

WISDOM AND COMPASSION

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Identity: the illusory sense of self	4
Consciousness.....	8
Being and knowing.....	9
Distinguishing awareness and consciousness.....	11
Being in the world with others	14
Identity	14
Awareness	16
Being with others	19
Protection	21
The Heart of wisdom is emptiness.....	22
'I' appears to have self-substance that continues through time	24
Here and now. There and then.....	29
Two moods that can be a problem for meditators	33
The Nature of compassion	34
We, as people, die but awareness does not.....	36
What is happiness?	37
Compassion and empty of essence.....	38
Space and spontaneity	41
Our original nature is our buddha nature	41
An endless conversation	42
Mahayana compassion is to oneself and to others	43
Dzogchen compassion is our basic goodness	44
Power used well.....	45
Including all sentient beings	47
Three aspects of ignoring that create samsara	49
The tumbling of life is within openness	51
The open welcomes all.....	51

The field of buddhism is very vast and many of the ways of understanding it offers are to do with the illusory nature of our existence. That doesn't mean that it's all an illusion and so nothing matters. Wisdom is inseparable from compassion, which is to feel the immediacy of the link we have to everything which is occurring. Compassion is not an effortful practice. It's not an artificial practice in which we struggle to become a better kind of person. Rather, by experiencing the inseparability of ourselves and others, we see directly that we are always in a movement of interaction and that what we call a 'self' is not cocooned in a bubble.

We are not isolated individuals. Our potential is revealed through our participation with other people and it's the very absence of a precisely determined, or an over-determined, sense of self which allows us to offer this free flow of compassion. The more tightly we define ourselves, the less freedom we have to respond to and participate in the world around us. Of course, when we are small, we get many different kinds of definition given to us and out of that we construct our personality, the sense of the continuity of ourselves based on the familiarity that we have with certain patterns that we repeat again and again. That can be helpful and reassuring if the patterns of our familiarity are relaxed, open, ethical and so on but often we also have internalised patterns that are full of doubt, anxiety and even self-hatred, in which we have become alienated from ourselves in terms of our potential. Very often these patterns were given to us many years ago and when we look around, we can see that there are many people who don't have these same beliefs about how life is. Nonetheless, we cling to these patterns and identify with them as if they are who we are.

The function of meditation is to open a space in which we can see the contingent nature of the building blocks out of which we construct our familiar sense of self. It's not that we are attempting to radically transform our personality. It is more about not taking it so seriously. If we are kind to ourselves, if we hold ourselves lightly, then we can start to hold other people lightly, which means we don't get pulled into their story lines. Having more room to manoeuvre, we can start to participate in the rising crest of the wave of potential. That is to say, new formations are always coming into being but a lot of the newness, the freshness, the unformed-ness of the emerging moment is hidden from us because of the projections of our habitual interpretation.

Our expectations of how things will be lead us to actively look for any signs that confirm our expectation and as a parallel move, to edit out the relevance of information that would put our expectations into question. Buddhist practice is very concerned with the immediacy of experience. Of course, there are many, many aspects of the tradition which describe particular kinds of constructs: of the nature of enlightenment, of buddhist pure lands and so on. These are methods of helping us prise our awareness and our attention from the foreclosure of our everyday expectations.

That is the key point: all the building blocks of our identity are transient. There is no substance to them. That doesn't mean that they are meaningless. It means that moment by moment, we live in an emergent gestural field, that we are moving in a world which is moving. There is no stability.

The fantasy of stability becomes persecutory because we start to think we should be 'sorted'. The years go by and we think we should have worked out who we are and what life is all about and how we should be with other people. We give ourselves to particular readings or identifications of situations. We inhabit that bubble for a while and then the bubble pops—and along comes another bubble—and another bubble—and another bubble. We have bubbles of hope and we have bubbles of disappointment. You can be hopeful for many years and then you can be depressed for many years and then you can be something else for many years. Each is like a particular room. It has a colour. It has furniture. It has a mood and you inhabit that mood and you think, *"Well, this is it. Can't get out of it. No doors. No windows."* You make the best of it. Sometimes it feels good. Sometimes it doesn't feel so good. The key thing there is not the nature of the room you're in but the fact that you are experiencing rooms.

We tend to be very object-fixated. We try to make sense of ourselves by talking about ourselves. Either we're thinking about our situation or we're describing things about ourselves to other people. That creates a triangulation because you have the immediacy of your experience; you have the qualities of what you take it to be; and you have your interpretation of it. The interpretation is a culturally derived set of story lines. Whatever stories we tell about ourselves, we can be sure some other people are

telling fairly similar stories about themselves because we have a lot of similarities as human beings.

What is ignored in that is the very nature of the experiencer. There is a presence which is continuous and it is continuous because it has no content. This is not how we normally think about ourselves. Normally we experience ourselves as an engaged consciousness. We know the things we like and don't like and we bring that furniture in to the room of our experience. That is to say, we are already filled with ourselves when we meet the world. We meet the world out of our particular shaping or construct but if we look back over the years, this furniture, or our set of structures, has undergone quite a lot of modification. The beliefs that we had when we were fifteen are probably not the beliefs that we have now. The kinds of things that we do now, the clothes we wear, the people we talk to, the things we talk about, will have changed many times in the course of our lives. So what constitutes 'me' and feels like 'me' is a content of experience. It is not the experiencer itself.

When I talk of my 'self' I'm talking about what is inside me. At the moment I am holding a glass and I can say that the glass has water in it. The glass can be filled with many other things. The potential of the glass is the fact that as an empty glass, it offers hospitality to many other contents. This lack of definition allows the glass to be useful. If somebody had put petrol in it, for example, every time you went near it to take a drink, you'd think, "*Whoa! That smells bad!*" because the trace of petrol lasts a long time. So, the more the glass is carrying its history, the fewer possibilities we would have with it. It's a similar situation for ourselves.

IDENTITY: THE ILLUSORY SENSE OF SELF

These traces of our past events are called *vasana* in Sanskrit, subtle traces that linger from previous events or karmic traces. Whatever we want to call them—habitual patterns or unresolved neurotic schemas—they bring particular orientations or taints to the freshness of each new moment. Because a certain flavour is hovering around the glass, there are many things that you wouldn't want to put in the glass. It wouldn't make sense to put a fine wine into a glass that smells of petrol. In that way, the more we identify with the patterns derived from the accidents of our history—the fact that we went to a particular school, had particular kinds of teachers who

encouraged or didn't encourage us—the more we maintain the shaping influence of the past. The somewhat random trajectory of our life which can often seem orderly in retrospect, but at the moment when you're in it, you haven't really got a clue about what's going on. We're just blown hither and thither by the random nature of events.

The traces of all of these impinging moments give us particular kinds of anxieties, particular kinds of avoidance, particular kinds of desires. The busyness of pursuing these particular patterns distracts us from asking, *“Who is the one who's experiencing this? Who is the actual subject?”* That is to say, *“Who am I?”* Moreover, what is the nature of our awareness since the world only exists for us because we are aware. If we don't register events they are not there for us. For example, you can be out walking with a friend and they say, *“Oh, Look! There's a woodpecker on that branch.”* You look and suddenly you see that there's a bird. You had seen it but not seen it. When the bird is pointed out to you, you incorporate it into your world. Prior to your friend's comment the bird was in the field of your potential experience yet invisible because you weren't attending to it. That is to say, the particularity of our world is what we actually attend to. We're all very familiar with that. When we go clothes shopping our eye is taken to certain garments, certain colours and shapes. Many things you see look nice but you couldn't imagine wearing them. That has to do with the particular topology you have of your body, the contouring and shaping of your sense of self based on your own history. We can't dissolve that into 'year zero' and begin again.

The function of meditation is to have some space within which these particular shapes are allowed as they are without being over-invested as being the truth about ourselves. If we are over-identified with the traces of our history we are very vulnerable. Any construct can be bumped into by new events and then we may feel gutted, disorientated, torn apart... because in fact all constructs are fragile.

Everything which exists is held dynamically in place by the meeting of many different factors. There is not one single entity which 'exists' in and of itself. We know this about ourselves. We have a body. Inside our body there are vulnerable organs prone to blood-clotting. There may be cancerous formations. There may be wear and tear on the spinal column. There are multiple ways in which this beloved body can gradually fade and collapse as well as many sudden ways it can suddenly go 'pop.' So

although we talk of 'my body' and it feels so familiar to us, it's not a possession that we can necessarily take good care of—because, how will we take good care of it? On these cold mornings is it good to go out jogging or not? Some people say that red wine is good for us, others say the opposite. Likewise with coffee. Actually, we don't know. Some people have a long life even though they live in a crazy way and other people have a short life although they eat very healthily. That might indicate that something else is going on. In that sense, we are moving in a field of interactive vectors, of pulsations which generate our existence. My existence is something I experience rather than something that I have. However the language that we use in talking about our self, is to talk of it as if it were a possession. There are plenty of nice people who have very sick bodies. To draw correlations between ethics and physical health can be experienced as very punitive. Perhaps it is better seen as our luck or fortune. In Buddhism this is spoken of in terms of karma or activity: how our body is in this life is an indication of our behaviour in previous lives. We participate in an emergent field over which we have some influence.

'Influence' is an important word because it's about fluidity. It's about a movement into an evolving field. We don't have control; we're not actually in charge. We are not out of control either, but neither are we in control. This is the middle way, which is being part of what is going on. We are always in the world and however the world is, it is influencing us. We participate, and as we do so we are both influencing events and being influenced by them.

What we take to be self and what we take to be other, are two moments which are always occurring at the same time. You cannot 'just be by yourself' because even if you close your eyes and put your fingers in your ears and cut yourself off, you still have to keep breathing. If you block your breath, you'll die. This is a basic fact. We are part of the world. The world comes into us with the in-breath and we go out in to the world with the outbreath. This is going on all the time. So although we talk about '*I, me, myself*', it's a bit phony. It's not really how it is. Our being is dependent on access to the environment. To have trouble breathing can be frightening and seeing somebody struggling for breath is horrible. They are being cut off from what they need and what they need is something which is other than them. They need the breath of the world to come into them.

We need the sounds of the world to come into our ears. We need the light of the world to come into our eyes. This is what replenishes us. Our movement into the world, through the world, is a movement of responsiveness. In buddhism this is taken to be a basic given. There is no inherent self-nature in a person. There is no fixed internal definition that tells us who we are since our identity is contingent. It is adventitious. It comes to us through the interactions that have been there right from the moment of conception. The development of the foetus in the womb could be a source of joy or of anxiety. The baby could be coming out into a warm, prepared, receptive environment or somewhere quite scary and difficult. All kinds of things happen to us. When you're small, you have no power at all. You're completely at the mercy of what's going on in the field. Gradually we build up more sense of separation and identity and we want to be self-defining. We struggle with our parents and siblings to 'get our space' and do things our own way but mostly we're constrained by what's going around. The world is always offering us particular kinds of deals and we have to engage with these.

This is a way of saying that identity is participative. It's determined by our potential which is arising in the moment. Each specific instance of our potential is never our entire potential since each aspect is constellated in each situation and is textured by the particular shaping of the environment at this particular moment. Doors open and doors close. Sometimes when a door is wide open in front of us, we can't move towards it. Sometimes when there's no door at all, we run straight into the wall! We may be full of enthusiasm but there's no way forward. I'm sure we've all experienced these kinds of situations.

