less uptight. That's essentially what it means. *Guru* means somebody who embodies the presence of the *dharma*, embodies the presence particularly of the three *kayas*. That is to say, their minds should be a bit relaxed and open, ideally fully integrated in the *Dharmakaya*, but at least some connection with the *Dharmakaya*. Their speech should be free and easy and connective, it shouldn't be dogmatic, it should be able to make various turns in order to fit the lived situations of people. And the body should be there in the service of others, not dominating situations, but trying to work with situations, in particular trying to help people get back on their own feet. Now of course, in the practice of *dharma*, devotion is very important and the nature of devotion is that it is a forward tilting thing. You know if you are devoted to something, you are *for it*, so in a sense devotion can be off balance which is why it's very important that a teacher should not be off balance. Because the teacher needs to work with the off balance of the

¹⁶ James here is referring to the corpse lying down posture, traditionally named *shavasana* (Skt. *śavāsana*).

positive projection, or the transference, of the student without also getting off balance. And through being off balance you get to rebalance; that's the essential thing. Devotion without a meditation practice is probably not very helpful because it's essentially a projective function in which we say "this is wonderful, this is wonderful". For example, every now and then in magazines like *'Woman's Own'*, you get articles about people, usually women, who have devoted their life to collecting artefacts connected with Queen Elizabeth the second. They have plates, they have mugs, they have commemorative vases of all kinds, they have stack of magazines and books, and they know everything about Queen Elizabeth. They know her birthday, the names of all her aunts and so on. They have great devotion to Her Majesty the Queen. The benefit of this is: it gives them something to do between birth and death. They will not themselves become Queen Elizabeth the second. Should they, on the basis of all their thoughts and reflections on Queen Elizabeth the second, imagine that they are indeed now Queen Elizabeth the Second, they are likely to be sectioned. In tantra it's not quite the same. You may have in your house many books on *Padmasambhava*, you may have statues of *Padmasambhava* and you may say, privately, or with a few discreet friends, "I am *Padmasambhava*" and they may say, I am glad your practice is working well, you won't be sectioned. Because you can become *Padmasambhava*. You can't become the queen because the queen exists as an entity, protected by all sorts of state legislation and she has bodyguards and so on. *Padmasambhava* is not like that. Although you can see him in some of the mandalas which many doorkeepers to the mandala, and gings, and all kinds of fierce people all around him, these are not really bodyguards. He says "come, come, come"; there is always a welcome from *Padmasambhava*. So, identification with the deity and identification with the teacher go in the same direction. Devotion needs to have a practice, though. If you think the teacher has some particular qualities, the important thing is to use that for yourself. Praising people and thinking that they are very nice is okay, but it is very low level activity. For example, if you go to a Tibetan monastery, they will have prayer wheels, you can walk around and turn the prayer wheels. Now that's very nice, but it's nothing very much either. What will change you is meditation, sitting with your mind, observing how your mind functions, and working with it as it knots itself, unknotting it; knots itself, unknotting it. It's a dynamic interaction. In the same way, working with a teacher means: remembering what they say, thinking about what is said, and then applying it. This is these three traditional aspects of *listening, reflecting and meditating*. First of all, you have to listen, and make sure you understand clearly, then you have to reflect on it and see if any questions arise and gain a certainty, "I know what to do, and not only that I know why I'm going to do it. I'm not going to do it just because some famous person or powerful person has said I should do it. I am going to do it because I can see the rationale to it, I can see how this relates to my lived experience". And then we do the practice.

So *Guru Yoga* is a way of saying: “I can see that the teachings of the *dharma* exist dynamically in the world now”. In some traditions it is regarded as a very great downfall if you were to say I am enlightened. That would be seen as a mark of pride and it would be seen also as a breach of fundamental vows because you would be misleading other people. In the Tibetan tradition, nobody is going to say that they are enlightened. I never heard any Lama say they were enlightened, and I don’t think any Lama ever would say they were enlightened. What is important is that the student is able to believe that the teacher has the qualities that are necessary. You could call this a *placebo effect*. Small children need to believe that their mother knows the answer to everything. “Mum, what’s this, mum, mum?”. That’s what children do all the time and mum has to somehow be there. Of course, mum has her anxieties, her difficulties, her worries, but in relation to the child, it is very important that she is a reliable presence. Because the child is making use of the mum, but the woman who is the mum is not just the mum. It’s very important though not to become too disruptive, that is to say, when teenagers start to become very suspicious of their parents, that brings about a fundamental rupture in the cocoon of safety woven in the idealizing fantasy about the parents which is preparing them to move on into later life. But the first period of life, the first ten, twelve years, for it to go well, generally requires a really heartfelt belief that mum in particular is great, that mum will provide everything. In the same way, devotion to the teacher is designed to create a mood, “all will be well, and all manner of things will be well”, that is to say, everything is okay that’s the link to *Kuntuzangpo*, “the always good”, everything is okay. It doesn’t feel okay, it feels very difficult. But we do the prayers, we say the practice and we become more peaceful. So *Guru Yoga* is the unification of one’s own nature with the teacher, with the lineage and this can be done in various ways. You might for example visualise the teacher in the form of *Padmasambhava*, and then you might recite the lineage prayer of all the lamas from the time of *Padmasambhava* down to the time of your own teacher. In which case you see your teacher as a representative of *Padmasambhava*, through this historical chain. Or you might pray to your teacher directly as *Padmasambhava* in the form of *Padmasambhava*. Or you might pray to your teacher in their ordinary form. The key thing is to pitch it at the level of your own faith. When you visualize the teacher in their ordinary form, you are seeing form and emptiness. The function of the teacher is to manifest the sense of form and emptiness. You yourselves, are form and emptiness. The unification with the deity or the teacher is about awakening directly to that experience of form and emptiness, that’s what it’s for. Because the ease or relaxation, that’s in that Tibetan word for *yoga*, comes about when you have a sense of yourself as being indestructible.