When life goes well, it tends to be because there is harmony between what is arising for us and as us, and what is in the world. What can we do to promote that? By not having established a tight notion of what our 'proper shape' is. In other words, flexibility is health. Being flexible means, *"I will become what is fitting for me to become."* But, *"What about me as me?"* Fixed notions of ourselves interfere with our capacity to be in connection in the world. The foundational Buddhist reflections on old age, sickness, impermanence and death are not practised to terrify us but to let us see how identity is formed in relation to events.

CONSCIOUSNESS

Mental consciousness is the means by which we construct patterns of identification and develop assumptions, intentions and plans. This kind of mental clarity allows us to have an intention towards how we're going to proceed. However our mental consciousness can be a very sophisticated liar. We all have a little Public Relations Department inside us so that when things go badly our little spin doctor steps forward, *"Oh well, it wasn't too bad really because at the end of the day the show must go on."* We've got to hang in there but this involves a lot of editing, a lot of adjusting. This is the nature of consciousness. It's a very busy phenomenon. It is the organisation of our mental structure, of all the different thoughts, feelings and sensations that need to be sorted out into patterns and evaluated as helpful or unhelpful and so on. This is continuous work, going all the time.

It's not surprising that we get very tired. Some unexpected new event comes along and, *"Whew! I've had it up to here. I just don't need any more."* We are a sort of middle management; we're not the big boss; we're not the CEO; we're trying to get the people underneath us to do things but every time we delegate, the buggers do the wrong thing! You delegate a task to your memory but as you get older your memory lets you down and you forget. It all gets a little bit scary. 'It's all up to me' is the paranoid position of an individualised sense of self-identity when in fact our consciousness is constituted by a stream of thoughts, feelings and sensations. Some of these thoughts may seem directly relevant. They feel not only 'like me' but 'helpful to me'. Others can feel 'like me' because they are familiar but they are not very helpful and some other thoughts are just plain weird! All kinds of strange stuff comes to us: in sleeping dreams, in daydreams, in sudden thoughts that shoot across our mind. It's all too much to make sense of.

That is why traditional buddhist texts say that there is no end to samsara. The field of experience is too complicated, too complex, to sort out. It keeps changing. Consciousness, which has a function of organising our participation, is essentially a dynamic, interactive movement. It is a function of engagement but it's not a stable identity. So the question, *'How can I know who I am?'* is actually a false question since you cannot know who you are. You can be yourself. You can be yourself as an

emergent subjectivity, but you are never actually a thing, an object that can be known. Interacting with circumstances, we are present as ourselves however that might be.

BEING AND KNOWING

Being and knowing are not the same and especially knowing about things is not the same as a kind of 'pure knowing'. For example, you go out and see some snowdrops—and they're very sweet—but then you see a robin. Oh, a double whammy, snowdrops and a robin! Oh! The heart melts! It's very nice. You're looking at this gorgeous little event. In a sense you know it and so there's nothing to think about. You just look at the snowdrops. It's a sort of wonder, an awe. It's a knowing but not knowing *about*. That causes a little door to open and we have a sense of being fresh. We're replenished. We return to ourselves through these simple moments of beauty. Blackbirds singing in the evening. It's evocative, maybe of memories of childhood or other happy times but it's also evocative of a deeper and lighter sense of ourselves. We are evoked into, '*Oh! Oh!*'

That's the arena of meditation, to move from knowing *about* things towards trusting the direct meaning given to us in the spontaneous revelation of the world when we open to it. It's much easier for most of us to open to a snowdrop than to open to the sound of a tyre screeching. We retract from that. We don't want that in our field even though it is just a transient event, like the perception of the snowdrop. That's where we see that the openness of awareness is easily closed down by the particularisation of egoic judgement, when we say "*This is good and I want more of it. This is bad and I want less of it. I don't want it near me.*" How is the emergent event in its simplicity is being distorted by my self-referential interpretations of it.

Our habit of trying to get the good things and trying to avoid the bad things is considered again and again in buddhist texts. In my book *SIMPLY BEING* there are many encouragements not to try to push away bad thoughts and hanging on to good thoughts in meditation. It is as if bad thoughts are like squatters breaking into our house. We know they are going to spoil how we want it to be. By opting to prolong good thoughts we're back with gardening: flowers and weeds. Get rid of the weeds; feed the flowers. Busy, busy, always busy because seeds are blowing in the wind into

your garden even while you're asleep. Some little weed is starting to dig itself in. When we meditate we encounter all these thoughts sprouting.

Meditation involves two aspects: one is to relax into the open spaciousness of awareness itself and the other is to become aware of the incredible pull of our habit of identifying with thoughts. These thoughts seem meaningful to us.

In the field of psychotherapy it is very common to encounter people who have become reliant on negative views about themselves. They are convinced that they have something wrong with their physical form, or that they are unlovable, or that their life is meaningless and the best thing they can do is kill themselves. If your own life is not too bad you may wonder why somebody would hang on to a belief like that. They come to therapy for a couple of months and you hope and expect they will get some progress now that you have given them a description of their patterns. Another two months go by, the description of the problem still seems valid however nothing much is changing. Why do they hang on to a belief which is so awful, that restricts them and keeps them in a frightened inhibited place? That is because being frightened and inhibited feels like home. That is the domain which that person's particular structure has adapted to and therefore its familiarity has become more powerful than the bitter taste of its content. *"This is just how I am."* Why would the negative, the destructive, the awful, become home? Because anything can be home. Human beings can identify with anything no matter how seemingly awful.

We can see a softer version of the same structure in our meditation practice. We want to relax into open awareness but we fall into thoughts again and again because thoughts seem so useful. We merge with the thought. The thought seems incredibly important. It seems meaningful to go off in a daydream about something. You're sitting, you want focus your mind, relax and be open—but you're gone! Why? *"It seemed a good idea at the time."* Maybe we could all have these words carved on our gravestone! It is important to see this because there can be a danger that we use meditation to beat ourselves up if we feel we are not making much progress. Or that we give up on it and think it's not working. The attachment that has us merging with our thoughts is the root structure of samsara. This is why we're here, because of the nature of attachment. Attachment in this sense is not a conscious kind of attachment like me (subject) being attached to something (object).

This more problematic kind of attachment is the immediate merging of our consciousness with what is arising for it. Consciousness only emerges as a formation in relation to an object. The actuality of our world is nondual. There is no wall between subject and object, between the mind and the content of the mind. We can't set up a border post with a barrier that announces, *"Hey! You can't come in here"* or *"You, you're very welcome."* There are no Customs Officers checking what thoughts can come in and what can't. Thoughts, feelings and sensations are immediately here so we can't prepare in advance to control them. They occur before we knew what was happening. If you feel persecuted by your thoughts and fight to control them, then meditation is going to be very difficult for you. We need to relax out of our assumptions and attend to thoughts as they are. Only by this does it become obvious that they have no inherent existence. The reifying ego-self cannot outwit the thoughts that it itself reifies.

If you self-identify as a drinker then struggling not to drink is very hard. Why? Because you're a drinker and until that core definition of being a drinker stops, then if there's a bottle, you're going to open it. If you stop being a drinker, you can look at the bottle and think, *"Hmm, I'm not fussed. Someone else can have it."* Some space has opened up. Nothing has happened to the bottle. The object hasn't changed. The object is the object but the hook between the object and the drinker has dropped. It's the same for smokers. If you're a smoker, the packet calls to you. If you're not a smoker, the packet doesn't say anything at all. In fact, it says what it says on the label, *'This will kill you.'* But if you're a smoker, it doesn't say that at all. It says, *"Oh, that will be nice!"* That's how it happens. That's what we have to see.

It's exactly the same structure with thoughts, feelings and sensations. As long as our primary self-definition is rooted in an individual particularising consciousness, that consciousness will merge with thoughts, feelings and sensations. We will always be caught up in this interaction. Therefore, the heart of the practice is to relax out of consciousness into awareness.

DISTINGUISHING AWARENESS AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Awareness and consciousness are not the same. Awareness has no form, or shape. It doesn't come from anywhere and it doesn't go anywhere. It is uncatchable.

That's why you cannot know awareness. It's not an object for the mind, but you can *be* aware. You can relax into a state of awareness within which consciousness will be moving around. Consciousness as the individual personal subject and the experiences of consciousness as your perceptions of the world—these will be moving together and you can see them to be the energy of your experience but not as the ground of your experience. The ground of your experience is the inseparability of awareness and space. That is to say, awareness is uncatchable, ungraspable. It's not a thing, yet it's always present. That's why it can be filled with whatever is occurring and whatever is occurring is devoid of self-existence.

Consciousness, on the other hand, is always taking on particular shapes in particular moments. Suddenly you feel thirsty, suddenly you want to go for a walk, suddenly you remember, *“Oh, tomorrow it’s Monday and on Monday I have to go to the dentist.”* A moment before you might have been relaxing then suddenly the thought comes, *“Oh, did I turn off the gas?”* The body tenses, you start to get a bit preoccupied. That's consciousness at work. A thought gives consciousness a poke and consciousness runs after the thought. It's an interplay of energy. It's like a pas-de-deux. Two dancers are moving together. They are no longer two separate dancers because the choreography has linked the movement of their bodies as a communication. The consciousness that says, *“I remember what I have to do on Monday”* is two things. It's an object in the sense of being a flow of thought patterns arising in the mind, and it's also the subject in being aware that this is what you have to do on Monday. Whatever is happening, whether seemingly subject or object, is simply a transient patterning of the ungraspable energy of the mind. It is this which is misconstrued as being our existence in a world of existents.

Experience has no experiencer. Experience is the unborn clarity of awareness itself. In the traditional example awareness is said to be like a mirror. A mirror shows what is there. What is there in terms of our existence is the ceaseless movement of thinker and thought, feeler and feeling, sensor and sensation. Sometimes awareness shows what looks like a subject, sometimes what looks like an object. They chase each other like a kitten chasing its tail. This tumbling is the energy of our experience and is the way in which as patterns of energy we participate in the world with others.

When it works well this pulsation of energy is very stimulating. It is the external form of our internal active and passive movement of being the thinker *and* the thought. This energetic formation of dance and dancers needs a stage. The stage, both the external stage and the internal stage, is awareness. Awareness, because it has no form or colour or content, is the field in which all our experience is arising. It's hidden from us, not because it's secret, or high, or holy, or special; not because we are unworthy or damaged or obscured, but just because we are caught up in all this falsely reified stuff. We are so busy looking at interactions and being part of interactions, that we don't see the field within which it's happening. We take the space for granted. We take being alive for granted. What does it mean to be alive? What is this freshness of existence? The fact that experience is revealing itself moment by moment by moment.

In the dzogchen teachings we talk of three modes or three linked fields. There is the open field, which is awareness itself, which is empty and unborn. This means that it has no substance to it; it's inconceivable. You can't really describe it.

Within this, instantly, is the spontaneous revelation of the entire field of experience. Each of us sitting here has a unique world being revealed to us—our particular take. Whatever seat you've chosen to sit in, gives you through your sense organs a particular revelation of this room. Nobody else will have the same: neither perceptually nor interpretatively. Each of us is the centre of the world in this specific way. There are similarities but these are similarities established through language and concepts. The openness is this field, vibrant and changing.

Within this luminosity is the third field, which is our gestural presence in which we speak, we listen, we move, we stretch, we hear, we have thoughts and feelings. It is a responsive field. The open field of awareness is unchanging. The richness of the field of spontaneous display, called *lhundrub* (Tib. *Lhun-Grub*) in Tibetan is immediate, always changing. Within it we have the particularity of our fresh emergence, moment by moment. Each emergent patterning is specific, responsive and ungraspable yet because we're not in touch with this open arena which is our ground, we don't see the light, playful, illusory nature of what is displaying itself.

Forgetfulness of the open ground and its radiance and its responsiveness gives rise to our busy thinking by which we have to make sense of what's going on. This

busy-ness is the preoccupation by which we avoid seeing the ground of our existence. It's as straightforward as that.

BEING IN THE WORLD WITH OTHERS

IDENTITY

Imagine two sentient beings in the sea. One of them is waving their hands and shouting. If you had a rope with a big hook at the end you could throw that for them to grab and then you could pull them safely to shore. However if the other sentient being is a fish and you threw a rope with a hook at the end, it would not be so helpful because dry land is the wrong place for a fish to be. As human beings we don't do all that well in the sea; we may manage a few hours. So it is important to see what is the right environment for us and for all the sentient beings we encounter. What sort of environment does each of us need in order to flourish?

On the level of openness, the environment that supports practice is a quiet one where we are not disturbed by other people. So think about how much time you could put aside for sitting meditation practice. It doesn't have to be a huge amount of time but if you don't go into a room, close the door, sit and relax completely, meditation is going to be difficult to enter.

Modern life has us in a fairly constant low level of arousal. Many people have mobile phones with them which can interrupt their behaviour at any time. We have many demands on us and we are primed to take them seriously and to respond. This state of readiness gets in the way of relaxation. For practitioners in traditional Tibet, it was very different. It's a big, big country with not many people. There was no television, no radio, no comics, no novels, no cinema. An occasional storyteller might come to your village but most of the time there's nothing much going on. You might have a shrine room in your house or you could go to a cave and quietly meditate. Just the sound of the wind or occasional birds calling. We're not living in a world like that at all, so applying the traditional approach in our situation is problematic. In order to survive in our world we have to engage with it as it is, and the toxicity in the environment cause forth a toxicity in ourselves. We need to survive toxic states of arousal suitable to our environment without being intoxicated by the toxins.

Most of us are not very aware of the toxicity of our arousal because it has become necessary in terms of harmonising with our environment. Perverse environments require perverse behaviours. It is normal on the London Underground to stand very close to other people and ignore each other. This unusual behaviour has become normalised. Human beings are social and communicative. It is against our nature not to say something to someone we are standing close to. We use language to mediate social distance but in the Underground, we don't use language to do that. People ease themselves into a dissociative state, blocking out all the people around. People who can't do that may start to get anxious and have panic attacks when they go on the Underground. Dissociation becomes vital. You can't say to the people around you that you're feeling anxious and unwell since they are all disassociated and avoidant of contact. That is the price of survival, of getting to your work on time, if you live in London. It's toxic, it's poisonous, it's wrong but it is necessary.

Our ego-self lacks the capacity to remain relaxed and open in stressful situations. It is dialogic and reactive. However, awareness is intrinsically open. It does not have to try to relax. To access this, we simply disidentify with our habitual patterns of identification and involvement. Awareness is not our 'true self'; It is not an aspect of our personality. Rather, our personality and our self-referencing egos are frozen energy, habitual patterns of unawareness that all experience is nondual with the open empty ground. Our ground, our basis, our source, is naked open and available. As such, it needs no protection. It is the delusional ego that is vulnerable. The ego is easily hurt due to its fragility and lack of inherent existence. Yet it cannot see this and imagines that the cause of its suffering is the unreliability and selfishness of the other. It is this misperception that fuels the desire for control and dominance, as if this would bring security. What it actually brings is hyper-vigilance, uncertainty and loneliness.

As I sit here looking around the room, I see different faces. I am here, and between me and you is a space. If that space were not there, I wouldn't be able to see you. We see each other access the space of separation. This gives us the chance to manoeuvre ourselves to get closer or further away from others. We can mediate our interpersonal distance in this way. This is how the ego is kept aroused in active engagement with the environment. Awareness is different. It is open and intimate yet unengaged, like a mirror. With a mirror the reflection comes into the mirror. It's

immediate, direct and unmediated by any conceptual apparatus. This is the same with the basic openness of awareness; it neither has nor needs any protection because it is indestructible. Awareness is like space; it doesn't have a material basis.

AWARENESS

Awareness itself is indestructible. In Sanskrit it is referred to as *vajra*, meaning indestructible, diamond, adamant. There's a story that the first *vajra* formation came with the Hindu god, Indra, who meditated for a very long time and completely calmed his anger so that no matter what provocation was offered to him, he didn't respond. Thus he became imperturbable, unruffled and was said to be *vajra*. This story is helpful for meditators because it's a good litmus test of the stability of your meditation. If you're in the domain of reactivity, you're in the domain of consciousness.

When you are very relaxed and spacious you can see experiences arising and passing yet with reactive involvement in the various forms that occur. The field of experiences is arising and we are present within it as an interactive pattern of experience. The pure presence of awareness is not a graspable activity. It is empty of self-defining content and so is invulnerable. This is very important. When present in uncontrived openness you don't have to edit your experience. Whatever comes, whether seemingly good or bad, if we are alive in unborn openness, these forms are clearly inherently empty of defining content and their 'existence' is merely a name put by transient mental activity.

Wisdom means to see the emptiness of every occurrence while compassion is hospitality to everything that occurs. If you experience a stream of negative thoughts, self-hating thoughts or cruel thoughts you can welcome them by offering them the space of emptiness. They are just thoughts. They are not going to harm your open empty essence. They are transient illusory forms that fill the space and then vanish. If they are allowed to just come and go while you remain relaxed and open, they will leave no trace just as reflections leave no trace in the mirror. As you know, if you make a mark on a piece of paper with a pen, or a pencil or a paintbrush, there is a trace and the trace stays on the paper. In fact it can be quite difficult to get it out of the paper without disturbing the paper. You might remember being back in school and rubbing

out your mistakes with a rubber. You rub and you rub and now you've made a hole on the page! That's what happens isn't it? So when you try to rub bad bits out of yourself, the self that you're trying to erase the bad bits from is also getting marked.

Awareness itself is not marked. Consciousness is marked. It is very important to note this difference because on the level of consciousness we need to be very, very tender with ourselves since we mark so easily.

We carry the marks of past events and they hold the patterns that we bring forward. Too much pain is not good. It makes us anxious and fearful and turn away from life. When you find yourself getting caught up in your thought patterns, don't enter into judgment and the thought will vanish. Everything that occurs will vanish since all the contents of the mind are transient.

Transient occurrences are not a reliable basis for establishing a fixed identity but neither are they dangerous if we allow them to be in that transient flow. If you let all movement pass through then there is no trace. It is when you resist what is happening that you get a reaction. It's like rolling with a punch. When you catch a cricket ball or a rugby ball, you catch it by moving with the ball because if you block it in a static catch then you'll feel the full force. That is very painful and you're likely to drop the ball. If you allow that movement it passes through.

If you relax in unborn openness and offer spacious hospitality to all occurrence you will not be harmed because in that nondual state there is no one to be harmed. However this does not function on the level of egoic participation in the world. As a person in the world, if you give a lot of space to others you may well get exploited. If you open up your space, someone else may come and inhabit it. If you don't set any limits, you may get taken for a ride. All parents face having to set limits for their children. Most parents recognise that it is not good for them and it's not good for the child if they don't set limits. Limits are helpful because reified energetic forms have an impact when they encounter other reified forms. This impact is the basis of karmic accumulation.

When integrating the meditative state with being in the world after meditation you have to maintain the non-duality of the open field and the arisings. Openness is unguarded, unprotected, tolerant of whatever is occurring, for all occurrences are

equal in that they are simply movements in the field. If the meditative state is lost then self and other will seem to be real and inherently different. In this case, you have to be mindful of the pull towards reactivity. Mindfulness of transience loosens the grip of reification and so arousal declines so that the inherent emptiness of the mind is revealed.

The mirror and the reflection are inseparable. The mirror doesn't need to interfere with the reflection in order to be safe. Naked unborn awareness is itself open as is all that is revealed in that openness. Openness is not something you can catch. When you look at a mirror you cannot catch the mirror; what you seem to catch are the reflections. The presence of the reflection lets you come to the conclusion that it is a mirror. If you look at the wall, you don't get a reflection of your face. You look at the curtains and you don't get a reflection. You see the wall, you see the curtains, but you cannot see the mirror itself. The mirror reveals itself through its function of showing reflections. The mirror-ness of the mirror is ungraspable because it is empty of self-content. Our mind also is empty of self-content and it is because of this that I can show an endless stream of thoughts, feelings, memories and so on. The mirror is shown by its reflection.

The nature of awareness is shown by what it reveals. The content of the mind is not showing what the mind itself is like. The reflection in a mirror doesn't show what the mirror itself is like. Our mind offers unlimited yet non-defining content. A mirror can show many different non-defining reflections. Each time it shows a reflection we think, *'That is a bus!', or 'That is a person!' or 'Gosh, my nose is a bit odd!'* Likewise a content arises in our mind and we think, *"He's got one of these new mobiles I want", or "I'd like a handbag like hers" or "Oops, I wish I hadn't said that."* In that moment there's a sense that how I show myself reveals myself as I am: that I can be defined by the current content of my experience.

This is such an essential point for meditation. The self that is shown in a social interaction—through a slip of the tongue, an inadvertent disclosure of a secret or whatever—is the ego-self. An energy formation, a temporary pattern, a construct. It is not our true nature. It is not who we are, but when we take these transient images to be ourselves as if we were something, the very intensity of that grasping creates an over-identification and then it is as if we are a knowable entity.

So the key point is that '*I am open. I, the source, the ground nature of who I am, the ground of my being, is not a thing.*' That's quite remarkable—to not be 'a thing' yet to manifest in the field of manifestations, just as the empty mirror allows many reflections appear.

BEING WITH OTHERS

In terms of our being in the world with others, we have to remember how supported we are by our Dharma study and practice. We need to maintain relative truth compassion of helping those wandering in samsara. If we increase our capacity for intuitive spontaneity we need to maintain our relaxed openness while being careful in our interactions with others since other people get hurt easily due to their dualistic frame of reference. We don't want to abuse them or create trouble for them. We have to attune to others as they are in their habitual patterning. Life is better for others and for ourselves when we show finesse, when we can fine-tune how we manifest. If we are self-preoccupied it may be difficult to feel in touch with others.

However if we remain relaxed and in contact, we can co-emerge with this specific presenting state of the other. With this, our freshness in the moment invites them to be fresh, too. We don't need to know what to say in advance but if we're fully present here and now, the words will come. This is the gift of uninterrupted spontaneity of the nondual field. Subject and object are not too different planets. By opening to the face of the other, we will come into being in a way that fits the other. That is something quite remarkable.

This level, is referred to as *lhundrub* (*Tib. lHun Grub*). *Lhun* means 'a heap' and *Drup* means accomplished, hence 'accomplished in a heap' all at once. It means the whole is spontaneously here. For example, in this room everyone is here as they are, some slumping, some alert, some distracted, bored, some looking a bit tired... All kinds of pulsations going on. This is what we're sharing and inside this some gestures are possible and some aren't.

Will we lose ourselves by tuning into others? This is a central question because as long as we have an individualised sense of self with our own particularities, then there are going to be things that we feel we need to have and things we feel we need to not have in order to feel okay. The idea of the idea of ourself as a noble entity can

blind us to the patterns all around us. If we start from the position that I am real and you are real and the differences between us are real and defining, then this dualising of the field of emergence is likely to lead to a fixation on the eight worldly concerns. These are: hope for pleasure and fear of pain; hope for gain and fear of loss; hope for praise and fear of blame; hope for good reputation and fear of bad reputation. These attitudes are pervasive in human cultures, and so not only do we have to release ourselves from our own tendencies but we have to practise equanimity in the face of the provocations arising from the attitudes and behaviours of others.