When I was a child, one of my best friends called Jackie, his dad had, when he was young, been driving a motor-cycle over a hump back bridge and he had an accident and lost his leg. And when I used to go and visit Jacky's dad, he'd be sitting on the sofa with his metal leg beside him. And his dad told me how he had found a way to make his disability work for him. There was a company that made socks, they may still make them, called *H.J. Indestructible Socks* and they guaranteed that if the pair of socks that you'd bought wore out within six months, they would replace it. Now his metal leg was very hard wearing on socks, so he was always wearing a hole in his socks within six months and always got free socks. There you go! He was very proud of that, he didn't bother about not having a leg, he was living in the world as it was! And indestructible is very important, because then you don't worry about it.

Now *vajra* is indestructible in a different way from these socks. *Vajra* means it will not be harmed. In our face we have these little water bubble eyes, they can be harmed very easily, this little bone box around our head also is damaged very easily, bodies get sick from the inside, with cancers, failures of vital organs, blood clots and so on, they get damaged from outside through accidents of various kinds. This body is very destructible. But the nature of the body as form and emptiness, the luminosity, the natural radiance of the body is indestructible. The body manifests out of emptiness, and will go back into emptiness at the time of death. And it is always in emptiness, it's not like when you go on holiday you leave Britain and you go to another country. When you enter the state of emptiness you are already in emptiness. You know, we are part of the European Union, so when we cross the channel, we enter Europe from Europe. Of course, we don't really believe that at all do we? "Britain is Britain!". But actually, we are Europe. So it's like that. Europe goes to Europe, you are in emptiness and you do the practice so you become more aware of the emptiness that you are in, so when you do the meditation practice, in *Guru Yoga* you recite the prayers, you visualise the teacher in the form, say of *Padmasambhava*, and at the end of the practice, this form is on the top of your head, you are imagining this body as made of light and all these representations that we see we should visualize them as completely translucent, a bit like a stained glass window. The light is just passing through them, they have no internal self-substance. Here is *Padmasambhava* on the crown of our head, and he is dissolving in light, turning in like a ball until it's a small ball about this size of rainbow coloured light and we imagine it coming down through the crown of our head into our heart. But our body is already full of light, it's full of light because we have been doing the *Dorje Sempa* practice. But also, while you are praying in the *Guru Yoga* practice, as you pray to *Padmasambhava*, you imagine that rays of light are flowing from his forehead, his throat and his heart into you, purifying all the obscurations of the body, obscurations of speech, obscurations of mind so that

gradually your body is full of rainbow coloured light, white light, and red light, then blue light and then the light of the yellow and green as well, which means the five wisdom light is completely pervading your body. So, when this ball of *Padmasambhava* comes down into your heart, it's a ball of light within a body of light. Then your body collapses, and very gently turns in and merges into that ball of light. Now there is only one ball of light, you have no other focus of attention, nothing else in the universe exists, your attention is completely in that and the ball gets smaller, and smaller, and smaller, and smaller, until it vanishes. Then there is nothing, all your attention, all your presence is just nothing, you have no body, there is no self, there is no other, there is just emptiness; and you rest very gently in that state. And then gradually thoughts, feelings and sensations start to arise. Where do they come from? Only from emptiness, there is nothing but emptiness. In that moment the whole world is transformed because you see there is only the radiance of emptiness. In the state of just emptiness itself, the mind and emptiness are inseparable. This is called *rigpa* (Tib.) or awareness, and *tongpa* (Tib.), emptiness, joined together. Then the manifestation starts of the thoughts and feelings and they are coming and going, they have no internal substance and you see them just as the energetic flow of the mind, this is called *tsal tong* (Tib.), or clarity and emptiness. And then at the end of the meditation, you get up with your body and you move around in the room, make a cup of tea or whatever, this is appearance and emptiness, *nang tong*, and you continue in this way, everything is empty, everything is light. All the sounds that you hear are the sounds of the Guru's voice, or the sound of mantra, sound and emptiness. All thoughts that you have, memories, hopes, fears, this is the mind of *Padmasambhava*. So, you don't need to do anything with it. It's pure because it's *Padmasambhava*. Therefore, trust it. You don't have to work out what it is, "yes but how can it be like this if it's from *Padmasambhava*?!", please don't bother. If you become a detective investigating things, you are saying "I am the measure of all things", not true. You are a peanut. As a peanut you should be very small and quiet. Don't be too busy trying to make sense of things, stay relaxed and open, just trust, and if you stay in that state, it will start to show itself. Gradually the *dharma* teachings will make sense, "oh yes, it's like that". But if you step outside and you investigate, your world will just become very small again.