By releasing ourselves from fusion with group identities, we can still fulfil our social roles and obligations—but in the manner of a dream. We have to see that our behaviour does not define us since there is no fixed self to define. And the same applies to other: no reifying, no judging. Simply ungraspable patterns meeting and parting. All of us belong to the emergent field. This truth is quite challenging because we have received a lot of messages about being true to ourselves, being our own person, dancing to our own drum. It can seem obvious that life is a matter of, *“Be yourself, do it your way...”* Of course there are costs to that but, *“at least I've been true to myself.”* This is very, very far from a buddhist understanding.

Being with other people is not about how we can pull them into our way of thinking and get them to go along with what we want to do. Such tedious management skills become all-pervasive and are essentially a politics of brutality based on a contempt and a lack of respect for others. We follow the middle way, seeking to benefit all without bias and without exception. The focus is not on what they want or what we want but on the practise of relaxed openness, which frees us to respond as required by the actual patterning of the emergent situation. By staying relaxed and open we find ourselves abiding in the integrity of the ground openness, the field of clarity and our non-self-referential responsivity within the field.

What is fundamentally important is to stay connected in the world, because we have only these three things: openness, the field of our experience; and how we integrate into it. That is all we have. Moment by moment through our lives, that is all that is ever going on, whether you're in school, in your work, in bed with your lover, wherever you are, you've just got your presence in a situation. To feel open, to feel no

need to protect oneself, is a delicious feeling. That quality of aliveness can become more constant in our lives by not protecting ourselves against the world.

PROTECTION

Who is the one who is vulnerable and needs protection? Awareness, the intrinsic illuminative power of the mind, doesn't need protection. Although all the shapes that we experience are inseparable from emptiness and lack all self-substance, our deluding ego-self claims certain patterns as its own and regards all the remaining patterns as 'other'. The patterns I claim to be 'my shape' certainly need protection since it is the very nature of such patterns to be impermanent. 'My shape' does not belong to me and it is not inherent in my sense of self. Rather, it is composed by selecting elements already in the field of experience and then claiming exclusive rights to them. But of course, such claims have little power—if you shoot me, my pattern will start to decompose. Our shape is always a shape already in the world.

People worry about identity theft and cybercrime. Well of course, if you transact with your bank across the internet, why wouldn't people access that information and steal from you? You've put it out there. Why would you trust that 'out there' is okay? The idea that you can have a private space in a public sphere does not hold up. All private spaces are niched within the open public unknowable space—the space of the earth free of the contingent discourse of lawyers. The ego-self is a similarly merely conventional imposition upon the unknowable open space of the dharmadhatu—the space within which all phenomena appear. Isolating, defining, ring-fencing, owning—these are all moves occurring within the deluding discourse of duality. All that is taken to be separate, existent, ownable, is in fact inseparable from the unborn open ground source. If this is seen, then all the names, the hierarchies of value, the attributions of specialness, are revealed as merely the ego's playtime. All that seems to be established is inherently unestablishable. All entities are merely names put by the mind.

Relaxing one's identification with specific forms as being 'oneself' allows us to access the ever-fresh potential out of which each moment arises. Then we see that we have the infinite protection of being grounded in the indestructible source, of

being inseparable from the potential of the radiant field, and of being the responsive connectivity that is love itself.

In acknowledging and experiencing the unique specificity of our world—the actual contouring of our life moment by moment—we can feel the growing edge of how we are with the world. The actual pulsating interface is not conceptual; it is direct for we are co-emergent with the environment. This points to the importance of relaxing out of our reliance on concepts and opening ourselves to the freshly revealing richness of the world as revealed through our senses.

THE HEART OF WISDOM IS EMPTINESS

From the mahayana point of view, the heart of wisdom is emptiness. Mahayana means 'great vehicle' and this term is used because it describes an approach to dharma that is inclusive. It means that all sentient beings are included in our practice, no matter what kind of practice we do. We are not trying to get enlightenment or liberation just for ourselves but for all sentient beings of whatever kind.

If you get something just for yourself you may gain this marvelous possession but you also have a little bit of worry. For example, when I was coming here by car we passed through some wealthy-looking suburbs. As the suburbs began to look more and more wealthy the fences got higher and higher and more and more the houses had alarm systems. If you've got something, you can lose it. In the same way, if you get enlightened but there are still all these miserable creatures wandering around causing trouble, then who wants that? So, unless you are prepared to live in a kind of buddha gated community, keeping out the rabble, it's best to take everyone with you when you get enlightened. That's the general view of the mahayana. This is both altruistic and pragmatic.

The generosity of spirit or compassion or love or altruism is grounded in the idea that there is enough to go around. The openness of awareness is not in opposition to the specificity and precision of our manifesting in our environment moment by moment. Resting in our ever-open ground, we manifest without taking the patterns of our manifesting to be our self, our true identity, who we are. All our arising forms signal not that we are discrete entities, but that we are ever-shifting patternings of

unborn potential in play with other such patternings. This is the emergent field free of duality within itself and non-dual with the ground.

When we live in a world where the resources that we need to maintain our sense of self are perceived to be finite, then we're immediately in competition for ownership; the more *you* get then the less there is available for *me* to get. Yet when we see that the basic field of experience is infinite, we see that there is enough for everyone.

The concept of emptiness may seem rather daunting or abstract whereas in fact it is extremely practical. We have already been looking at the impermanence of phenomena and we no longer are how many of the identities we have been in our lives. Identities that we once held, that we were completely committed to, somehow have washed out of us. They have vanished from our repertoire. They may be physical things, like climbing trees or wanting to go out on your scooter. They may be ideas we were once committed to yet now are indifferent towards. They no longer have 'pulling power' for us. Everything, which comes into existence, passes out of existence. There are no enduring phenomena in the world. Houses are built and fall down. Economies grow and shrink. People grow from children into being powerful adults and then, if we are fortunate, we become old and frail until eventually we die. No matter how much we may cling to something, to anything, we have no ability to make it last forever.

Our attachments are always contextual and how we experience both ourselves and our content are ever-shifting. The things that we relate to tend to be a means to an end. We make use of something at a certain period in our life—and then not. The toys of our childhood have lost their magic. In our present circumstances, our body, voice and mind are adapting to the emergent environment. When we are preparing food in the kitchen there are certain knives that we use for chopping vegetables, but we wouldn't put out these knives on the table to eat with, because they're too sharp or too big. They have their place. They're taken up and they're put down. Taken up and put down. This tends to be the somewhat pragmatic relationship we have with the world: we make use of things and we make use of people. We probably don't feel very comfortable acknowledging or saying that we make use of the people we meet, but it is quite true. 'Use of' is not the same as exploiting. Is there anyone here in this room who would like to be use-less? If we're not going to be use-less, then we're use-

full and if we're use-full, then that means other people can make use of us. If they don't make use of us, we feel a bit 'spare'.

Perhaps that should give us a sense that the world is one of mutual engagement. It is wonderful if we have some value and our value is revealed by other people partaking of it. If no one partakes of what we have, then it remains hidden. We can't reveal ourselves to ourselves and so it is through interaction with other people that aspects of ourselves are given an invitation to manifest. Without the invitation of others, without them needing to make use of us, we wouldn't have that opportunity.

Some people here may have had the experience of becoming grandparents. That has advantages and disadvantages but it does mean that qualities which have been quiescent for some years, can be reactivated and get a new lease of life. All that parenting knowledge which had become redundant due to the children leaving home, is allowed to express itself in a way which can be useful. So there is a sense of aspects of ourselves being called into play.

‘I’ APPEARS TO HAVE SELF-SUBSTANCE THAT CONTINUES THROUGH TIME

Is there any continuing 'self-substance,' which is always there? From the buddhist point of view, no—there is not. According to the abhidharma tradition, there are three things which continue through time and there is one thing, which *appears* to continue through time.

The three things which continue through time are: enlightenment, the moment of enlightenment and the sky. The thing which *appears* to continue through time is the inherent existence of ourselves because we think, *“Well, I'm still alive. I was alive some years ago and I'm still here now.”* Who is the one who is still here? 'I am!' This 'I' is a conceptual presentation. What is continuing is our capacity to use the first person singular. However the content of the first person singular has changed. *'I'm still here'*, but not as the 'me' that I was. That's a bit weird isn't it? So...the 'me' that I was before, I no longer 'am', but 'I'm still here.' Now, of course, when we talk of 'me' we tend to be talking of the more objective narrative notion of ourself. 'I', the first person singular, is the naked bit of us that moves out into the world. 'I'—and then we can announce whatever we like after that. *'Here's something you should know about me'* is presenting an image of ourselves as a character. The information we offer

conceals just as much as it reveals. 'I' and 'me' link together because 'I' can always identify or misidentify with 'me'. That is to say, we can deny ourselves. We can pretend that we are other than how we are. Why? Because we want to stay ahead of the game. How? How, because 'I' is empty of self, of inherent existence.

It is the emptiness of the empty signifier that is the first person singular that allows 'me' to say whatever I like about how 'I' am. *"I am this. I am that. I am the other."* On the table in front of me is a recording machine. By the look of it, it cost a lot of money. Therefore, whoever is the owner of this will presumably be quite protective of it. I might notice a nail sticking out of my chair and since this recording machine is made of metal, and since I don't have a hammer, I could make use of that object to bash down the nail. It has some hammer-like potential. The owner of the recording machine would counsel against doing this, insisting on a very tight construal of the article, *'It is for recording sound and for no other purpose.'* Many objects are like that. They have one specialised function and although with our creative imagination we could turn them to other purposes, that would be unwise because we would be running against the definition of what it is, or rather, of what we *say* it is. These separate objects we identify in the world seem to be what we take them to be—in describing them we are confident that we know what we're talking about.

However the first person singular is a different story. 'I' is always empty and all its attributes remain attributes and do not remove the intrinsic emptiness of the signified. To be understood you actually only need three words. *'I am hungry.'* *'I am tired.'* *'I am sleepy.'* Three would be enough. Or if you're a child, you can use just two; *'I go.'* 'I' by itself doesn't do anything or go anywhere. 'I' has no content. It needs something linked to it to give it content.

That is its wonderful potential. It doesn't foreclose or over-determine the sphere within which it operate. It's like an amazing universal tool which can immediately link in with whatever environment it meets. It is the emptiness of the first person singular that makes it useful.

This sound recording device in front of me is very useful for its defined purpose. It has a very particular technology behind it which means that it has a very restricted remit of what it can be used for. 'I' can be used for anything. 'I' is empty of

fixed, internal content. 'I' is 'open', an openness which allows it to be filled with the 'not I' which becomes 'I' by being linked with 'I'.

Emptiness, in terms of each person indicates that there is nothing fixed about us—not in our body, not in our voice and not in our mind. What our mind fills with will depend on particular circumstances. We may be doing something that requires great care and attention so we focus our mind in a way which allows our body to be very precise in its actions. At other times we just let our mind wander hither and thither. Neither the body, nor the voice, nor the mind, has a fixed content. The constituents of our self change and yet we appear to continue.

I as the empty signifier can generate a false sense of continuity, hence I can say, *"I am still me."* That is a delusion, an illusion. We are deluded by the illusion that just because we say something is the same, it is the same. *"I have been in Macclesfield before."* In what way is the Macclesfield that I have previously visited the same Macclesfield as I am in today? At the entrance to the city there are signs that say, 'Macclesfield', 'Welcome to Macclesfield'. You come to the boundary of the town. Before you cross the boundary, you're in non-Macclesfield. You take a step across that boundary and now you're in Macclesfield. This shows the arbitrary nature of the name 'Macclesfield'.

By relying on the abstraction, on the name, it is as if the abstraction is identical with the phenomenon but phenomena are always changing and the abstraction seems to be continuous because it is preserved in the refrigerator of the mind. It's in the freezer. The word flows out of our mouth and it goes back into our mind. Every time the term 'Macclesfield' is used, 'Macclesfield' sounds the same. You might say, *"I hate living in Macclesfield"*, you might say, *"I love living in Macclesfield"*, or you might even say, *"I used to hate living in Macclesfield but now I love living in Macclesfield"*, or vice versa. There are endless permutations you can make around this. Yet each time you say it, it is as if the other person will know what you mean when you say 'Macclesfield'. Which of course they don't and they can't, because they don't live in the same Macclesfield as you do. Your Macclesfield is what is revealed to you of the potential of Macclesfield as an unstable co-emergence with your embodied participation.

I can only directly access my own experience. I can, of course, access narratives others give of their experience. The first is unmediated, the second is mediated. The point is that I alone have my particular experience. This can be very lonely since nobody else has my actual experience. That is a fact. Therefore, we need to communicate. We can't take it for granted that other people know what we're talking about. The realm of language and the realm of direct experience are not the same. The direct is essentially inexpressible. It is unique and stands alone. The indirect realm of linguistic composition is expressing concepts which provide the illusion of shared experience. Yet shared signifiers do not equate with shared experience. Language lets us treat knowledge of something as a commodity. Yet the 'something' we know about is not self-existing. We create what we talk about in the very active talking. The 'object' is revealed through the 'subject' and is always mediated. Profound, direct experience is free of both subject and object.

In school we probably study a lot of subjects and have to memorise a lot to get through various exams. Is it fair to say that a lot of that information has not been enormously useful to us in our life? What we were learning, however, was how to be in a group of people, how to take our place, how to take our turn. This is the key point: the 'stuff-ness' that we learn is not what it's all about. It's about how we find our way into connectivity: that we need to interact with other people to work out what we are on about.

It is quite difficult to examine ourselves. If we have a problem and are wondering what to do we often have an urge to talk about it to a friend because in talking about it we lay it out and express our doubts; even if our friend does not ask a question, just the look on their face somehow helps us to unpack the problem in a more open way than we could have done on our own. Even how we tell a story about ourself will depend on our circumstances at any given time.

Working as a therapist, I see some people over quite long periods of time during which they may tell me many times about the 'same' event. Each time they tell it, it's slightly different. Communication is the revealing of nuances in the service of making the bond of shared experience. This 'shared experience' is actually the sharing of narratives about the idea of what occurred. Experience has to be objectified if it is to be shared. However such objectification creates representations which disguise the

actual experience. Since there is nothing really 'to get', we make use of other people to find out who we are, because we are who we reveal ourselves to be. As individuals were born through the process of objectification. If we can't reveal ourselves, it can be very hard for us to function in a world of images.

Early buddhism examined the structure of phenomena and identified that in being compounded, they were impermanent: buildings, places, people, experience. They appear, remain for a while and vanish. What we are looking at now is generated by our residing inside our assumptions, judgments, memories, plans and predictions. The mental apparatus that we have, our capacity to construe, construct and interpret has us tracking entities and events across the three times. We move to the past. We move to the future. We're momentarily in this conceptual present. The actual present is always fresh, fresh and ungraspable. It is untouched by concepts.

It is likely that very little of our lives has been situated within this open availability. We tend to mediate all that occurs through our conceptual discourse—telling stories about life as if it was composed of a stream of existents. Reified event following reified event brings a sense of reality and stability to our lives. Yet the realm of the unconceptualised is always available. Conceptualised and unconceptualised might seem to be mutually excluding categories, yet concepts emerge within the space of the non-conceptual, like rainbows in the sky. If we can see this, then the concepts that were our friends and have become our obstructors as we seek clarity are now revealed as the radiance of our non-conceptual unborn awareness.

At lunch, I went for a short walk along the banks of the nearby canal and I was remembering how as a child, I used to play along the banks of a canal in Glasgow—but that canal is not this canal here in Macclesfield. I am back in a place which I haven't been to for a long time, which I have no desire to visit, and even if I went, I couldn't be there because that canal, in that form, no longer exists. The experience of this moment by the Macclesfield canal triggered a 'hook' whereby I absented myself from where I was, to be somewhere where I couldn't be, and yet I was.

I'm sure that's a familiar experience for many of us—that we slip away from this moment into the future and into the past. It's not that it's wrong to do this—because we do need to make plans and arrangements—however, whatever is

occurring, whether it's a memory or a plan, is now. Planning or reflection needn't remove us from now. It can be the way in which the now is showing itself. That is to say, you can be present with your memory, or you can fall into your memory. When you fall into your memory it takes you off on a little riff going here and there, until something happens and then we're back here again. But that journey was kind of nowhere, a sort of cyberspace. It didn't truly exist; we can't get a handle on it. So, how can we stay present?

HERE AND NOW. THERE AND THEN.

In fact the openness of 'now' is the very basis for it being filled with thoughts of elsewhere, which are actually only now. Does that make sense? If you look at a photograph from last summer you go into memories of last summer, but the photo you're looking at is in front of you now. The memories are happening for you now but it is as if you have gone somehow into that realm of last summer. You haven't gone anywhere! All your life occurs in here and now. It has no other site of occurrence. Yet within the here and now, the there and then occurs, and it is as if that occurrence was real and not the illusion that it actually is.

This is important for meditators because it means that two aspects are present simultaneously: the openness of the present awareness; and the arising thought which is denying its open empty nature by pretending to be something else.

It's like a child pretending to be Batman. They got their little costume for their birthday and now they go about in it saying, *"I'm Batman"* or *"I'm Spiderman."* They probably want to have a duvet cover that's got Spiderman on it as well and the matching pillow—the whole kit. *"This is me and this is my world."* They are Spiderman but they're not Spiderman. They are—and they're not. There is no real division.

In the same way, when we get lost in meditation we haven't gone away anywhere else. This is important because if you see the truth of this it means that there is nothing to be corrected. You don't need to do anything to improve or make reparation for what has happened because nothing wrong or bad has actually occurred. You are here, just here and now. This moment of here and now is filled with the illusion of there and then. Here and now is not destroyed or tainted by this illusory there and then. Just as a mirror is not tainted by the reflections which fill it so the

openness of your awareness is always present in the here and now even when the images arising seemed to evoke there and then. The power of the illusory arising lies not in the arising but in our belief in it, in our letting ourselves be taken in by it. To take an illusion to be real is to be deluded.

Under the power of this delusion, you might conclude, *“Oh, I can’t meditate at all. This is all just a waste of time. I don’t know what I’m doing.”* Then having been distracted in the meditation you enter another level of distraction by beating yourself up about having been distracted by an illusion. You can fill the whole of your life looping thoughts in this way: thought chasing thought. Where is this occurring? Here and now. Where is here? The space of awareness. Where is now? The space of awareness. There is nothing outside now. This is all there is. Every memory that we have, we only can access, now.

Can you remember your first day in primary school? Remember what that was like going up to the playground? You’ll have some memories and some feelings and you are having these memories and feelings *now*. However that 'there' and 'then' appeared to be, it can only ever actually be 'here' and 'now'. Likewise whatever futures we can imagine, they are also only 'here' and 'now'.

The dzogchen tradition talks about the one *tigle*. *Tigle* means a sphere or a ball. It's visualised as a ball of rainbow-coloured light. It represents the infinity of existence. Now, this moment, is like an infinite ball which includes everything. It includes all the past, all the future, all that is here and all that is there. We could have a conversation about New York or Paris. All of these words, memories, plans, hopes, would be—here and now. You have never been anywhere other than here and now. 'Here and now', just like 'I', just like the mirror, is empty, because anywhere can be 'here'. We're here and then later today, we won't be here. We'll be in another place, which we will call 'here'.

This evening someone may ask you what you are going to do now. *“Well, it's two o'clock in the afternoon so let's go out for a walk.” “No, it's not. It's seven o'clock at night and it is dark outside.”* 'Now' is whenever now is. 'Here' is wherever here is. 'I' am whoever I am. The mirror is showing whatever it's showing. Despite this hospitality we become selfish, stupid, and blind by not recognising and honouring the

openness of here and now. We take openness for granted, ignore it and fall asleep in our stories. This is very sad because actually it's quite amazing that the only place you can ever be is here and now!

The semantic content, the interpretative content, which we take to be the truth of each and every situation, is a non-intrinsic import, a transient filling. All such momentary fillers of the space of possibilities are themselves unreliable in the way that they seemed to point to something reliable. *'We're here in Macclesfield together.'* This is where we are. Some of us may go to a restaurant tonight and then we be 'here' in that restaurant. Both will be in Macclesfield but they'll be different 'here's in Macclesfield. Likewise there will be different moments of 'now'.

The freshness of 'here and now', the very basis for the arising of these different experiences is ignored because we are caught up in our stories, the staleness of talking about something. The fresh is right in front of our nose but we don't see it because we've locked onto our storyline: *'I'm like this, that or whatever.'* We fill the space of here and now with a story which obscures for us the freshness and connectedness of here and now. The actual here and now is us as we are in this moment, co-emergent and ungraspable. It's us; but in my storyline it's 'me'. In the story inside my head I'm looking out at you all in the room. However if I relax and release myself from that interpretation then 'we' are here.

The actual basis of our existence is nondual: there is no barrier between self and other, good and bad, right and wrong, heaven and hell. Each of these binary oppositions only has meaning in the intercourse between its polarities. Only by knowing what the concept of bad is referring to in a specific context can you work out what might be conveyed by good. In buddhist terminology all polarities are co-emergent. They have to arise together to create the field in which discriminations are possible. In that way they are mutually dependent with no real barrier between them. Emptiness of self allows us to see everything that we experience as illusory movement, dynamic and unborn.

Even our tendency to tell stories about what is going on is itself an empty self-dissolving activity. If I have the thought, *"Ah, Macclesfield - there used to be a lot of silk production here."* I have now installed a thought about Macclesfield: *'Macclesfield:*

the end of the silk route. It takes maybe four seconds to set up that thought. Four seconds gone. Now what? Our whole life is, *'Now what? Now what?'* This is impermanence. We cannot establish anything through construction because it just washes away. *"What will I do then, if everything is empty and open and ungraspable. I'm drowning."*

Well, the fish doesn't drown in the sea. You drown because you conceptualise yourself as somebody who has to hold themselves together and make sense of what's going on. If experience is inherently self-validating then it has no need of effort to make sense of it. *"But if there is no sense to be made of anything, what am I going to do?"* The one who is worrying about that, is itself simply thought in flow. There is no inherent self-nature to either subject or object.

The practice arising from this view is to release identification with the thoughts, feelings and sensations that are the ingredients out of which we construct our familiar sense of self. We're not pushing them away but we're not gathering them together either to build a construction. In the meditation, thoughts come and go by themselves. We don't have to push them away or hang on to them or fall into them. They're just there and they're gone. There is no mental arising, which stays for a long time.

Moods can seem quite insidious and subtle, are like morning mist in a valley. They change in their texture. You may wake up in the morning feeling a bit depressed but if you just lie in the bed and open yourself—staying with the depression as it presents itself without over-conceptualising it—you will find that it presents many different flavours. However if you move away from the immediate experience and focus on the thoughts that tell you that you are depressed then you are wedding yourself into a concept which will mop up the gravy of each moment like a sponge and subsume it into your definition of yourself as being depressed. This will blind you to the changes in your mood. By being touched and moved through contact with others I am taken out of myself. I find myself in a new form. Whereas if I seal myself in my self-definition, the other cannot refresh me.