So that's really at the heart of what the *Guru Yoga* practice is, the word *guru* in English has taken on some very negative connotations because of various sects and movements which came up particularly in the sixties. The idea being that the *guru* is some kind of demonic human being who uses power differential to exploit other people. Of course that kind of danger always exists, power can easily lead into corruption. That's why it's important for students to learn how to use the power of the *Guru Yoga*

situation, the tantric situation in order to deconstruct power. All the power is empty and through the practice, we have access to the power. So, one has to understand: in order to keep myself safe, I project the goodness in me out. Basic Kleinian splitting¹⁷: split the good and the bad, project the bad out - so that it's safe and won't contaminate me -, or project the good out so that it's held safe somewhere else. If you are doing the *yoga* practice, we do exactly that kind of splitting. We say, at the beginning of the practice, "I am a useless person, I am wandering in *samsara*, I don't know anything, my mind is always confused, please help me. You Padmasambhava have all these qualities, you have radiance, you have enlightenment, you understand everything, I am completely stupid, you are completely wonderful". So, you are creating through this practice, a great tension, there is a kind of dramatic tension, Mr. Lost - Mr. Found. It's like a little kind of love advert in the *Guardian*, "*Mr. Lost seeks Mr. Found, Mr. Lost in search of something*". That is the separation of love. Now we need to work with that, we pray from the heart, "please save me, please save me", we say the prayers again and again, we say the mantras of *Padmasambhava*, we say the Seven Line prayer, or if you are doing it with *Tara* or *Chenrezig* then you say the appropriate mantras and prayers. They will be in the texts of your lineage. But the key thing is to have the longing, so that when you come to the end and you are doing the visualisation of the deity melting into you: this is all you want, this is all you have been longing for, this is salvation itself and, in that way, you practice non-distraction. On a general level, you can develop a capacity for non-distraction by focusing on the breath as it goes in and out, in a general *shamatha* kind of sitting, but when you do that the breath is not very interesting. When you look at something very interesting then you don't get so distracted, it's just very simple. Here the object of meditation is the one who is going to save you, that's for most of us slightly more interesting than the breath. So it's increasing a valorization, putting value into the object so that the object has the power to hold our attention, and then when the object and the subject, self and other which is the primordial basic entry into *samsara*, the splitting of subject and object, when these are now held together in this radiant tension because all you want is to have the blessing and the fulfillment of this deity, nothing else matters, then these two come together, the two become one and the one becomes nothing. And then from that state of nothing, there comes one, there comes two, there comes everything. And so, you have in that practice, the birth of the world, the recreation of the universe, except that instead of being

¹⁷ James here is referring Melanie Klein's splitting: "the ego is incapable of splitting the object (in 'wholly good' or 'wholly bad', as an infant does) — internal or external — without a corresponding splitting taking place within the ego". For Klein and the post-Kleinian's, splitting is an *active defense* mechanism and, as of latest research, can be identified into four kinds: "a coherent split in the object (1), a coherent split in the ego (2), a fragmentation of the object (3), and a fragmentation of the ego (4)."

in a universe where you are just another punter wandering around trying to work out what it's all about, a world full of stuff that you never quite understand, now everything reveals itself as the body of *Padmasambhava*. Every sound is the sound of *Padmasambhava*, so you don't need to work out what things are. That is to say you don't need to stay in a conceptual frame of reference, you don't need to be busy working out the meaning of things, you can trust the immediacy of your energetic connection to the situation. That's the real meaning of that practice.

And we offer the merit of our practice and study together to all beings, and in particular to those suffering in Tibet.

So, we come to the end of our brief time together, the winds of our *karma* will scatter us out in the world. So, I have enjoyed myself being here once again and maybe see you again in the future.

Thank you!

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