Essentially this is how emptiness is our basic freedom. It's not something abstract or vague, theoretical or esoteric. It is simply the nonduality of the experiential

field. We're in this here and now together. The revelation of the here and now is the only actual. An anxious teenager may hide in their bedroom but the world is still going on. If they carry on doing that for some years, by the time they come out of their bedroom, they will be four years older with the same level of social skills that they had when they were sixteen. They haven't protected themselves. They've actually made themselves more vulnerable. The only way to learn—which is painful for most of us—is to participate. If you participate, you make mistakes and get embarrassed, but open and empty and self-liberating. So observe the dynamic nature of your experience. Nothing is fixed. Nothing is set in stone. Just allow experience to arise and pass.

TWO MOODS THAT CAN BE A PROBLEM FOR MEDITATORS

The dzogchen tradition refers to two main moods of energy which can be problematic for meditators. One is *gö-pa* (Tib. *rGod-Pa*) and the other is *ching-wa* (Tib. *Bying-Ba*). *Gö-pa* is a dispersed wild energy, perhaps a bit manic, and surrendering into that energy may feel exciting. You may want to go and get drunk, or spend lots of money, get carried away by lots of thoughts... *Ching-wa* means 'to sink' and feel a bit like a tired swimmer who can't go on any more and just wants to give up and sink under the waves. You can't summon up the will to keep going. Both the wild energy and the sinking energy are experiences inside the ocean of the mind so just trust their inherent emptiness and be present with them without merging.

The energy of the experiencer is participating in a field that is arising from the open spaciousness which is the basis of both experiencer and experienced. So relax and open, relax and open; just be with however it is. *Whatever comes, comes. Whatever goes, goes.* If you feel completely awful just sit present with 'awful', not falling into it, not pushing it away but allowing it space to be the current content of your experience. It will definitely pass.

The experiencer has no fixed content. In this state you are open and empty and self-liberating. You are in the state of the mirror and the mirror neither adopts nor rejects any experience which occurs. Every now and then you are likely to fall into a particular ripple of experience and when that happens, don't try to push it away. Don't blame yourself, just very gently pull your awareness back to being present with

what is arising. Always remember that the reflection is in the mirror but the mirror isn't contaminated.

THE NATURE OF COMPASSION

Our mind has three aspects. The first is the field of openness, in which there are no separate phenomena. The field of openness revealed by awareness is devoid of any content. It has no shape, colour or form and yet it is the basis for the second aspect, the field of radiance. This is the field of luminosity, the clarity of bright experience offering nothing to grasp at. Within this there is the field of our illusory participation, as we emerge as apparitional forms dissolving the delusion of duality. The inseparability of these three is a self-rectifying balance. The ego-self on the other hand is prone to imbalance. If we lean too heavily towards the aspect of being a separated individual whose ground is an internal personal essence, then this isolation makes us overburdened. If we lose any sense of the particularity, of the unique specificity of our own situation, then we can also lose our balance by going to the other extreme; we can become very vague, spaced-out and 'all over the place', not able to hold our lives together.

The integrity of openness and the field of experience and our own particular arising, is precisely just this moment by moment. Resting in this the emergence of how we are is as a site of delicacy, grace and poise, an inclusive responsive co-emergence with others. We are neither internally preoccupied and functionally cut off from others nor so open and porous that we are invaded and pulled into reactivity by whatever is going on. Instead we manifest as a ceaseless pulsation moving between the polarities of active and passive.

The function of meditation is to help us experience the flow of experience and see that everything is dynamic. Stasis does not exist; it is a concept which we superimpose on movement because movement seems to be so overwhelming when an individual self tries to make sense of it. Samsara is a state of confusion, repetition, compulsion and the endless reiteration of the same old patterns. Samsara is maintained by trying to exert control through interpreting and finding meaning in events, through trying to make sense of what is going on. Samsara is endlessly busy with a task that can never be completed.

The difference between the busyness of samsara and the calm state of nirvana is essentially whether or not we are relaxing in openness and experiencing the givenness of intrinsic presencing, the basic facticity of 'just this', 'just this', 'just this'. It is as it is; and within this you respond and move. Seamlessly, yet just prior to the gestures of participation there is the basic truth of what is arising—that it is empty of inherent self-nature. There is no substance to it and yet it is undeniably here.

When you start to get a cold, it's undeniable. There are signs and symptoms. You have to keep blowing your nose and keep a tissue handy. It's not that we can magic things away by saying, *“Well, it's all illusion, it's not there.”* What occurs is a pattern. Having a cold has a particular sequence. It lasts a few days and then it usually gets better or it may deepen into something else. It is a dynamic unfolding. Before you get a cold, you're in one state. That state is not your true state because since you've been small, you've probably had all sorts of colds and scratches and illnesses of various kinds. The embodied ego self is not a stable home base, because even when you're physically healthy, sometimes you may be more tired, sometimes you may be more upbeat and so on. There isn't a 'real me'. There isn't 'my true self' as a form which can be established. What we experience are multiple forms through which we arise. Each of these forms is a situational relational identity that we seem to 'be' momentarily. Yet none of these has enduring existence.

How can we offer hospitality to our life as it is? How can we open to yet not merge with all our transient apparitions. This is the real question. Usually we're trying to correct ourselves, to modify ourselves, to make adjustments because we have some game plan, some map, some image of how our life should be. We want to reduce interpersonal stress by transforming maladaptive procedures into adaptive procedures. Most psychotherapy is concerned with such issues. In our dzogchen practice however the key point is abiding in our integrity with openness rather than alignment with a map. So, instead of trying harder, contorting ourselves to fit into a particular image, we can stay relaxed with how events actually are and then work with that. Because actually, this is all we have. The maps neither exist nor describe real existents. They are abstract concepts which have whatever truth concepts have.

The basis of our practice is again and again to ease ourselves out of our habitual identities so that openness, revelation and participation are seamless.

Maintaining this integral view of non-duality, how shall we become sites of kindness and compassion? Generally speaking, in Buddhism, compassion is the intention and practice of supporting universal happiness free of pain and suffering. This compassion is *focussed on the ultimate welfare of sentient beings*. We wish all beings the unchanging happiness which arises from them recognising that they are buddhas. Buddhas are not human beings. What does this mean? Our identity as human beings is not definitive. This view of who we are arises from our obscurations and karma. When the obscurations fall away, we see that we are not who we thought we were.

The mind is infinite, it does not have limits. When you actually see how awareness is, it doesn't have a top or bottom. It doesn't have sides. It doesn't have a beginning or an end. It doesn't come from anywhere, stay anywhere or go anywhere. This is something you can investigate for yourself. As you examine each of these statements in turn, you see that your thoughts can describe other thoughts but they cannot represent awareness. Awareness is not an entity and is beyond conceptualisation. Consciousness seeks an object and also can consider itself as an object. Consciousness needs an object in order to manifest, it needs to get its teeth into something. Yet whatever presents itself is an evanescent moment. It arises and passes. We keep on looking but each conclusion we suppose to be final, vanishes. The mind cannot catch itself.

With this we start to be aware of our actual nature which is luminous, vital, alive. We are the presence of ungraspable openness. Neither our ground nor our presence is a substantial entity. We are 'just this', the immediacy of participation in the ever-open field of luminosity.

WE, AS PEOPLE, DIE BUT AWARENESS DOES NOT

When we take our body to be an entity, something we have or we are, then we are not open to our unborn ground. The basis of our emergence as ever-shifting co-emergent patterning is ungraspable openness. We are not a thing. The body is a site of dynamic communication. It manifests as a relational formation. As such, it is shaped by and with events and after some time its patterning ceases to support the manifestation of awareness. And this is what we call 'death'.

The body as process is susceptible to outside dangers and internal diseases. There are many ways in which the dynamic function can come to an end. Every gesture that we make with our body is finite. It has a beginning, a middle and an end. Every speech act is finite, finite and contextual. But the mind itself is infinite. As the Buddha said, *“All beginning things are ending things.”* Everything which has a beginning will have an end. Therefore, everything which is finite will go towards dissolution but the mind itself, awareness, has neither beginning nor end.

This is why awareness is the true refuge. We take refuge in the nature of our own mind. We do not hang on to a concept of our real nature, which would be dualistic, but rather we enter into the practice again and again. We find our way into relaxing through the layers of stickiness of our habitual identification with thoughts, feelings and sensations until we fully open to infinite awareness. Infinite awareness indicates that it has no beginning and no end. This has huge implications for how we understand death. The forms of the energy of awareness—our physical forms, our memories, thoughts, intentions and so on—are always changing while we are alive. Death is when this internal patterning of emergence ceases to emerge in a way that supports our dualistic consciousness. We, as people, die but awareness does not. Openness is the ground of awareness and awareness is like the sun shining in the sky of openness. Awareness is not consciousness. Consciousness is reificatory knowing focused on the particularities of experience. Awareness is non-reificatory.

WHAT IS HAPPINESS?

Thus, when we say, *“May all beings be happy”*, it is a brief way of saying *“May all beings rest in the ground of their own being.”* We are not saying, *“May they get lots of nice experiences all the time.”* Nice experiences will necessarily be ephemeral.

In English we have a saying, *‘You can't have your cake and eat it.’* If you keep something nice for later, it might get spoilt but if you eat it now, you won't have it later. This is the nature of time. It just is like that. You can't hang on to things in this world because they change. People want to have a secure place to put their money. They put it in property. Prices go up and down. They put it in equities. Prices go up and down. They trade in foreign currencies. Values go up and down. Nobody can

predict what's going to happen. It's a moveable feast. There is nothing secure in the world of manifestation.

Therefore, to wish happiness to all beings is not to wish them some-*thing*. Of course on a relative level we hope that people have a safe place to sleep, are protected from violence, have food, kindness and so on but each of these situations is vulnerable to events. If you've got a house, problems arise with it. Either you do repairs yourself or you get in a builder. If you get in a builder, you may as well sign a blank cheque! Every problem starts as some good idea. You buy a car; somebody scrapes your car. How could that happen? Driving along, a stone flies up and chips the windscreen. If you've got a car, you get problems. If you've got a house, you get problems. If you've got a body, you get problems. Problems go with the territory because all phenomena are impermanent. We have built-in obsolescence and everything around us is crumbling away all the time. That is why real happiness comes from awakening to the contentment or satisfaction of residing in the natural condition of awareness.

The mahayana tradition describes two aspects of profound universal compassion, or bodhicitta: compassion which is like planning to go on a journey and the compassion of actually going on a journey. The intention '*May all beings be happy*' is a beautiful thought that can open our heart and make us feel connected with all beings, but then we have to go on the actual journey. We have to act in a way which will bring about that happiness.

In the tantric tradition it is believed that visualisation practices open up a luminous world that includes all beings, bringing actual direct immediate benefit for others. The practice itself within the view of nonduality brings an actual change to the condition of beings. However, because beings repeatedly choose patterns of lostness, these practices have to be done again and again.

COMPASSION AND EMPTY OF ESSENCE

We are used to the difference between fantasy and reality, where reality is provable and fantasy is like a daydream. The term 'illusion' points to a different approach to experience. An illusion is an appearance which has no actual existence. It arises due to causes and can be seen yet it has no substance, as with a rainbow or a

mirage. From the view of emptiness, all that we encounter, including ourselves, is like an illusion.

For example this recording machine in front of me has no essence. It is operating on the basis of the interaction of many factors. There's a supply of electricity coming into it and there are many metal and electronic components inside. Through their collaboration, they function in a way that will lead to the recording of sound. The machine operates through juxtaposition and interaction. If the pieces are put together in the right way and the flow of power coming into the machine allows these connected pieces to operate, then the recording function is performed. However if you open the machine, you won't find some little essential piece which is doing all the work, just as inside us there isn't a homunculus, a kind of mini-man or mini-woman, who is our real essence. Our body has no essence in it. Some people say that the heart is the essence but if you remove the liver or the lungs we're not going to do very well either. Our bodies have many vital organs and function through the communication of these vital organs. The body is a communication system just like the recording machine. There is no essence. Each of these vital elements functions yet there is no essence driving them and they produce no fixed existent.

When we look at sentient beings, we tend to conceptualise them. We imagine that thinking about them will somehow bring us closer to who they are. The naming of a person is a bit like inserting the keystone in an arch. It locks the arch. When builders are making an arch they put some wood in the centre as they build up the arch. When they drop in the keystone this locks it and they can remove the wood. You know someone's name so you apply their name to them and it is as if we now know them. Our habitual picture of that person, a picture built up over time and on the basis of diverse situations, can be summoned forth by evoking their name. It's as if their name represents some essential form. Yet of course, 'our name' is contingent, given to us by our parents at birth or changed by us later on in life. Although there is no essence to a person, when we take a person to be an entity it can seem as if we're being kind and thoughtful by remembering the details of their individual life. What we take as a given about them is what we remember of their life. This is only a minute slice of all the things that have happened in their life and so when we sum people up according to our experience of them, then the image that we create is not going to be

true to the complexity of their interactive life. Human beings are unfoldings; they are moving and changing with events. When people engage with each other two complex dynamic systems are engaging with each other, generating new patterns of communication. When we bring our over-conceptualising knowledge into a situation like this and to try predict how it's likely to develop, this interference will interrupt the free-flow of the possibilities of the situation.

For example, if one member of a family has a problem, let's say an addiction, then the others start to think, *"Oh, they are behaving in that way because they are in the grip of such and such an addiction. There's not much we can do about that."* The fixity of reading of the situation, which they return to again and again, and which is held by other members in the family system, starts to insert a perverse choreography in which everybody is adapting to the identified patient. *"We all have to put up with Johnny because you know that's just what Johnny's like..."* Then the pendulum swings: *"For God's sake! Is this ever going to change? I can't bear it anymore."* The problem is, *'I can't bear it anymore.'* Since we have decided that we know what 'it' is, there is a frozen reading or interpretation of the situation. Actually what you have is somebody revealing themselves moment by moment in particular ways. If you can respond fluidly to how they present themselves, unmediated by this grand story about who they are or what they need, then there is the possibility of a true meeting with some authenticity.

The more you believe that you know who and what another person is, the more you're constrained whereas compassion free of over-fixation can open up a space for spontaneous contact with other people. By not getting caught up in a dramatised reading of a situation, which over-determines what moves we can make, there is the possibility of authentic and genuine responsiveness in the moment. Knowing that what we say in the moment applies just to the moment helps us not to consolidate our sense of the other, but to stay open to their potential even when they are disregarding it to themselves. To sum other people up is to do them a violence.

If you're responding in the moment it is important to have a sense of where that response is coming from. If you have a stored-up notion of the other person, even if you think you're not activating it, it is going to be activated and what you're going to do is whack the other person with an impulsive, rather than a spontaneous,

response. Impulses are not spontaneous. They are always preformed. *"Here is something I prepared earlier"*, as TV chefs often say. Impulses are story lines that have been run before. They come out of the freezer, into the microwave and into your mouth. This is not fresh food. It's just something I happen to have handy, so we whack the other person with that. It's not a very useful way to respond.

SPACE AND SPONTANEITY

Spontaneity means being relaxed and open. This is particularly difficult in family dynamics because we have built up such huge memory banks about who we take the other members to be. Like chess players, we are often planning and fantasising several moves ahead: *"If I do this they probably will do that and then I will have to do..."* In betraying the freshness of contactful emergence we deprive the other person of the chance to encounter the space of fresh potential.

Of course predictability can reduce anxiety and other people may prefer that to a fresh and open encounter. Confirmation of knowable and enduring identities may be the culture of the family or the wider group. *"Only if I am sure that you are one of us will I feel safe with you."* This narrow self-protective stance is an impediment to the practice of opening to the open. Whenever mutuality breaks down, we are constrained in preformed choreographed scripts.

OUR ORIGINAL NATURE IS OUR BUDDHA NATURE

Our original nature is our buddha nature yet at the moment we live without clarity regarding our true nature. We maintain our belief that we have an enduring self and this acts as an obscuration, a cover-up, a veneer of habitual intoxication. We are intoxicated by ideas, judgments, evaluations, memories, intentions and so on—by the whole maelstrom of mental activity. While we are invested in that level of turbulence we experience a lot of stimulus and so we are endlessly busy, acting and being acted on. Because we are so busy 'hoeing our garden' we are not aware of the potential of the soil. In fact our buddha nature is hidden from us by our very efforts to stop ourselves being bad people. That's terribly sad.

One of the functions of meditating and relaxing into the unborn open dimension of the mind, is to access the fundamental goodness of our being. The

primordial buddha of this lineage is called Kuntuzangpo. *Kuntu* means 'always' or 'always already', and *Zangpo* means 'good'. This is our basis and fundamentally we have not strayed from this basis, despite all the activities we have engaged in.

There is a basic goodness or a basic health which is fundamental to all of us; difficulties are adventitious. They arrive. They have a beginning. They are not intrinsic. They function in our lives and have to be dealt with some way or another. Yet they have no real existence and do not arise from our true nature. It can be helpful to examine our negative core beliefs in order to discover the actual nature of such beliefs. Perhaps we hate ourselves, distrust ourselves, think that we are a bad person, or greedy or lazy. *"That's just like me. I always get it wrong. That's just my luck. I'll never be able to fit in."*

When we take up these beliefs as definitions of who we are, it is as if they are essential truths which sum us up. However when we notice how they arise and pass and have no stability of their own, we start to doubt that such transient structures could truly define us. Then we start to notice how they are like echoes of what others have said about us. We have built up images of ourselves and taken these to be the truth. Meditation is the means to avoid such limiting conceptual constructs. We learn to relax, open and allow the stream of thoughts, feelings, memories, and so on to show us directly their illusory nature. We have been trapped within the dream of existence and now we have the means to waken up.

AN ENDLESS CONVERSATION

By neither merging with nor trying to avoid our own experience, we can let it reveal itself. We start to see that what has seemed essential about us is actually contingent. All we need is to learn proper punctuation: *"I'm a complete waste of space, **when I get lost.**"* Once you begin inserting commas in the place of full stops, you start to see that you are caught up in an endless conversation. You make one proposition about yourself and then you supply other evidence to support it, and then you identify more evidence and more evidence... When you see what you are up to you start to articulate all the positions of yourself, your self-states or self-aspects or sub-personalities. All these positionings, core beliefs, voices, are part of a

conversation that goes on and on, the infinite conversation that is the engine of samsara.

When we attend to this conversation, we understand that we can never reach a final definition of ourself. Everything that I say about myself may be true contextually while in terms of the wider picture it may be untrue. It is both true and false. It may be true about the moment but it is not true about a core identity. Once we start to understand this then we start to access true freedom. This is freedom from final definition, from summation. We all have limitations and our limitations mean that we will let other people down. We will not be able to provide other people with all that they want. However, this fact points only to transient circumstances; it is not the truth of our actuality. To believe in it is to thicken the veils of obscurity. The practice is quite simple—do less assuming, speculating and judging and relax and see how your mind actually is when it is not interfered with.

MAHAYANA COMPASSION IS TO ONESELF AND TO OTHERS

If you over-privilege yourself, it's not good. To see the co-emergence of self and environment is the liberation of duality. Our environment includes everyone: everyone in this room, everyone in Macclesfield, in England, in the world, all the worms in the soil, the birds in the sky, the ducks in the canal. All sentient beings are within the open field of presence. Nobody is a stranger to us for we share the same basis.

The mahayana tradition offers us a narrative to support adopting this position: we have had many previous lives and in every life we have had a mother. These mothers have taken care of us, fed us, clothed us, done difficult things in order to keep us safe. Whenever we meet another sentient being, we meet them from the place of debt and obligation since they have been our mother in a previous life. They have done this kindness for us and now it is our chance to repay them.

That is a very powerful vision to adopt. It really serves to undermine any notion of putting oneself first. In fact, the task of my life is to pay off my debts, and so every time I do a good thing, I don't go 'one-up'—I go from 'one down' to 'neutral'. 'Neutral' is the middle way. It's equanimity. This is a very beautiful kind of practice. The ways in

which these mahayana practices have developed over time are so exquisite. They are so finely attuned and balanced and are so good for the heart. They are truly good food.

DZOGCHEN COMPASSION IS OUR BASIC GOODNESS

In the dzogchen tradition, however, there is less reliance on supportive narratives and more direct trust that our basic purity and goodness will give rise to ethical conduct. The dzogchen view is that we are the emergence of the ever-pure basis or ground. Its purity is our purity since it is our actual source. All seemingly limiting factors are merely non-inherent contingent patternings of transient experience. All interpretations of experience are illusory. The sole truth is nondual open emptiness.

The infinite ground source has no limit. Therefore all that occurs is occurring within this infinity. There is no source other than this. There are no imports because there's nowhere to import anything from. This is the all-inclusive expanse of awareness. Whatever is occurring is the illusory radiant manifestation of the dharmakaya, the intrinsic mode. The more we trust this the more we see the light, radiant, luminous quality of all experience, including our experience of ourselves. However these experiences may appear, they are intrinsically pure and unborn.

We are all sitting here in this room, seemingly in the same room yet the room is revealed to each of us in different ways according to our particular patterning. The particularity of how we arise is often compared to light going into a crystal. A natural rock crystal will have different planes inside it. These could be referred to as impurities yet they help to reveal the richness of the potential for refraction. As the light goes in, it hits a particular plane which reveals the colours present within clear light. The intensity of the colours in the refracted light depends on the brightness of the light. When we are thickened and dulled with beliefs in inherent existence very little bright light comes in, and so we seem to encounter fixed, solid objects.

Each of us is like a crystal and the potential of any situation shines like light through us which we refract as our unique 'take' on that situation. When this crystalline potential is unobscured, refraction occurs prior to conceptualizing, so that we manifest as an aspect of the integrated responsiveness of the field.

As we come to trust this intuitive spontaneous responsiveness we rely less and less on conceptual planning. We are not reviewing the past or projecting into the future. We are part of the emergent field of experience and this inclusivity brings a simple fit to our presence, moment by moment. Then we can see clearly that isolation and hesitation are products of conceptualisation. Nondual participation is free of anxious control. Paradoxically, by allowing the self-arising and self-vanishing of the many moments of experience there is more instant clarity leading to effective participation. Habitual preoccupations cloud the freshness of the sky of emergent moments and lead to impulses based on the past. This self-referential concern distorts the arising activity so that it manifests as a pre-patterned reaction rather than as a fresh response.

So the heart of the healing contact which is compassion is to trust that being relaxed, open and connected allows a finesse of engagement that is fundamental and ethical. Ethics then feed relaxation because you start to find that you're on the point; you're on the beat. You are emerging with the field. That's how musicians would start to jam isn't it? They hear each other playing and they get a sense of what's possible and then they're in a groove and it takes off. Nobody's leading, nobody's deciding, but somehow the 'field' is the organising factor rather than the individual.

POWER USED WELL

One of the big problems in religious structures is patriarchy and hierarchy because the basic rule of power positions is 'never apologise and never explain'. I think it is important that dharma practitioners apologise a lot and to learn to explain, in the sense of a clear description rather than a justification. To say, *"I was cycling home from work in a hurry and I was went through a red light without stopping. I did not see you crossing the road. I did not mean to hit you and I am sorry that I did."* That's factual and neutral. You're not abasing yourself by saying something like *"Oh my god! I'm so sorry. I'm so stupid. I'm always making mistakes."* This will not help the person you hit, and neither will blaming them: *"Well, you should not have worn a black coat on a dark night and then walked so slowly across the road..."*

The issue of power has to be worked with again and again until we are clear about our agency. As long as I believe that 'I' am the doer of the deed, the source of

the activity, the stable basis of everything I do, then I will remain unaware of the open, empty ground of my manifestation. The personal pronoun 'I' is actually a sign without referent; it does not point towards an inner self. 'I' is pointing to the site of this activity and this site is the unborn openness of the mind. My power is the power of the source, it is not a personal possession. Every aspect of who I take myself to be and what I believe that I do is the emergent patterning of the potential of the ground. When I consider myself to be this particular person this is a conclusion that indicates a primacy of the 'self', of 'I, me, myself' as a separate entity with inherent existence. This is a false understanding an erroneous belief that is standard and normal within our world as structured by a belief in duality.

This is why it is vital to relax and observe how your mind is. When your mind reveals its own open emptiness to you it is obvious that there is no hidden ego-self as doer or core identity. With this clarity we can relax even more and not interfere with the intuitive spontaneity of responsivity—which is our actual participation in this ever-changing, ungraspable field of experience. My power is not mine; it is the expression of the source arising in the service of the field of radiance of the source.

Fundamentally, I am not a person and so do not need power over others. But as long as I believe in the delusion of separate egoic existence I will seek the kind of profit that goes with having power so that after each moment of being powerful, I will 'scrape the cream off the top of the milk' and use it to build a power edifice from whose heights I look down on other people. As we go through the years we all develop a bit more expertise at some things and we can use that to feel that we 'know what's what'. That is the wrong direction of knowledge. Knowledge in the service of the moment—like an array of ingredients to be taken up as required for cooking a particular recipe—is useful. But knowledge as a protection, knowledge as a way of proving that *'I'm right and you're wrong'* or that *'I'm a good person'* or whatever, becomes very opaque and dangerous.

Knowledge can provide useful tools when it is freed from its tendency to serve power structures and positions. From the point of view of dzogchen, every time you take up a position, you enter sclerosis. You enter into developing a carapace, a rigidity, a lack of movement. Then, having established a position you have to protect it.

Other people, strange to say, have minds of their own! Other people will make of us what they will, and all one can say is, *“Good luck to them.”* We can't control other people's minds. You might stand on your head. You might bend over backwards. You might do 'the right thing' again and again but the other person continues to have a 'mind of their own'. How can that be? Because they don't see the world the way we do. Neither I nor 'others' truly exist. Moment by moment we shift in posture, gesture, expression. We are not fixed and we have no fixed core self. It is not that we have a mind of our own, but rather that habitual tendencies generate the delusion of an enduring self. We are unborn emergence, never parting from the source. This permits true co-emergence, ceaseless co-patterning without the distortion of self-reference. Aspects of potential form transient self-arising and self-vanishing patterns which can be opened to as responsive presence or which can be reified as aspects of myself.

This is the intrinsic freedom of the ground, our ground. We can open to it and rest within it, as it, or we can claim to be apart from it as a stand-alone entity, an individual. Having met the lineage teachings this choice is revealed to us. How we proceed is up to us.

INCLUDING ALL SENTIENT BEINGS

We don't need knowledge or information about other people in order to be connected with them. The contact that we have arises within a connection which is prior to cognition. We are always already connected. It is our cognitions which allow us or don't allow us to live with that. We manifest as sentient beings. As sentient beings, we all share a lot but let's just take human beings: two arms, two legs, two eyes and so on... In Shakespeare's play *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* Shylock asks, *“If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?”* Antonio has put him in a category (Jew) that does not merit being treated decently like other categories (Christian). *“Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?”*

Putting people in categories is such a powerful thing to do to an individual or a group. We can see it happening all over the world. All sorts of dreadful things are

being done by people to people because people who are incredibly similar say to other people, *“Oi! You're not one of us! You are in a different category”* These 'cuttings' that we make occur on so many bases: gender, age, religion, nationality, appearance, sexual orientation... Due to this, aspects of the integral field of experience are cut off, excluded, rejected and even annihilated. When individual identity is privileged over intrinsic belonging within the ever-open field, then opacity and projection become the ego-stabilising functions.

Under the power of unawareness we take ourselves to be individuals. With our selective attention we notice which thoughts seem to confirm who we are and so we want to hang on to these thoughts. We also notice thoughts that seem to undermine our sense of who we are or who we want to be. We try to exclude these. This splitting and projection, editing and manipulation, goes on all the time. However, simultaneously and without effort everything arises from 'the ground'. Everything is movement in space and therefore any division which gets introduced is not inherent in the ground but arises due to intoxication with conceptualisation.

We have to be aware of just how powerful the toxic power of concepts can be when they dominate our experience. Recent conflicts around the world show how all lived and shared experiences are vulnerable to being wiped out on the basis of our intoxication with a concept. *'We know who you are. You fit into such and such a group. We don't want you here.'* The intensity of that thought formation, albeit blind, stupid and blunt, is incredibly powerful as it takes us back an infantile clarity where our feelings seem to tell us the truth about what is going on. The good and bad qualities we see in situations tend to be identified on the basis of their impact on us which is taken to be the truth of how they are.

If we can stay with the freshness of the impact, we might see that *“I am having a response to this moment of how you are for me.”* However if I flip into my narrative of *“I don't like you because you are...”*. then the other gets more and more defined on my terms. Regardless of their actual presentation our interaction can come to a point where there's nothing they can say or do to step out of my accumulated narrative definition.

Meditation is a very practical way of engaging with our tendencies to regress to simplistic formulations about our world. As we experience our capacity to open we find that we can live with more of the actual complexity. This means that we have less need to squeeze other people into the compartments of our conceptualisation. Our violence towards the other arises from the limited ability of the self to make sense of what's going on. When it's all 'too much' then shrinking the variables makes life easier. Reducing the available labels for the other to just 'you're one of them/you're one of us' is an easy but false simplification.

By relaxing, opening and resting in spaciousness we start to see that truly we're part of the field. The field arises in its integrity as the display of the ground. All divisions are adventitious, having been artificially introduced. They don't belong and they are unnecessary. They are vibrations of excess mental activity. We don't need strong judgements. We don't need definitions. We don't need defining conclusions because if the world is as we've been exploring over this weekend, then we inhabit an unfolding field in which final statements are impossible.

THREE ASPECTS OF IGNORING THAT CREATE SAMBARA

The traditional explanation of the development of samsara describes three aspects of ignoring. The first aspect is a kind of momentary disjunction. The natural integration of the flow of the three modes is interrupted. There's a hiatus. Sometimes it's compared to a drunk person falling down the stairs, "*Oh!*" There's a shock. Instead of relaxing back into the ongoing flow of unborn experience there's a question, "*Oops. What happened there?*" This question is not asked by someone. It is more like a circling eddy in the flow. It gives rise to a dualistic process of conceptualising the situation as a way of clarifying it. Once this starts, we move into the second aspect of ignoring whereby each item of experience is assigned a name or identification. Now the nascent ego consciousness enters a world of interpretation. With this develops an increasingly sophisticated mental apparatus filling the world with more and more names and categories. Of course once you've got a noun, you're going to have adjectives and verbs and adverbs and so on. We now have the complex identification of myriad particular entities, whereas in the flow there are no entities - there are only moments of experience, of appearance and so on which are changing. With the first

aspect of ignoring there is a retraction from the whole with a consequent thickening and solidification of experience. The reification of 'I am real and what is around me is real' brings a confidence that everything can be defined and known.

Once that aspect has been established it leads on to asking and answering "So *what is this? And who am I?*" This results in the manufacture of thoughts, concepts and endless narratives.

This leads into the third aspect where we are caught up in activity without quite understanding the delayed consequences of our actions. This is referred to as the ignoring which is the stupidity of not understanding karma. We are getting along with our lives, doing this and that, thinking that each sequence of events is self-contained. However because our lives are energetic, all our actions create patterns of arousal which lead us into experiencing different patterns in the future. As we shape ourselves towards a particular activity, that shaping sets up a particular form which then reverberates as an energetic vibration that will have another manifestation in the future.

These three aspects of ignoring are going on all the time. In the first aspect of ignoring, because there's forgetfulness, we lose touch with the open nature of our mind and its natural radiance displaying the field of experience. In the second aspect of ignoring, the natural radiance of the display of the field of experience which is arising just by itself, is now appropriated into being a sequence of entities which can be moved around according to our definitions. In the third aspect our unique and precise participation in each moment by gesture, posture, tone of voice and so on, is not recognised for what it is because our experience is now mediated through our dualised interpretation.

To free ourselves from these three aspects of ignoring we relax into space again and again. In order to do that we have to confront our habitual desire to be preoccupied by busy activity. That was the point about the drunk person falling down the stairs and then trying to make sense of what just happened. Only by relaxing into intrinsic value, the fulfilment of the integrity of all aspects of our presence, can we fully release ourselves from the burden of having to make sense of everything. The loss of the intrinsic is the birth of the burden of the reified contingent.

THE TUMBLING OF LIFE IS WITHIN OPENNESS

The root of samsara is agitation and anxiety. Relaxation is the fundamental medicine, the pure restorative. Relaxation allows form to be experienced integral with emptiness. There is nothing to protect. Patterns arise and pass and change. They will always do that. There is no way to stabilise the aspect of manifestation. However we don't need to do this since our presence spans these three aspects: open; part of the field; and just this. 'This' never lasts long. Participation is always moving and changing. The field too is ungraspable.

At night when we go to sleep, we can sit quietly, relax into openness, and gradually fall asleep. In the morning we wake up into the open and then life starts tumbling along. The tumbling of life is within the openness. Life is like a dream and inside that dream many events will happen, none of which can be fixed or accurately predicted. Again and again we relax into the ever-open and this is the integration of the field and the participation. This brings the unravelling of the three modes of ignoring. From the dzogchen point of view unravelling is resting in the natural completion of life, the perfect fulfilment of it is as it is.

THE OPEN WELCOMES ALL

Opening to the space of experience means that pleasure and pain come together. Good and bad. Success and failure. Happiness and sorrow. Loneliness and connection. So many different flavours. If we become picky eaters and mobilise all our intelligence towards being a 'picky eater' then, entitled to be 'a picky eater', we can indeed spend our whole life eating only fish fingers or whatever, but to what gain? Every time we have an experience, we are not alone. If we have a bereavement, or a sorrow, or a betrayal in our life the world is full of people also experiencing that. Experiences come and go—they are not mine and they do not happen to me. 'I, me, myself' are aspects of experience—they are not apart from it. The mahayana view of infinite love, compassion and connectivity is not other than that of the dzogchen view of opening to life as it is. We participate as part of as it is. This is itself nondual compassion as we abide in a relaxed openness that is always available for contact.

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